

Twentieth-Century
Literary Criticism

TCLC

241

Volume 241

Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism

**Criticism of the
Works of Novelists, Poets, Playwrights,
Short Story Writers, and Other Creative Writers
Who Lived between 1900 and 1999,
from the First Published Critical
Appraisals to Current Evaluations**



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**Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism, Vol.
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Preface

Since its inception *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism* (TCLC) has been purchased and used by some 10,000 school, public, and college or university libraries. TCLC has covered more than 1000 authors, representing over 60 nationalities and nearly 50,000 titles. No other reference source has surveyed the critical response to twentieth-century authors and literature as thoroughly as TCLC. In the words of one reviewer, “there is nothing comparable available.” TCLC “is a gold mine of information—dates, pseudonyms, biographical information, and criticism from books and periodicals—which many librarians would have difficulty assembling on their own.”

Scope of the Series

TCLC is designed to serve as an introduction to authors who died between 1900 and 1999 and to the most significant interpretations of these author’s works. Volumes published from 1978 through 1999 included authors who died between 1900 and 1960. The great poets, novelists, short story writers, playwrights, and philosophers of the period are frequently studied in high school and college literature courses. In organizing and reprinting the vast amount of critical material written on these authors, TCLC helps students develop valuable insight into literary history, promotes a better understanding of the texts, and sparks ideas for papers and assignments. Each entry in TCLC presents a comprehensive survey on an author’s career or an individual work of literature and provides the user with a multiplicity of interpretations and assessments. Such variety allows students to pursue their own interests; furthermore, it fosters an awareness that literature is dynamic and responsive to many different opinions.

Every fourth volume of TCLC is devoted to literary topics. These topics widen the focus of the series from the individual authors to such broader subjects as literary movements, prominent themes in twentieth-century literature, literary reaction to political and historical events, significant eras in literary history, prominent literary anniversaries, and the literatures of cultures that are often overlooked by English-speaking readers.

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- The **Introduction** contains background information that introduces the reader to the author, work, or topic that is the subject of the entry.
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In response to numerous suggestions from librarians, Gale also produces a paperbound edition of the *TCLC* cumulative title index. This annual cumulation, which alphabetically lists all titles reviewed in the series, is available to all customers. Additional copies of this index are available upon request. Librarians and patrons will welcome this separate index; it saves shelf space, is easy to use, and is recyclable upon receipt of the next edition.

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Robert Desnos

1900-1945

(Also wrote under the pseudonyms Pierre Andier, Lucien Gallois, Valentin Guillois, and Cancale) French poet, novelist, essayist, critic, and playwright.

The following entry provides an overview of Desnos's life and works. For additional information on his career, see *TCLC*, Volume 22.

INTRODUCTION

Robert Desnos was a respected French lyric poet of the twentieth century and an early member of the Surrealist movement, which began in Paris in the decade immediately following World War I. During the 1920s, while he lived in Paris, Desnos associated with the leading figures of the French literary scene, such as André Breton, Paul Elouard, Antonin Artaud, and other avant-garde writers, and mastered the technique of automatic writing, a Surrealist device in which poets spoke or wrote from a hypnotic state in an effort to explore the imagination and free language from rational thought. While his earliest published works, including *Rose Sélavy* (1922), provide records of these playful linguistic experiments, the author's subsequent writings, such as the novel *La liberté ou l'amour!* (1927; *Liberty or Love!*) and the poetry collections *À la mystérieuse* (1926) and *Les ténèbres* (1927), reflect his growing interest in themes related to ecstatic love, desire, and fulfillment. His later works, written during the 1930s and early 1940s, demonstrate Desnos's preoccupation with independence and his willingness to experiment with traditional poetic forms. Although he is most often recognized as a prototypical representative of the Surrealist movement, the author has gradually been accepted as a versatile and complex writer, whose various works are unified by a single idea, namely, a commitment to freedom of expression. Richard H. Zakarian has described Desnos as "a multifaceted and genial poet" who, like all Surrealists, sought "to unite the conscious and the unconscious, the dream and the reality, in myth and beyond."

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Desnos was born July 4, 1900, in Paris, and spent his childhood years in the Marais district, which is often considered the historic and artistic heart of the city. His

mother, Claire Guillaies, was a Parisian native and the daughter of a merchant, while his father, Lucien Desnos, was a poultry merchant who was later appointed to the position of sales agent at Les Halles, the central food market that served most of Paris. The neighborhood of Desnos's childhood, a lively place imbued with nostalgia and the legends of magicians and alchemists, is believed to have had a profound effect on his imagination. The author attended the Communal School as a boy, and then Lycée Turgot from ages thirteen to sixteen, and cultivated a passion for literature, although he had little interest in other academic studies. Desnos began writing poems at an early age, some of which, including "Aquarelle," "Casqués du heaume," and "Chanson," were published in the review *La tribune des jeunes* in 1918.

After leaving school the author held a number of jobs, including that of druggist and of medical translator; his appointment in 1919 as the personal secretary of Jean de Bonnefon, a freethinking man of letters who ran several publishing firms, was a turning point in his young career, as it served to broaden his literary experience. During this time Desnos also became acquainted with various figures within Dada and Surrealist circles, such as Georges Limbour, Paul Smara, Roger Vitrac, and Stéphane Manier, and met André Breton, the leader of the Surrealist movement, in 1921. Desnos began his compulsory military service in 1920, which took him to Morocco. In 1922 he returned to Paris and worked several jobs before returning to his post as secretary and researcher for Bonnefon in 1923.

His connections led to a position with La Librairie Baillière, a publishing house for scholarly journals, and soon after the author became the assistant editor for the medical journals *Paris-Médical* and *Les archives des maladies du cœur*. Desnos continued to cultivate his connections with the Parisian literary elite, and after sending several poems to Breton, he was accepted into the poet's inner circle. During this time he explored the role of the unconscious in the creative process and experimented with hypnosis, participated in automatic writing and drawing, and plumbed his dreams and imagination for poetic material. Several of his poetic experiments were published in Breton's literary journal, *Littérature*.

Desnos's explorations of the unconscious impressed Breton and other members of the group, particularly his ability to produce elaborate oracular alexandrines and

cryptic drawings from a self-induced state of hypnosis. Breton documented these forays into the imagination in an article, "Entrée des médiums," published in *Littérature*, which brought Desnos to the forefront of the movement. Several of his longer experiments were published during this time, including *Rose Sélavy*, *L'aumonyme* (1923), and *Langage cuit* (1923).

Desnos's newfound notoriety quickly waned, however, and at times the authenticity of his trances was questioned by other members of the group. When the dramatic intensity surrounding these events escalated, Breton called a halt to the hypnotic sessions altogether, fearing the long-term effects they might have on the sanity of participants. During this time Desnos began to focus his energies on a career in journalism, and he produced essays, articles, and cinema reviews for *Paris-soir* and other publications. He also produced a novel, titled *Deuil pour deuil* (1924; *Mourning for Mourning*), and a volume of poetry, *C'est les bottes de sept lieues cette phrase: "Je me vois,"* published in 1926. The novel *Liberty or Love!*, one of his most respected works, appeared one year later.

Desnos was involved with the nightlife in the Montparnasse, then considered the artistic center of Paris, where he associated with cabaret performers and artists such as Man Ray. He also became acquainted with the Belgian singer and actress Yvonne George and developed a deep admiration for her, which was unrequited. Much of Desnos's poetic work of the late 1920s and early 1930s, including *À la mystérieuse* and *Les ténèbres*, was inspired by this infatuation. In 1928 Desnos met Youki Foujita (née Lucie Badoud), a free-spirited model who was married to the Japanese painter Tsuguharu Foujita. The three became close friends, and after Tsuguharu became involved in another relationship, he gave Youki and Desnos his blessing to become romantically involved. Although they never married, they remained intimate throughout the author's life.

At the end of the 1920s Desnos's relationship with Breton and other Surrealists became strained, when the author, reluctant to give up his personal freedom, refused to join the Communist Party despite his friend's encouragement. Tensions mounted in 1930, when Desnos publicly criticized Breton in an article published in *Le courrier littéraire*. During the 1930s Desnos published *Corps et biens* (1930), a collection of his Surrealist poetry of the 1920s, became increasingly involved in radio, and wrote new poems, some of which were later collected in *Fortunes* (1942). In 1939, after France declared war on Germany, Desnos was mobilized as a sergeant but continued to produce articles reflecting his hostility for the Nazi party, which were published in various journals under pseudonyms, such as Pierre Andier, Lucien Gallois, Valentin Guillois, and Cancale.

He published a final collection of poems, titled *Contrée* (1944; *Country*), before he was arrested by the Gestapo in February of 1944. After several transfers, Desnos was deported to Auschwitz in April. He was moved to another camp, in Flöha, where he labored under abhorrent conditions for eleven months, after which he was forced to march to a camp near Terezin, Czechoslovakia. The camp was liberated in May of 1945 by Allied forces, but by then the author's health had deteriorated significantly as a result of malnutrition, dehydration, and typhus. Desnos died on June 8, 1945.

MAJOR WORKS

Desnos's poetry and prose published early in his career reflects his interest in the Surrealist movement. In such works as *Rose Sélavy*, *L'aumonyme* (the title of which plays on the word "homonym"), and *Langage cuit*, he embraced the liberating and playful aspects of language, employing wit and ambiguity to free words from conventional meanings. The title of *Rose Sélavy*, a transformation of the phrase "Eros, c'est la vie" ("Eros, it's life"), is borrowed from Marcel Duchamp, who used the name as an alias for his feminine alter ego when cross-dressing. Desnos's *Rose Sélavy*, a collection of aphorisms, includes one hundred and fifty word puns, spoonerisms, anagrams, and neologisms. The work's reliance on internal rhyme and syntactical juxtaposition has posed challenges for translators.

Desnos's first novel, *Mourning for Mourning*, also reflects the author's experimentation with language and the creative process, particularly automatic writing. Episodic in structure, the novel can be read as a single fragmented text or a series of twenty-four distinct texts. While the work is narrated in a single voice, Desnos shifts pronouns and other parts of speech in an effort to resist assigning the narrator with a specific gender or identity. The work eschews the restrictions of chronological time, or a central governing narrative, and evokes a dreamlike state, using dense, complex images and frequent shifts in setting.

In the poetry collection *C'est les bottes de sept lieues cette phrase: "Je me vois,"* Desnos continued to playfully manipulate language, although the volume also reflects a tonal shift in his poetry. More serious and introspective, the collection utilizes dark images, including skeletons, weapons, and coffins, to evoke fear and death. In poems such as "Destinée Arbitraire," the author also conveys a desire to look inward and a new self-awareness, declaring "je sens que mon commencement est proche" ("I know that my beginning is near"). By altering the traditional phrase, "I know that my end is near," Desnos continues to express his playful nature, while the poem's themes suggest a new focus in his art.

Desnos's next work, *Liberty or Love!*, is a loosely structured, lyric novel that focuses on the travels and experiences of Corsaire Sanglot and his sexual adventures with Louise Lame. Reflecting the author's libertine sensibilities, the novel challenges bourgeois notions regarding the erotic by freely exploring the sexual fantasies of its main characters. Heavily censored when it was first published, *Liberty or Love!* did not appear in its entirety until 1962.

Desnos continued to explore themes related to love in the poetry of *À la mystérieuse* and *Les ténèbres*, much of which was inspired by the author's infatuation with Yvonne George. *À la mystérieuse* is a seven-poem cycle, which, on one level, treats the subject of the speaker's love for an unattainable woman. The woman in question is presented as a shadowy, phantom-like figure, who disappears under the poet's gaze. Some scholars have also noted the sense of isolation that pervades the poems in this cycle, which nevertheless is tempered by a note of hope. Among the lyric poems collected in the volume is "J'ai tant rêvé de toi," or "I've Dreamt So Much of You," which is one of Desnos's best-known poems. *Les ténèbres*, considered one of the poet's most complex and intensely lyric works, explores themes related to love, as well as the quest for aesthetic expression, language, and the creative process. In twenty-four poems the volume attempts to reconcile the conflict between fulfillment through love and gratification from poetic expression. Self-reflexivity, as well as the speaker's sense of isolation and solitude, is emphasized in such poems as "Il fait nuit" and "Le désespoir du soleil."

In addition to these works, Desnos published a diary, titled *Journal d'une apparition* (1927), which was written during several months between the end of 1926 and the beginning of 1927. In this work the author claimed that he was visited by a mysterious woman, who appeared in his bedroom every night but disappeared by morning. Although in the work Desnos questions the reality of the figure, he later maintained that he could see and hear her, and even smell her perfume.

Scholars have noted a significant shift in the works that Desnos composed and published after 1930, following his public break with Breton and the Surrealists. The poems of *The Night of Loveless Nights* (1930) signal the beginning of this transition in his literary career. Like earlier collections, this volume explores themes such as doubt, fulfillment, and love, and expresses the speaker's struggle with poetic expression. Desnos experimented with poetic forms in this work, however, presenting a lyric, fragmented text, composed of a collage of prose and alexandrine lines. *Fortunes*, which collects much of the poetry Desnos composed during the 1930s, also conveys the author's break with the primary aims of Surrealism. Composed to appeal to a

wider audience, these poems treat subjects such as camaraderie and the simple pleasures of daily life.

Desnos's increased awareness and displeasure with Europe's political climate in the early 1940s is demonstrated in the poems of *Etat de veille* (1943), which address themes related to struggle and courage. Abandoning the dream-like evocations of his earlier works, Desnos firmly locates his speaker in the conscious present in such poems as "Demain," "Je n'aime plus la rue St. Martin," and "Le soleil de la rue de Bagnolet," and at times utilizes classic poetic forms.

The author also produced a novel during this later period of his career, titled *Le vin est tiré* (1943), which, as some scholars have noted, differs significantly from his earlier prose works. In this novel Desnos traces the downfall of a group of young Parisian bohemians, who are destroyed by their drug addictions. While Desnos retained Surrealist elements in the work, he also applied a more strict formal structure to the narrative, a balance, which for many scholars, proved unsuccessful. *Country*, the last volume of poetry Desnos published before his arrest in 1944, is comprised of twenty-five poems, including, among others, "Le cimetière," "Le souvenir," "La prophétie," "La route," and "La Maison," all of which incorporate images of country scenes as well as meditations on the individual's position in the world. Desnos used traditional poetic forms in *Country*, including the alexandrine and sonnet.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Desnos first achieved critical and popular attention during the early 1920s, as a result of his affiliation with Breton and the Surrealist movement. Renowned within these circles for his skills at automatic writing and development of other Surrealist techniques, he exemplified the philosophies and goals of the movement and was praised for delving into the unconscious to uncover the authentic and uninhibited processes of human thought, specifically in such works as *Rose Sélavy*, *Langage cuit*, and *Mourning for Mourning*. As the 1920s progressed Desnos continued to draw attention with provocative experimental works that explored themes related to love and sexuality. He also promoted himself through alternative media, including radio, journalism, and cinema.

Although he was publicly censured by Breton and his coterie during the 1930s for betraying his Surrealist principles and catering to popular demands, Desnos continued to attract new readers with his unique blend of colloquial and poetic language in his verse and prose. While he slowly detached himself from the Surrealist movement during this time, he continued to refer to

himself as a Surrealist, "in its most open sense." After Desnos's death, Breton publicly expressed regret for their estrangement in 1946. Since that time, Desnos has been heralded as one of the finest lyric poets of the twentieth century.

Desnos has continued to draw critical interest in recent decades. Scholars such as Katharine Conley and Mary Ann Caws have increasingly characterized him as a versatile and complex figure and have studied the development of his work—from its early Surrealist preoccupations, to its form-consciousness of the 1930s, and finally to its concern with resistance and freedom, as demonstrated in the works written during World War II. Discussions of the poet's experiments with language and form have been at the forefront of many recent critical studies, including those by Caws and Andrew Elbon. Caws has characterized Desnos as "the most difficult for the reader to approach" of all the Surrealists but adds that this was primarily a result of the reader's "insufficiency," not that of Desnos. Elbon has explored the author's experiments with syntax, particularly in the novel *Liberty or Love!*, remarking that "there is pleasure in the unfolding of signification and the meandering of the passage," and that pleasure "finds its possibility in the qualities avoided or eliminated by conventional discursive practices." Other critics, including Albert Sonnenfeld and Katharine Conley (writing under her previous name of Katharine Gingrass), have addressed the thematic preoccupations of Desnos's prose and poetry.

For the most part, scholars have continued to privilege the writings Desnos composed prior to 1930, but in recent years some have reconsidered the work of his later literary period. For such critics the author stands as an exemplary lyric and visionary poet of the twentieth century, who, regardless of his formal preoccupations and literary affiliations, produced a significant body of work that reflects his abiding commitment to the pursuit of free artistic expression. Conley has argued that for Desnos "every liberty of the imagination was possible. One form could yield a variety of interpretations—literal, fanciful, aural, visual, legally sanctioned, and clandestine." As K. R. Dutton has maintained, however, it would be a mistake to "dismiss [Desnos's] linguistic adventures as mere *jeu verbal* for its own sake. The systematic subversion of language is but one aspect of the poet's attack upon the received view of the universe as an ordered and rational system in which the boundaries between the object observed and the object imagined are firmly and irrevocably established; in breaking the conventions of traditional discourse, the poet is rejecting the hierarchical organization imposed upon experience by linear reasoning and by conscious thought in general."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

- Rose Sélavy* (aphorisms) 1922
- L'aumonyme* (poetry) 1923
- Langage cuit* (poetry) 1923
- Deuil pour deuil* [*Mourning for Mourning*] (novel) 1924
- À la mystérieuse* (poetry) 1926
- C'est les bottes de sept lieues cette phrase: "Je me vois"* (poetry) 1926
- Journal d'une apparition* (journal) 1927
- La liberté ou l'amour!* [*Liberty or Love!*] (novel) 1927
- Les ténèbres* (poetry) 1927
- Corps et biens* (poetry) 1930
- The Night of Loveless Nights* (poetry) 1930
- Fortunes* (poetry) 1942
- Etat de veille* (poetry) 1943
- Le vin est tiré* (novel) 1943
- Le bain avec Andromède* (poetry) 1944
- Contrée* [*Country*] (poetry) 1944
- La place de l'étoile: Antipoème* [*La place de l'étoile: Antipoem*] (play) 1945
- Choix de poèmes* (poetry) 1946
- Les trois solitaires* (poetry) 1947
- Domaine public* (poetry and essays) 1953
- De l'érotisme: Considéré dans ses manifestations écrites et du point de vue de l'esprit moderne* (essay) 1953
- Mines de rein* (poetry) 1957
- Calixto, suivi de contrée* [*Calixto*] (poetry) 1962
- Cinéma* (criticism) 1966
- 22 Poems* (poetry) 1971
- The Voice* (poetry) 1972
- The Selected Poems of Robert Desnos* (poetry) 1991
- Le livre secret pour Youki* [*The Secret Book for Youki, and Other Poems*] (poetry) 1999
- Circle and the Star: Selected Poems of Robert Desnos* (poetry) 2000

CRITICISM

Mary Ann Caws (essay date December 1967)

SOURCE: Caws, Mary Ann. "Techniques of Alienation in the Early Novels of Robert Desnos." *Modern Language Quarterly* 28, no. 4 (December 1967): 473-77.

[In the following essay, Caws emphasizes the Surrealist techniques and subject matter in Desnos's two early novels, *Mourning for Mourning* and *Liberty or Love!*, but she notes as well the ways in which these works "deny" the idea of "the marvelous" so prevalent in Surrealist writings and establish a "deliberate separation between writing on the one hand and life or love on the other."]

At a first reading, Robert Desnos's *Deuil pour deuil* (1924) and *La Liberté ou l'amour!* (1927) seem "typical" surrealist novels. The encounters or near encounters between a light blue jacket, a skeleton, and a blonde virgin, or between a white-helmeted explorer, a pirate, and a woman clothed only in a leopard skin coat can be closely associated with the encounters of the surrealist marvelous. Just as the deserted and sunny squares pervaded sometimes by fear and sometimes by ennui remind us not only of the early Chirico, but also of Breton's poem on ennui in *Poisson soluble* and of his "route mystérieuse où la peur à chaque pas nous guette," so the transformation of coffee into tea, of wine first into a dove and then into a crown, and of the wine-glass into an hourglass and finally into a glass eye can be taken as illustrations of Breton's remark about Matta's discoveries:

la désintégration des aspects extérieurs: c'est que, pour qui sait voir, tous ces aspects sont *ouverts*, ouverts non seulement comme la pomme de Cézanne à la lumière mais à tout le reste y compris les autres corps opaques, qu'ils sont constamment prêts à fusionner, que dans cette fusion *seule* se forge une clé qui est le *seul* passepartout de la vie.¹

Even in their details, Desnos's novels are linked to those of the other surrealists: the evocation of ruins, the references to sponges (in *La Liberté ou l'amour!*), and the statement that ideas can only be concrete, never abstract, are all found in Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris*.

Desnos's style in both these novels is also related to his own most brilliant surrealist poetry. This is true with respect to the smallest details of structure, where one finds two elements characteristic of Desnos and of the other surrealist poets: the litany form and the play of dualities. For example, in the short ninth chapter of *La Liberté ou l'amour!* three paragraphs begin with the line "Perdu dans le désert, l'explorateur casqué de blanc." Three poetic modulations follow, the last of which is the most tragic:

Perdu dans un désert de houille et d'anthracite, un explorateur vêtu de blanc. . . .

Perdu entre les segments d'un horizon féroce, l'explorateur casqué de blanc. . . .

Dans le désert, perdu, irrémédiablement perdu, l'explorateur casqué de blanc. . . .²

It is in this particular form that much surrealist poetry assumes its most convincing tone. In Desnos's chapter the echoing "blanc" of this line is made to contrast exactly with the blackboard of an amphitheater in ruins, with the anthracite desert, and with the less material "esprit noir des circonstances" (p. 96) and the "amour de la nuit" (p. 98). This device is linked to the all-

important surrealist concept of duality and particularly to Desnos's own poems, many of which have these contrasts along with the echoes mentioned above.

But in these novels Desnos makes a decided effort to deny the marvelous within the writing itself, that is, to assert the value of life against the sterility of "écriture" in a contrast as deliberate as the black and white just discussed; in this respect he does not resemble the other surrealists in their optimism. The encounters that take place "dans la plaine aride d'un manuscrit" are vain, and the faith in the alchemical work of writing, the hope "de transformer en miroir le papier par une écriture magique et efficace" is a "stupide espoir" (*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 58). Juxtaposed with his celebrated creed—"Je crois encore au merveilleux en amour, je crois à la réalité des rêves"—is an ironic paragraph which begins:

Banalité! Banalité! Le voilà donc ce style sensuel! La voici cette prose abondante. Qu'il y a loin de la plume à la bouche. Sois donc absurde, roman où je veux prétentieusement emprisonner mes aspirations robustes à l'amour, sois insuffisant, sois pauvre, sois décevant. . . . Sois banal, récit tumultueux!

(*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 45)

This reads less as a regret that his prose is not sensual (a condition which, he had said before, would have to prevail in order for him to express his love) than as a challenge to his own style to stand in direct opposition to the force of his sentiment and to the vivacity of his action. There are definite marks all through the novels of Desnos's deliberate separation between writing on the one hand and life or love on the other.

The structure of both novels is a structure of denial, so that the most striking sentence forms are the following:

(1) Irrelevance: "Forêts traversées à coups de couteau, étendues de lianes et de grands arbres, prairies, steppes neigeuses, lutte contre des Indiens, traîneaux volés, daims abattus, vous n'avez pas vu passer l'invisible corsaire."

(*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 30)

(2) Contradiction: "Les cuisses étaient brutalement écartées. Ce n'était pas vrai."

(*ibid.*, p. 31)

Desnos uses many other techniques to work this same destruction of his own statements, such as the forty-line sentence that intricately describes various sights of the "merveilleux" and ends, "paysages, vous n'êtes que du carton-pâte et des portants de décors" (p. 91), and the mockingly forgetful passage:

Corsaire Sanglot aborde au port. Le môle est en granit, la douane en marbre blanc. Et quel silence. De quoi parlé-je? Du Corsaire Sanglot. Il aborde au port, le môle est de porphyre et la douane en lave fondue . . . et quel silence sur tout cela.

(*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 45)

In this last example, the simple beauty of the repeated "silence" almost makes us overlook the denial within the paragraph (given here in its entirety), as if the author really were so engaged in his own lyricism as to merit an excuse for changing unimportant details, which is a further trick, insulting because it is so obvious.

The reader has no choice but to feel himself alienated from the writer when he is counseled to pay attention to the calligraphy and to think of the number of "gouttes d'eau oculaires à travers lesquelles ces mots sont passés" (p. 47)—a remark scarcely aimed at a direct communication by the written word. Desnos mocks us, his hero, and himself:

Corsaire Sanglot s'engage dans, Corsaire Sanglot commence à, Corsaire Sanglot, Corsaire Sanglot.

La femme que j'aime, la femme, ah! j'allais écrire son nom. J'allais écrire "j'allais dire son nom".

Compte, Robert Desnos, compte le nombre de fois que tu as employé les mots "merveilleux", "magifique" . . .

Corsaire Sanglot ne se promène plus dans le magasin d'ameublement aux styles imités.

La femme que j'aime!

(*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 48)

One might say that this style parallels the rapid transformations of things in the new surrealist universe, but the feeling here is not one of amazement before the marvelous: it is, rather, a purposeful scorn of the written. Desnos stands outside his writing and forces us into the same position.³ And the main thing we cannot participate in is the one thing he takes seriously: "Mais toi, enfin, je te salue, toi dont l'existence doue mes jours d'une joie surnaturelle. Je t'ai aimé rien qu'à ton nom" (*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 113). We may know who this is, from exterior knowledge, but since he carefully does not give us the name, we are shut out once more.⁴ All the real action and the summits of poetic description take place in the future where we cannot be:

Qu'elle soit bénie, cette galère! qu'ils seront beaux, les rivages que nous apercevrons! qu'elle sera luxueuse, la chaîne qui nous unira! qu'elle sera libre, cette galère!

(*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 46)

Et la perle éternellement fixée au gouvernail s'étonnera que le bateau reste immobile éternellement sous un océan de sapin sans se douter du destin magnifique imparté à ses pareilles sur la terre civilisée, dans les villes où les chasseurs de bar ont des dolmans couleur du ciel.

(*Deuil pour deuil*, p. 137)

Foule qui passes dans cette rue, respecte mon sommeil. Les grandes orgues du soleil te font marcher au pas, moi je m'éveillerai ce soir quand la lune commencera sa prière.

Je partirai vers la côte où jamais un navire n'aborde; il s'en présentera un, un drapeau noir à l'arrière. Les rochers s'écarteront.

Je monterai.

Et dès lors mes amis, du haut de leur observatoire, guetteront les faits et gestes des bandes de pavillons noirs répandus dans la plaine, tandis qu'au-dessus d'eux la lune dira sa prière. Elle égrènera son chapelet d'étoiles et de lointaines cathédrales s'effondreront.

(*Deuil pour deuil*, p. 145)

However much we may prefer to be counted as one of these "amis," it is hard not to feel we are probably intended to be part of the "foule." Even at the end of *La Liberté ou l'amour!*, as the sharks are closing in on the boat of Corsaire Sanglot, we are isolated from any knowledge the author has: "C'est alors que le Corsaire Sanglot . . ." (p. 118).

Desnos says much later and with some pride that he has learned to write poems whose ends remain as if suspended—he had already mastered the technique in 1927. He never expected us to share with him his "course à l'aveugle vers des horizons mobiles" (*La Liberté ou l'amour!*, p. 114). Of all the surrealist poets, and poets who were at one time surrealists, Desnos is the most difficult for the reader to approach, precisely because he turns away from his writing and from us at the point where the other surrealists are most genuinely present. But as early as *Deuil pour deuil*, he was aware that he would always do so and that his turning away was less a result of his own choice than of our insufficiency: "Avez-vous la monnaie de ma pièce? Personne au monde ne peut avoir la monnaie de ma pièce" (p. 128).

Notes

1. André Breton, *Le Surréalisme et la peinture* (Paris, 1965), p. 187.
2. Robert Desnos, *La Liberté ou l'amour!* suivi de *Deuil pour deuil* (Paris, 1962), pp. 98, 99, 100. The following passage (also from *La Liberté ou l'amour!*) is another example of the form: "rien ne pourra désormais consoler ces âmes en peine. En dépit des années passant sur la pelouse unie et les allées et les arbres de la forêt proche. En dépit des années passant sur ces fronts soucieux, sur ces yeux amoureux des ténèbres, sur ces corps éternels. Et, quelque nuit, l'orage roulant sur la plaine et le marécage éclairera de nouveau la façade sévère et le marais aux feux follets. Mais plus jamais le Corsaire Sanglot ne reparaitra . . ." (p. 109).

3. To some extent, of course, Desnos's attempt to show himself as disengaged from what he writes can be associated with the similar attempt of the "new novelists" in their ironic techniques of interruption, suspension, contradiction, omission, etc. In each case the illusion of literature is to be destroyed both for the author and for the reader—but Desnos seems more deliberately self-conscious in his style ("Compte, Robert Desnos, compte . . .") and more elusive.
4. The alienation Desnos purposely creates must be distinguished from the distance he unwillingly acknowledges in the well-known and pathetic lines from "Si tu savais": "Loin de moi et cependant présente à ton insu . . . / O toi, loin-de-moi à qui je suis soumis . . ." (*Domaine public* [Paris, 1953], p. 100).

Richard H. Zakarian (essay date 1978)

SOURCE: Zakarian, Richard H. "Desnos and a Mythic Fard." *Dada/Surrealism*, no. 8 (1978): 78-83.

[In the following essay, Zakarian studies the theme of "demythification" in Desnos's poem "Le fard des Argonautes," as well as the techniques the poet employs to create his mock epic and debunk the classical legend of the Golden Fleece.]

In Robert Desnos' "Le fard des Argonautes" (1919), the liminal poem for his collection entitled *Corps et biens* (1930), irony through the techniques of reduction, omission, black humor, and balance/imbalance is his primary mechanism in deflating the myth of the Golden Fleece. In debunking the classical legend he uses the neoclassical form but takes extraordinary liberties with language which is far removed from the noble," vulgar, even explicitly erotic. Form, then, intimately serves the poet's aim to shock the reader into a questioning frame of mind and hopefully to illuminate him. The main theme of demythification is supported in Desnos' mock epic by its form: considerable length (103 verses), alexandrine line, framing technique, deliberate alternation of verb tenses and time frame to distinguish fact from fiction, complexity and variety of stanzas (one-line stanza, two couplets, 22 quatrains, the crescendo of two quintets ending the main body of the poem and introducing the conclusion), the perfect balance/imbalance of complementary stanzas (v. 26-29 vs v. 86-90), the ironic and progressive reduction of key images ("toison d'or" and "la nef Argo," etc.). He also makes powerful and persuasive arguments for demythification in his use of formal and imagistic devices: the movement from the formal "Partez" that introduces the quest to the concluding and frenetic "Va-t-en" which he repeats three

times (Peter's triple denial of Christ) and then follows by two subjunctives, psychologically setting the tone for the embellishment of fact; the prostitution of reality made formally concrete in a framing device (the *fard* of the title and the "putains de Marseille" to the "peuple, fellateur clandestin" of the conclusion), and, finally, the progression from the specific to the universal (from the lie of the classical legend to the mythology of the Judeo-Christian one). All of these elements contribute to a cohesive and organic whole: a highly successful poem far superior to anything Voltaire ever produced when working in the mock epic. It is fitting also that Desnos should have begun his career by debunking the gods of bourgeois society.

The title "fard," in the Baudelairean sense (to improve on nature, to embellish—beautify—the facts, and, by extension to fabricate; also, makeup worn by prostitutes to attract and to cover over imperfections), is fully supported by the framing technique: the juxtaposition of "fard" (pejorative here in the title) with the epic "Argonautes" prepares the way for the ironic thrust and direction of the poem. Thus we move from the "putains de Marseille" to the "soeurs océanes" (v. 1—prostitution as a worldwide and timeless profession) which lends itself to the themes of voyage-quest, to the erotic and vulgar attributes associated with the "peuple, goujat, fellateur clandestin / Au phallus de la vie collant sa bouche blême" who would sell and prostitute their souls for a moment of glory. Schematically, it might be presented thus: fard → putain → peuple, goujat, fellateur clandestin. But "phare" is also a homonym or homophone of "fard," and we know Desnos' fondness for word play (*L'Aumonyme*, 1923). The text itself seems to support this view, since Phoebus, god of light, has relinquished his normal role to plunge into the depths of the sea (v. 79). It is, then, the role of the poet as "phare" to reveal the truth masked behind the "fard" of legend, as he, Robert Desnos, plunges into the sea of his poem much as Rimbaud does in his "Bateau ivre."

STRUCTURE

The first four quatrains (vs. 1-16) introduce the subject; they are expository, set the scene. They introduce the themes of "bateaux-voyageocéan," of music in all its forms, vocal and instrumental, and, of course, the oral, poetic tradition; they also initiate the reader into the principal themes of legend, past and future, reality and myth and to Desnos' obsession with death and failure.

The one-line stanza and unique form (v. 17), "Partez!" is the formal "porte d'entrée" to the adventure or the quest. The eight quatrains (vs. 18-49) to the points of suspension incorporate the reader into the actual voyage with its classical dramatic cast (Jason, Orphée, Castor, Pollux) and the concomitant oracles. Desnos uses the historical past and imperfect tenses for reality and the