



Max Ernst, *L'ange du foyer*, 1937
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Centre Pompidou visits

Guided audio tours through the exhibitions and permanent collection.

"Surrealism" exhibition

This podcast accompanies "Surrealism. The centenary exhibition", which takes place in gallery 1 of the Centre Pompidou from 4 September 2024 to 13 January 2025.

Following the main themes of the exhibition, this podcast highlights the literary dimension of Surrealism, and gives a chance to hear the wonderful texts of the authors and artists who contributed to this movement.

Colour code:

In black, Anna Mandico voice

In green, quotes

In purple, the musical excerpts



Podcast transcription

Reading time: 20 minutes

[Jingle intro]

Hello, good evening, welcome. Open wide your eyes and ears, you've been taken for a visit to the Centre Pompidou.

1. The Mediums Enter

[sound of piano]

André Breton and Philippe Soupault wrote *The Magnetic Fields* together in 1919. In this work, they experimented with automatic writing, unfettered by reason. This quest for immediate expression helped to anticipate streams of thought and established a link between the Surrealist artist and the figure of the medium.

Waves of miracles and deeds

Divine calculation of palaces

Thanks for all these members

A solid covering a sword-cane and the glory of exiles

The numbers of horizons scarlet tongue angles

Why lower the noble or struggling head

Days pass through the hands

Little flame for the blind at birth

Demonstration of laughs brown school at the end of the village

Blue smoke of charcoal burners and alpine forest rangers

A rainbow shepherd magician

Light comes like a spring

Physics is no longer anything

Those long threads and telegrams are the flowers of our
Pink civilizations
You have to be concerned about neighbors smells of
night and the next day

The college window hung with ivy
The gallop of camels
Lost harbour
The station is to the right café of the Branch station It is fear
Oceanic headquarters
I am hiding in a historic picture
[André Breton, Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields*, 1919]

The Surrealists envied the utter freedom and imaginative power of the insane and the alienated. In 1928, André Breton condemned the locking up of the mentally ill in psychiatric hospitals, in *Nadja*.

I was told, several months ago, that Nadja was mad. After the eccentricities in which it seems she had indulged herself in the hallways of her hotel, she had had to be committed to the Vaucluse sanitarium. Others will provide their useless epilogues on this fact, which they will inevitably interpret as the fatal result of all that has gone before. (...) Unless you have been inside a sanitarium you do not know that madmen are *made* there, just as criminals are made in our reformatories. Is there anything more detestable than these systems of so-called social conservation which, for a trifle, some initial and exterior rejection of respectability or common sense, hurl an individual among others whose association can only be harmful to him and, above all, systematically deprive him of relations with everyone whose moral or practical sense is more firmly established than his own? [André Breton, *Nadja*, 1928]

Unica Zürn published *The Man of Jasmine* in 1957, in which she referred to her own mental health issues for which she was interned many times:

The man behind his desk looks at her in great astonishment. Perhaps he has rarely encountered a sick person who is so delighted to arrive for the first time at this dreaded place (...) Right away she is brought the first medication for her madness.

A cup containing a very bitter liquid which produces a strange and almost metallic ringing in her body, as if someone were beating a large gong.

In all probability this medicine is intended to stop her thinking these mad incessant thoughts, but it doesn't work very quickly. Her body grows very tired, and she starts to observe the other women in the room with great interest, and her thoughts start to revolve around each of the people she sees.

[Unica Zürn, *The Man of Jasmine*, 1957]

2. Trajectory of the Dreams

The Surrealists published accounts of their dreams in magazines. This was a way of exploring the depths of the human spirit and resurrecting a forgotten literary genre.

My friend André Masson and I are soaring through the air like gymnasiarchs. A voice calls up to us: "World-class acrobats, when are the two of you finally going to come down to earth?" At these words, we execute a flip over the horizon and drop into a concave hemisphere. [Michel Leiris, *Dream stories*, 15 janvier 1925]

[sweet piano melody]

I am in a field with Jim. He wants to pick a fruit for me in the hedge along the field, a fruit that, to me, looks like a walnut. It isn't ripe yet, and I don't want it. He tries to reattach it to the branch he took it from, so that it will ripen. I don't have time to tell him that it's a crazy idea. He puts down the fruit, it falls on the other side of the hedge.

A young man passing by—someone I think I recognize—seeing how sad Jim is, picks up a nut for him, but Jim tells him: “Not this one, no, that peach”. The young man finds the peach and gives it to Jim who offers it to me. Then, gesticulating as he leaves, the young man announces that a walnut falling from a tree becomes a peach when it touches the ground. [Renée Gauthier, *la Révolution surréaliste* n°1, *Dream stories*, 1924]

The poet Robert Desnos experimented with hypnotic sleep and waking dream sessions. Dreams were given a central place in his work, especially in the anthology *Bodies and Goods*, published in 1926:

I've dreamed of you so much that you lose your reality.
Is there still time to reach that living body and to kiss on
those lips the birth of the voice I love?
I've dreamed of you so much that my arms, which always
find my own breast even as they clutch at your shadow,
may never close on the contours of your body.
So much that, confronted by one who has haunted and
controlled me for days and for years, I would certainly
become a shadow myself.

O the seesaw of emotions.
I've dreamed of you so much that it's probably too late to
wake up. I'm asleep on my feet, my body exposed to
all the sensations of life and love, and you, the only
woman these days who counts for me, I couldn't
touch your mouth or your brow as well as I could the
next one that comes along. I've dreamed of you so much, walked, talked, slept with

your phantom so much that all that's left to me, perhaps,
is to be a phantom among phantoms and a hundred
times more shadowy than that shadow walking in joy,
now and in time to come, across the sun-dial of your life.
[Robert Desnos, I've Dreamed of You So Much, 1926].

3. Sewing machines and umbrellas

[mysterious piano melody]

The writer Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont died in 1870 at the age of 23, later to be rediscovered by André Breton and Philippe Soupault, and celebrated by the Surrealists. They were especially fascinated by a line in *The Songs of Maldoror*, a collection published in 1869, in which Lautréamont compared beauty to a “chance meeting on a dissection bench of a sewing machine and an umbrella!” The Surrealists adopted this arbitrary encounter as the definition of beauty:

If you look in the direction of where the Rue Colbert meets the Rue Vivienne-- a character show his silhouette at the angle formed by the intersection of these two thoroughfares and walk softly towards the boulevards. But if one draws closer still, without attracting this wayfarer's attention, one realises with pleasant surprise that he is young! From a distance, as a matter of fact, one would have taken him for a mature man.

The sum of days no longer counts when it is a question of estimating the intellectual capacity of a serious face. I know all about telling age from the physiognomical lines of the forehead: he is sixteen years and four months old!

He is fair as the retractility of the claws of birds of prey: or again, as the uncertainty of the muscular movements in wounds in the soft parts of the lower cervical region; or rather, as that perpetual rat-trap always reset by the trapped animal,

which by itself can catch rodents indefinitely and work even when hidden under straw;
and above all, as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and
an umbrella! [Lautréamont, *The Songs of Maldoror, Chant VI*, 1869]

[piano]

Paul Eluard and Benjamin Péret adopted this aesthetic, freely juxtaposing words and
ideas.

My plane on fire my castle inundated by Rhine wine
my ghetto of black iris my crystal ear
my rock rolling down the cliff to crush the sheriff
my opal snail my air mosquito
my eiderdown of birds of paradise my hair of black foam
my tomb burst asunder my rain of red grasshoppers
my flying island my turquoise grape
my collision of crazy and cautious cars my wild flower bed
my dandelion pistil shot in my eye
my tulip onion in the brain
my gazelle wandered into a cinema on the boulevard
my casket of sunlight my volcano fruit
my laugh of hidden pond in which absent-minded prophets are going to drown
my inundation of cassis my morel butterfly
my blue waterfall like a deep wave that makes the spring
my coral revolver with a mouth that attracts me like the eye of a well
scintillating
frozen like a mirror in which you contemplate the flight of the hummingbirds of your
glance
lost in an exhibition of white framed by mummies
I love you.

[Benjamin Péret, « Allo » in *The Great Game*, 1928]

The Japanese poet Shūzō Takiguchi translated André Breton's *Surrealism and Painting* and in 1937 organised an "International Exhibition of Surrealism" in Japan. He also pursued the collage aesthetic which triggered a poetic shock:

red-plated fish skillfully collide head-on in the intersection,
that's when you hide your face
in a fine-tuned gasping
a rose becomes weighty and downcast
and the tigress splits

[Shūzō Takiguchi, « Lines » in *Poetic Experiments 1927-1937*]

4. The Chimera

[piano]

The theme of hybridity is a core element in Surrealist literature, and especially the Chimera. This mythological creature had a lion's head, a goat's body and a serpent's tail. The poet Gherasim Luca was a founding member of the Romanian Surrealist group. In 1953, in his anthology *Héros-limite*, he cut up both language and bodies for the purposes of collage.

despair has three pairs of legs
despair has four pairs of legs
four pairs of airborne volcanic absorbent symmetrical legs
it has five pairs of legs five symmetrical pairs
or six pairs of airborne volcanic legs
despair has seven and eight pairs of volcanic legs
eight pairs of legs eight pairs of socks
eight airborne forks absorbed by the legs

it has nine symmetrical forks for its nine pairs of legs
ten pairs of legs absorbed by its legs
that means eleven pairs of absorbent volcanic legs
despair has twelve pairs of legs twelve pairs of legs
it has thirteen pairs of legs
despair has fourteen pairs of airborne volcanic legs
fifteen pairs of legs
despair has sixteen pairs of legs sixteen pairs of legs
despair has seventeen pairs of legs absorbed by the legs
eighteen pairs of legs and eighteen pairs of socks
it has eighteen pairs of socks in the forks of its legs
that means nineteen pairs of legs
despair has twenty pairs of legs
despair has thirty pairs of legs
despair has no pairs of legs
but absolutely no pairs of legs
absolutely no absolutely no pairs of legs
but absolutely no legs
absolutely three legs
[Gherasim Luca, *Ma Déraison d'être*, 1953]

The American Ted Joans was a poet, painter, trumpeter, and pioneer of free jazz, who André Breton welcomed into the Surrealist group in 1960. He produced a musical self-portrait in *Jazz Anatomy*.

my head is a trumpet
my heart is a drum
both arms are pianos
both legs are bass viols
my stomach the trombone
both lungs are flutes

both ears are clarinets
my penis is a violin
my chest is a guitar
vibes are my ribs
cymbals are my eyes
my mouth is the score
and my soul is where the music lies
[Ted Joans, *Jazz anatomy*]

5. Alice

In 1855, Lewis Carroll wrote *Alice in Wonderland*, and later, *The Hunting of the Snark*, translated by Louis Aragon in 1929.

The latter also published an important article on Carroll in *Le Surréalisme au service de la Révolution*. Heedless of the prevailing bourgeois conventions and rational mindset of British society at the turn of the century, the author of *Alice in Wonderland* embodied wonder, a core Surrealist notion.

When the members of the group discovered the poetry of 14-year-old Gisèle Prassinos, they saw in her an incarnation of a new Alice.

A Child was feeling very hot and entered a room, which he stunk up with his moldy hair. He thought he was doing the right thing when he asked me the price of the amphora on the shelf in the waiting room. But I told him that his nephew would be happier if he got rid of his head.

He looked at me distrustfully and said, "Those swallows are cruel".

Soon another child arrived. A hard, cylindrical object hung from his bare stomach, making him look like an escaped prisoner.

He went to sit down by the other child and said, "You have moldy hair".

Then, as he cleaned the tip of his red shoe, he threw me one of the many small leather balls they were both holding.

I turned to look through the window. As I did so, someone must have come in. It had to be a little girl because I heard her teeth breaking a nutshell. When I turned back, I saw a little girl with green nuts between her teeth. She looked at me, grabbed the first child with her yellowed hands, and said "His hair must be moldy because I found a tiny wood shaving on the landing". Soon there was a faint grating sound. It was the second child, who was crying and looking at his friend's hair.

When I woke up, the children were gone. But a boy's foot lay on the rug, wrapped in a bandage, along with some moldy hair and some nuts. Children are afraid of idols.
[Gisèle Prassinós, *Arthritic grasshopper*, 1934-1944]

British painter and writer Leonora Carrington also examined the pursuit of wonder in fairy tales, fables and short stories in which humans and animals conversed freely together. Her fairy tale *The Debutante* was published in the *Anthology of Black Humour* curated by Breton in 1940, alongside writings by Lewis Carroll.

When I was a debutante, I often went to the zoo. The animal I got to know best was a young hyena. She knew me too. She was very intelligent. I taught her French, and she, in return, taught me her language. In this way we passed many pleasant hours.

On the morning of the first of May 1934, very early, I went to visit the hyena.

"What a bloody nuisance", I said to her. "I've got to go to my ball tonight".

"You're very lucky", she said. "I'd love to go. I don't know how to dance, but at least I could make small talk".

"There'll be a great many different things to eat", I told her. "I've seen truckloads of food delivered to our house".

“And you’re complaining”, replied the hyena, disgusted. “Just think of me, I eat once a day, and you can’t imagine what a heap of bloody rubbish I’m given”.

I had an audacious idea, and I almost laughed. “All you have to do is to go instead of me!” [Leonora Carrington, « La débutante », 1938]

The poet Emmy Bridgwater was a member of the British Surrealist group, and one of the famous “Children of Alice”.

As she walked into the garden the birds flew down to her pecking at her lips. “Don't do that”, she cried. “It's mine. I'm alive you know”. “Well, why don't you wear colors?” She heard them talking. “Dead people walk, but they don't wear colors. They scream and they talk too”. The birds went on chattering about dead people. They all perched up on the holly bush but they didn't peck the soft berries. They just stared down at her. All of them stared with their little black beady eyes. They were looking at her red lips. [Emmy Bridgewater, « The Birds », *Free Unions*, 1946]

6. Political Monsters

[sweet melody in piano]

Monsters featured largely in Surrealist imagination from the 1930s onwards, as fascist horrors emerged in Europe. Half-man half-bull, the Minotaur from Greek mythology embodied an outsize figure of bestiality for the Surrealists. In 1936, Georges Bataille founded the magazine *Acéphale* symbolised by a headless figure devoid of reason.

Man has escaped from his head just as the condemned man has escaped from his prison. He has found beyond himself not God, who is the prohibition against crime, but a being who is unaware of prohibition. Beyond what I am, I meet a being who makes me laugh because he is headless; this fills me with dread because he is made of

innocence and crime; he holds a steel weapon in his left hand, flames like those of a Sacred Heart in his right. He reunites in the same eruption Birth and Death. He is not a man. He is not a god either. He is not me but he is more than me: his stomach is the labyrinth in which he has lost himself, loses me with him, and in which I discover myself as him, in other words as a monster. [Georges Bataille, *Acéphale*, n°1, 1936]

In July 1944, Claude Cahun, a resistance fighter, was arrested by the Gestapo then imprisoned at Saint-Helier, with her companion Marcel Moore. There, she wrote the memories of this period of captivity:

The charm of the mask inspires petty romantic souls, but wearing the mask plays into the hands of those who, for material or psychological reasons, have an interest in not behaving in an open-faced way.

Masks are made of different quality materials: cardboard, velvet, flesh, the Word. The carnal mask and the verbal mask are worn in all seasons. I soon learned to prefer to all others these off-the-market stratagems. You study yourself; you add a wrinkle, a fold at the corner of the mouth, a look, an intonation, a gesture, even a muscle. You create for yourself several clearly defined vocabularies, several syntaxes, several ways of being, thinking, and even feeling—from which you'll choose a skin the color of time...

This game is so engaging that it'll soon rob you of the means to cause harm (or to live, as you please). A coin out of circulation. Devoid of social value. Disgusted with its ruts, the train car leaves its rails and falls over on its side. So, all it takes is for the flesh to make way for the spirit (that being the logical progress of evil). From now on, at the roll call you'll only be able to answer "absent", you'll be incapable of taking lessons, and you'll be able to make love only by correspondence. (...)

In front of the mirror, on a day full of enthusiasm, you put your mask on too heavily; it bites your skin. After the party, you lift up a corner to see... a failed decal. With horror you see that the flesh and its mask have become inseparable. Quickly, with a little saliva, you reglue the bandage on the wound. [Claude Cahun, *Écrits*, notes]

7. Kingdom of mothers

In 1942, André Breton wrote about Yves Tanguy's painting that it penetrates "the kingdom of Mothers", in reference to the invisible beings, the matrices of all forms in the universe, described by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in *Faust II*. The surrealist artist becomes a new Faust, charged with meeting these Mothers locked away in "the deepest of depths", "surrounded by life but lifeless".

And by that tripod's light you'll see the Mothers;
Some sitting, as the case may be, and others
Who stand or walk. Formation, transformation,
The eternal Mind's eternal delectation.
You'll pass unseen: the whole world of creatures
swarms
As images round them; they see empty forms
And nothing else.
[Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust II*, 1832]

After leaving Europe during the war alongside other Surrealist artists, Leonora Carrington settled in Mexico, where, close to Remedios Varo, she married, developed her work as a painter and sculptor, created frescoes, gave birth to two children and continued to write.

WHAT IS A WOMAN?

Fifty-three years ago I was born a female human animal.
This, I was told, meant that I was a "Woman".
But I never knew what they meant.
Fall in love with a man and you will see I fell (several times), but saw not.
Give birth and you will see I gave birth and did not know, who am I? Am I? Who?
Am I that which I observe or that which observes me?
(...)

Like everybody else I yearn for an identity although this yearning mystifies me always. If there is a true individual *identity* I would like to find it, because like truth on discovery it has already gone. So I try to reduce myself to facts. I am an aging human female, now: soon I will be old and then dead. This is all I know as far as facts are concerned. [Leonora Carrington, *What is a woman?*]

American painter Kay Sage began exhibiting with the Surrealists in 1938. She is known for her mysterious, restless universes, which can be compared to the organic worlds of her husband Yves Tanguy. She also wrote poetry. In 1957, she published her first collection of poems in French, *Demain Monsieur Silber*, with Editions Seghers. Her poetry, written in French and English, takes the form of a nursery rhyme.

I took a small tree
which had no branches
and I transplanted it.
I chose richer soil
because I wanted
a big tree.
The tree grew no taller
but many branches
sprouted from it.

One by one
as the branches grew,
I cut them off
for firewood.
At last the branches
ceased to grow.

I pulled up
the small tree
and put it back
where it had come from.
[Kay Sage, "A Small Tree", 1957]

The fascination with biomorphism, and the parallel between artistic practice and germination drawn by many Surrealist artists, such as Jean Arp, are invitations to "rediscover the path that leads to the Mothers".

Art is a fruit growing out of man like the fruit out of a plant like the child out of the mother. While the fruit of the plant grows independent forms and never resembles a balloon or a president in a cutaway suit the artistic fruit of man shows for the most part a ridiculous resemblance to the appearance of other things. Reason tells man to stand above nature and to be the measure of all things. Thus man thinks he is able to live and to create against the laws of nature and he creates abortions. Through reason man became a tragic and ugly figure. I dare say he would create even his children in the form of vases with umbilical cords if he could do so. Reason has cut man off from nature. [Hans Arp, *Notes From a Diary*]

8. Melusine

[piano]

The medieval myth of the fairy Melusine, condemned to a weekly metamorphosis as a serpent from her waist down to her feet, enjoyed lasting success in the Surrealist imagination. André Breton compared the beloved woman to plants in his poem *Free Union*, published in 1931.

My wife whose shoulders are champagne
Are fountains that curl from the heads of dolphins over the ice
My wife whose wrists are matches
Whose fingers are raffles holding the ace of hearts
Whose fingers are fresh cut hay
My wife with the armpits of martens and beech fruit
And Midsummer Night
That are hedges of privet and resting places for sea snails
Whose arms are of sea foam and a landlocked sea
And a fusion of wheat and a mill
Whose legs are spindles
In the delicate movements of watches and despair.
[André Breton, « Free Union », 1931]

In 1936, Alice Rahon, a poet of Mexican origin, published the anthology *On the Bare Ground* that same year:

the stone owl's head
watches over
the sailors' town
limbo of springs not born
to love suffocated
under pairs of false lovers
false presences
false windows
opening to the wall
of the night
false virtue of the weak

our bones curling in the fire
desert burnt by waiting

where rules the madwoman in the mirror
For those parallel destinies
there is no horizon line
where they meet where they rest where they flee those cruel fish of anguish and
discord

They swim between the shores of these dark rivers
which separate lovers

The shadow descends a staircase of sun down to the bottom of my heart
I think about the chaste and thoughtful loves of these animals that unite
as if holding hands

[Alice Rahon Paalen, *On the bare ground*, 1936]

9. Forests

Jungian psychoanalysis posits that fear of the forest is a fear of what the unconscious might reveal. The forest thus became the scene of magic and wonder for the Surrealists, as a metaphor for labyrinths and initiatory journeys. It appears in all its force in *L'Histoire de la Taupe Blanche*, taken from the story "Corps à Corps", which Benjamin Péret wrote as he played an active role in founding the Surrealist aesthetic movement.

Suddenly, as we approached a forest which had barred the horizon for a long time, I saw the forest leave the ground and come galloping up on both sides after bowing respectfully to my companion, who, at this moment, appeared to be filled with unbearable self-sufficiency. They had a long conversation of which I could grasp only a few words, which gave me no idea of what it was about!

- Down there, in that pavilion...what can these letters mean: S. G. D. G. ... What if we visited the naval section... provided we get safely into port..., etc.

However, I supposed it had to do with me, and I had no doubt they intended to do me a bad turn, so I prepared to defend myself, but I did not have the chance, the forest grabbed me from behind and immobilised me in no time, then shoved my head into my stomach, pinned my arms against my buttocks, and carried me away, rolling me along like a barrel. And since then I have wandered the world over.

[Benjamin Péret, *The white mole story*]

Published posthumously in 1981, *Lying in ambush* is a poetic adventure tale set in the “forest of Rashomon”, where strange creatures live side by side:

Rain is falling in Rashomons forest. With slow, sorrowful steps, the rascal’s lady-love crosses the street to buy some unsweetened chocolate.

Meanwhile, advancing slowly through the forest on a white horse is the white-veiled woman in her high white hat. Reverently her husband squeezes her tiny, cold hand; he has no fear of murderers. Seated beneath the temple's open roof, which is supported by four round pillars, are four priests and a woodchopper. The rain persists, and a thick fog hovers in the trees. The day is long, sad, completely white. Each of the five witnesses offers a completely different version of the murder.

Each one saw everything that happened; each one envies the others’ stories. Silence reigns in the forest as Rashomon rouses himself from a deep and prolonged slumber.

[Unica Zürn, *Lying in ambush*]

Symbolising vitality, the forest became an obscure, dramatic place in several wartime texts such as the resistance memoirs of poet René Char in *Furor & Mystery*, in 1948:

I was in one of those forests where the sun has no access, but where stars penetrate by night.

This place could exist only because the inquisition of the State had overlooked it. Forsaken easements showed me their scorn. The obsession to chastise was taken from me. Here and there, the memory of a strength caressed the peasant flights of the grass. I ruled myself without doctrine, in serene vehemence. I was the equal of things whose secret fitted under the beam of a wing. For most, the essential is never born, and its possessors cannot exchange it without harm to themselves.

None consent to lose what was conquered by dint of pain! Otherwise, it would be youth and grace, spring and delta would be equally pure.

I was in one of those forests where the sun has no access, but where stars penetrate by night for a relentless warring. [René Char, « Twilight », *Furor & Mystery*, 1948]

10. Philosopher's stone

In reaction to positivism, the Surrealists drew an analogy between the philosopher's stone, as the ultimate quest in alchemy as a discipline, and artistic creation. The painter and poet Ithell Colquhoun joined the British Surrealist group in 1936. She was later excluded for belonging to occult societies. However she forged ahead with her exploration of esoterica and in 1961, published her novel on alchemy *Goose of Hermogenes*.

I write with the unfading ink
Used for a declaration
A record not to be falsified.

I invoke the parts of the body
In their planetary connections
From the head dedicated to Mars

To the feet in Jupiter
Zenith to nadir
I assign them all to Venus' work
Until we possess one another.

Sigils of the grimoire you I recall
Constructing the pantacle of protection
I make the gestures, speak the words
I call on left and right
I call on north and south
I call on night and day
I call on the two halves of the year
I conjure into Venus' pantacle, there to stay
Until we possess one another.

I summon from the collective dream
Symbols of the magian world
To do my will under Venus' sign:

I summon salt and sulphur
I summon mercury and gold
I summon diamond and ruby
I summon lymph and blood
I summon serpent and lion
I summon white tincture and red
I summon the tree bearing moon and sun as fruit
I put you under Venus' reign
Until we possess one another.

The vessel is ready:
Phoenix, here the alembic

Alchemy's fire-bird, light the furnace here!

[Ithell Colquhoun, "Love-Charms II"]

[piano]

Edouard Jaguer was close to the Surrealist group as from 1959 and founded the Phases group. He shared a penchant for the occult with his contemporaries.

At the bottom of the blue eyes passes the greyhound of chance

At the bottom of the black eyes passes the tiger of boredom

At the bottom of the white eyes crawls the finch of anguish

The greyhound of chance stays in the new hay

The tiger of boredom in the spring wheat

The finch of anguish in the plaster's constellation

The fresh hay crackles in winter

The spring wheat separates in the fall

The plaster's constellations disappear in summer

A winter to kill children

A fall to slay parents

A summer to kill the survivors

[Edouard Jaguer, *The fern tree*, 1944]

Joyce Mansour evoked the mandrake, a plant with hallucinogenic and magic properties.

Husband neglecting you?

Invite his mother to sleep in your room

Then sprawled in the armoire next to the bed

Project your final word along with a handful of salamanders

In the mirror where the shadow sways

Husband avoiding you?

The divine director must be put on a diet

Piss in his soup when he lies down happily next to you

Be gentle but skillful stuffing the fat goose

With octopus messages

And mandrake roots

Tease his kinks with a silk brush

Sprinkle his moth with blood and soot

Be sure to smile when he dies in your arms

Despite himself he will think of you

[Joyce Mansour, *Dowsing (Rhabdomancie)*]

11. Hymns to the Night

[piano]

Unimpeded by enlightened Reason, the Night was constantly celebrated by the Surrealists. It was the setting for many encounters among these nocturnal poets and artists. In *Paris Peasant*, published in 1926, Louis Aragon described the city in the thrall of the night and its capacity for metamorphosis:

Among the forces of nature, there is one with a power which has always been acknowledged and which remains eternally mysterious and wholly bound up with man: that force is the night. This great black illusion follows fashion, and the vagaries of fashion adopted visibly by its slaves.

The night of our cities no longer resembles that howling of dogs of the Latin shadows, or the wheeling bat of the Middle Ages, or that image of sufferings which is the night of the Renaissance. She is a vast sheet-metal monster pierced by countless knives. The blood of the modern night is a singing light. Night bears tattoos, shifting patterns of tattoos upon her breast. Her hair curlers are sparks, and where the smoke trails have

just died men are straddling falling stars. The night has whistles and lakes of glimmers. She hangs like a fruit over the earth's coast-line, like a haunch of beef in the cities' golden fist. This palpitating corpse has loosened her hair over the world, and the hesitant phantom of freedoms seeks refuge in this final nest, exhausting its insensate desire for open air and peril, there along the edges of streets illuminated by social sense.

Thus, in public gardens the densest part of the darkness is no longer distinguishable from a kind of desperate kiss exchanged between love and rebellion.

Night gives these absurd places a sense of not knowing.

[Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*, 1926 (*extrait*)]

Robert Desnos wrote several texts about the night, including the epic poem *The Night of Loveless Nights*, written between 1926 and 1927 and *Poem to the Mysterious Woman*, published in 1930 in the anthology *Bodies and Goods*.

To slip into your shadow under cover of night.

To follow your steps, your shadow at the window.

This shadow at the window, it's you, no one else, it's you.

Don't open this window behind whose curtains you're moving.

Close your eyes.

I'd like to close them with my lips.

But the window opens and the wind, wind swaying the flame so oddly and the flag cloaking my flight.

The window opens: it's not you.

I knew it all along.

[Robert Desnos, *Under cover of night*, 1930]

André Breton wrote *Arcane 17* in 1944 on his travels through Gaspesia in Quebec. In it, he referred to the German Romantics, especially Novalis and his *Hymns to the Night*.

I've closed my eyes to pray for the return of true night, night with its mask of terrors removed, night the supreme regulator and consolation, the great virgin night of Hymns to the Night. We had to wait for the confusion to clear from its surface, give it time to rest. Now it has taken up permanent residence in the frame that it fills to the breaking point with its myriad facets. It's bottomless as a diamond and only those lovers who have been able perilously to isolate themselves to lean over it from a window projecting above a park while in the distance the party rages on among crystal reeds and musical bubbles under the straps of the chandeliers, will know what mirrored vaults, what a lighthouse lens rose on such a night make a shining basket for their drunkenness, will be able to bear witness that it's only on such a night that the leaps of the heart and the senses find their infinite response. [André Breton *Arcane* 17, 1944]

12. The tears of Eros

Desire and love played a core role in Surrealist imagination.

In 1926, they were the main themes in *Capital of Pain*, an anthology that Paul Eluard dedicated to his partner, Gala.

She is standing on my eyelids
And her hair mingles with mine,
She has the shape of my hands,
She has the color of my eyes,
She dissolves into my shadow
Like a stone against the sky.
Her eyes are always open
And she doesn't let me sleep.
Her dreams in daylight
Cause the suns to drift away,
Make me laugh, weep and laugh,
Speak when I have nothing to say.

[Paul Eluard, « A Woman In Love », in *Capitale de la douleur*, 1926]

[piano]

The love letters that Frida Kahlo sent to her lover to Diego Riviera took this exploration of sensuality further:

In the saliva
In the paper
in the eclipse
In all the lines
in all the colors
in all the clay jars
in my breast
outside inside —
in the inkwell — in the difficulties of writing
in the wonder of my eyes — in the ultimate
limits of the sun (the sun has no limits) in
everything. To speak it all is imbecile, magnificent
DIEGO in my urine — DIEGO in my mouth — in my
heart. In my madness. In my dream- in
the blottter — in the point of my pen —
in the pencils — in the landscapes — in the
food — in the metal — in imagination
in the sickness-- in the glass cupboards--
in his lapels — in his eyes — DIEGO —
in his mouth — DIEGO — in his lies.

[Frida Kahlo, "In The Saliva"]

In 1953, Éditions Seghers published the first anthology by the Egyptian poet Joyce Mansour, entitled *Screams*. She attracted the attention of André Breton and moved to

Paris the next year. She took part in Surrealist group activities, while continuing to produce literary works of exacerbated eroticism.

The hook snagged in my astral jaw
The horns growing behind my ears
My bleeding wounds which never heal
My blood that turns to water dissolves embalms
The children I choke to satisfy their whims
All this makes me Your Lord and God
(...)
Let me lick your closed eyes
Let me pierce them with my pointed tongue
And fill their hollows with my triumphant spit.
Let me blind you.
[Joyce Mansour, *Screams*, 1953]

13. Cosmos

Antonin Artaud's works, in particular *The Theatre and its Double*, published in 1938, further this denunciation of a civilisation that has lost its footing due to excessive control, forgetting its primordial relation with the universe.

The library at Alexandria can be burnt down. There are forces above and beyond papyrus: we may temporarily be deprived of our ability to discover these forces, but their energy will not be suppressed. [...] It is right that from time to time cataclysms occur which compel us to return to nature, i.e., to rediscover life. [Antonin Artaud, *the Theatre and Its Double*, 1938]

The domination of humankind over nature and of men over other peoples is a core topic in the work of Martinique poet Aimé Césaire.

He wrote *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, upon his return to Martinique in 1939.

I would rediscover the secret of great communications and great combustions. I would say storm. I would say river. I would say tornado.

I would say leaf. I would say tree.

I would be drenched by all rains, moistened by all dews.

(...)

Who and what are we? A most worthy question!

From staring too long at trees I have become a tree and my long tree feet have dug in the ground large venom sacs high cities of bone

from brooding too long on the Congo

I have become a Congo resounding with forests and rivers where the whip cracks like a great banner. [Aimé Césaire, *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, 1939]

[Jingle outro]

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