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**‘Saved by Separation...All in One Piece’: Surrealist Collage in  
Barnes’ *Nightwood* and Nin’s *Collages***

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## **‘Saved by Separation...All in One Piece’: Surrealist Collage in Barnes’ *Nightwood* and Nin’s *Collages***

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‘He who says collage,’ wrote Surrealist artist Max Ernst, ‘says the irrational.’<sup>1</sup> Collage, the art of assembling fragments of material on a single surface to compose a whole image, was a crucial practice of the Surrealist movement, and also for writers such as Anaïs Nin, who saw collage as a method for reassembling the fragmented self. Given its disruptions of reality and its affinity with dream imagery, collage is a ‘privileged mode of creating the surreal’ because of its capacity for anchoring the marvellous in reality.<sup>2</sup> This article will discuss Nin’s final novel *Collages* and Djuna Barnes’ Surrealist work *Nightwood* in the light of the collage aesthetic, tracing patterns of fragmentation and re-assemblage in both to show how they formally subvert discursive hierarchies and resist the singularity of interpretation to articulate the surreal.

Although collage techniques are found in art dating back to twelfth-century Japan and thirteenth-century Persia, collage in history have been primarily decorative; it was not till the twentieth century, as Herta Wescher asserts, that it became ‘a new and valid means of expression, one which has left its mark indelibly on the art of today.’<sup>3</sup> This began with the practice of *papier collé*—pasting scrap paper onto a painted canvas—popularised by Cubists such as Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, and evolved into the politically-driven

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<sup>1</sup> Ernst, *Surrealists* 131.

<sup>2</sup> Adamowicz 11.

<sup>3</sup> Wescher 19.

photomontages and assemblages of the Dadaists; all this preceded the Surrealist movement, to which collage became a vital foundational technique.<sup>4</sup>

Both Barnes and Nin were influenced by Surrealism, although it would be a great stretch to associate either author with the automatic writing that characterised the literature of the movement. The surrealism of *Nightwood* is critically recognised; John McGuigan goes so far as to claim *Nightwood* fulfils the call that Surrealist leader André Breton made for a novel where ‘the verisimilitude of the scenery will for the first time fail to hide from us the strange symbolical life which even the most definite and most common objects lead in dream...’<sup>5</sup> The sliding alternative discourse and formal obliqueness of *Nightwood’s* language and structure launch a subversive attack against hegemonic and rational thought, much as the Surrealists aimed to do. In contrast, Nin’s work itself is not entirely surreal; although she aligned herself with the Surrealists’ location of the marvellous in the unconscious, she criticised what she saw as their refusal to make interpretative connections between dream and life. In her theoretical work *The Novel of the Future*, she disparages those who have brought ‘the nocturnal life into visibility but, unable to extract any significance from their findings, have emptied at our feet their vast nets filled with chaos and debris. This is what they have found in their unconscious!’<sup>6</sup> Yet, as Thomas March remarks, her writing shares with Surrealist collage the objective of magical creation through the juxtaposition of disparity, as she pieces together fragments of dream and lived experience in an effort to produce a world more ‘real’ than the rational ‘realism’ that counterfeits reality.<sup>7</sup> (March 162).

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<sup>4</sup> Spies 83-4.

<sup>5</sup> McGuigan 18.

<sup>6</sup> Nin, *Novel* 27.

<sup>7</sup> March 162.

Sharon Spencer dubs Nin a ‘ragpicker of experience’, whose work can be regarded as a ‘vast reclamation project.’<sup>8</sup> The conceptualisation of identity as a collage of experiences is central to Nin’s psychological objectives. Her narratives are fraught with the tensions of fractured identity; her female protagonists often vacillate between the diversity that comes with a multiplicity of selves and the fragmentation this entails. In her earlier novel *A Spy in the House of Love*, the protagonist Sabina visualises herself as Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending A Staircase* (1912): ‘Eight or ten outlines of the same woman, like many multiple exposures of a woman’s personality, neatly divided into many layers, walking down the stairs in unison.’<sup>9</sup> The effort of ‘pulling these disparate fragments’ together exhausts Sabina.<sup>10</sup> Towards the end of her fictional oeuvre, Nin turns to collage as a response to the trauma of fragmentation, developing Duchamp’s Cubist representation of the self into the synthesis of difference that collage embodies. This reaches fruition in her last novel, *Collages*, as its title explicitly acknowledges.

*Collages* is a ‘collage’ of 19 prose-poetic portraits, held together by the protagonist Renate, an itinerant Viennese painter who acts as the glue binding them to the narrative’s surface. Anne Salvatore observes that while Renate’s presence grants *Collages* the impression of linearity, the text nevertheless repeatedly manifests rupture.<sup>11</sup> *Collages* opens as Renate’s life story, but after her childhood in Vienna and difficult relationship with the bisexual poet Bruce, the narrative abruptly shifts its focus and delves instead randomly into the stories of others whose only immediately common aspect is their acquaintance with Renate. The novel’s flagrant disregard for sequential development has been a source of censure.<sup>12</sup> For Nancy Scholar, it lacks controlling design; Oliver Evans remarks that Renate,

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<sup>8</sup> Spencer 1

<sup>9</sup> Nin, *Spy* 112.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>11</sup> Salvatore 8.

<sup>12</sup> Jason 70.

despite being the protagonist, sees no character development and remains peripheral to the narrative.<sup>13</sup> To read the text's narrational incoherence as failure is, however, to overlook a subversive objective of collage, which eschews the seamless surface and the integrated narrative, foregrounding instead the scars created by the grafting together of anomalies and non-sequiturs. According to Elza Adamowicz, Surrealist collage should be analysed as an act of production, rather than a product, and also an act of reception.<sup>14</sup> The absence of structural continuity in *Collages* disrupts the reader's expectation of linearity, placing the onus on them to fill in the gaps and reassemble the text in their own consciousness.

*Collages* is rife with instances of actual collages. One personage, Colonel Tishnar, seems to be made of 'all textures except human skin'; Renate muses that a portrait of him would have to be a collage, with 'spun glass' for his white hair, 'suede' for his skin, and 'plastic' for his military figure.<sup>15</sup> There is the magazine that Renate cobbles together from photos rejected by other magazines as being 'way out', stories which fail to fit neatly with journalistic news, and a 'dazzling article' by a film critic constructed from paragraphs that were excised for the sake of layout; the last certainly resembles the verbal collages produced by Breton and his circle.<sup>16</sup>

At the heart of *Collages* is the collage-maker Varda – based on Nin's friend, the Greek artist Jean 'Janko' Varda – who makes textile collages of beautiful women:

In his landscapes of joy, women became staminated flowers, and flowers women (...) They were translucent and airy, carrying their Arabian Night's cities like nebulous scarves around their lucite necks.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Scholar 127; Evans 178.

<sup>14</sup> Adamowicz 30.

<sup>15</sup> Nin, *Collages* 132.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 140-1.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

The synaesthesia of his collages gestures towards the Expressionist ‘synchronism’ of Wassily Kandinsky, who believed ‘colours and forms could be the equivalents of musical harmonies.’<sup>18</sup> The ekphrasis of Varda’s colours bears this out: ‘Orange tones played like the notes of a flute. Magenta had a sound of bells. The blues throbbed like the night.’<sup>19</sup> This synchronism enables the effective representation of dream imagery, which is rendered so real that it eclipses the reality the collages are exhibited in, where Varda’s ‘treble greens vibrated and made the plants seem dead and the flowers artificial.’<sup>20</sup> Varda’s accomplishment here corresponds to the Surrealist objective of elevating mankind beyond Breton’s ‘*le peu de réalité*’, the paucity of reality; his collages, as the narrative describes them, manifest sur-reality.<sup>21</sup>

Yet one cannot overlook how *Collages* presents Varda as a man who cuts out women to ‘suit the changing form of his desires.’<sup>22</sup> Spies calls collage a ‘skeptical approach’, since its use implies a dissatisfaction with existing media or subjects.<sup>23</sup> Through his collage, Varda exhibits dissatisfaction with real women, refusing to aestheticize ‘homely women, jealous women, or women with colds’. His women are idealised and dream-like, but this makes them ‘interchangeable’ and they flow ‘into one another as in dreams’; he denies them singularity or agency. A more sinister aspect of collage emerges here, as Varda interweaves ‘cupolas and breasts, legs and columns, windows and eyes on beds of pleasure’.<sup>24</sup> This description bears an eerie resemblance to Hans Bellmer’s disjointed dolls; while they might be aesthetically on opposite ends of the scale, both engage in the fetishisation of the fragmented female. The phallogentrism of Surrealism has been widely indicted as anti-feminist, given its practices of relegating the female body to material for the projects of desire undertaken by male artists;

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<sup>18</sup> Richard-Allerdyce 130.

<sup>19</sup> Nin, *Collages* 79

<sup>20</sup> Nin, *Collages* 78.

<sup>21</sup> Finkelstein 115.

<sup>22</sup> Nin, *Collages* 90.

<sup>23</sup> Spies 11.

<sup>24</sup> Nin, *Collages* 80.

this erases feminine alterity through totalitarian dismemberment.<sup>25</sup> Varda's conquest of the paucity of reality reaches its apotheosis when his daughter, a cynical, tomboyish science student who previously resisted his attempts to transform her into 'those flashy, glittering women', takes LSD and identifies her fantastical drug-induced visions with the visuals of her father's collages. Converted, she dons 'Varda's own rutilant colours', absorbed into his collection of dream women.<sup>26</sup>

What is puzzling about this is that no hint of criticism on Nin's part is present in the novel; on the contrary, Varda is one of her more positive male characterisations, and Spencer goes so far as to consider him Nin's 'spiritual father.'<sup>27</sup> Salvatore claims that Nin 'undercuts' Varda's patriarchal approach by criticising his canonisation of his women as secular saints.<sup>28</sup> However, the text has Renate implicitly endorse Varda's conversion of his daughter by wishing secretly she had a father like him.<sup>29</sup> Even more bewildering is the divergence between the novel's ekphrasis of Varda's collages and his



Figure 1: Jean Varda, *Delightful Women in Crowd* (1950s)



Figure 2: Jean Varda, *Women Reconstructing the World* (1944)

<sup>25</sup> Adamowicz 178.

<sup>26</sup> Nin, *Collages* 94.

<sup>27</sup> Spencer 21.

<sup>28</sup> Salvatore 9.

<sup>29</sup> Nin, *Collages* 94.

work in real life: the sexualised fragmentation of the female body is nowhere near as evident in the actual collages as the narrative makes it sound. The title of the collage he gifted to Nin, *Women Reconstructing The World* (1944), suggests the women in the collage are not constructed as objects of phallogentric desire, but rather are actively engaged in reconstruction and reclamation themselves.<sup>30</sup> It is unclear if this incongruity in gender politics is intentional on the part of Nin, a self-proclaimed feminist; elsewhere in the novel, she ably describes the beauty of women who are not conventionally attractive due to age or body shape, such as a grey-haired poetess or a laundromat manageress whose eyes are ‘deeply imbedded in cushions of flesh like a jewel in a feather bedspread’, for whom the novelised Varda would probably not bother to lift his brush.<sup>31</sup> The disparity of the Varda episode remains problematic, however, and lends some weight to Estelle C. Jelinek’s argument that Nin cannot resist mythologising the mystical feminine at the cost of other forms of femininity; therefore ‘any woman who takes her feminism seriously must at least question Nin’s attitudes.’<sup>32</sup>

The Varda episode aside, *Collages* remains nevertheless Nin’s most affirmative text on womanhood and art. Her diaries and early work are fraught with anxiety about being a woman versus being an artist, a dichotomy pressed upon her by the social expectation that women should devote her life to procreation, not creation.<sup>33</sup> Her time under the influences of psychoanalysts such as Otto Rank and René Allendy reportedly contributed to these anxieties. ‘Women,’ she records Rank as telling her, ‘when cured of neurosis, enter life. Man enters art. Woman is too close to life, too human.’<sup>34</sup> The female protagonists of her continuous novel *Cities of the Interior* are more often performers than artists or writers, and spend most of their

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<sup>30</sup> Spencer 4.

<sup>31</sup> Nin, *Collages* 47.

<sup>32</sup> Jelinek 18.

<sup>33</sup> Spencer 99.

<sup>34</sup> Spencer 102.



narratives seeking psychological wholeness through relationships with men. Renate is the most notable deviation from this trend. Benjamin Franklin and Duane Schneider deem *Collages* to be at best ‘a flawed extension of the continuous novel’, and Renate a ‘weak sister to Lillian, Sabina, Djuna and even Stella.’<sup>35</sup> However, Renate is by far the strongest, most self-assured of Nin’s protagonists, as Spencer has rightly observed.<sup>36</sup> She does not seek psychological wholeness in others; they find it in her instead. It is implied that Renate’s strength of character comes from her identity as an artist; the ‘desperate anonymous’ patrons of the restaurant where she works as a hostess flock to her, because where they struggle to name themselves as stars or directors or family men, ‘none of these facts had the full-bodied power Renate had when she said: “I am a painter.”’<sup>37</sup> Creation comes naturally to her: from the novel’s beginning, she is already refusing to be told the histories of the statues of Vienna so she can invent her own narratives for them.<sup>38</sup> She achieves the synthesis between femininity and artistry that Nin strives towards throughout the arc of her fiction. Renate’s secure identification of herself as both woman and artist establishes these categories as not mutually exclusive. Varda describes Renate as a *femme toute faite*, ‘already designed, completed, perfect in every detail’; he cannot incorporate her into his collages because he can only use ‘fragments’ of women.<sup>39</sup> Renate might not question Varda’s aesthetic, but at the same time, she is no mere muse. As a woman artist, she ‘makes her own patterns’, because the existing patterns, founded on social assumptions such as those voiced by Rank, are not made for women’s use.<sup>40</sup>

It might appear that Nin has unintentionally depicted collage as a non-feminine art, since in the novel Varda’s practice of it is patriarchal and Renate, because of her self-

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<sup>35</sup> Franklin and Schneider 163.

<sup>36</sup> Spencer 10.

<sup>37</sup> Nin, *Collages* 67.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

assurance as a woman artist, is not eligible to be part of a collage. Renate herself is not a collagist; rather, she is a painter of ‘phantasmagorical’ portraits of women and beasts, more in the vein of Leonora Carrington’s human-animal chimeras or Frida Kahlo’s self-portraits accompanied by wild creatures. Yet while Renate is part of no visual collage, she is instrumental as the adhesive of Nin’s verbal one; her characterisation enables others to reconstruct their fragmented selves. The artist Renate Druks, whom Nin based her protagonist on, told Nin that during times of financial difficulty, her fictional portrait kept her ‘from going to pieces’ during crises, and she only had to read it to ‘reassemble herself.’<sup>41</sup> Nin’s collaging inspiration may come from a masculine source, but through reclaiming collage as a form of women’s writing, she realises a new technique for assembling and articulating the multi-faceted complexity of the female psyche.

As a material practice, Surrealist collage subverts traditional aesthetic expectations through displacement and perversion.<sup>42</sup> While *Collages* does deviate from sequentiality in its narrative, the degree of displacement in Nin’s writing is slight compared to the ‘extraordinary displacement’ that Louis Aragon considers the supreme ability of collage.<sup>43</sup> This ‘extraordinary displacement’ arguably occurs to greater extent in *Nightwood*, which continually displaces itself through what Victoria Smith considers ‘torrential and Byzantine language’, linguistically re-enacting the loss of the unspeakable, whether the lesbian subject or historical representation.<sup>44</sup> It also flaunts its perversity through imagery fixated on genitalia and the scatological. ‘Obscene and touching’, it has more in common with certain aspects of Surrealist collage than Nin’s work.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Logan 90.

<sup>42</sup> Adamowicz 7.

<sup>43</sup> Aragon 38.

<sup>44</sup> Smith 196.

<sup>45</sup> Barnes 153.

Critics such as Louis Kannenstine have observed that *Nightwood's* imagery recalls the art of Surrealist collage, which 'combines elements out of an instinct for inner truth rather than coherent order of concept of surface'; rarely, however, have they picked through this comparison in depth.<sup>46</sup> *Nightwood* deliberately disturbs the reader's expectations of linear, hegemonic narrative. Set in 1930s Paris, Vienna and America, the novel moves between marginalised figures such as homosexuals, Jews, and circus performers, who inhabit the label-less, Rabelaisian environment of the 'night'. The narrative seems always to be drawing towards meaning, yet inevitably veering away, nowhere more so than in the speech of Doctor Matthew O'Connor, the homosexual, cross-dressing backstreet abortionist who presides over the novel's relationships. 'I have a narrative,' he proclaims, 'but you will be put to it to find it.'<sup>47</sup> Indeed, his digressive monologues seem calculated to deny his listeners – and the reader – either meaning or psychological closure. While the predominant critical view is that *Nightwood* is characterised by fragmentation, this overlooks how the novel remains a prose narrative that the reader absorbs chronologically, and that the displacement and perversity of the text is in fact augmented by how the fragments have been reassembled as textual collage.

In *Nightwood's* critical history, one cannot overlook the early contribution of Joseph Frank, who pioneered the argument that the novel is meant to be read spatially as opposed to temporally, less like a linear narrative and more like a work of visual art. In defiance of the popular critical opinion that the flux of time is central to Modernist writing, Frank argues that *Nightwood* destroys temporal progression, fixing it instead in stasis; its eight chapters are not knit together by any progress through action or the flow of experience, but rather by the 'continual reference and cross reference of images and symbols that must be referred to each other spatially throughout the time-act of reading.'<sup>48</sup> It is through this approximation of the

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<sup>46</sup> Kannenstine 106.

<sup>47</sup> Barnes 87.

<sup>48</sup> Frank 32.

plastic arts, which are inherently spatial, that Frank believes the modern novel is moving towards the obliteration between prose and poetry, soon to pull itself out of the flux of the ‘time world of history’ and enter the ‘timeless world of myth.’<sup>49</sup>

Frank’s theory of spatial form has of course since come under much criticism. Diane Warren observes that Frank fails to extend his argument for *Nightwood’s* formal subversiveness to a challenging of gender categories.<sup>50</sup> Brian Glavey finds the spatial form theory elitist and totalitarian, as its quest for wholeness through the autonomy of art runs parallel to attempts to ‘preserve identity and suppress difference in the social world.’<sup>51</sup> Frank himself was later dismissive of his youthful exegesis of *Nightwood*, which was ‘not destined, as the passage of time has shown, to exercise a major influence on the course of the novel.’<sup>52</sup> Ironically, his paradigm of spatial form has since been obscured by the passage of time. Nevertheless, it is useful to consider the conceptualisation of *Nightwood* as a work of art. Frank writes that in *Nightwood*, ‘past and present are apprehended spatially, locked in a timeless unity that, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of sequence by the very act of juxtaposition.’<sup>53</sup> The whole that eradicates linearity by somehow stressing the fragment, highlighted here by Frank, is precisely the paradox of the collage; to read the apparent formlessness of *Nightwood* through this lens demonstrates the relationship between fragmentation and cohesion in Barnes’ novel.

A motif of fragmentation that recurs heavily throughout *Nightwood* is that of the body. Kate Armond notes the pattern of decapitation references in the novel: the doctor’s opening monologue refers to an encounter with a headsman, which he claims gave him ‘heart failure for the rest of [his] life’; his closing monologue features a quack medicine man promising to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>50</sup> Warren 7.

<sup>51</sup> Glavey 754-5.

<sup>52</sup> Qtd. In Glavey 755.

<sup>53</sup> Frank 59.

behead a small boy in public performance. In between, he suggests instigating ‘Meat-Axe Day’, on which he would ‘whack off’ the heads of Nora and other miserable lovers, and is haunted by the memory of a dead horse he saw in the war with its head lying a distance from its body.<sup>54</sup> He says of Catherine of Hapsburg’s dismembered corpse that she is ‘saved by separation’, lamenting that he remains ‘all in one piece!’<sup>55</sup> Elsewhere, the straying Robin is compared to an ‘amputated hand’; the loss of her is like a ‘physical removal’, an ‘amputation that Nora could not renounce.’<sup>56</sup> Loss drives the novel’s fragmentation physically and emotionally: when Nora sees Robin with another woman, she experiences anguish as a ‘sensation of evil, complete and dismembering.’<sup>57</sup> Armond reads the text’s preoccupation with mutilation and dismemberment as catalysing the transcendence into truth through violence; she cites Walter Benjamin: ‘The human body could be no exception to the commandment which ruled the destruction of the organic so that the true meaning might be picked up from its fragments.’<sup>58</sup>

While the pervasive imagery of dismemberment does indeed parallel the dislocation of meaning in *Nightwood*, this is only possible through the re-assemblage of the fragments into illogical configurations, such as the doctor’s nonsensical axioms: ‘If one gave birth to a heart on a plate, it would say “Love” and twitch like the lopped leg of a frog.’<sup>59</sup> Textual collage is embodied further in the doctor’s ekphrasis of Nikka, a black circus performer tattooed ‘from head to heel with all the *ameublement* of depravity.’<sup>60</sup> Nikka’s skin is a page inscribed with diverse, often contradictory lexia drawn from colonial discourse and the fetishisation of racial difference: for example, the word ‘Desdemona’ on his penis suggests the myth of the black man’s sexual rapacity, ironically undermined when the doctor reveals

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<sup>54</sup> Armond 866; Barnes 21; 147; 115-6.

<sup>55</sup> Barnes 148.

<sup>56</sup> Barnes 53.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>58</sup> Qtd. In Armond 865.

<sup>59</sup> Barnes 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 14.

that Nikka is impotent towards women.<sup>61</sup> Nikka's tattoos, which scorn the Levitical prohibition of marking one's body, exemplify what Jane Marcus calls the 'ferociously oxymoronic frenzy' with which Barnes lashes oppositions together.<sup>62</sup> The text of *Nightwood* resembles therefore the *cadavre exquis*, the Surrealist 'exquisite corpse' game in which sentences or illustrated bodies are collectively assembled, with each player unaware of what previous contributors have included.<sup>63</sup> The arbitrary juxtaposition of disconnected elements creates hybrid monstrosities, detonating the naturalised aesthetic of the organic body – or the cohesive narrative – in favour of a reassembled body that visibly flaunts its status as a construct.

References to various art movements parade throughout *Nightwood*. Kanneenstine attempts a rundown of these movements; besides the Surrealism of the novel's imagery, which he compares to the work of Joan Miró and René Magritte, he also discusses the link between the 'rococo halls' of the Volkbein house and the novel's whorled, asymmetrical design, as well as Rousseauvian portrait-landscape and the *genre pittoresque*.<sup>64</sup> Kanneenstine advises that *Nightwood's* diversity of influences would make it erroneous to link it too closely to a sole tradition.<sup>65</sup> Instead, these jostling aesthetics may be read as a collage of styles. Benjamin notes the collagists' harnessing of the 'revolutionary energies that appear in the "outmoded"', which perhaps corresponds to Barnes's use of styles like rococo, fashionable two centuries before her time; when incongruously juxtaposed with snippets of avant-garde Surrealism, the collocations bring – to quote Benjamin – the 'immense force of "atmosphere" concealed in these things to the point of explosion.'<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Glavey 753.

<sup>62</sup> Marcus 150.

<sup>63</sup> Adamowicz 55.

<sup>64</sup> Kanneenstine 105-7.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 107.

<sup>66</sup> Benjamin 229.

One of the most notable of these aesthetic references appears in the introduction of Robin Vote, the central figure of the novel's directions and desires. Felix Volkbein and the doctor find her lying unconscious in a hotel room, which is compared to a 'painting by the *douanier* Rousseau':

... she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room (in the apprehension of which the walls have made their escape), thrown in among the carnivorous flowers as their ration; the set, the property of an unseen *dompteur*...<sup>67</sup>



Figure 3: Henri Rousseau, *The Dream* (1910)

The painting in question has been identified as *The Dream* (1910) by the French post-Impressionist Henri Rousseau, the self-avowed creator of the 'portrait-landscape'.<sup>68</sup> The portrait-landscape typically depicts a central subject as defined by the context of the landscape.<sup>69</sup> In *The Dream*, a young woman reclines on a couch in a jungle, surrounded by tropical plants and animals. Unlike Robin, she is nude and conscious, but Robin appears the

<sup>67</sup> Barnes 31.

<sup>68</sup> Plumb 218.

<sup>69</sup> Bellman 52.

more vulnerable of the two despite being clothed, for the Rousseau subject is awake and returns the gaze of her animal spectators, whereas Robin lies prone as if prey for ‘carnivorous flowers’.<sup>70</sup> Robin is an atavistic being caught in the collision between nature and culture, in a wilderness that is made to seem real by the foregrounding of its very artifice: it is a ‘set’ pre-arranged by the ‘unseen *dompteur*’, its artist, which positions Robin as theatrical spectacle and Felix and the doctor as voyeurs. The savage, exotic jungle is contained, improbably, in a drawing room, yet it is not the painting’s captive content that is driven to escape but its frame, ‘the walls’, without which the artificial jungle encroaches upon the viewers’ dimension.<sup>71</sup> This compounds the sense of threat, particularly when we read later that the ‘woman who presents herself to the spectator as a “picture” forever arranged,’ as Robin has, ‘is the chiefest danger to the contemplative mind.’<sup>72</sup> The threat, however, is generated not externally by the woman but within the desiring mind of the spectator, who tries to fix her ekphrastically. ‘I had an image of her,’ says Felix, after he has married and been left by Robin, ‘but that is not the same thing. An image is a stop the mind makes between uncertainties.’<sup>73</sup> As Glavey points out, the image may present itself as a unity before the eye, but is always divided from itself through time.<sup>74</sup> Robin’s lovers repeatedly attempt to control her through ekphrasis, that they may possess her ‘forever arranged’ as a static *objet d’art*; these reifications inevitably fail, and what they end up fixing instead is the eternally recurring moment of their loss.<sup>75</sup>

The Rousseauvian couch reappears in *Collages*, when Renate recalls how Rousseau, when asked, ‘Why did you paint a couch in the middle of the jungle,’ responded, ‘Because one has a right to paint one’s dreams.’<sup>76</sup> Both Barnes’s and Nin’s writing evoke the distortion of dream imagery, which underscores the Surrealist influence upon their work. Surrealism

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<sup>70</sup> Barnes 31.

<sup>71</sup> Warren 129-30.

<sup>72</sup> Barnes 33.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 100.

<sup>74</sup> Glavey 756.

<sup>75</sup> Warren 133.

<sup>76</sup> Nin, *Collages* 52.



emphasised the importance of the dream, which Breton believed could be resolved with its opposite, reality, into ‘a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*’, a fusion which the collage method facilitates.<sup>77</sup> Nin, who has referred to writing as ‘directed dream’, states that she turned to collage for her last novel because she was writing about dreamers ‘who couldn’t possibly talk to each other because each one was pursuing his own fantasy.’<sup>78</sup> One of *Collages*’s characters, Nina, is an eccentric who Renate believes is ‘dreaming awake’, because she speaks in ‘flights and vertiginous transitions’, often about things which have not temporally occurred, glues silver foil to the walls, and sits on trees in Pershing Square at the risk of being arrested and sent to the madhouse.<sup>79</sup> Nina herself is a collage of a woman – she claims there are ‘fourteen women’ inside her – and the character who comes closest to manifesting the dream in conscious reality in the novel.<sup>80</sup> Her magical nature, however, means she is discomfiting and must be protected, handed from friend to friend. ‘People are afraid of dreamers’, she says. ‘They want to put me away.’<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Breton 308.

<sup>78</sup> Nin, *Novel* 62; 118.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, *Collages* 98-103.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 97.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 103.

Nina's madness is harmless, and the dreams of *Collages* are by and large miraculous, pleasurable experiences. The dreams of *Nightwood* are a different matter. The novel unfolds in the realm of the night, the habitat of Robin, 'the born somnambule who lives in two worlds.'<sup>82</sup> Unlike Nora, who can recognise when she is dreaming and is able to lucidly observe in a dream of her grandmother's house that this 'dream will not be dreamed again,' Robin dreams awake, much like Nina.<sup>83</sup> Figured as a liminal being who straddles binaries – sleeping and waking, man and woman,

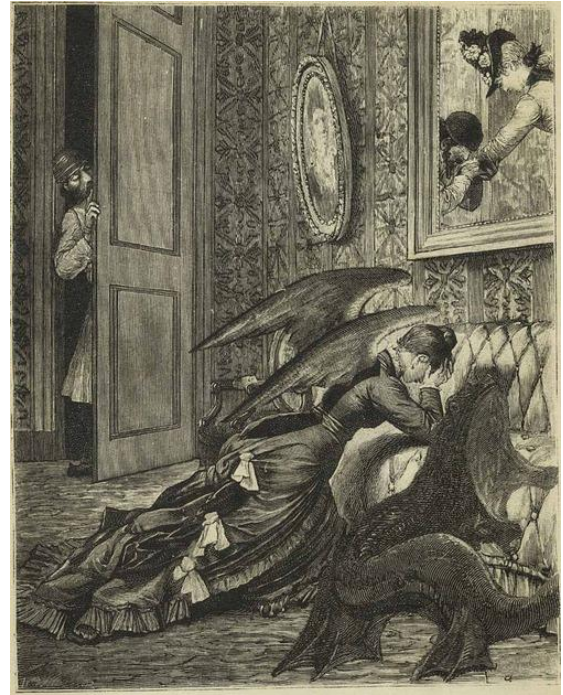


Figure 4: Max Ernst, "La Cour du Dragon 10", *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934)

mother and child, human and beast – Robin elides these boundaries. The aporia of Robin resembles Ernst's *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934), which inverts collage's typical self-referentiality through a technical integration so precise that fantastical elements blend seamlessly with Victorian realism; Werner Spies, who worked with Ernst on his exhibition *Une Semaine de Bonté*, recalls having to feel for the joins like a blind person reading Braille.<sup>84</sup> Like Ernst's impossible creations, Robin fuses dream and reality into an indissoluble unity simultaneously familiar and enigmatic, enhancing the disorientation within the text. The doctor surmises that to force a realistic interpretation of Robin is to dress 'the unknown in the garments of the known', which is 'unwise' because Robin can never be comprehended by the discourse of the conscious mind.<sup>85</sup> Robin challenges even Nora's waking subjectivity; the doctor remarks: 'Robin is not in your life, you are in her dream,

<sup>82</sup> Barnes 31.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 56.

<sup>84</sup> Spies 95.

<sup>85</sup> Barnes 123.

you'll never get out of it.'<sup>86</sup> The dream threatens to eclipse the waking world; the characters can no longer tell which is which in the uncertain chaos of the night.

The endings of *Nightwood* and *Collages* are intertwined, as the latter refers heavily to the former. *Nightwood* concludes in a nightmarish scene in which Nora witnesses Robin in her family's chapel 'going down' before Nora's dog, harassing him until both lie exhausted on the ground. Nora herself plunges into the door-jamb, presumably collapsing.<sup>87</sup> The scene's ambiguity has instigated a vast plethora of readings, from Monika Kaup's dismal conclusion that Robin has finally degenerated from human to animal, to Susanna Martins's optimistic extrapolation that Robin is re-enacting for Nora their relationship dynamics, with herself as the pursuing Nora and the cornered dog representing her own position, and this signifies that she has an eye on reconciliation.<sup>88</sup> *Nightwood's* ending withholds the closure of comprehension, and the diversity of readings it has sparked testifies to its resistance of singularity. Like the Surrealist collage, it challenges every attempt to dress its unknowable substance in the garments of the known.

*Collages* builds on *Nightwood's* ending by introducing in its last episode the writer Judith Sands, who is a thinly-veiled version of Barnes herself.<sup>89</sup> (Logan 90).<sup>90</sup> (In real life, Barnes ignored Nin's letters in real life, reportedly resenting her for naming a character Djuna in earlier novels.)<sup>91</sup> If the description of Sands as a reclusive cape-wearing 'amazon in a tailored suit' were not enough, her courtship by the Israeli Doctor Mann, who has fallen in love with her 'poetic, mythologized novel', would give it away.<sup>92</sup> Doctor Mann is of course another incarnation of Doctor Matthew O'Connor – clear from the moment he begins 'an

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<sup>86</sup> Barnes 131.

<sup>87</sup> Barnes 152-3.

<sup>88</sup> Kaup 103; Martins 122.

<sup>89</sup> Logan 90.

<sup>90</sup> In real life, Barnes ignored Nin's letters in real life, reportedly resenting her for naming a character Djuna in earlier novels (McBrien 280).

<sup>91</sup> McBrien 280.

<sup>92</sup> Nin, *Collages* 155-6.

interminable monologue like one of the characters in her novel' – who has come to confront his author.<sup>93</sup> Sands finally emerges to meet him, admitting she is not actually sure what *Nightwood's* ending means, but adding enigmatically: 'Human beings can reach such desperate solitude that they may cross a boundary beyond which words cannot serve, and at such moments there is nothing left for them but to bark.'<sup>94</sup> Nin reads *Nightwood's* ending as the desperation located at the limits of interaction, and the fate of those who dream alone, which is to be only ever interpreted from an external perspective, never to truly communicate.

To overcome Sands' fear of becoming an image, which she has observed as the fate of Robin – 'to steal my own image of me and expose it to the world, distorted' – Mann takes Sands to see the novel's final collage, Tinguely's Machine That Destroys Itself, a pile of junkyard objects which deliberately returns itself to fragments in an explosion.<sup>95</sup> The audience disperses, each carrying part of the debris; Mann has rescued a roll of paper with the signatures of artists on it, doubtless a sly reference to the avant-garde manifestos of days gone by. One of the few names that has survived is 'Judith Sands'.<sup>96</sup> Heartened by this, Sands invites Mann, Renate and Bruce back to her apartment and shows them her unpublished manuscript, which turns out to have the same opening as *Collages* itself: 'Vienna was the city of statues...'<sup>97</sup> Moving through self-destruction into meta-textuality, *Collages* ends as it begins; Sands' revelation collapses the distinction between fictional layers and deconstructs the hierarchy of author and character. Diane Richard-Allerdyce identifies here a lineage of women writing that is drawn between Sands/Barnes and Nin by conflating the two as authors of this text.<sup>98</sup> Like the Surrealist collage, the novel highlights the intertextual process of its

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<sup>93</sup> Nin, *Collages* 157.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 166.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 163.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 169.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* 170.

<sup>98</sup> Richard-Allerdyce 143.

own creation, referring outside of itself to its fragments' original sources and thus revealing itself as a construct, reinforcing its status as a staging of assemblage.

The novels of Barnes and Nin echo the Surrealist collage as transgressive texts that disrupt coherence and celebrate hybridity. Barnes takes her world to pieces – formally, anatomically, linguistically – stitching from the scraps a monstrous text that eludes all attempts to fix its meaning. Nin gathers disparate dreamers and juxtaposes them in a synaesthetic spectrum of disarray. In both novels are dreams made manifest, whether Nin's phantasmagorical fantasies or Barnes' grotesque nightmares; both pay homage to the visual aesthetic, although Barnes problematises ekphrasis and Nin struggles to merge artistry and womanhood in a composite identity. *Nightwood* ultimately denies closure, a decision interrogated by *Collages*, which opts to end by paradoxically starting again. Both deconstruct and reconstruct themselves in the tense space between the fragmented and the whole.

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