Surrealism and The Feminine Element: André Breton's *Nadja* and Gellu Naum's *Zenobia*

Ileana Alexandra ORLICH

Although Romanian critics have often commented on the connections between *Zenobia*, Naum's most celebrated work, and André Breton's *Nadja*, another equally mysterious, surrealist masterpiece[1], there has been no clear attempt to interpret the two writers' treatment of the women protagonists that ultimately enable their surreal vision.

Published in 1985 and projected in an indeterminate time, *Zenobia* is a "*prozopoem*"[2] whose narrative discourse, in the manner of Breton's *Nadja*, borders on poetic representation and brings up the same unanswerable question formulated in Michel Beaujour's "*Qu'est-ce que Nadja?*": Is *Nadja* fiction or poetry?[3] From this perspective, *Zenobia* is, like *Nadja*, an artistic experiment that crystallizes the chief tenets of Surrealism: correspondences between different realms from the unconscious to consciousness, from mental image to actual event; an insistence on the omnipotence of dream and the necessity for man to incorporate the dream process into his waking state; and a belief in Breton's concept of *hasard objectif* (objective chance or coincidence) as the means of liberating the psyche from its enslavement to reason by stringing together endless non-rational associations.

Even though Naum (1915-2001) stated in an interview taken several decades after Breton's death that he could no longer bear to read him, he also insisted on praising the charismatic founder of surrealist ideology as the man who "brought together all the great ideas of the 20th century, changed people's minds, indeed changed the world". "Take a look around you", Naum urged his interviewer, "and [you will] believe me that

[1] See Vasile Spiridon's "Despre poheticitatea romanului"; Simona Popescu, *Salvarea speciei. Despre suprarealism si Gellu Naum*, Bucureşti, Editura Fundaţiei Culturale, 2000; Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, *Plural: Culture and Civilization* Bucureşti, Institutul Cultural Român, 3 (19) 2003, p. 195-198. Of particular significance in this context is Monica Lovinescu's persuasive essay *Est-etice/Unde scurte IV*, in which she argues against Marian Papahagi's view that Naum writes in the manner of Mircea Eliade's fantastic. Lovinescu's point is that Naum's surrealism is different from Eliade's fantastic, which attributes mythical approaches to daily occurrences.

[2] I am borrowing this term from Ion Pop's book *Gellu Naum: Poezia contra literaturii*, Cluj, Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2001. According to the Romanian critic, "*Discursul său [al lui Naum] de narator se desfăşoară de la început în vecinătatea poemelor, putând fi situat, ca la toţi avangardiştii, în zona de interferenţă dintre poemul în proză organizat pe o solidă armătură programatiăa de manifest"* "Naum's narrative discourse takes place from the start on the margins of poetry, and thus can be located, as in the case of all avant-garde writers, on the border between prose and poetry built on a firm, manifesto-like foundation", 149 (My translation).

[3] *Surrealism and the Novel*, "French Studies", XX (1966), p. 366-387. In support of this view see also Vasile Spiridon's *Despre poheticitatea romanului*.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

he [Breton] managed to shatter the old and false ideas – and that's no small task"[4]. Beyond this public acknowledgement of praise for Breton, Naum was closely connected to the figures of the Romanian surrealist movement loosely clustered around a literary and artistic avant-garde that had prompted Breton's comment that "the center of the world has moved to Bucharest." In 1940, together with a group of surrealists that included Paul Păun and Virgil Teodorescu, Gellu Naum elaborated the surrealist manifesto, *Critique of Misery*, which defined the basic concepts of Romanian Surrealism. While borrowing some of its notes from the earlier surrealist circles centered around such reviews as "75HP", "Contemporanul", "Integral", or "Unu"[5], Naum's manifesto also took its dictates directly from Breton, with whose work he was well acquainted from the pre-war Paris days when he was pursuing a doctoral program in philosophy and establishing the close ties with French language and literature that later made him the excellent translator into Romanian of works by Diderot, Stendhal, Victor Hugo, Alexandre Dumas, René Char and Jacques Prévert.

Like Breton, Naum pleads for the quest of that "point of the mind at which," as Breton puts it, "life and death, the real and the imagined, past and future, the communicable and the incommunicable, high and low, cease to be perceived as contradictions"[6] The very title of Naum's first volume, *The Firing Traveler* (1936), announces the incandescent itinerary of the writer's spirit engaged in a subversive quest that continues in subsequent works, *The Freedom to Sleep on a Forehead* (1937), *Vasco de Gama* (1940), *The Corridor of Sleep* (1944), *Medium* (1945), *The Terrible Forbidden* (1945) and *The Blind Man's Castle* (1946). Sorting and disseminating facts, Naum's approach in all these works is to de-familiarize and excommunicate objects by giving them estranged shapes and never tested properties. Ultimately, these seemingly rambling narratives are conceived in the spirit of Benjamin Fondane's advise in the "Preface" to his 1930 volume of poetry *Privelişti,* as "an autonomous universe, with arbitrary laws and unforeseen hazard. A kind of Morse code"[7].

[4] Interview with Simona Popescu, *Suprarealism pe cont propriu*, Bucureşti, Editura Fundației Culturale, 2000 (my translation).

[5] Among the prominent surrealist journals of the period, mention should be made of "75HP" which appeared in 1924 as a single issue under the directorship of Ilarie Voronca and Victor Brauner; "Contimporanul", a leading surrealist journal, which started its publication in 1922 under the supervision of Ion Vinea and was in subsequent years responsible for organizing four surrealist exhibitions that hosted both Romanian and foreign surrealists; "Integral" (1925-1928) which started its publication in Bucharest under M.H. Maxy and later added another publishing office in Paris under Benjamin Fondane and Hans Mattis-Teutsch; "Unu" (1928-1932), led by Saşa Pană, which included contributions not only from prominent Romanian surrealists, such as Ilarie Voronca, Geo Bogza, Stephane Roll (the literary pseudonym of Gheorghe Dinu) but also from foreign contributors like Louis Aragon, André Breton, René Crevel, and Paul Éluard, and which was richly illustrated with the art work of Marc Chagall and Man Ray, among many others.

[6] André Breton, *Second Manifesto of Surrealism*, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 123-124.

[7] Fondane's volume, which includes poems written between 1917 and 1923, made a great impact on the newer generation of Romanian surrealists, especially through its Preface titled *Câteva cuvinte pădureţe*. Loosely translated to mean "words as tart as green apples," this title suggests that artistic creation must not be mawkish and follow convention, but instead should use words that sting the taste buds, like tart green apples.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

As in Breton's case, where a close reading of *Nadja* is necessary in order to assess the full extent of Breton's surrealist project and the centrality of women's role in achieving a surrealist vision, a detailed analysis of *Zenobia* is an obligatory step toward understanding it as Naum's response and reaction to Surrealism and to Breton's incorporation of the feminine element. And even though the discussion of *Nadja*'s and *Zenobia*'s similar narrative techniques and textual poetics that I undertake is a necessary next step in this comparative study, my goal in the process is to highlight not only Naum's recuperation of Breton's objectives, but also the impact Surrealism and its image of woman as an essentially sensual bodily backdrop for the male vision have had in Naum's own work. Skillfully embedded in *Zenobia*, such views may reveal not only Naum's appropriations and perceived limitations and inconsistencies of Breton's theories, but also, coming full circle, the significant contributions of Romanian modern fiction to the Surrealist experiment and to the perception of woman as a strong and commanding presence on an imaginative plane.

Originally published in 1928, Breton's *Nadja* is the first and perhaps best Surrealist romance ever written. Divided into two parts, a long preamble of about seventy pages, which is a kind of illustrated essay on surrealism, and the shorter, strange story of the encounters with the character Nadja, Breton's book identifies Surrealism's preoccupations, principles, and attitude toward everyday life while exploring notions of love and physical passion. In recounting Breton's love affair with Nadja, a mentally disturbed young woman in Paris, this autobiographical novel (the opening sentence is a question *Qui suis-je?* "Who am I?") focuses on the writer's own beliefs that surreal states of consciousness were best attainable through encounters with the feminine side of masculinity and sexual love.

With her inability to distinguish between illusion and reality, obsessive behavior, and dark eccentricity, Nadja is "*une étoile au coeur même du fini*," who synthesizes the surrealist trait of the irrational feminine forces that Breton views as complementary to the rational masculine. Although initially attracted to Nadja particularly because she embodies the extralogical and extrarational modes of thought the Surrealists cherished (the first syllable of her name means "hope" in Russian), Breton ultimately abandons her upon discovering her growing madness; Nadja's inability to break the barrier separating sanity from insanity eventually leads to the young woman's institutionalization. The novel ends on a note of exalted hope after the writer's presumable encounter with another woman, whose presence announces "THE DAWN" of a new relationship and whom the first person writer-narrator-protagonist celebrates in the highest degree:

> "You who do so wonderfully all that you do and whose splendid reasons, not bounded for me in unreason, dazzle and all inexorably as thunderbolts. You, the most vital of beings, who seem to have been put in my path only so I may feel in all its rigor the strength of what is not felt in you. You who know evil only by hearsay. You, indeed, ideally beautiful (157)"[8].

[8] André Breton, *Nadja*, trans. Richard Howard, New York, Grove Press, 1960. All quotations are from this edition.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

Such exalted praise of his "supreme love" leads to Breton's mythic view of women expressed in his last prose narrative, *Arcane 17* (1944), which asserts that women might serve as a means for humanity to attain spiritual enlightenment and renewal.

Naum must have read *Nadja* as a form of mental rewriting, in the fashion of Henry James's famous theory that discusses his own looking at the creative problems the novel he is reading tried to solve (or express) and then imagining the ways in which he would have dealt with these problems within the same structure[9]. In similar ways, the construction of *Zenobia* must have been subconsciously drawn from what Ralph Waldo Emerson, in speaking of "the secret of the reader's joy in literary genius and the contagious character of felicitous expression," defined as "the mechanics of inspiration by which a text induces an independently creative state of mind in the reader, [and becomes] a mechanical help to the fancy and the imagination that trigger in the reader a desire to write"[10].

Published a little over a half century later than *Nadja*, *Zenobia* subscribes to Breton's view of interchangeability of dream and reality and the interference of the conscious (rationality) and the unconscious or subconscious (an antithesis to reality) as two apparently contradictory states that will be resolved into a sort of absolute reality, of surreality.

Both *Nadja* and *Zenobia* detail their author-narrator-protagonist pursuit of and engagement with an ideal feminine counterpart to the masculine side to satisfy the Platonic idea of the original androgynous couple, as expressed by Aristophanes in *The Symposium*. Through catalytic love, this missing feminine part that will be recognized instantly will then dissolve in complete physical and spiritual sameness with the masculine side. Together they attain and nourish an extraordinary kind of perception that erodes and transcends the habitual experience of concrete reality opening up a fluid world of physical objects and imagination that will enable them to reach and experience a different, surreal realm. To implement such textual objectives, both authors use an abundance of signs, words, names, and free associations and fantasies of a poetic domain that cease to give routine directions in a familiar world, but create new affinities or assert their mystery.

Zenobia, which proposes from the start an unlikely space of indeterminate temporal progression, begins with the narrator-protagonist's visit at the house of Mr. Sima, a neighbor and friend (Sima is the French word *amis* spelled backwards) of the marsh-dwelling narrator. Here the dreamlike scenario alternating between magical reality and hallucination is further complicated when the narrator finds a very weird looking old man named Dragoş, who appears to be asleep on top of a table, and two young men, Jason and Peter, clustered around a beautiful, nameless girl. Wrapped in a dirty sheet of plastic, she had been found "almost unconscious" in the marsh by the two young men whose attitudes and behaviors toward her could not have been more different: Jason, who kicks her and calls her "scum," and Peter, who claims to love the girl madly but appears strangely impotent in his affection. Smitten with the girl's unimaginable beauty, the narrator, who calls himself by his real name, Naum, and who

[9] See James's letter to Mrs. Humphrey Ward (July 26, 1899), "Letters", Vol. 4, p. 111.
[10] Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Uses of Great Men* and *Nominalist and Realist*, respectively.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

is, like Breton in *Nadja*, the protagonist of his own novel, also falls madly in love with her and begins to speak to her:

> "My dear", I said then, softly to that girl, "because I don't know your name I will call you Zenobia, and you should know that I love you so unimaginably much" (4)[11].

Mr. Sima's remark that the girl is looking at the narrator "as if he were her long-awaited bridegroom," brings into immediate reality the narrator's own account of a dream in which he had in fact met the same girl. Since the dream reveals that the narrator and the girl, who had been the bride of a friend of the narrator's in the dream, have long been acquainted with each other, she is clearly the long anticipated woman of a lifetime quest instantly recognized. In spite of Peter's deep sorrow, the narrator takes her away, to his damp hollow of the dam, where they live together "lying shoulder to shoulder, with our faces pressed against the wet dirt," (9) as they "clutch each other in the darkness." Their passionate love-making continues in their next dwelling, a hollow in a tree, where they "hibernate" during the winter that "is especially harsh in the swamps" (10). Surrounded by lots of snow, during the blizzards, the two lovers live "like moles," telling each other incessantly how unimaginably much they are in love as "the dirt and the dried branches in their hollow rustle faintly" (11). Even on those rare outings away from the hole when they run in the field to stretch their limbs, they never part because Zenobia is permanently attached to her lover's shoulder.

In Surrealist manner, the chance encounter with the girl whose real name, as in Nadja's case, nobody knows, is similar to Breton's haphazard meeting with Nadja during an aimless stroll, and it provokes a similar state of emotional upheaval in Naum, the narrator-protagonist. Furthermore, the exploration of sexual passion by explicitly recounting the narrator-protagonist's love for Zenobia extends beyond Breton's intense erotic pursuits and occasional illuminations into the occult in *Nadja*; taking its initial notes from Breton's dictates, Naum's prolonged and richly detailed sexual experiment take the narrator a step higher and enable him to transcend reality and reach surreality. In such moments, he feels "like I was falling, without shoulders of wings, in a void without sounds of landscapes. I lived in a state of non-existence, a collapse into the void, from which I didn't want to escape" (102).

An "esprit nouveau" similar to Nadja, Zenobia is as necessary as Nadja was for inducing a systematic disordering of all senses and surreal moments in her lover. Like Nadja, whose response, "On ne m'atteint pas," to Breton's attempts to solve the mystery of her identity, suggests her mysterious, in-between space, Zenobia speaks and acts in dimly discernable gestures that transcend familiar surroundings. Afraid whenever she hears the smallest sound and able to hear the movement of shadows along the walls, Zenobia's actions point not only toward indeterminacy, but also to the existence of a mysterious realm in which virtual realities nearly eclipse actual environments. Her "crystal silhouette" (26) and her continuing whispers "with her lover's shoulders, with his mouth, with his knees" (10), for she very seldom speaks directly to him, suggest her

[11] James Brook and Sasha Vlad, Translators, Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995. All quotes are from this edition of *Zenobia*.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

other-worldly quality, and her "chirping about some much more powerful circles that our minds can't do anything about" integrate the novel's magical and material spheres.

Created from the bringing together of two realms, water and earth, the marshes are a hybrid, surreal space that seems to gives birth to the unworldly beautiful Zenobia. This Surrealist necessity of bringing together two distinctly different domains to form the surreal is ever present in *Nadja*, not only in the heroine's emblematic drawings (*Le rêve du chat*, for instance, depicting the cat suspended between the air, where he tries to lift himself, and the earth to which it is bound), but also in the author's own comments about himself. When he states that "in that game which consists of finding a resemblance with some animal, people usually agree that I am a dolphin," Breton publicizes his condition: like the dolphin, a creature apart from others because he needs both air and water to live, the narrator-protagonist is actively engaged in a search to find surreality, the domain resulting from the merging of reality and unreality. In similarly thinly disguised fashion, Naum's claim from the very beginning that he lives in a crevasse in the "slippery mess" of the marshes whose mud is "all over his cotton socks," alludes to both his being in a space of factual uncertainty and his estrangement from the existing order.

Although Naum does not include in his text cryptic drawings like *The Lover's Flower* and many others that Breton attributes to Nadja, he talks about Zenobia drawing while blindfolded, in the dark, without using her hands and eyes. Clearly indebted to Breton's account of his own portrait and Nadja's and of the curious cut out of a woman's face and hand drawn by Nadja, Naum's detailed description of Zenobia's quasi-hallucinatory drawing of the two of them is also an illustration of the concept of *pictopoezie.* Formulated in the 1924 issue of the surrealist review "75 HP" by Ilarie Voronca and Victor Brauner, two luminaries of the Romanian historical avant-garde, *pictopoezia* proposed that the link between the imagination and the imagined be erased, camouflaged from view in the communication between the interior subjective and the exterior objective universe expressed in the intersection of the literary and the visual arts.

In an interesting reversal from Breton, for whom Nadja's unstoppable imagination carries the risk of sinking into madness, and perhaps mindful of Breton's implicit warning in *Nadja* that the surreal world can at any time turn into a deadly trap for the unprepared, Naum devises a reconfiguration of the feminine and masculine identities, reserving for himself the irrational tendencies and endowing Zenobia's character with rational force. Asked during an interview if *Zenobia* is his literary response to Breton's *Nadja,* Naum acknowledged the relationship and then added that in his work the narrator relies on Zenobia to steer him away from madness and despair[12].

From the moment when the narrator meets her, Zenobia's transparent plastic sheet cover gives a totally different sense of mystery than Nadja's heavy makeup, unfinished around the eyes, her hairstyle, hat, silk stockings and provocative allure. The two heroines' behavior, too, is vastly different: Nadja is a "wandering soul," unaccountable to herself as to others, while Zenobia is peaceful and constant in her love. Later on, after the departure from the marshes and the tree hollow, she begins to work in a "sordid novelty shop" in the city, where her "cutting and pasting letters and flowers on rags and pieces of cardboard" (92) shows none of Nadja's siren-like qualities.

[12] James Brook, *Contestarea poetică. Interviu cu Gellu Naum*, "Observatorul Cultural", Nr. 1.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

If as a sphinx-type Nadja poses a threat to others and even to herself especially during her hallucinatory phases, forcing the narrator protagonist to abandon her for fear that her frightening inconsistency and unpredictability may harm his own sanity, Zenobia is the narrator's ideal feminine counterpart. Enveloped in what he calls "the axiom of our love," Naum claims to feel Zenobia "so attached, so incorporated in me that I almost didn't see her anymore, just as you don't see your retina" (92). In this deep, obsessive union, Zenobia is the valorized half who partakes of, and hence reflects, the adventures of the spirit from one level (or "circle," as Zenobia mysteriously calls them) to the next; and in the narrator's moments of exaltation, she even advises Naum "not to place himself on their [the circles'] margins, lest he be thrown outside" (14). Her encoded drawing, *The State of the World*, which begins "in the lower part with a multitude of cripples who squirmed in the large box of the malady of the conscious and ended at the top of the pyramid, under a star, where there was no one left" (105), indicates (1) her awareness of the disastrous, systematic rituals of purification that the conscious inflicts regularly upon the surreal world of the subconscious; and (2) her pivotal position as a figure imbued with a cosmically mysterious dimension and responsible for the narrator's cycles of transformation.

Thus although Nadja's visions extend beyond immediate experience to countless accounts of a world of weird analogies, strange encounters, and predictions, such as her feeling akin to figures of the past like Melusine, a siren and fairy, or Madame de Chevreuse, a prominent figure before and during the Fronde, her illuminations and insights into mysterious powers do not have the strength of what appears to be Zenobia's permanent ties with, and attachment to, the surreal realm from which she has emerged. Finally, if in Nadja one can discern a female spirit occasionally transforming a male's musings as he strolls around Paris, in Naum's text Zenobia's gentle presence and delicate powers leak their magic over the real world.

Even connecting links between the two heroines turn into significant contrasts as overt references to their spiritual powers result into completely different possibilities. Water images, for instance, which are frequently associated with a female sensibility and which circulate through both novels, are more positive in *Zenobia* than in *Nadja*. As Nadja, in front of a fountain whose jet she is watching with Breton, imagines the waters to be "your thoughts and mine...falling back only to be driven back up with the same strength" (86), she stirs in Breton the shock of recognition at having verbalized the same thoughts he had finished reading about in a vignette preceding the third of Berkeley's *Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in the 1750 edition, where it is accompanied by the legend "*Urget aquas vis sursum eadem, flectit que deorsum*." Although Nadja's thoughts about the water are of great significance to Breton as they exemplify his own theories of the communicating vases, the water is clearly associated here not with Nadja but with the currents of tradition and cultural intertwining that Breton's text navigates. By contrast, Naum's association of Zenobia with the marshes and the waters from where she emerges, nameless and wrapped in dirty plastic, symbolizes her womanly heritage, the life of birthing and nursing that enables the flesh and spirit to survive, and the female stream that Zenobia portrays and protects as a benevolent priestess grounded in the domestic. Her emotional warmth appears to be the slippery handles that Naum needs to grasp in order to deepen his image seeking sensibility and to destabilize realist scenarios in the loose narrative of the text.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

More importantly, whereas Naum makes Zenobia the *sine qua non* of his artistic inspiration who enables him to accede to an ever higher reality, Breton turns Nadja's pursuits of enigmas and revelations into a sinister endeavor. Whereas Zenobia moves and deepens Naum's imagination not so much as an object of carnal temptation but rather as a power that stimulates his expansion of consciousness, Nadja appears as a solitary figure, a satanic and self-sufficient angel aspiring to an infinite series of metamorphoses. She wonders what role she would have played at the time of Marie-Antoinette; appears as a *voyante* who sees the city lights transformed into a flaming hand and senses during a walk with Breton that a key episode of *Poisson soluble* took place at a specific spot; and ultimately becomes for Breton something of a witch closely associated with the devil, as evidenced in her drawing "The Devil's Salute" and in "assuming with an astonishing facility the arrogance of the Devil [when] she has thrown a fold of her cape back over her shoulder" (102).

As Xavière Gauthier points out in her book *Surrealisme and sexuality*, Breton's views concerning women and the entire surrealist project are in fact determined by a fundamental contradiction within the general surrealist vision of femininity. Contained within Breton's simultaneous exaltation of the supreme lover and his pleas for the unleashing of a completely unimpeded sexuality, such contradiction leads to both the sanctification of woman and to fear and debasement of her. While considering the opposites and extremes that color the portrayal of Nadja, Gauthier comments that Breton sees her as "edible, but she devours men; she is angel and demon, fairy and sorceress, salvation and damnation, symbol of purity as well as sin; she is singular and multiple, repose and turbulence, victim and executioner, nurturance and destruction, protector and protected, giver of life and of death, mother and child, heaven and earth, vice and virtue, hope and despair, God and Satan"[13].

Unlike Breton's vision, Naum's predominant tendency with respect to Zenobia is toward sanctification, an attitude that seems to grow out of his insistence on the cult of supreme, monogamous love. Thus Naum's love for Zenobia acquires something of a mystical or divine quality, closer to Breton's view of woman in *Arcane 17*. As the satisfaction of a lifetime quest, it is an ultimate experience; their complete physical and spiritual likeness leads to their being able to find each other in a specific movie theatre of a big city like Bucharest, based on the vague indication which Zenobia leaves for Naum that she expects him to join her at the movies because she has bought tickets.

Breton's experience with Nadja, which, as Michel Beaujour notes, "ultimately *fails* in that he cannot love or truly understand her"[14], requires further examination, particularly since such an exploration can highlight the differences between Breton's and Naum's ultimate objectives. From the beginning of their relationship, Nadja is not reassuringly reflective of Breton; instead, she goes off into new modes of "different" behavior clearly not prescribed by the masculine norm. Whereas Zenobia blends into Naum body and soul as his missing half of the reconstituted androgyne, Nadja becomes quite literally incomprehensible, and therefore "mad."

The moment of Nadja's final estrangement from Breton, as Bethany Ladimer remarks in her interesting discussion of *Nadja*, is rarely mentioned by critics of the work

[13] Xavière Gauthier, *Surrealism and Sexuality,* Paris, 1971.
[14] "French Studies", XX (1966), 366-387.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

precisely because this dramatic occurrence in the plot yields the remaining information needed to elucidate Breton's attitude toward her, and toward her madness[15]. The dramatic point occurs when Nadja, while describing a violent event from her past, provokes Breton's own violent revulsion to the account, thus setting the tone for the demise of their relationship:

> "I had a frightfully violent reaction to the excessively detailed account she gave of certain scenes from her past, and I judged, perhaps with too much detachment, that her dignity must have been impaired by these events. One story about a blow she had received directly in the face, so that she bled profusely, one day in a room in the Brasserie Zimmer, the story of a blow she received from a man whose propositions she had refused with calculated satisfaction simply because he was despicable (and several times she had called for help but had nonetheless taken the time, before disappearing, to bloody his clothes) this story very nearly, in the early afternoon of 13 October, alienated me from her forever. I do not know what absolutely irremediable feeling her derisive, sardonic account of this horrible adventure awakened within me, but I cried for a long time after hearing it, in a way I did not suspect I could still cry". (113-14)

Nadja has become in this account "unrecognizable" in terms of traditional sex-roles definitions, and hence mad in the terms Breton outlines in the passage above. In the light of Gauthier's discussion of Breton's internally contradictory view of women, the reader's interpretation of both Nadja's account and of its reception by Breton may simply communicate the specifically female experience in society. It is an experience that falls under the category of "sex-alienation," and it is closely related to Shoshana Felman's summary of masculine/social suppression of female "difference," because it threatens to prevent a man from finding in a woman his specular and harmonious "missing half," or "Other"[16].

At this point, it is quite obvious that I am aiming here at a restatement of the Platonic ideal of the reconstituted Androgyne mentioned earlier as an essential part of Breton's concept of love. The failure of his love affair with Nadja results, in final analysis, from her failure to conform and submit to this specular or traditional definition of femininity: her madness becomes a hyperbole of feminine difference which Breton finds unacceptable.

In contrast, Zenobia is Naum's complementary half, or as he puts it, "the witness and judge of my existence" (168). Blending the real and the surreal, deceit and reality, her plastic wrapping reveals as much as it shadows life while capturing the narrator's hypnotic stance. In the tree hollow and the crevasse in the marshes, as well as later on in the city, she makes possible Naum's revelings in intense experiences of the senses that allow his spirit to effectively reconceive reality and reach the heightened awareness which collapses the boundaries between rationality and the unconscious.

---

[15] Bethany Ladimer, *Madness and the Irrational in the Works of André Breton: A Feminist Perspective*, in "Feminist Studies", Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 1980, p. 175-195.

[16] See *Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy*, in which Felman offers a lucid discussion of the implications of this basic Western philosophical principle of woman's otherness/femininity mirroring the masculine side/masculinity (181-84). In contemporary French critical terminology, this reassuring definition of femininity as a constant reminder of masculinity is often named "the Other(ness)" of woman because it functions as a sort of mirror or reflector (of masculinity).

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

With a name associated, as Marian Papahagi points out, with both a goddess and life[17], Zenobia is a new model for outworldly desire, close to the type Naum describes in his earlier work, *Medium* – "a woman waiting for my love, a woman who will objectify all my desires" (my translation). As embodiment of the feminine principle, Zenobia is also a Penelope, who waits for the narrator eternally and unconditionally. When his wanderings come to an end, and when he draws back from the hallucinatory images overcoming him, the narrator returns home where "in front of the hollow [in the tree], Zenobia was sitting quietly on a heap of dry reeds with her hands in her lap. Her hair had turned white from waiting" (192).

In Zenobia's quasi-chimerical portrayal and through the associations of her character with myth and ordinary enchantments, Naum achieves a narrative of defocalization to foreground without obvious transition the interference of dream and reality. More specifically, Zenobia becomes the embodiment of the narrator's surreal longings often associated with the feminine[18]. In this sense, both Ion Pop, who talks about an arrangement of the text around the female characters like Maria, Mrs. Gerda, and the giant matron[19], and Marian Papahagi, who stresses Naum's focus on the giant "Woman Spirit"[20], suggest an examination of *Zenobia* in terms of female focalization and a feminine thread that carries the narrative. Naum's own poetic evocations in interconnected monologues appear symbolically planted to address such a topic when he declares:

> "Perhaps it would be fitting to say here that I felt always around me the all-encompassing presence of a feminine principle that, when I tried to define its features, to give it a face, I named the Woman Spirit. But my receptiveness, still immature, succeeded only in creating the image of a giant woman, as big as the world". (97)

Characterized by structures of diffusion and polivocality as "mother of all mothers, ferocious and indifferent, gentle and generous, deaf, primitive, and infinitely superior to my rude masculinity, she protected me, she shielded me, she guided me through the complicated appearance that envelops us like the air we breathe, without being aware of it" (97), Naum's "Woman Spirit" experiences both human and extraterrestrial characteristics. While coming to terms with "the brightness of this intuitive concept" (97) of her "prefigured 'giantism' [that] had become for me a kind of purely spiritual, abstract, fluid, and formless dimension in which immensity and smallness, anomaly and naturalness, promiscuity and splendor coexisted" (99), Naum formulates a discourse that resembles a ludic feminism by partaking of the difference within, or *différence*, which undermines the notion of individual identity. Furthermore, by disrupting the mimetic program of realism in the representation of women, Naum's portrayal of the Woman Spirit appears in line with Christine Buci-Gluksmann's claim that "the metaphor of the feminine rises up as an element in the break with a certain

[17] Marian Papahagi, *În căutarea sensului, Cumpănă şi semn*, Bucureşti, Editura Cartea românească, 1990, p. 36-42.

[18] I am thinking, for instance, of Henry James's novella *Madame de Mauves*, where Euphemia de Mauves, born Clève, becomes the embodiment of Longmore's infatuated sensations.

[19] Ion Pop, *Gellu Naum: Poezia contra literaturii*, Cluj, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2001, p. 165.

[20] Marian Papahagi, *În căutarea sensului...*, p. 36-42.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

discredited rationality. It does this by designing a new heterogeneity, a new otherness"[21].

It seems as though Naum needs the aid of this giant female body not only to break through realistic tradition but also, and more importantly for my purpose here, to challenge and reverse the disruptive female desire that Susan Suleiman sees as central to Surrealism. From a position of female empowerment, then, Naum's Giant Woman Spirit signals the demise of the patriarchal age and of Breton's female *clairevoyantes* whom the founder and chief ideologue of Surrealism imagines to passively "accuse themselves of sometimes adorably moral sins"[22] and whose suffering he has appropriated.

Furthermore, whereas for Breton and the surrealists the female presence functions as "the Other" that permits male writers to reach the world of the second reality, the subaltern whose liminal power and wisdom they wish to appropriate, for Naum the Giant Woman Spirit is the paradigmatic body through which the text is focalized. Using the feminine as a bridge and conduit to the beyond, Naum situates himself more in line with Irigaray's view of the female as "a *sensible transcendental*" coming into being through a very special male, for whom she "would be the mediator and bridge"[23].

Thus unlike *Nadja*'s patrilineal form, Zenobia's feminocentric orientation bridges the worlds of tradition and modernity, of concrete reality and subconscious visions, and it does so by the incorporation of both female and male views into a union that signals the replenishment and integration of Naum's narrative powers. To consider these developments from a feminine perspective suggests that if Breton fragments the female body in surrealist fashion, Naum reconstructs it as a fascinating narrative. Naum's portrayal of Zenobia's female spiritual guidance and their experiences of surreal union throughout the novel are again strikingly similar to Irigaray's description in a different context of "la mystérique":

> "This is the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames. This is the place where "she" – and in some cases he, if he follows her lead – speaks about the dazzling glare which comes from the source of light that has been logically repressed, about "abject" and "Other" flowing out into an embrace of fire that mingles one term into another"[24].

If dark imagery is Breton's master in *Nadja*, Zenobia appears as Naum's lover and master, leading him beyond consciousness and out of commonplace reality into the "dark night that is also fire and flames", i.e., the surreal space which by no means erases its complementary physical ecstasy. And even though Zenobia and Naum achieve the embrace of fire that mingles one term into another of Irigaray's description, Naum's book does not end on a heavenly note but in the domain of the marshes where Zenobia

[21] Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Baroque Reason: The Aesthetics of Modernity*, trans. Patrick Camiller, London, Sage, 1994, p. 49.

[22] Breton, "A Letter to Seers," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1969, p. 197.

[23] Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991, p. 144.

[24] Luce Irigaray, *La Mystérique*, in *Speculum of Another Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1984, p. 191-202.

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)

waits for the narrator, underscoring simultaneously once again the female relation to the mystical, and the necessary mingling of the worlds of concrete reality and of the spirit that the surrealists consider their chief narrative scenario.

Surrealisme et le Feminine: *Nadja* d'André Breton et *Zenobia* de Gellu Naum

Comme dans le cas de André Breton, où une lecture détaillée de *Nadja* est nécessaire afin d'évaluer à fond le projet surréaliste de Breton, une analyse systématique de *Zenobia* par Gellu Naum est une étape obligatoire pour envisager l'oeuvre de Naum en tant que réponse et réaction envers le surréalisme et Breton. Et bien que la discussion que j'entame sur les techniques narratives et la poétique textuelle similaires dans le cas de *Nadja* et *Zenobia* soit une phase importante dans cette étude comparative, mon but est d'évidencier pas seulement la récuperation des objectifs surréalistes de Breton par Naum, mais aussi l'impact que le surréalisme a eu sur un plan imaginatif dans l'oeuvre même de Naum. Adroitement encastrés en *Zenobia*, de tels points de vue peuvent dévoiler la manière dont Naum assimile les théories de Breton aussi que la manière dont il perçoit les limitations et les inconséquences des mêmes théories. Du surcroît, afin de faire un tour complet, on va également souligner la contribution considérable de la fiction roumaine moderne à l'expériment surréaliste.

Arizona State University
USA

BDD-A794 © 2006 Institutul de Filologie Română „A. Philippide"
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 23:07:19 UTC)