

# Surrealism, an Exalting Freedom: The Sexual and Erotic Dimension

**Bora Kuçuku**

University of Tirana, Faculty of Foreign Languages

## Abstract

This article aims at exploring the sexual factor, which sensitized and even scandalized the contemporaries of Surrealism. The tendency for a different kind of freedom put the Surrealist movement at the forefront of the changes that happened in the twentieth century. The Surrealists became aware that sexuality was becoming a source of huge scandals and debates and they thought of using it as an “attack” weapon. In the Second Surrealist Manifesto, Breton calls upon every Surrealist “to level at the breed of ‘moral duties’ the long-range weapon of sexual cynicism ».

**Keywords:** Surrealism, dream, sexuality, erotism, revolution

## Introduction

*“The Revolution must be sexual or it can never be a Revolution”*

The sexual freedom can only be achieved through the social revolution. The role and import of this sexuality leads us into considering a Surrealist dimension of sexuality and of a sexual dimension of Surrealism; both sexuality and Surrealism are conditioned by the absolute freedom, which can be so extreme as to terrify us. Human beings are wholly transformed into sexual beings. In the Surrealist texts, the bodily metamorphosis is a kind of adaptation to the new sexuality, a reality which is portrayed especially in Desnos’s *Les Pénalités de l’Enfer ou les Nouvelles-Hébrides* (*The Penalties of Hell or the New Hebrides*). The Hebrides are an archipelago in Scotland, whereas the New Hebrides are an archipelago north of New Caledonia, a French-British colony, which took the status of a *condominium* at the beginning of the twentieth century, that is, joint rule of a territory by two countries. From 1940 to 1945 the colony became a protectorate of Great Britain, retaining however the nominal and symbolic rights of the French over this territory. The American soldiers entered this territory during 1942-1947 with the aim of preventing the Japanese occupation.

## Methodology

The basic methodology of this paper is the analysis. The very nature of surrealist

texts requires a detailed analysis, as well as a comparative perspective. Analytical methodology is associated with a synthetic one. The study would not have achieved its goal if it had not risen to critical conclusions, which are the fruit of syntheses.

## Discussion

In Desnos's work the story is set in Paris, which the author compares to pre-World War II New Hebrides. The references to the horrors of the war and the political-social turmoil are ignored and the story focuses on the relationship between the narrator and the sensual American Miss Flowers, a relationship which is physical rather than romantic. The narrator vents his lust not so much on Miss Flowers as on the war ideologies. Making love in the context of destruction, ruins, and corpses is typically Surrealist. The 1920s, or the "roaring twenties", were permeated throughout by the desire of the survivors to live life in all forms. The trauma and pain were converted into anti-conformity, rebellion, madness and perversity. The frequent bodily metamorphoses in Surrealist works are astounding and often befall a comical, albeit perverse, character. This dominant feature of Surrealism turns its world into an extravagant universe, often fraught with erotic scenes. This occurs since the primary issue that the Surrealists were fond of tackling was the destruction of all taboos. They wished to trample over all sexual taboos and they did that not only because they were the most provocative, but also because they aimed at introducing a new sexuality, which, they saw as deriving from natural (sexual) desire and was a genuine expression of freedom and bodily energy. It can be argued that the Surrealist sexuality is comparable to that of dreams: with no logical, bodily or moral limitations. This type of sexuality wishes to be fast, surprising, and one which presses itself violently into the borders of life, reaching death and, if necessary, even going beyond that. On the other hand, death too becomes eroticized, as are animals, plants or even the city (Paris). The Eiffel Tower is transformed both into a phallic symbol and a symbol of castration. It might seem that Surrealism sexualizes the world and, through the world of dreams, God also can be sexualized. This turns Surrealism into the religion of sex:

Sainte Vierge ayez pitié de qui ne l'est pas ou plutôt non pas de pitié pour elle, ni de justice mais le pouvoir pour les prostitués et les prostituées de régner sur ce peuple imbécile. » (Robert Desnos, *NH*, p.76)

Virgin Mary, have mercy on those who are not virgin, or, better, do not have mercy on them, nor justice, but give power to the whoremongers and prostitutes to rule over this imbecile people." (Robert Desnos, *NH*, p.76)

It was Desnos who, imbued with revolutionary courage, created almost a personal religion endowing "god" (purposely written in lower case letter) with new qualities. That was his way of conceiving of (his) God: reconceptualized, since now he has sexualized and gendered him. This transformation comes as a result of the desire to see a humanized God, a God turned man, therefore equipped with sexual organs, or, vice versa, the desire for divine sexuality. The question arises whether every revolution begins with dreams and whether the activity of dreaming stands at the

origin of every great revolutionary change. The new and perverse (also perplexing) sexuality, especially because of the way it was introduced, caused a real scandal. The Surrealists have been called “revolutionaries without a revolution”. But, for Maurice Nadeau, the real revolution is the victory of sexual desire. This means that, indirectly, this is the victory of the Dream, where, for Freud, resides the Suppressed Desire:

“If you like LOVE, you will like SURREALISM” (Center of Surrealist Activity, Papillon 1943, Claude Oterelo collection).

The Surrealist work is not only an erotic work but, in its call for freedom, it aims at both provoking and scandalizing. The Surrealists were inspired by “three great liberators of the (sexual) desire: Sade, Fourier, and Freud”. Sade, essentially subversive, pushed the fantasies of sexual perversion to their extremity, thereby attacking the taboos at the foundation of Western civilization. A thoroughgoing atheist, he leads the reader into a dazzling overthrow of values and he postulates as an absolute principle the obedience to the laws of nature, which, to him, entail the quest for sensual pleasure and the total freedom for the individual. In the works of Sade we find an almost exhaustive inventory of perversities. Guillaume Apollinaire and the Surrealists contributed in gradually rehabilitate the figure of Sade.

Fourierism is based on the belief in the principle of universal harmony, which can be summed in four areas: the material universe, organic life, animal life, and the human society. That harmony cannot come into being unless people abolish the limitations imposed by society’s conventional modes of behavior which prevent the complete fulfillment of desire and which should disappear so that people could live freely and live their existence to the fullest. The main contribution of Freud was the introduction of a completely novel approach to the human being as a social being. The strong connection between dreams and sexuality is given a detailed explanation in his *Interpretation of Dreams*. Most dreams can be interpreted as having a sexual origin, based on childhood memories. Thus the dream represents the fulfillment of a desire, usually of a sexual desire.

Nevertheless, in 1920 the Freudian doctrine underwent a change, when Freud published his essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he put forward the opposition between “the drive to life”, which he named Eros, and “the drive to death”, which he called Thanatos. The Surrealists saw in Sade the genesis of the subversive idea of seriously doubting the Western civilization and its practices. By publishing for the first time the accounts of their dreams and putting them at the center of the attention, they challenged the self-censorship and the public morality.

With the advent of Surrealism, the dream will be divested of its secret character of a shameful intimacy. The dreams which leave the most lasting impression on us are the typical dreams and the bad dreams (nightmares). Their nature define the dreaming person as an individual that is assaulted by inner distress, which is inherited by a childhood in which they experienced lack of affection and deep suppressed feelings. The Surrealists were increasingly concerned with exploring the unconscious, thereby

endowing the modern spirit with a new dimension. Sexuality, as conceived of by the Surrealists, is composed, first and foremost, by a strong subversive energy, which looks for the physical and psychical liberation, focusing on deliriums, phobias, and obsessions. The Surrealist is identified with the figure of the dreaming person. A good Surrealist would also necessarily be a good dreamer. In Desnos's dreams one encounters extreme love scenes, which originate from an extraordinary fantasy, which, for Vitrac, transforms itself into a shocking desire of crimes and death. The real sexual revolution is the engine of this movement. The Surrealist view on love and sexuality, nonetheless, often seems contradictory.

Love and its holy vision, which is, however, linked with the idea of damnation, are also justified by Freud's theory. Freud believes that religion, by means of the notion of sacrifice, imposes a permanent guilt on mankind. Going against the notion of the "forbidden fruit", Breton wishes to give holy attributes to love. Whatever is holy is forever forbidden. His idea of Christianity is a sort of damnation which is inextricably linked with love. If love is poisonous, this is the case because love is a sin.

Many Surrealist works can be called real hymns of love. The best example of such a hymn would be the work *L'immaculée Conception (The Immaculate Conception)*, in which the triad:

### **Love-Poetry-Freedom**

finds its most perfect expression. Breton defined from a very early stage the practice of Automatic Writing as an act of love ("The words make love"). The new spirit of the age, which was created, as some texts affirm, by the textual and sexual transgression of the Surrealist writers, is undoubtedly closely linked with the contemporary drama of the world and signifies a break with the classical European tradition.

André Breton's *La Mythologie amoureuse (The Mythology of Love)*, which focuses on finding the lost half of the primordial androgyne, differs greatly from Max Ernst's "Hundred Headless Woman" or Bellmer's "Doll". In fact, the sexual dimension and the dimension of love are closely related. The idealization of love pervades the texts and lives of both Vitrac and Desnos. In their texts the reader encounters praises for their beloved woman. For Vitrac, Patricia, a fictional character, is the "form", that is, the "universal female", "irrespective of her complexion, her eye shape, her mouth, her skin, her hair, and her jewels". For Desnos that figure is clearly embodied in the singer Yvonne Georges, who, in his work *La liberté ou l'amour (Freedom or Love)*, is represented by Louise Lame. "The censorship was alarmed by certain erotic and anticlerical excesses of the text. On 5 May 1928, the publisher was ordered to leave out of print those fragments which described the club of the sperm drunkards and of the new Eucharist which sanctified the divinity of Baby Cadum". (Marie-Claire Dumas, in R. Desnos, *Works*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999, p. 315)

The figure of the woman is endowed with a series of epithets and attributes, such as: the wonderful woman, the mysterious hysterical, the hysterical and castrating

mother, the multiform woman, the prostitute, the murderous or suicidal woman, the mad beauty, etc. The Surrealist ideal is best represented in:

« Nu-tête, nu-pieds, nu- jambes, nu-cerveau, nu-corps, c'était donc là l'idéal de vos faces en pilules d'iode » (Robert Desnos, *NH*, p.94)

*"Bare-headed, bare-footed, bare-brained, bare-bodied, that was then the ideal of your faces in iodine pills".* (Robert Desnos, *NH*, p.94)

The figure of the woman in the Surrealist texts is seen by Marie-Claire Bamet (*La femme cent sexes ou les genres communants / Deharme, Mansour, Prassions, Bem, Peter Lang*, 1988) as a "Surrealist slave", in which she turns into an experiment of all their follies. The act of birth replaces a theatrical show. Her cadaver is violated at a street corner. The Surrealist man longs for a carpet made of women's hair, prefers that virgins be turned into fruit jam. There have been, nevertheless, Surrealists who were endowed with a sensitive soul and who were able to experience moving and emotive love.

The Surrealist sexuality is portrayed as a problematic sexuality and the Surrealists aim at sexuality to be like that. A plain sexuality would be unacceptable by the Surrealists, fearing that it would lose its enchantment and turn monotonous and uninteresting. The Surrealist movement is characterized by ambiguity. On the one hand, it goes against all rules, norms, traditions and moral limits while, on the other hand, it puts into doubt – even disdains – a definite attitude or a definite sexual identity. The existence of the Surrealist Manifesto is in itself an imposed theory. In a discussion on sexuality, Breton affirms that what interests him the most is that "Everything in physical love be subjected to perversity". And when Queneau bluntly asked him: "Breton, do you condemn what people call the sexual perversion?", his answer was: "not a bit", even though he adds that he meant those perversions which were not expressed during their discussion. It should be noted here that the participants in that discussion had explored in turn such activities as: onanism/masturbation, homosexuality, fetishism, as well as collective love. (Xaviere Gauthier, *La Surréalisme et la Sexualité*, Idées Collections, Gallimard 1971, p.208)

Breton's fondness for "perversion" is quite limited; however, rather than "limited", it can be viewed as unclear and ambivalent. Is it related to tastes or rather to moral punishments? On his part, it seems that Desnos does not condemn anything. Especially in his *Nouvelles Hébrides* and in *La liberté ou l'amour* he plays with the sexual space by pushing freedom to its limits. On the other hand, Vitrac is more sensitive to love as a feeling and more passionate about instinctual violence. Still, Vitrac does not hide incestuous desire, which seems to go beyond even Desnos's merciless audacity and, consequently, his choice is even more threatening. Xavière Gauthier in his *La surréalisme et la Sexualité (Surrealism and Sexuality)* puts it that the Surrealist art includes the following perversities:

Onanism, zoophilia, coprophilia, necrophilia, fetishism, collective love, expositionism,

voyeurism, fellatio, sodomy, male and female homosexuality

It is obvious that these Surrealist texts can easily illustrate the above collection. And here we are in the realm of the dream. Certain elements which, at first sight, have no sexual connotation or coloring, lead to the same path, if we are to follow the Freudian symbolism.

### Conclusion

In fact, Surrealism is characterized by the overthrow and trespassing of the limits, especially in terms of eroticism. According to Picasso's paintings, the liberating sexuality requires first and foremost the nudity. The nude woman becomes a primordial landscape, which is in harmony with nature and echoes the image of Aphrodite lying on a cloud. Of interest here is also the Paranoiac-Critic Method developed by Salvador Dali. The released sexuality became a natural requirement by the members of the Surrealist movement. The Surrealists did not hesitate to view love as an artistic activity and art as a love activity. Art objects in exhibitions symbolize the sexual act or represent erotic fantasies. Eroticism in Surrealism acquires a number of functions and it conveys originality, modernity, perversity, violence, the comical, provocation, ambiguity, revolt, cynicism, heroism, etc. The rediscovery of primitive freedom, which, at its core, means instinctual freedom, represented precisely the new concept of liberating love.

### Bibliography

- [1] Alexandrian, Sarane, *Le Surréalisme Et Le Rêve*, Paris, Gallimard, 1974
- [2] Aubert Thierry, *Le Surréalisme Et La Mort*, Paris, L'age D'homme, Bibliothèque Mélusine, 2001
- [3] Barnet Marie-Claire Corinne, *La Femme Cent Sexes Ou Les Genres Communiquant*, Deharme, Mansour, 1998, University of California, Davis 1994
- [4] Behar Henri, *Etude Sur Le Théâtre Dada Et Surréaliste*, Paris, Gallimard, 1967
- [5] Behar Henri, *Roger Vitrac, Un Réprouvé Du Surréalisme*, Paris, a.- G. Nizet, 1966
- [6] Behar Henri, *Vitrac, Théâtre Ouvert Sur Le Rêve*, Paris, Fernand Nathan, 1980, Bruxelles, Labor, 1980
- [7] Behar Henri, Carassou Michel, *Le Surréalisme*, Paris, Le Livre De Poche, 1984
- [8] Bonnet Marguerite, *André Breton, Naissance De L'œuvre Surréaliste*, José Corti, 1988
- [9] Chenieux-Gendron Jacqueline, *Le Surréalisme*, Paris, Puf, 1984
- [10] Dumas Marie-Claire, *Desnos Œuvres*, Paris, Gallimard, 1999
- [11] Gautier Xavière, *Surréalisme Et Sexualité*, Paris, Gallimard, 1971
- [12] Limat-Letellier Nathalie, « Les Récits De Prodiges Dans *Anicet Et Les Aventures De Télémaque* », Dans Mélusine
- [13] No° 20, Paris, L'age D'homme, 2000
- [14] Baudelaire Charles, *Les Fleurs Du Mal*, Paris, Maxi-Poche, 1993
- [15] Sade Marquis De, *La Philosophie Dans Le Boudoir*, Paris, Maxi-Poche, 1994
- [16] Bellemin-Noel Jean, « Fantastique Onuphrius », *Romantisme*, No° 6, 1973

- [17] Gollut Jean-Daniel, *Contre Les Rêves/ La Narration De L'expérience Onirique Dans Les Œuvres De La Modernité*, Paris, José Corti, 1993
- [18] Todorov Tzvetan, *Introduction a La Littérature Fantastique*, Paris, Seuil, 1970
- [19] Freud Sigmund, *L'interprétation Des Rêves*, Paris, Puf, 1926
- [20] Bachelard Gaston, *La Poétique De La Rêverie*, Paris, Puf, 1960
- [21] Souriau Etienne, *Vocabulaire D'esthétique*, Paris, Quadrige/ Puf, 1999
- [22] *Dictionnaire Des Genres Et Des Notions Littéraires*, Paris, Encyclopædia Universalis Avec Albin Michel, 2001