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Silence in the Heart: The Feminine in Desnos's *La Liberté ou l'amour!*

by Katharine Gingrass

In the night in which we live, in the carefully preserved obscurity which prevents man from rebelling, a beam from a lighthouse sweeps in a circular path over the human and extra-human horizon: it is the light of Surrealism.
—Hugnet 64

The probing image of a lighthouse shedding its light into the night and into the sea, which opens Robert Desnos's *La Liberté ou l’amour!*, is emblematic of the relationships represented in the text. This image eloquently characterizes the manner in which the Surrealists of the 1920s—at that time an almost exclusively male group—envisioned their appropriation of traditionally feminine territory: the unconscious world of dreams, magic, and clairvoyance. They sought to redefine the feminine by examining it with a masculine gaze. Desnos made the feminine particularly radiant by shining his poetic admiration upon it and depicting the feminine—women, fantastic beasts, the sea, and most importantly, love—as marvelous, mysterious and mystically powerful. But what was the role of the feminine for the Surrealists, particularly Desnos?

In order to lay claim successfully to traditionally feminine territory, the Surrealists needed to ostracize women from their inner circle, and impose absence on them. Gérard Durozoi and Bernard Lecherbonnier assert that from the Surrealists's perspective, women had childlike qualities, and retained contact with an unconscious world, a “monde prélogique” (174), in which language was unnecessary for communication. They explain the Surrealists's wish for tapping their own inner knowledge as “le désir de retrouver le secret, oblitéré par le rationalisme et déformé par le christianisme, de cette pensée magique, de ces ‘pouvoirs perdus’” (11), in other words, a desire for privileged access to the feminine, in which they would not lose control of their logic, their language, of their masculinity itself.

The fundamental opposition between masculine presence and feminine absence is what Desnos sought to resolve in *La Liberté ou l’amour!*, by writing a love story about a fictional pair—the adventurous Corsaire San-
glot and his lover, Louise Lame—which runs counter to the story of another pair: himself, or "je," and a second feminine persona, identified as "elle," "tu," or "la chanteuse." In the first relationship, the male is dominant through his presence, his actions and the inner voice the reader is given to follow; in the other, the female dominates by her silence. A final opposition lies between Desnos and his text: it serves as the record of his search for the feminine, while simultaneously separating him from it by virtue of its nature, but also because of its self-reflexive perspective.

The primary opposition in the text is that generated by the contrast between the narrator's, and his hero's, relationships. Where the Corsaire enjoys two sexual encounters with Louise Lame in the text—the first in a hotel room, the second at the English boarding school where she teaches (26 and 108)—Desnos himself merely longs for meetings with his Other. He addresses her in the text, but fails to elicit a response. This silence is in fact what generates the text; the record of the Corsaire's adventures may be seen primarily as a digression from the narrator's more pressing interest: waiting for his lover to respond while filling the time with the story of someone who achieves what he cannot.

Desnos uses the encounters between the Corsaire and Louise as a reverse paradigm for his own love for "elle": the Corsaire and Louise succeed in meeting and making love, which he does not; and when they do meet, their union is denied by the callous treatment of one by the other. The Corsaire is united with Louise, but also opposed to her: he leaves her crying after their first encounter. As she attempts to bar his departure by standing in front of the door: "Il l'écrita de la main et tandis qu'elle s'écroulait sanglotante et décoiffée, le pas décrit dans l'escalier" (31). Desnos, whose role in his love-relationship approximates Louise's more than the Corsaire's, names himself as the explicit narrator in chapter four, leaving no doubt that the reader is meant to equate Robert Desnos and "je":

Compte, Robert Desnos, compte le nombre de fois que tu as employé les mots 'merveilleux', 'magnifique' . . .
Corsaire Sanglot ne se promène plus dans le magasin d'ameublement aux styles imités.
La femme que j'aime! (48)

He is opposed to his "chanteuse" because she pretends to ignore him, hence this text:

Qu'elle vienne, celle que j'aimerai, au lieu de vous raconter des histoires merveilleuses. . . mais il faut que dans le moule d'une prose sensuelle j'exprime l'amour pour celle que j'aime. Je la voit, elle vient, elle m'ignore ou feint de m'ignorer. (44)

The third set of relationships, between members of the Club des Buveurs de Sperme (a club into which the Corsaire wanders in chapter seven) and their lovers, are oppositional as well. The women described in this chapter have been humiliated, beaten, sodomized, even murdered (66–86).
One characteristic links these relationships: they are all erotic in the sense that none of the sexual encounters is traditional, none can result in children. According to the Catholic Church in which Desnos was raised, sexual relationships should occur only between husband and wife, and only for the purpose of procreation. From the love Desnos bears his “chanteresse,” to the thrills the members of the Club des Buveurs de Sperme experience in recounting their various seductions, none of these relationships is appropriate in the eyes of the church, because none of them will result in progeny. They are hence all “criminal,” since they are in the service of pleasure—but whose?

Throughout the text, Desnos inserts references to characters who serve as the text’s icons. He mentions that the hotel room where the Corsaire and Louise engage in oral sex is also a place where Jack the Ripper once claimed a victim (26); while the Corsaire is on one of his adventures, he passes through a town which has a statue of Jack the Ripper in one of its plazas, causing the narrator to comment, “la statue de Jack l’éventreur indique seule qu’une population de haute culture morale vivait jadis” (46). In chapter eleven, he evokes the execution of Louis XVI and unites two other icons: “Le marquis de Sade met son visage près de Robespierre. Leurs deux profils se détachent sur la lunette rouge de la guillotine et Corsaire Sanglot admire cette médaille d’une minute” (112). For Desnos, these characters are worthy of mention in the text because of their histories of sexual and violent crimes. Jack the Ripper, in particular, was an ideal icon for the Surrealists (who admired violent criminals such as Germaine Berton) because his crimes were both sexual in nature and violent; his outrageousness was heightened by the fact that he was never caught. Sade was another favorite of the Surrealists, whose celebrity was also linked to his sexuality, as Maurice Nadeau explains:

The surrealists wove a legend around his name; for them he represented the highest and most stirring example. His lucid materialism, his search for the absolute in all forms of pleasure, notably in the sexual realm, his opposition to the traditional values and to those representing them, his gifts as a visionary, form the perfect figure of a man as they conceived him. (70)

Like Sade, Robespierre was against traditional values—those of the monarchy. He represented heroism for Desnos because his extremism was at the service of the Revolution—a revolution the Surrealists as a group hoped to emulate artistically—and because of the phonetic similarity of his name to Desnos’s given names: Robert Pierre.²

Of these three historic figures, Sade is the most significant because of his treatment of women. Angela Carter comments, “He was unusual in his period for claiming rights of free sexuality for women, and in installing women as beings of power in his imaginary worlds” (37). She cites Sade (in translation):
Charming sex, you will be free: just as men do, you shall enjoy all the pleasures that Nature makes your duty, do not withhold yourselves from one. Must the more divine half of mankind be kept in chains by the others? Ah, break those bonds: nature wills it. (37)

In *La Liberté ou l’amour!* Desnos shows an interest in exploring the nature of women’s erotic pleasure as well as men’s. As participants in erotic sexual acts, women too are liberated from their reproductive function, for so long viewed as their most significant role in society.

Louise Lame, for example, has a role apart from that of the Corsaire’s lover. Desnos attempts to characterize her as an equal partner to the Corsaire. He describes their first kiss as a “Baiser magistral des bouches ennemies” (27), and he refers to her as “la légendaire Louise Lame” (100). She also fights with the mermaid-concierge of the Club des Buveurs de Sperme, apparently living up to her name (lame, or blade). At the English boarding school where she is a mistress, she is shown without him, taking pleasure in ritually beating her charges (chapter ten). And she is shown undressing with, and making love to, two friends of hers—Jeanne-d’Arc-en-ciel and her sister, la pêcheuse de perles—in a room with a view of the Eiffel tower (56).

These sisters serve as foils for Louise because they are two-dimensional and she much less so. Jeanne-d’Arc-en-ciel is characterized as strong and fierce, a war-hero who defeats Jeanne d’Arc (53); la pêcheuse de perles (who is “named” for her function), is representative of extreme feminine weakness—she would prefer suicide to the pains of love (52). Jeanne d’Arc-en-ciel is physically powerful; la pêcheuse’s name evokes nocturnal palor and quietude. They serve as mirror-images for different aspects of Louise: she is strong and fierce—when she makes love to the Corsaire, the narrator comments, “Louise Lame devint plus resplendissante que le mâle” (28)—but she is also submissive to the Corsaire and weak by comparison to him. For these indications of Louise’s strength are continuously undercut by counter-examples of her weakness. She loses the fight with the mermaid at the Club des Buveurs de Sperme, and the Corsaire must take revenge on her behalf, by throwing the mermaid through a window (82). When he leaves her at the English boarding school after their second sexual encounter, the narrator explains: “La haine amoureuse la dresse. Car elle n’a pas suffi au contentement du Corsaire” (109). Even her pleasure in beating school girls is portrayed as a voyeuristic male fantasy: the Corsaire is described peeking through the window. Likewise, the love-making between Louise and the two sisters is presented in relationship to a phallic perspective: the room overlooks the Eiffel tower, and at one point the Corsaire passes beneath their window, casting a shadow over them, which troubles them (56).

In effect, even in her independent actions, Louise cannot escape her male lover’s influence. She remains more object than subject. Like her friends,
who serve as foils for her, she seeks out images of herself: she educated herself with picture postcards, in which she sought representations of her own "sexe martyrisé" (31). While together, the three women "se mirent dans une psyché et la nuit couleur de braises vives les enveloppe dans des reflets de réverbères et masque leur étreinte sur le canapé" (56). This inclination to seek mirror images reveals a propensity in Louise for becoming a mirror herself, not for other female characters, but for the novel's hero, the Corsaire. He is the adventurer who drives the narrative forward with his actions; she waits and is left behind. Her worthiness is primarily important as it relates to him, as it serves to enhance his stature as hero. Marie-Claire Dumas asserts that "Louise Lame apparaît, dans la lutte amoureuse, comme le digne adversaire—ou la digne partenaire—du Corsaire" (450). But the emphasis here must remain on the term "partner" and not on "worthiness," for her role too often approximates that of the damsel in distress.

By suppressing the individuality of his principal female character, Desnos seems to be jinxing his own hopes for a response from his female Other, the "chanteuse." Ironically, she who is characterized by her voice, is silent. And unlike the Corsaire, who seems indifferent to what Louise has to say to him, Desnos seems to want nothing more than to be able to talk to his love. He resembles Louise more than the Corsaire in his relationship; he reiterates several times throughout the text that he is the one who is waiting for the "chanteuse." For example, in the midst of the Corsaire's first sea-adventure in chapter four, the narrator suddenly interrupts his tale to speculate: "Je l'attends. Viendra-t-elle?" (41), switching from his character's story to his own, thus placing stronger emphasis on his own. He feels himself to be the victim in this relationship, because it is his feelings that are slighted. He reproaches her for her indifference: "Comment n'aurais-tu pas remarqué mon émoi? Comment n'aurais-tu pas voulu le provoquer?" (50). Their encounters are real only in his imagination: "tu couches toute nue dans mon cerveau et je n'ose plus dormir" (50). Is there any surprise in the fact that as he waits he creates a character so unlike himself, who is so much quicker to act?

Desnos gives the first indication of the Corsaire's difference from himself very early on. Assuming the narrative voice "je," he follows Louise Lame down the street. Gathering up her clothing as she sheds it from beneath her fur coat he exclaims, "Le pantalon de Louise Lame! quel univers!" (22)—but he never speaks to her. The Corsaire, on the other hand, is able to address and kiss a woman's hand, probably that of the "chanteuse" (the text is ambiguous on this point (21)). Whereas Desnos remains merely a voyeur, the Corsaire steps onto the stage of desire and plays an active part. He may be emotionally cold—a characteristic belied by his name, sanglot—but he is capable of passionate, if loveless affairs with women and other female creatures, like the "sphinx femelle" (92). In fact, he has more in common with the members of the Club des Buveurs de Sperme, who
recount their tales of romantic conquest as though they were mock-battle sagas—each story being more dramatic than the last—than with the narrator. He is less sensitive than the narrator, and yet, surprisingly, the Corsaire achieves not only a physical, but a spiritual relationship with his lover. He and Louise both think about one another when they are apart. As they walk the streets of Paris in chapter nine, for example, their thoughts of each other are powerful enough to travel “à travers les murailles, se rencontrent et créent des étoiles nouvelles” (100); they generate fireworks, indicating that union may be achieved but only in spirit, although even in spirit, the relationship between them seems to be beyond the narrator’s wildest dreams.

The Corsaire and Louise Lame’s final meeting encapsulates Desnos’s position regarding his female character. They are at a large gathering in Nice, which includes members of the Club des Buveurs de Sperme and the “chanteuse.” The guests go to sea in boats, hoping to gather marvelous treasures from their fishing nets, but instead they are attacked by sharks. We are not told the fate of Louise Lame, or of the “chanteuse,” but we seem to be assured of the Corsaire’s survival—we’ve been told he has killed sharks in the past (67), and the novel ends with an ellipsis, suggesting the continuance of his adventures: “C’est alors que le Corsaire Sanglot . . .” (118). In this implied survival by the Corsaire, and the complete lack of indication regarding Louise’s fate, the narrator can figuratively revenge himself upon his lover, “elle.” He may not be able to dominate her, but he can show how both he and his male protagonist prevail over Louise Lame in his story.

Despite the fact that Louise Lame is a realized character, her main role is nonetheless as object—not only of the Corsaire’s desire, but also of the narrator’s whim. At one point the narrator announces her funeral, countering his own authorial power to her mortality: “Le corbillard de Louise Lame peut poursuivre dans Paris un chemin sans accidents, je ne le saluerai point au passage. J’ai rendez-vous demain avec Louise Lame et rien ne peut m’empêcher de m’y rendre. Elle y viendra” (63). The phrase “Elle y viendra” is typical of men extremely confident with women, which Desnos reveals he is not. He is self-assured only with his fictional women: by means of his alter-ego, the Corsaire, and his text, he can control her in a way he cannot control the “chanteuse,” about whom he says in chapter four: “Sa vue imprime à mon cœur un mouvement plus rapide, son absence emplit mon esprit” (45).

Despite his longing and desire, “la chanteuse” is primarily present for Desnos as one of the “fantômes jaillis de la nuit profonde de l’encrier” (58), inadvertently united with the Corsaire and Louise on “la plaine aride d’un manuscrit” (58), this manuscript. Her emotional dominance reverts to submission under his pen. Ultimately, Desnos’s search for a mirror Other brings him back to the blank page, cold, like white marble (63), which refuses to be transformed into a mirror for his spirit “par une écriture
magique et efficace" (58). His writing creates only a “cimetière des mots” (63). The feminine he seeks is absent; like the chanteuse, she is interiorized, yet remains inaccessible. The feminine soul, l’âme (Lame), of his text is deaf to his entreaties, and denies his existence.

Desnos, in trying to inscribe his unconscious in this work, discovers that all of his love (Eros)-snares fail to capture the inner psyche (Psyche), or soul, he so earnestly seeks. Unlike the intrepid Corsaire, Desnos, the narrator, is more like the text’s other less successful explorers, particularly the desert explorer in chapter nine. When this explorer approaches the city he has seen from afar, it dissolves into a mirage, its castle, made of sand, decimated by wind. His own self-image becomes distorted to the point at which he feels himself to be reflected in “l’image chaotique des cieux, des autres êtres, des objets inanimés et des incarnations de ses pensées” (101). In writing this text, Desnos is recording the at times chaotic images of his own imagination, hoping that by their inscription he will be able to totalize them, to see them clearly, like a map to his own psyche. In chapter four, he speaks of writing as “l’alchimie de la calligraphie,” as a “phénomène magique” (47); the alchemical magic generated by this particular record of personal images is intended to permit him to get an overview of his own mental geography and finally to see it as the mirror it really is, capable of reflecting back to him the key to himself, and to that interiorized feminine self, his secret Other.

At the moment when the lost desert explorer experiences his revelation, and Desnos identifies most with him, Desnos is far from the arrogant “nous” of the introductory poem, “Les Veilleurs.” This “nous” is a group of men who believe they can control lives by controlling language:

C’est dans un café clair aux glaces dépouillées  
Que nous manions comme un guignol l’humanité  
Gens passés, gens futurs, images abolies  
Et les aspects du verbe en sainte trinité. (17)

But by the end of the poem, Desnos’s “nous” would more appropriately have been changed to “je,” as he approaches an epiphany: they cannot control what, or whom, they see with their clarifying gaze, particularly not the woman from the sea who will arrive before dawn and reconcile love with liberty:

Et depuis nous scrutons la nuit fade et nuageuse  
Dans l’espoir qu’avant l’aube en ce ciel déserté,  
S’illuminant à chaque brasse, une nageuse  
Conciliera l’amour avec la liberté. (18)

She is what they have been waiting for, as night changes to dawn. They have been waiting to catch sight of the hidden feminine within themselves. But since that realm of the feminine is “pré-logique,” it continues to evade their gaze, their rationality, their language.

Within the scope of La Liberté ou l’amour!, the feminine remains silent,
beneath the surface, as mysterious as the sea creatures evoked in the text: the mermaids, starfish, even the shipwrecks. For eroticism may subject women, or even liberate them from their conventional roles, but it fails to link them with their masculine counterparts as reunited entities. André Breton proclaimed the Androgyne myth as a paradigm for the ideal relationship wherein every man seeks to be reconciled with his lost other half, a mirror reflection of himself in feminine form. This myth is embodied in *La Liberté ou l’amour!* as a symbolic bottle. Jeanne d’Arc-en-ciel encounters a sphinx, and answers her riddle with “une bouteille,” (55) an apparent non-sequitur. But later Desnos reveals that it is a characteristically equivocal, surrealist interpretation of Oedipus’s answer because the androgynous bottle is symbolic of both man and woman: “la bouteille, n’est-ce pas la femme érigée toute droite au moment du spasme, et le rêveur insensible dans le vent et le téton pour la bouche de l’amant et le phallus” (64).

The bottle’s masculine symbolism is obvious. Its feminine symbolism is underscored by the association of the bottle with its function as a vessel, not for children, here, but for other substances, such as alcohol. The feminine bottle has an oracular nature because it metonymically represents the alcohol it sometimes contains, which is capable of drawing unexpected truths from those who imbibe it (“in vino veritas”). The result is a rather flippant reminder of other, earlier, feminine oracles such as the sibyl at Delphi, or the less serious “dive Bouteille” from Rabelais whose secret is revealed as: “en vin est vérité cachée” (*Œuvres complètes* 883). This reference proves to be ironic, however, because the women are not permitted to be oracular—they rarely speak. Rather, Desnos seems to wish to tap his own oracular capacity by means of this simile; he seems to be seeking the feminine within himself, even more than the woman “je” pursues. The record of his own chaotic dream-images—the psychic map he hopes to glimpse thanks to his own writing—is, in effect, a key to the balance of masculine and feminine within, not a guide to other kinds of relationship. Not until he learns to read that inner map with any accuracy, can he have any hope of realizing his professed dream of shared love with another, even if that love is only a fiction experienced within the context of his writing.

In his text the two relationships do not result in mutual love. They are too contradictory and ultimately cancel each other out, as the protagonists’ names nullify one other—*lame* does not characterize Louise any more than *sanglot* characterizes the Corsaire. Even the narrator’s attempt to shed light onto a woman’s experience of her own sexuality in his portrayal of Louise Lame, is undercut by her primary role as the Corsaire’s lover. Her most memorable lines, addressed to him, reveal little about herself: “Dis-moi que tu m’aimes!” and “Non, tu ne partiras pas, non tu ne partiras pas, non tu ne partiras pas” (31).

Desnos’s narrative perspective is too much like that of the lighthouse from the beginning of “Les Veilleurs.” In Hélène Cixous’s words, by conspiring to “keep the glorious phallic monosexuality in view,” (884)—the
perspective from the Eiffel tower in relation to the room where the three female characters make love, or from the lighthouse—the feminine experience must remain as mysterious as the marvels of the sea’s phosphorescents. His narrator’s gaze, like the lighthouse flares—those “phares délateurs”—is too close to being a voyeur’s look. The reader cannot see inside Louise’s experience because the focus on her is exterior. The narrator unwittingly withholds the necessary cues.

The narrator’s Other will not respond to him until an appropriate silence is accorded her, one that anticipates a response without pre-determining its nature. With “elle,” the narrator has chosen silence over her voice, for he reveals himself to be too impatient to fill it. Ultimately, the “chanteuse” cannot answer. Desnos himself has imposed silence upon her in the way the Surrealist group silenced women in general, by means of the example of his own fiction. Not until the “chanteuse” has reason to believe that her words will be heard as language—and not just as another version of the unoriginal words she sings to earn her living—will she be willing to speak.

Despite Desnos’s provocative descriptions of women and feminine sea-creatures, at the heart of his narrative there is silence where he least desires it. As Mary-Ann Caws comments: “Finally, as the content is self-denying and our involvement is refused, it is the form of the language itself which holds us” (55). The language itself is so poignant, so hopeful for relationship, that it prompts the reader to seek a symbol of hopefulness in the text. Dumas suggests that the woman swimming in from the sea, whom the narrator awaits at the end of “Les Veilleurs,” is Youki, Desnos’s first fulfilled love. Certainly, this figure represents the possibility of dialogue. She is a powerful symbol: a woman who has physical strength and independence, who comes from the night and from the sea—two strong emblems for feminine powers—and who turns out to be what the poem’s “nous” was waiting for. She is the answer to Desnos’s evocation of silence. By representing the one who will reconcile liberty and love, she has the potential to love the narrator while retaining enough personal liberty to initiate meaningful dialogue with him.

Notes

1See Maurice Nadeau, The History of Surrealism, 94.
2See Marie-Claire Dumas, Robert Desnos ou l’Exploration des Limites, 54.
3The ellipsis may also be intended as a reminder to the reader of Lautréamont’s Maldoror, whose true spiritual Other is not a woman, but a fierce female shark. Isidore Ducasse (Comte de Lautréamont), II.7, “Les Chants de Maldoror,” Œuvres Complètes (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1970) 116–123.
4See Xavière Gauthier, Surréalisme et sexualité, 72.
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