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Writing the Virgin’s Body: Breton and Eluard’s *Immaculée Conception*

by Katharine Conley

For Andre Breton, Francis Picabia’s work merited acclaim as both modern and surreal because, for Breton, Picabia: “demeure le maître de la surprise. . . . La surprise commande, en effet, toute la notion du ‘moderne’ au seul sens acceptable de préhension, de happement du futur dans le présent” (“Surréalisme” 221). “Le maître de la surprise”—the “master of surprise”—is an interestingly problematic designation, and no figure better embodies this surrealist paradox than Woman, because of the way the Surrealists continuously tried to “master” her by writing about her as an object of desire at once fearsome and alluring.

Surprise is characteristic of what one may call the “Automatic Woman” in Surrealism, because Woman as muse for automatic writing presides over a practice whose results are always surprising. Furthermore, as an image Woman can surprise in Surrealism because of the way she generates electric shocks. For example, in *L’Amour fou* Breton pays his highest compliment to Jacqueline Lamba, his second wife, when he writes of her: “cette femme était scandaleusement belle” (“Amour” 63). She surprises, shocks, or scandalizes in the manner of the mechanical short-circuit process so essential to surrealism.

As a muse, “Automatic Woman” stretches as the ideal conductor between the Surrealist male poet and his art, because she helps generate creative sparks in him. Woman is a “conductrice d’électricité mentale” (*Arcane* 17 11). At the same time she figures as a metaphor for the art he produces: she connects the poet with his object of art and is the object of his art—in other words, via the spark generated by her beauty, or her aura, she connects with the male poet in the manner of the two “réalités éloignées” from the definition of the surrealist image, first established by Reverdy: “L’image est une création pure de l’esprit. Elle ne peut naître d’une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées” (*Nord-Sud* 13, mars 1918). It is Woman, after all, who elicits and embodies Breton’s manifesto-statement about surrealist beauty: “la beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas” (“Œuvres” 753).

Images of Woman can also surprise the viewer through the shock of laughter. To compare a woman to a machine, for example, is shocking, which is precisely the effect sought by Picabia in his “La Fille née sans mère” (1913), a painting of a machine identified as a human being. In another
example, Man Ray's painting on glass, "L'Impossible, or L'Impossibilité" (or "Dancer/Danger") (1920), the various gears representing anticipated motion are labeled "Dancer." However, a strategic smear across the bottom of the "C" causes the viewer to do a double-take and re-read the name as "Danger." This image is an apt illustration of the notion of "Automatic
Woman" because it surprises and amuses by virtue of the associations the visual pun arouses, linking the figure of the dancer—Woman-as-an-emblem-of-Beauty to the figure of danger—Woman-as-Medusa. The substitution of a machine for a female dancer—a traditional emblem of beauty—also heightens the impression of Woman as Other for the male artist, and it emphasizes Woman's potential for glamor because of the way the feminine name shrouds the rather ordinary-seeming machine in mystery.

Of all Breton's muses, his "automatic" women, the Virgin Mary as the Immaculate Conception stands apart as the most appropriately surreal. The Virgin was a classic anti-symbol for the Surrealist group. The Surrealists were actively disdainful of organized religion and disrespectful of its symbolic representatives: a good pre-Surrealist example may be seen in Francis Picabia's "Sainte Vierge"—an inkblot representation of the Virgin Mary, from Picabia's Journal, 391 (March 1920); the viewer is first surprised by the assignation of such a serious name to an image that can be so casually produced, then shocked that such playfulness should be so surprising.

Humor is again the ultimate effect of the shock value of Max Ernst's "La Vierge corrigeant l'enfant Jésus devant trois témoins: André Breton, Paul Eluard et Max Ernst" (1926). While we may or may not feel shocked by the representation of the Virgin spanking the infant Jesus, or, perhaps more pointedly, by the fact that in the process the child's halo has fallen to the ground, we certainly do recognize how unusual it is to see the Virgin and the child Jesus portrayed in such a way, and the effectiveness of the joke is enhanced by our surprise.

Irreverent or not, however, both "The Virgin Spanking the Infant Jesus" and the inclusion of a chapter on the "Immaculate Conception" in Max Ernst's collage-novel, La Femme 100 têtes (1928), betray an attraction to the image and symbolism of the Virgin Mary on the part of the Surrealists. In many ways this is not surprising, because she is an easy mark, having been so seriously and formally portrayed by the Church for centuries. But the Virgin as the Immaculate Conception is also more directly relevant to Surrealism because she herself has subversive value as a female deity-figure within the patriarchal Church. That she functions as an appropriate anti-symbol for the Surrealists is obvious. It is less apparent but equally arguable that she also works as a potentially positive, straightforward symbol within Surrealism.

As the Immaculate Conception, the Virgin is shown alone, and consequently most subversively resembles the more powerful, previous goddesses whom she replaced—specifically, Isis. As the medieval miracle stories show, the Virgin has traditionally been viewed as a disruptive figure in the patriarchal Church—protecting known sinners who showed unswerving loyalty to her. She certainly continues to play an unpredictable role in the very modern sense for which Breton praises Picabia in that she
disrupts time by continuing to appear in body, up into the twentieth century.\(^3\)

Her apparitions are surrealistically disquieting because she returns in the same body, according to Church doctrine (1950), since she did not die but was “translated” into heaven.\(^4\) Her body functions as a medium between Heaven and Earth and between two kinds of time: eternal and chronological. Physically, the Virgin Mary lives in two worlds at once, reconciling apparently irreconcilable states of being and mind. When her body appears and is seen in France or elsewhere, a bit of infinity slips into the temporal world, like a surrealist surge of the irrational within daily life. Her words uncannily remind us of the “phrase qui cognait à la vitre”—the phrase that knocks at the window of consciousness— which Breton refers to in the first *Manifeste du surréalisme* as his initial experience of automatism (“Œuvres” 324).

When she appears we expect her to speak for the patriarchal Father; yet one day she might refuse to act as an intermediary and shock and surprise us by speaking for herself. In this sense, the Virgin is a positive symbol for Surrealism, and not merely an anti-symbol. She is emblematic of the modern—of the “happement du futur dans le présent” which Breton admired in Picabia’s work, and she stands as an appropriate metaphor for the automatic text itself. Like an automatic text, she herself touches both the irrational and rational, articulating the inexpressible. Her physical being utters words from out of this world the way a Surrealist enunciates an unconscious flow of words through the automatic text. Just as she disrupts time, so does the Surrealist composer of automatic texts: by writing quickly, the automatic writer seeks to make time stand still momentarily by slipping in words between the minutes necessitated for thought-word formulation.

*L’Immaculée Conception* was written over a two-to-three-week period in the late summer of 1930 by André Breton and Paul Eluard. As with all automatic writing projects, including Breton and Philippe Soupault’s *Champs magnétiques* (1919), in this one, Breton and Eluard sought to produce text without censoring the writing process in any way. The first section, “L’Homme,” traces the human life cycle; in the second, “Les Possessions,” Breton and Eluard simulate states of mental illness in a series of “Essais”: “Essai de la débilité mentale,” “Essai de la manie aiguë,” etc. This section is particularly interesting because the writing loses syntactical clarity, something which did not happen in *Les Champs magnétiques*. The text breaks down, not only on the level of grammatical intelligibility, but also on the level of the signifier. The third section, “Les Méditations,” consists of automatic musings on various notions which function as mediators of reality: “La Force de l’habitude,” “La Surprise,” “Il n’y a rien d’incompréhensible,” “Le Sentiment de la nature,” “L’Amour,” “L’Idée du devenir.” The fourth and final section comes back to a playful recasting of Christian notions of truth and time: “Le Jugement originel.”

Unlike the procedure followed by Breton and Soupault with *Les Champs*...
magnétiques, Breton and Eluard determined in advance the overall title, *L’Immaculée Conception*, and the titles of the individual sections, and wrote automatically from the inspiration of those titles. In effect, then, the Virgin governs the text in a way that the section titles of *Les Champs magnétiques* cannot. Not only is the text named for her, but the frontispiece to the original edition was illustrated with the familiar photograph of the statue of her at Lourdes. The Picasso Museum manuscript also shows a supplementary image of her: another postcard of her as the Immaculate Conception, as she appeared at Azpeitia in the Basque region of Northern Spain—a reflection of the influence of Salvador Dali, who was from this region, on the artistic and personal lives of Breton and Eluard at the time (Gala had recently left Eluard for Dali; an illustration by Dali adorned the cover.).

The first phrase in the text is a direct reference to the Virgin Mary: “Prenons le Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle et montrons-le.” Breton and Eluard poke fun at the “Good News” of the Gospels by referring to them in the name of an ordinary Parisian boulevard, and by opposing this work of automatic writing to them. They also slyly make fun of the “Good News” delivered to the Virgin at the Annunciation, while at the same time proposing to demonstrate the ways in which voices from internalized other worlds—including hers—can speak out through the medium of the automatic text and influence the way we perceive “reality.”

One of the first indicators that there is an element of seriousness to Breton and Eluard’s play is the fact that the first section, “L’Homme”—the Word made Man according to the Gospels—represents an indirect reference to the very “Good News” which they are also mocking. A complete “human life” cycle is contained within this section’s five parts—“La Conception,” “La Vie intra-utérine,” “La Naissance,” “La Vie,” and “La Mort”—which is further suggestive of the entire Christian cultural construct within which Breton and Eluard grew up.

The final section’s title, “Le Jugement originel,” similarly traces the Christian life cycle by implication: from Man’s first entry into the human world after the “original” sin, to the final “judgment” at the end. By reversing the references chronologically, making the “judgment” “original” instead of “final,” Breton and Eluard inscribe in this title the qualities associated with the Christian God, (and with the immortal Virgin), implying that in the original sin lies the final judgment: in the end is the beginning, a metaphor for infinity.

Critics such as Marguerite Bonnet and Etienne-Alain Hubert, editors of the Pléiade edition, have recognized the significance of using the Virgin Mary in the title. But beyond its title, *L’Immaculée Conception* is interwoven with thematic references to the Virgin: first, to her as a feminine archetype; second, to her as a disruption to chronological time; third, to her as a being at once natural—a mother—and unnatural—a mother who conceived, and was conceived, immaculately, the way a thoroughly “modern”
machine might reproduce; fourth, as a metaphor for the male artist's own "immaculate" conception of the automatic text; and finally as a metaphor for the automatic text itself.

The first thematic reference to the Virgin—to Woman as a traditional object of desire—is deployed throughout the text in various forms. In "La Vie intra-utérine," for example, Woman as representative of an absolute is referred to in the guise of statues of Venus. Because these statues are multiple, they become generic archetypes of the feminine—in the manner of the myriad statuettes of the Virgin present in churches and available at pilgrimage sites such as Lourdes. These statues in particular link Venus, the older goddess of Love and Beauty, to the Virgin, because they are maternal and play actively the role of muse: "Les gestes interdits des statues dans le moule ont donné ces figures imparfaites et revenantes: les Vénus dont les mains absentes caressent les cheveux des poètes" (45-46).

Woman as a beautiful object of desire is also impossibly idealized beyond the scope of the real in one of the "Possessions": "Essai de simulation de la paralysie générale." In terms not unlike those from traditional poems to Mary, the text reads like a love letter—almost unpunctuated, propelled by the untrammeled eroticism of images of love and desire—in which the beloved is described as a limitlessly beautiful creature: "Ma grande adorée belle comme tout sur la terre et dans les plus belles étoiles de la terre que j'adore ma grande femme adorée par toutes les puissances des étoiles belle avec la beauté des milliards de reines qui parent la terre l'adoration que j'ai pour ta beauté me met à genoux..." (79). This ideal Woman is like a deity for the poet, an internalized ideal—the way the Virgin Mary is for believers, and also for many writers raised in the Western poetic tradition.

The idealization of this Woman-as-beautiful-object-of-desire is in keeping with the way in which the Virgin also represents eternal time in relation to our sense of chronology—the second thematic reference to her. In L'Immaculée Conception, the principal contrast between an eternal dimension and the human life cycle is presented in visual terms of invisibility and visibility. References to alternate modes of conceiving of time pepper the entire first section, but the most striking imagistic references occur in the "Méditations." In "La Surprise," the contrast between the two dimensions is represented in the form of a relay race: "Les êtres possibles interrogent les êtres probables, déjà sans pères et sans mères. Ils attendent leur tour, ils font cercle, ils se passent le gant de la visibilité. L'homme, au centre, n'est plus que la chandelle." (113). When we are alive, in other words, the only difference from when we are not, is our visibility, which in and of itself is only a matter of perception, of the light shed on life by human sight and thought.

In "L'Idée du devenir" this image becomes more explicitly that of a race: coming into visibility from invisibility is a collective effort in which we are alone among many on our path through visibility-life:
Que de coureurs et quelle course! C’est si loin qu’il n’y aura personne à attendre l’arrivée. Les premiers auront mille et mille fois rejoint les derniers, tant après tout la piste est petite: or, comme on se garde bien, et pour cause, de compter les tours . . . Dans nos courts rapports avec l’existence le tout est que nous ayons un peu entretenus le rythme. La mémoire se perd des courbes du trajet. C’est par une ligne indéfiniment droite que la direction est donnée, que le retour est rendu impossible. Et le coureur se dépasse . . . Il est devenu invisible.

In keeping with the third category of thematic references to her, the Virgin’s characteristic of being both natural and unnatural at the same time, the text plays with the question of nature. Some of the least comprehensible phrases are taken from the serious journal, La Nature, in an act of appropriation of words that parallels Ernst’s appropriation of images into his visual collages. Breton and Eluard, by de-contextualizing the phrases they incorporate into L’Immaculée Conception, show just how unnatural nature can seem, just as Ernst did in La Femme 100 têtes. The reference to “la podurelle du col de fenêtre,” for example, makes sense once we learn that it is lifted directly from the August 1893 issue of La Nature, which announces the discovery of a new kind of podurelle, a tiny orange insect, near the “col de Fenêtre” which is in the “massif du Grand Saint-Bernard” (Bonnet, “Notice” in “Œuvres” 1645).

Breton and Eluard also refer indirectly to the Virgin’s unnatural nature by referring to a woman who is described as anarchistic because she bears children. In a surrealist perspective, it is unnatural for women to bear children. This is because, ostensibly, the Surrealists claimed to be in favor of freeing women from their reproductive function. In accordance with her presentation in this text as an emblem of resistance to Church hierarchy, the Virgin is unnatural, if not anarchistic, because, according to Church doctrine, she managed to bear a child while retaining her virginity.

The Virgin Mary’s body may have served as a “vessel” for Jesus Christ, but he was not conceived naturally. In this way, Mary “reproduced” the way poets do, who also conceive and give birth to texts immaculately in a similarly “unnatural” way. This constitutes the fourth thematic reference to her. Finally, Mary may also be identified with the text itself. Her body works like a signifier, transporting signified-meaning. But because the signifieds she carries are mystical and polyvalent, her body is a particularly apt metaphor for the signifiers in an automatic text, in which the referents are unclear, and which tend to play a larger role in producing meaning, in establishing new fields of reference. Like the mentally ill whom they are emulating in the “Possessions,” Breton and Eluard seek to find meaning and poetry through language as an active source, a medium, whose role goes beyond that of mere mediator of meaning. The words themselves are like bodies which have life of their own, just as the Virgin Mary, through her bodily “appearances,” seems to have a life of her own.

For Breton and Eluard, the automatic text mediates between their con-
scious selves and their more sacred unconscious beings. The Virgin as an Automatic Woman acts as a conductor to their work by revealing repressed aspects of themselves on paper, and she acts as a metaphor for that work. As a deity-figure, she helps them discover the feminine-sibyl in themselves; and as an unpredictable liminal body outside of themselves—an icon for *écriture*—she emblematizes the automatic text, the result of their inspiration. Under the “heading” of the Immaculate Conception, Breton and Eluard experiment with the ways in which language itself can generate poetry. The text demonstrates how poetic language, something like an Automatic Woman, is capable of doing more than either mirroring the writer’s consciousness or mediating between himself and the world. Poetic language is capable of generating its own spark and momentum, particularly in the automatic writing process, like an Automatic Woman become autonomous.

In Breton’s 1938 photomontage, “Autoportrait” (also entitled *Ecriture automatique*), he shows himself facing the viewer: through the lens of his microscope, wild horses escape under a full moon. With his lens he consciously pursues the marvelous, while all along it lies behind him—a visual metaphor for “within” him—repressed behind the prison-wall of his unconscious, and disguised as a beautiful woman. The woman is looking at him, not at the camera. She is accessible only to him and waits to be let out, via the automatic writing process.7

For Breton, and the Surrealists in general, the marvelous was gendered feminine, like the Virgin Mary. The Virgin as the Immaculate Conception was most effective for them as a muse when they internalized her, like the woman in the “Autoportrait,” and also like the Virgin Mary and all her characteristics. She was whom they sought when they held the pen over the page in anticipation of the writing which would spill out and reveal their own secret identities to them. She inspired the text and embodied it, because as long as the “Automatic Woman” was only the ephemeral marvelous—like the Virgin Mary—she could endlessly and immaculately reproduce sparks within the male poets who turned to her for that ineffable feeling of creativity made manifest in their own works.

The seriousness with which patriarchal religion regards her makes the Virgin an easy target for the Surrealists’s sense of humor. But her appearing body serves as a metaphor for their own writing bodies—used by them as mediums in their search to unveil the secrets of their own desires—and acts as an appropriate metaphor for the automatic writing project, as an icon for the surprising, modern, automatic text itself.
Notes


2 Henry Adams quotes Gaston Paris on Gaultier de Coincy, the thirteenth-century poet who put the Miracles de la Vierge into verse: “a nun who has quitted her convent to lead a life of sin, returns after long years, and finds that the Holy Virgin, to whom, in spite of all, she has never ceased to offer every day her prayer, has, during all this time, filled her place as sacristine, so that no one has perceived her absence” (244).

3 Three of her most celebrated appearances have taken place in Paris to Catherine Labouré in 1830, at Lourdes to Bernadette Soubirous in 1858, and at Fatima, Portugal to three children in 1917. But she reportedly continues to make appearances to this day.

4 The date when it was determined that the Virgin kept her original body (1950) indicates to what extent interest in the Virgin Mary is a twentieth-century concern; Mary is said to have gone to heaven in her sleep, without dying, in a doctrine called the “Dormition,” according to which “she is translated to heaven” (“Alone” 84).


6 Both of these photographs are reproduced in the 1991 Corti edition of L’Immaculée Conception. For more on Dali’s influence on L’Immaculée Conception see Chénieux-Gendron.

7 There is an earlier photograph entitled L’Écriture automatique, which appeared in the Révolution surréaliste (1927). It shows a woman dressed as a school-girl, a femme-enfant, holding a pen poised and ready for the automatic flow of words. She looks away both from the page and the camera, and thus represents Woman as Medium, emphasizing Woman’s capacity for clairvoyance, but also her lack of mental engagement in the process. She is another example of a surrealist Woman-symbol, devoid of subjectivity. She functions as an early visual metaphor for the automatic text as medium between the male poet’s conscious and unconscious thoughts.

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