

**The Modern Mediatrix: Medieval Rhetoric
in André Breton's *Nadja* and Leonora Carrington's "Down Below"**

Bonnie Lander

Misogyny and courtly love are co-conspiring abstractions of the feminine whose function was from the start, and continues to be, diversion of women from history by the annihilation of the identity of individual women.

Neil Cartlidge

Female visionaries are poor mad exploited sibyls and pythonesses. Male ones are prophets and poets.

A. S. Byatt

Surrealism remains a minor field within 20th century literary studies. This has meant that important feminist surrealists, such as Leonora Carrington, who themselves represent a minor field in surrealist criticism, are largely forgotten. Carrington and her feminist contemporaries take issue with those aspects of Surrealism that late-20th century readers often also reject: its obscurity, misogyny, its wilful naïveté and refusal of accountability. Yet, it is by virtue of Carrington's critique of Surrealism that the study of her writing can broaden the terms by which we recognize Surrealist texts and therefore, perhaps, increase interest in the movement as a whole. This

broadening of critical interest in Surrealism is also made possible when we pay close attention to the earlier literary traditions on which it depends. Carrington's "Down Below" challenges André Breton's *Nadja* by contesting Breton's dubious politics, but the text does this by re-engaging the same medieval tropes as him in order to show how Breton makes those tropes serve Surrealism's masculinist agenda.¹ Both texts borrow heavily from the visionary texts of the Middle Ages, such as those that record the experiences of Margery Kempe, Christine the Astonishing and Elizabeth of Spaalbeek. Compared to the attention *Nadja* and "Down Below" receive from 20th century critics, the visionary writing on which their structure and topoi depend are subject to a considerable amount of commentary from medievalists. Paying attention to the narrative, thematic and rhetorical correlations between these Surrealist texts and their medieval predecessors will broaden the context in which the former are considered. Such a comparison also enables Carrington's work to take a more central place among that of her male contemporaries, since recognition of "Down Below"'s medieval tropes explicates the text's crucially important dialogue with the Surrealist tradition as typified by Breton. The following study is not intended as an exhaustive interrogation of the texts and traditions to which it attends, given it draws together two very separate critical fields. I hope instead to raise each of the significant correlations between the Surrealist texts and their predecessors and show how these correlations operate as part of Carrington's critique of Breton.

"*Nadja*," Walter Benjamin observes, "has achieved the true, creative synthesis between the art novel and the *roman-a-clef*. Moreover, one need only take love seriously to recognise in it, too – as *Nadja* also indicates – a 'profane illumination.'" He then cites Erich Auerbach, who, in his *Dante: Poet of the Secular World*, argues that "all the poets of the 'new style' possess a mystical beloved, they all have approximately the same very curious experience of love; to them the Amor bestows or withholds gifts that resemble an illumination more than sensual pleasure; all are subject to a kind of secret bond that determines their inner and perhaps their outer lives." Benjamin continues: "the lady, in esoteric love, matters least. So too, for Breton. He is closer to the things that *Nadja* is close to than to her." What is particularly important in Benjamin's application of Auerbach to Breton is his stress upon the lady as a conduit between the poet/lover and an illuminatory, intangible world of experience that, through her, he is transported to. This notion of the elected woman as mediatrix is essential to the unravelling of Surrealism's medieval borrowings, since she represents the ability to grant the poet/lover access to "a world that borders not only on the tombs of the Sacred Heart or alters to the Virgin, but also on the morning before a

battle or after a victory.”² The mediatrix of the Surrealist imagination was constructed as much from medieval theology as from courtly literature. Yet, this co-dependence between sacred and secular rhetoric was – though differently expressed – as prevalent in medieval representations of the mediatrix.

The terms of the relationship between the saint and her witness borrowed heavily from the codes of the court. “Arthurian romance had so permeated late-medieval culture that authors of mystical and didactic literature...could assume familiarity with courtly matter.”³ The same popular rhetorical forms were utilised by sacred and secular texts. Ecclesiastical narrative already contained the bridal imagery in the *Song of Songs* and the iconography of the arch-mediatrix, the Virgin Mary. The influential secular romance *Roman de la Rose* contains a garden, which, like most medieval literary gardens, is a reflection of the court. The garden walls bear, among the fashionable personifications of Gladnesse, Curtesye, Youthe, a list of the vices that will not be tolerated within the garden’s walls: Hate, Coveytyse, Avarice, all figures lifted from scripture.

Primary among correlations between the sacred and the secular forms is the exaltation of a silent, removed, “superior” woman, whose distance and absence suggests to the lover/worshipper a space in which his soul might be reflected and articulated. The influence of both forms in the construction of the mediatrix is apparent in Dante’s *La Vita Nuova* and *La Divina Commedia*. In the latter, Beatrice is both the distant, silent (because dead, immaterial) and exalted beloved, but her immateriality allows her a degree of divinity and the trial her lover must undertake is therefore located outside of the material world: a move which takes Beatrice from the secular status of the courtly lady into the realms of the divine. She is not only exalted on the bases of her social elevation, her haughtiness and her withholding of love, but is also divinely angelic, a “pure” abstraction of womanhood that inspires both the courtly cerebro-sexual passions and the religious.

It is the mingling of the sacred and the courtly aspects of medieval love conventions that marks the territory of the vision romance. Drawing on Dante, Nerval – via Charcot – brought this particular set of visionary and romantic conventions closer to those Surrealist concerns he was himself anticipating. The descent for the beloved, that mystical imperative and elusive object of love, is enmeshed within a Surrealist interest in “poetic” madness, dream states, and an art-as-revolution politic. The mediatrix *par excellence* of this modern praxis is the heroine of Breton’s *Nadja*. It is by deploying tropes from medieval romance and hagiography that Breton is able to represent – both to himself and his readership – his brief sexual and fiscal relationship with the patently unstable Nadja as “like making love to

Joan or Arc.”⁴ Leonora Carrington’s “Down Below” speaks directly to this use of historical rhetoric as a gloss or justification for the Surrealists’ reprehensible use of the mad *femme-enfant* as mediatrix in their project of poetic self-articulation.

Breton’s psychiatric training prepared him for the role of witness, confessor and scribe to Nadja’s visions and ecstasies. As a student of Charcot, he learnt early to associate the pleasurable act of observing (and questioning) female hysterics with that of observing a female mystic. Of his hysterics, Charcot remarked:

Les attitudes qu’elles prennent font songer aux attitudes sous lesquelles on représente les mystiques du Moyen Age, les Saintes le plus renommes par leur exaltation religieuses.⁵

Breton’s first conversation with Nadja is described as a confession.⁶ He imagines himself as Nadja’s God, and as her sun.⁷ She is Melusine, she is a sphinx. She is poor, pure, evasive, strange and she receives visions, both prophetic and divine; visions that Breton feels compelled to record in order that their significance will not go unrecognised. Throughout his brief time with her he is “greatly interested” in Louis VI’s and Louis VII’s “Courts of Love,” “imagining with great intensity what life might have been like during the period.”⁸

Theological readings of the fall in the Middle Ages mapped the direction of sin: from woman to man. Eve’s temptation was characterised by a desire for a specific knowledge – a desire she was unable to mitigate and which is therefore read as temptation. Consequently, the female pursuit of knowledge is dangerous, not only for woman but for the spiritual security of the community. Eve’s temptation suggested to Augustine her lack of *doctrinal* knowledge, which would perceive danger and vanquish it.

Perhaps the woman had not yet received the gift of the knowledge of God, but under the direction and tutelage of her husband she was to acquire it gradually.⁹

This acquisition was not only to be gradual but never fully realised, and its direction would counter the direction of sin: man to woman. The masculine disclosure of doctrine and the feminine threat of sin were positioned within a relationship of mutual resistance. Therefore, when women did begin to speak of their direct communications with God, the nature of their relationship with him, the nature of their telling of that relationship and the nature of its reception by the community were vastly different from those of male saints. In order to compensate for the potential eradication of man (and the perceived danger to the community of such an eradication) by a dialogue

between a woman and God, an abbot, or any male of a religious order, was required to be a female visionary's witness, scribe or confessor. He had to verify her as a genuine saint and her visions as genuine messages from God. And he had to record those messages. This arrangement is clearly fraught with issues of translation. "For some women, a male cleric was not just the authoriser but the author of her text."¹⁰

If she did not already, the female saint had to be made to meet religious requirements, just as Nadja must be made to meet Surrealist requirements. There are a number of instances in the text, as there are in medieval texts, where Breton interprets Nadja in ways that serve his Surrealist agenda: he describes her inability to conform to societal norms and her inability to afford or negotiate healthcare as "purely poetic,"¹¹ thereby complementing the Surrealist distaste for, and mistrust of, work, establishment and institutions – particularly psychiatric ones.

The questionable role of confessor, and the issues of translation that it presents, rub up against the Surrealist relationship with psychoanalysis. Breton's tone is modelled on that of the psychiatrist's recording of his medical observations – something which his training has prepared him for and which immediately positions him within the witness/scribe role. Surrealism's relationship with psychology is a complicated one, which Hal Foster and J H Matthews have assessed in detail.¹² For this particular reading of *Nadja*, we need to bear in mind Breton's professional exposure to, and fascination with, abnormal psychology and his and his contemporaries' belief in those abnormal states as an avenue to the poetic. But we must also consider his own dismissive remark that "Psychoanalysis is in fashion this winter."¹³ Freud's work, like that of Darwin and Nietzsche, was made to serve the Surrealists' poetics, while they rejected "the portion of Freudianism which demanded analysis and therapy."¹⁴ Their concern with abnormal states directly correlated with those states' ability to produce visionary material that complemented their poetic view: they did not want the secrets of their own unconscious exposed.

Nicholas Calas claims that "Freud's patients were victims; the poet, by the sole fact that he creates, is a *hero*."¹⁵ As we shall see, it is around the issues of responsibility and accountability, which this remark obliquely raises, that the medieval saint/witness relationship and that of Breton and Nadja are eventually confronted in Carrington's "Down Below." Among other things, "Down Below" highlights the various breaches of responsibility apparent in such relationships. The poet and the victim in Calas's example are the same person, differentiated simply by the discourse – psychoanalytic or Surrealist – through which they are perceived. The former presents a subject victim to the control of his/her unconscious and, perhaps, his/her

psychoanalyst; the latter, a subject connected to, and heroically navigating, the poetically fruitful beyond. The viewer's responsibility is substantial, since how the patient/poet is viewed significantly affects his/her further reception and, therefore, fate: incarceration or exaltation (or both). There is a slippage in Breton's view of Nadja: she is at times poet and at times mad. That slippage appears to repeatedly serve Breton's agenda, but also recalls that the medieval witness was required to judge between madness and the touch of God. In both relationships it is the male observer who must juggle the unknown with the known – a task which frequently requires that he defend himself and his credibility, since the failure to differentiate between the mysterious and the abnormal would place him in a publicly questionable position: a medieval abbot found to be housing a madwoman ran the risk of unemployment and blasphemy.

In both instances there are clear examples of the male witness defending his interpretations of his subject's behaviour and visionary experience. In *Nadja*, Breton's tendency to read unstable behaviour as the miraculous clearly aggravates Nadja's instability, which places greater pressure on Breton to find the poetic in her conduct, her speech and her naïve drawings. However, when he does recognise her madness, it is only at those times when she has failed to meet his definition of poetic (Surrealist) knowledge or connectedness. The final section of *Nadja*, in which Breton works and re-works his views on psychiatric institutions, is an example of this, since his impetus for writing it is Nadja's actual breakdown. Having been removed from his place of private witness by her incarceration, he is free to ruminate on his contempt for psychiatry and an uncomprehending society. To the last, Breton is defensive: he refuses to acknowledge his role in Nadja's unravelling, insisting always – even if defensively – that he reserves a privileged and illuminating view of her visions and the experience of “miraculous chance” those visions inspire in him. Breton attributes Nadja's slippage from inspired sphinx to raving madwoman to an overly prosaic society and psychiatric institution.

While still enamoured of her he claims that “she is so pure, so free of any earthly tie, and cares so little, but so marvellously, for life.”¹⁶ To have little care for life is marvellous – ostensibly an example of his own adherence to unworldliness (a very holy medieval notion) – however, immediately following this remark Breton exposes his specific interest in *her* unworldliness, rather than his own: “In her position she is certainly going to need me.” Her dependence upon him and her brilliance are immediately linked. Later he admits to his own “terribly decisive”¹⁷ role in her life (but not in her breakdown); he says that his allowing her too great a sense of emancipation was his mistake. Here, Breton is presenting himself as her

"Sun," the absolutist presence on which she is dependent and from which she receives stability and sanity so long as she is kept on a short leash. However, the "sanity" Breton refers to is only ever a Surrealist identity, which demands not only absolute dependence from her but also the difficult task of remaining enough outside the borders of normative behaviour to be a source of Surrealist vision and inspiration, and enough inside those borders not to be thought "mad" by her confessor (Breton). That is, she must not fail to inspire and surprise him, and she certainly must not get herself locked up. Once Nadja is incarcerated, Breton blames her for her fall from Surrealist heights, by emphasizing his own steadfastness:

I myself shall continue living in my glass house where you can always see who comes to call where I sleep nights in a glass bed, under glass sheets, where *who I am* will sooner or later appear etched in a diamond.¹⁸

By falling into certified madness, Nadja proves she was too weak to keep up the Surrealist cause, leaving Breton to carry on.

Yet, Breton's steadfast fidelity to his Surrealist identity forever depends on Nadja as literary figure. Nadja, Mark Polozzotti points out, is also trapped beneath the glass with Breton.¹⁹ In fact, any observation of Breton, as author and Surrealist, is dependent upon his observations and representations of her, since without her to witness and present to the world, his authorial agenda is annulled. This dependence is one reiterated by the medieval visionary and the man who "sees" her and records her behaviour and visions, since it is by virtue of this role that he is promoted from unknown cleric to widely read author. Breton's remark quoted above tellingly conflates the act of observation with that of entrapment and promotes entrapment as an ideal: it is in being seen that the glass encasement is transformed into diamond. In reaching this ideal, the confessor is dependent on his female visionary. Hence Nadja and Nadja's virtue only exist in her being observed: a reliable method of decreasing the agency and autonomy of the observed. This is nothing new to feminism, and it is absolutely applicable to the female spiritualists. Their worth was in what they could show to their witnesses.

It is not simply Breton's own observation/objectification of Nadja that shapes her virtues. Breton assesses her on the degree to which she is assessed by other men and the nature of that assessment. There is Nadja's judge, "Mr. G," and her "dear friend," a man to whom she "owes everything," who "put her to sleep every night...made her tell him about her day, down to the last detail, approved what he considered good, criticized the rest" – a man who fulfils the same vexed role as Breton: that of Nadja's

confessor. "Certain men are captivated" by Nadja, publicly and spontaneously blowing her kisses and proposing marriage, and waiters are so befuddled by her beauty that they fail to serve her food.²⁰ In the brief middle section of the text alone, Breton remarks thirteen times on other men's various attentions toward Nadja – almost as many instances as her attention to, and dependence upon, himself are remarked upon. Again, Breton's interest in the rhetoric of medieval romance and mysticism points to the source of this gendered arrangement.

Both the secular world of the court and the sacred world of the saints and their confessors were homosocial. "While the fantasy on which the romance genre is based might seem to involve the relations between men and women, closer analysis reveals that the homosocial bonds by which men established relations with one another, using women as tokens of exchange, are central to courtly ideology."²¹ Similarly, female saints, who, by virtue of their sex were forbidden to attend or participate in the majority of sacred ritual, were nonetheless significant emblems of sacred status between the men to whom they were connected.²² Surrealism is also a homosocial economy, as Simone De Beauvoir outlines in *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir stipulates that Surrealism is a masculine economy that fails to grant women their subjectivity. Carrington's text also points to this homosocial arrangement through the symptoms of her madness: anything fatherly is terrifying, but it is her "brothers" that rescue her from that terror. When incarcerated, she undergoes/imagines a ritual in which the powerful Don Luis punishes her for desiring fraternity by binding her and two men in a strange mute stillness for hours. Even her return to sanity, when it comes, is initiated by a man within the institution – Don Gonzalo – who "demystified the mystery that had enveloped me and which they all seemed to take pleasure in deepening around me."²³ One of Don Gonzalo's demystifying actions is to recommend that Carrington transfer her erotic desire for the destructive Don Luis to the benign Jose – continuing the practice of identifying her continually through, and passing her continually between, the men that surround her. But it is in *Nadja* that we find the most interesting example the (Surrealist) homosocial.

In a book full of actual images – the streets Breton and Nadja walked, the bars and cafés they drank in, the male Surrealists Breton mentions, their paintings, and Nadja's drawings – we are told that Max Ernst refuses to paint Nadja's portrait for the publication since Madam Sacco (whose photograph also features in *Nadja*) has predicted that a woman named Nadia or Natasha will do physical harm to the woman Ernst loves. Nadja's complete lack of representation as an actual woman – in a book full of images – is blamed on the psychically predicted possibility that she will harm

her rival. If we read the psychic's prediction as an extension of Ernst's anxieties, then his reluctance to meet Nadja could be seen as an oblique confession of his fear that Breton's girl is a more successful realisation of the Surrealist aspiration than his own; and therefore, Breton's value, as a man and a Surrealist, excels that of Ernst.

Nadja, as an emblem of Breton's worth, directly affects his eminence whenever she fails to meet the behavioural criteria set for her. Her behaviour sinks toward the ordinary and he is "desperate to restore her to a true conception of her worth."²⁴ He outlines what it is that constitutes her worth: her role as his visionary – a role that is constructed out of what will reflect back, favourably, onto himself. Further, she is "herself" when she is "not desperately deploring my strictness"²⁵ – she is herself when she is acquiescent to him and his concept of himself. "Who am I?" asks Breton in his opening line; "Who goes there?" he echoes in his closing, "is it only me? Is it myself?" Arguably, any homosocial society runs the risk of narcissism, since it is built upon reflections, but Surrealism – the philosophy that places Breton within a glass observatory – is undoubtedly a narcissistic economy. Chrétien de Troyes, the most eminent romance poet from the period Breton is so intrigued by, confirms the roots of this narcissism: when his great lover Erec first sees Enid and her beauty is such that the narrator is nearly silenced: "What should I say of her beauty? She was truly one who was made to be looked at, for one might gaze at her just as one gazes into a mirror."²⁶

The notion of woman as a kind of social glue between the men of a homosocial, narcissistic economy locates us firmly within the literary tradition of poetic feminine abstraction since, within that tradition, the feminine poetic operates as a link between two states. The lady linked the lover/troubadour to his benefactor, her Lord; the female spiritualists connected men with God, just as the Virgin did; Fortuna (the Fortuna of Boethius, Chaucer and Shakespeare) linked man with his fate; Nature linked the Romantics to nature; Love and Death carried Nerval between his life and his dreams. This is a narcissistic literary tradition: the writer pursues an abstraction – which is manipulable and predictable in ways actualities are not – in order to reach some knowledge or representation of himself. This is particularly true of Breton, whose literary practice pursues its object in order to experience "objective chance" – the experience that will "tear him out of subjectivity" into a more desirable and apparently more "true" experience of the self.²⁷ The assumption that events in the external world can reflect the self is a narcissistic pattern, but for Breton and his contemporaries this narcissistic gaze extends to those invisible mysteries "beyond" the empirical. The beyond, which the female visionary links the

male subject to, is therefore an amalgam of all the aspects of the self the narcissist longs to see reflected: the mysterious beyond is a canvas onto which requisite images of the self can be beamed.

This entanglement of the male subject with what he perceives within the female object's visions is made possible within the space created by those translation issues discussed above: the male "watcher" interprets his object's visions subjectively. We see this played out in the text when Breton factors himself into Nadja's visionary readings of public spaces, without questioning the nature of Nadja's visionary relationship with the external world since, for him, that relationship is clear: it is a playground of his own reflections. However, when Carrington reads personal, hermetic messages in billboards, those readings are presented as an example of her deluded state, a remark aimed at dismantling and exposing Breton's – and more generally, that of the male witness's – narcissistic use of female visions.

Carrington, writing as the mad woman, takes on Surrealism by speaking directly from a position of female subjectivity. She does this by adopting the voice of the Goddess (which is for her a pagan entity) through the symptoms of her madness. Like Nerval, she blurs the distinction between her interior and exterior world, deciphering meaning for the one in the events of the other. Unlike Nerval, who, in his visionary states, sees the feminine creative force, Carrington *is* that force. She feels that "it is (her) duty to liberate" the world – a world that *is* her body.²⁸ Her stomach is Spain, which she must purify by drinking orange blossom water and vomiting. This sense of corporeality not only characterises the life and work of the female spiritualists, it is one of the factors that contribute to their existence in an otherwise male tradition.

In the course of the Middle Ages there was a general shift in emphasis toward Christ's humanity, God inhabiting a suffering human body, culminating in the mutilation of that body in the Passion and Crucifixion... Given that medieval thought associated masculinity with mind and spirit and femininity with body, women, for all their inferiority and subordination, could be felt to have a special connection with Jesus and his Passion, and through their bodies they could hope to have special access to the sacredness associated with his body.²⁹

Margery Kempe wept obstreperously and often, and is told by Christ not to be ashamed but to take him, when she is in bed, as though he were her wedded husband. Julian of Norwich had (Surrealist) visions of Christ's copious blood seeping into her bedclothes until they were soaked through. Christine the Astonishing resurrected herself at her own funeral and spent

the remainder of her life enacting the punishments of purgatory – leaping into fiery ovens and plunging into icy water – and Elizabeth of Spaalbeek's life was an unbroken piece of spectacular gymnastic performance. She bled spontaneously; hung from a mimed cross; beat her breasts and eyes until they bled; and stayed in ecstasies, motionless and upright, for hours. Yet all of this was done by women whose witnesses presented them as the feminine behavioural ideal of romantic literature: Elizabeth of Spaalbeek, "hir pappys (breasts) ... alle defuyled with blode rennyng fro hir eyen" is nonetheless "fulle manerly" and displays a "merueilous onest and shameful gladness of cheer" and "maydenly shamefastnes."³⁰ Their often violent corporeality maintains, and is maintained by, their femininity.

Carrington's physicality has pagan roots, which firmly locates the corporeal woman – as a potentially healthy, robust and autonomous form – at the centre of the text's Surrealist adventure. This is an effective deconstruction of the physicality of the visionary tradition, in which the female subject dedicates and often sacrifices her body to God and the masculine institution of the Church. It also challenges the male Surrealist project, which either mutilates or removes completely the material presence of women. (As we have seen, Breton, together with Max Ernst, disallowed Nadja any photographic representation in a book full of photographs.) But this is only one of "Down Below"'s feminist functions. Given the confused and evasive manner of Breton's position in relation to his own role as Nadja's confessor/witness, one of Carrington's central concerns is to clarify the distinction between a stable and an unstable state of mind, while simultaneously criticising the invasive and naïvely narcissistic male Surrealist as manipulator and observer of those states. Before retreating into the "well-known lack of frontiers between *non-madness* and madness,"³¹ Breton comes so close to making the distinction between mental health and madness that it is difficult to believe his ignorance is not voluntary – especially since to admit his knowledge of those distinctions would undermine his entire Surrealist agenda. He defines moments of objective chance as a "complete lack of peace with ourselves provoked by certain combinations of circumstances which greatly surpass our understanding and permit us to resume rational activity, only if, in most cases, we call upon our very instinct of self-preservation to do so."³² But it is the presence of this self-preserving instinct in the person experiencing such a lack of peace that marks them as mentally fit. Carrington, on her opening page, outlines the need for that definition which Breton fails to make; and she does so bodily:

I want to say that the sentence passed on me by society at that particular time was probably, surely even, a god-send, for I was not aware of the importance of health, I mean of the absolute necessity

of having a healthy body to avoid disaster in the liberation of the mind.³³

Carrington, like Breton, is interested in openness, connectedness, freedom – what, with a glance back to Augustine, she calls “knowledge.” This is a knowledge free from “conformism” or institutionalism, and she locates it at the mid-point of what can be described as a continuum between health and madness.

It is within this middle ground of “non-madness” or “Knowledge,” as Carrington calls it, that she experiences a physical liberation – becoming nimble and at ease climbing mountains and trees, developing a sensitive “touch” language with animals – but that state quickly passes over into delusion. Again, the place of crossing is corporeal. Carrington, like her predecessors Elizabeth of Spaalbeek and Mary of Oignies succumbs to anorexia, two main symptoms of which are a cessation of all ingestion and a furious expenditure of energy: symptoms Carrington shares with these women. We know of anorexia now that it is a method of arrogating power to the powerless, but for the medieval spiritualists it was also a sign of holiness encouraged by the Church: food is of the world, which has been renounced. For Carrington, to not eat is a method of controlling a life that, with the inception of war, Max Ernst’s imprisonment and her consequent isolation, had become frighteningly unstable. However, as her opening remarks show, by continuing to not eat, she slips out of her “connected,” liberated state, into one of disconnection and dislocation. Her sense of responsibility for the world, and her subsequent bodily cleansing, is therefore both a dialogue with the voice of the goddess and a personal move toward applying order to a society that has turned, quite suddenly, disordered and alien.

Carrington continues to highlight the truths behind Breton’s evasions. In *The Manifesto of Surrealism*, Breton refers to the mad as having a “profound indifference to the way in which we judge them, and even to the various punishments meted out to them, which allows us to suppose that they derive a great deal of comfort from their imagination.”³⁴ This suggests that their indifference is self-elected, as is their privileging of the imaginative world. However, as Carrington illustrates, the mentally ill are in no way indifferent to the way they are judged; they may appear to be so since their ability to respond in an “ordinary” or expected manner to that judgement is muted. Far from evoking indifference, the way Carrington is judged and the punishments meted out to her – which are various and brutal – aggravate her condition. Most significant, since imagination bears such weight in Breton’s paradigm, is Carrington’s demonstration of the fact that her imagination offers her no comfort. Her attempts to imaginatively cure herself are

enacted in ritualistic ways that further exaggerate her illusions: the “excesses” of her imagination are symptomatic of her illness and the more she engages her imagination, the further entangled she becomes in the delusions she recognises as having a tyrannical hold on her.

Breton believes in the virtue of openness; Carrington believes in this also, but she manages to make the distinction between the kind of self-aware openness that is a rebellion against conformism and the openness of madness that is profoundly vulnerable and that eradicates the sufferer’s autonomy, leaving her dependent on her masculine witness/companion, as Nadja is. Once incarcerated, Carrington encounters Don Luis, who is essential in Carrington’s critique of the masculine fascination with female visionaries. What is intriguing about the way he is presented is that, speaking from within a position of the mad female subject, Carrington offers a fragmentary view of him that nonetheless manages to illustrate his fundamental incapacity to understand her.

At Covadonga, they tore my clothes off brutally and strapped me naked to the bed. Don Luis came into my room to gaze upon me. I wept copiously and asked him why I was kept prisoner and treated so badly. He left quickly without answering me. Then Frau Asegurado appeared once more. I asked her several question. She said to me: “It is necessary that you should know who Don Luis is; every night he comes and talks to you; standing on your bed, you answer him according to his will.” I did not remember any of this. I swore to myself that, from that moment on, I would never sleep and would protect my consciousness.³⁵

Don Luis, like Nadja’s “dear friend” comes to her at night and exercises his will over her own self-representation in such a way that engenders a psychological dependence on him as confessor. “I suddenly felt horribly depressed,” Carrington reports. “I felt that I was being possessed by Don Luis’s mind, that his domination was swelling within me like a giant automobile tyre.”³⁶ In her position there are few defensive measures to call on and, in a similar pattern to that of anorexia, she resists by refusing to perform a task which, fundamental to her *bodily*, is still within her control: she refuses to sleep. Carrington’s fragmentary picture of Don Luis continues:

Don Luis took me to the sunroom ... He began to talk of my visions, as though he had lived through them with me.³⁷

Don Luis called on me at midnight; his presence in my room at that hour inspired me with a desire for him. He talked to me gently and I believed he was coming to examine my delusions. Without waiting

for his questions, I would say: “*I have no delusions*, I am playing. When will you stop playing with me?” he would stare at me in amazement at finding me lucid, then laugh. And I would say: “Who am I?” while thinking: Who am I *to you*? He would leave without answering, completely disarmed.³⁸

Who is in control of these scenes? The power shifts repeatedly – an ambiguity that Breton does not allow for but which may have nonetheless existed between Nadja and himself. This kind of ambiguity marks the relationship between the saint and her confessor also, as Janette Dillon suggests in her article “Holy women and their confessors or confessors and their holy women?”.³⁹ There are a number of instances in the writings on medieval female spirituality in which the gendered and hierarchical relationship between the saint and her witness is reversed and the woman, speaking for God, begins to offer counsel and even absolution – a move that reverses the fundamental Christian beliefs in the directions of sin and knowledge. As we have seen, the female saints, by way of their femaleness – and their corporeality – had a particular relationship to God, but it is worthwhile placing this notion within the context of the various ideas of knowledge that haunt both medieval and Surrealist texts.

Breton is drawn to Nadja because she smiles “knowingly” and he clearly believes that she has a particular knowledge of, and connection to, the beyond; but this connection is expressed by her ability to reflect him and the phenomena of his life – thereby creating for him moments of “objective” chance. He therefore does not recognise her knowledge, but rather his own knowledge of himself via her, and his construction of her as a vehicle for his narcissistic aspirations. The knowledge Carrington is interested in is a freedom, a connectedness that challenges conformism to state, gender, rationality – a transcendent knowledge. Men who considered themselves Surrealist were also interested in this idea – their forays into automatic writing and altered states are well documented – but their particular fascination with the kind of “naturally” occurring and erotically desirable openness of the mad woman (which includes the innocent openness of the *femme-enfant*) is something separate to their own participation in the mysteries. Again, turning to the Middle Ages highlights this distinction.

The female saint was an aberration. This aberrance secured her career: to the cleric, church and village that abdicated her she brought renown, which in turn attracted pilgrims, who constituted the largest form of income, not only for the church, which received alms, but for the villages in which the pilgrims stayed. The female saint’s aberrance was therefore her most saleable quality. She, like Nadja to Breton and Carrington to Don Luis, brought prestige and renown. Her aberrance also meant that she was

able to conduct herself in ways precluded by the very education that was denied her. Her lack of scholastic training, or any training (excepting Hadjewich, Bridget of Sweden and Julian of Norwich, who were educated), granted her a particular kind of knowledge by virtue of her ignorance or naïveté, through which the voice of God might enter in forms inconceivable to her masculine counterpart. Educated, Christian men simply would not have behaved in the ways the female saints did – just as the Surrealists, for all their attempts at mimicking mad states, were not mad. The innocence of the female knowledge of God (or the poetry of the madwoman’s knowledge of the beyond) represented masculinity’s loss of such a knowledge – a loss that educated rationalism guaranteed would never be reclaimed. However, by positioning the muse so that she could be read as a reflection of his own worth, the narcissistic Surrealist (and the captivated medieval witness) could experience a semblance of that reversal and its accompanying sense of completeness.

You, the most vital of beings, who seem to have been put in my path only so I may feel in all its rigor the strength of what is not felt in you. You who know evil only by hearsay. You, indeed, ideally beautiful ... Without you what shall I do with my abiding love of genius, in whose name I have at least been able to attempt a few acknowledgements here and there?⁴⁰

Acknowledging genius is not an act of genius, and the distinction haunts Breton. Preoccupied by the reflection of genius that he perceives as operating between himself and Nadja (or, in the above quote, Susanne Muzard, Nadja’s successor and the woman to whom *Nadja* is dedicated), Breton has written a text that fails to represent either himself – lost as he is in the glow of reflection – or she in whom he saw that reflection. As a result the reader is not “abandoned ... to a fury of symbols” but to a fury of constructions.⁴¹

In a genre that pursues knowledge or “genius,” there is a transference between the “natural,” connected, aberrant knowledge of the female visionary/madwoman and the rational, witnessing knowledge of the male subject in whose hands that genre is shaped. He wants her knowledge, but by being rendered communicable to the public it is reconfigured into a different kind of knowledge – one in which Breton’s own rationality is mingled. As a result, the text (in this case, *Nadja*) – though built entirely around notions of the marvellous, the mysterious – feels weighed down by rationality. Ownership kills mystery; colonialism has shown us that. There is something of the colonist in the male subject’s desire for the ownership of a “feminine mystery” and his inability to grasp it in any way other than to abstract it, “wor-

ship" it as a reflection of himself, and ultimately annihilate it, leaving, in his voice or work, an echo of its once-vital presence. This brings us to those questions of authorship that make these texts, both medieval and Surrealist, so distinct.

Who is writing these texts? The visionary or the witness? The Breton captivated by Nadja's ethereal walk and leaf-like trembling? Or the Breton of the 1960s who re-edited *Nadja*, removing the sex scene with his "Joan of Arc"? Or the Breton of the retrospective voice at the text's end? Which Carrington? There are a number of narrated Carringtons; each positioned along her continuum of sanity, knowledge and madness. And there are a number of narrators: the autobiographer, the fiction writer, the satirist. Central to these questions is a notion that characterises the difference between *Nadja* and "Down Below" – the difference between objectivity and subjectivity. We have already seen that Breton's passion for "objective chance" unwittingly exposes his own narcissistic subjectivity and his consequent objectification of Nadja. Carrington's position within the feminine subjective is multifaceted and complex and at times more objective than is immediately apparent. These ambiguities are further confused when compared to medieval texts, which belong to a literary tradition in which allegory is used to represent subjectivity in an external form and a cultural tradition in which a person's virtue is realised externally, through action.

In her *Revelations*,⁴² St. Elizabeth of Hungary insists that her visions are "visible," corporeal, external, yet she sees them "secretly with the eyes of (her) soul." Finke writes:

Many of Elizabeth's visions occur while she is praying, which is surely as much as interior as an exterior activity, that is, one's state of mind is more important than the external signs of prayer (kneeling, crossing, reciting).⁴³

Yet, in a vision, the Virgin tells Elizabeth how she should pray by representing the activity to her as an external event: "When I prayed I did as he that would make a well."⁴⁴ The saints had externally-constructed visions that they looked upon, not in order to distance and control those visions, but to further their experience of the divine – they objectified, or externalised, an interior or subjective vision and, by gazing at it, they surrendered to it, often running the risk of annihilation:⁴⁵

Suddenly she saw the our Lord Jesus on high sitting on his throne and with that delectable sight she fell from herself into nothing as burning wood turns to ashes.⁴⁶

This annihilation is the goal of Marguerite of Porete's "heresy of the free

spirit," which deems that the individual soul, reduced to absolute nothingness and absorbed into the soul of God, is superior to other Christian souls and therefore no longer required to seek the virtues, which are "bondage" to such a free, liberated state.⁴⁷ The echoes with Carrington are clear: the female subject's pursuit of the virtues is a practice stipulated by the masculine institution of the Church (just as the aspiration for, and provision of, a visionary state and its poetic product is the masculine doctrine of the Surrealists). By subverting the trope of self-annihilation, the visionary presents herself as connecting directly, and without the assistance of her witness, to those experiences beyond the worldly and institutional. In doing so, she finds not only autonomy but spiritual or poetic supremacy. She is no longer the mediatrix between her male confessor and God (or the Surrealist and the poetic beyond); rather, her relationship with God is a privileged one that renders her confessor or witness not only unnecessary but spiritually deficient.

Nadja and "Down Below" also share with their medieval predecessors the temporal issues attendant upon the transmission of these texts. There is always a belatedness to the reportage of visionary experience and how the time between the event and the telling of it is represented reveals varying forms and degrees of authorial presence. Julian of Norwich filled the temporal gap with homely images, images lifted from her surroundings, thus mixing her empirical and visionary experiences. She describes the blood flowing from Christ's crown as "round beads...round herring scales...and raindrops from the eaves."⁴⁸ From Crampton, Finke argues that these consciously formed representations of Julian's visionary images are both an "effort to communicate, to get the vision down exactly as remembered," but also, a "reminder of language's failure to communicate the vision effectively."⁴⁹ Breton uses the belatedness of reportage to further construct and deepen his representation of his experiences (via *Nadja*) of the marvellous. The middle section of *Nadja* is often something of a pen fight between the narrating and the narrated Breton:

I give her money, three times the agreed amount, which, as I have only just realised, is certainly a coincidence. She cries. We are alone in the bar when in comes a kind of peddler ... He offers a few crudely coloured prints for sale, mostly French historical scenes ... (I had recently become greatly interested in the period...imaging with great intensity what life might have been like).⁵⁰

In Breton's case, the recollection of events is itself part of a project he wishes to attribute wholly to the time of the events themselves. This contributes to his tone of defensiveness, given it suggests his awareness that

the events lack sufficient credibility or interest and must be embellished, while the fact of the embellishment itself must be denied. Conversely, Carrington makes explicit use of the temporal distance between the events and their telling in order to give a sense of truth both to the events themselves and to the difficulty of representing them. She acknowledges the impossibility of reconstructing the past as unaltered by the time that has lapsed: "Before taking up the actual facts of my experience"; "I now resume my story"; "I am afraid I am going to drift into fiction, truthful but incomplete, for lack of some details which I cannot conjure up today and which might have enlightened us."⁵¹ Carrington's self-conscious and acknowledged use of narrative conventions actually reads as the most straightforward method of telling, especially since she is trying to reconstruct both the subjective experience of insanity and those events – outside of the mad subject's cognitive register – that contributed to and sustained her illness. Her point is that such an experience can only be reconstructed: were she to present the reader with the actual voice of the madwoman, the text would lack the sufficient structure for the reader to comprehend either her experience or its context. By locating us within her various temporal positions in order to transmit the experience of remembering difficult and convoluted events, Carrington's authorial voice feels less constructed – though it is arguably a more sophisticated narrative construction – than Breton's interjecting narrative voice.

Carrington at times guides the reader through the interpretation of her delusions:

I went up to my room and found on my bed some nightgowns belonging to Catherine, which the laundress had deposited there by mistake. I imagined that Van Ghent, acknowledging my power, had made amends and sent them to me as a present.⁵²

These moments, in which Carrington outlines the delusional aspects of her behaviour, come early in the text and early in her breakdown. Narrated this way, Carrington enables the reader to walk with her through the beginnings of the fracturing of her consciousness, and thereby understand the gradual movement toward a more complete delusional state. In later scenes, she remains within the narrated voice, inviting the reader to step into the scene and experience the confused line between delusion and reality. One such example is when Don Luis himself "goes mad" – we are left to decide whether he is "mad," "angry" or taking "a vacation from himself."⁵³ This scene also serves to communicate the slippage of power between subject and object and the unclear division of the sane and the mad: "I quietly rejoiced at the idea that Don Luis had become a raving maniac."⁵⁴

Carrington uses the distance between the events she reports and the event of the reporting to highlight that “connected” space on the continuum between sanity and madness that so interests her. Within that space, the delusions she suffers in fact form a kind of super-reality, since they are built from political truths:

An accord between Spain and England seemed to me the best solution. I therefore called at the British Embassy and saw the Consul there. I endeavoured to convince him that the World War was being waged hypnotically by a group of people – Hitler and Co. ... Instead of wandering aimlessly in political and economic labyrinths, it was essential to believe in our metaphysical force and divide it among all human beings, who would thus be liberated. This good British citizen perceived at once that I was mad.⁵⁵

As part of her project to define a continuum of knowledge and then place herself along it at the point where she can experience emancipation without slipping into delusion, Carrington alludes to the maddening effects of both class and gendered behavioural expectations:

It is obvious that, for the ordinary citizen, this must have taken on a strange and crazy aspect: a well-brought-up young Englishwoman jumping from one rock to another, amusing herself in so irrational a manner.⁵⁶

Likewise when incarcerated she perceives that “the windows were closely corseted with iron bars.”⁵⁷ Is it the narrated or the narrating Carrington that codes her enclosure femininely? If it is the former, then her political remarks are being served from within the visionary experience and this comment becomes one of Carrington’s “super-real” observations – an example of “connected” knowledge from the beyond. If it is the latter, then the corseted bars are a political remark made possible by the belatedness of her reportage – an example of her politicised authorial use of that knowledge.

Each of the structural, rhetorical and thematic correlations raised here between the two modes of surrealist visionary *récit* and their medieval counterparts would repay more detailed examination. Such studies will broaden the terms under which we consider the Surrealist movement, while further explicating the crucial role female writers such as Carrington play in the surrealist tradition.

- 1 André Breton, *Nadja*. Trans. Richard Howard (London: Penguin, 1999); Leonora Carrington, "Down Below," *The House of Fear* (London: Virago, 1988), pp. 163-216.
- 2 Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," *Reflections*, Trans. E. Jephcott (NY: Schocken Books, 1978), p. 181.
- 3 Deborah Rose-Lefmann, "Lady Love, King, Minstrel: Courtly Depictions of Jesus or God in Late-Medieval Vernacular Mystical Literature," *Arthurian Literature and Christianity: Notes from the Twentieth Century*. Ed. P. Meister (London: Garland Publishing, 1999), p. 141.
- 4 Mark Polizotti, "Introduction" to Breton, *Nadja*, p. xiv.
- 5 "The attitudes they adopt are reminiscent of those representing medieval mysticism and the glorification of the saintly women of that era," R. Bourneville, "Iconographie Photographique de la Salpetriere." *Aux Bearaux de Progress Medical* 1 (1876-80), p. 107-8.
- 6 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 64.
- 7 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 111.
- 8 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 97.
- 9 Augustine. *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*. Trans. John Hammond Taylor (NY: Newman Press, 1982), p. 175.
- 10 Elizabeth Spearing, "Introduction," *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality* (London: Penguin, 2002), p. 3.
- 11 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 70.
- 12 Hal Foster, *Convulsive Beauty* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1993); Mathews, L. H. *Surrealism, Insanity and Poetry* (NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982).
- 13 André Breton, "Interview de Professeur Freud a Vienne," *Litterature* 1 (1922), p. 19.
- 14 R. Belton, *The Beribboned Bomb: The Image of Women in Male Surrealist Art* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1995), p. 26.
- 15 Nicolas Calas, "The Light of Words," *Arson* 1 (1942), 16. Cited in F. J Hoffman, *Freudianism and the Literary Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana UP, 1945), p. 108.
- 16 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 90.
- 17 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 136.
- 18 Quoted in Mark Polizotti, "Introduction" to Breton, *Nadja*, p. xvi.
- 19 Mark Polizotti, "Introduction" to Breton, *Nadja*,
- 20 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 99.
- 21 Laurie Finke, *Women's Writing in English: Medieval England* (London: Longman, 1999), p. 161.
- 22 Spearing, "Introduction," viii-xi.
- 23 Carrington, "Down Below," p. 208.
- 24 Breton, *Nadja*, p. 135.

- ²⁵ Breton, *Nadja*, p. 135.
- ²⁶ Chretien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*. Trans. William W. Kibbler (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 42.
- ²⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1953), p. 257.
- ²⁸ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 172.
- ²⁹ Spearing, "Introduction," p. xi.
- ³⁰ Manuscript Douce 114, cited in Spearing, "Introduction," p. xxi.
- ³¹ Breton, *Nadja*, p. 144 (italics Breton's).
- ³² Breton, *Nadja*, p. 20.
- ³³ Carrington, "Down Below," 1 p. 64.
- ³⁴ André Breton, *The Manifesto of Surrealism*. Trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Michigan: Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1969), p. 5.
- ³⁵ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 183.
- ³⁶ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 186.
- ³⁷ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 190.
- ³⁸ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 203 (italics hers).
- ³⁹ Janette Dillon, "Holy Women and their Confessors or Confessors and their Holy Women?: Margery Kemp and the Continental Tradition," *Prophets Abroad: The Reception of Continental Holy Women in Late-Medieval England*. Ed. Rosalynn Voaden (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1996), pp. 115-40.
- ⁴⁰ Breton, *Nadja*, p. 157.
- ⁴¹ Breton, *Nadja*, p. 111.
- ⁴² *Revelations of St. Elizabeth*, Cambridge University Library MS Hh.1.11. Folio 126. Cited in Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 131.
- ⁴³ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 131.
- ⁴⁴ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 131.
- ⁴⁵ S. Stanbury, "Regimes of the Visual in Pre-Modern England: Gaze, Body and Chaucer's Clerk's Tale," *New Literary History* 28 (1997), pp. 261-90.
- ⁴⁶ Mechtild of Hackeborn in Finke, *Women's Writings in English*, p. 129.
- ⁴⁷ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. xix.
- ⁴⁸ From Shewings, in Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 170.
- ⁴⁹ Finke, *Women's Writing in English*, p. 170.
- ⁵⁰ Breton, *Nadja*, p. 97.
- ⁵¹ Carrington, "Down Below," pp. 163, 117, 175.
- ⁵² Carrington, "Down Below," p. 172.
- ⁵³ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 188.
- ⁵⁴ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 190.
- ⁵⁵ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 173.

⁵⁶ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 169.

⁵⁷ Carrington, "Down Below," p. 179.