



Dada at Midnight

Jim Feast

HALF ANGEL, HALF LUNCH

Sharon Mesmer

Hard Press

PO Box 184, West Stockbridge, MA 01266
72 pages; paper, \$12.95

***THE AMAZING "TRUE" STORY
OF A TEENAGE SINGLE MOM***

Katherine Arnoldi

Hyperion

192 pages; cloth, \$16.00

To situate the two writers to be reviewed, I need to make some heavy claims about US post-World War II poetry. I want to discuss purely *formal* creativity. Caution: Formal creativity is no criterion of aesthetic greatness. Neither Shakespeare nor Sidney, for example, made formal innovations in the sonnet form, yet this is obviously no reflection on the glory of their work.

With that in mind, if we were to characterize American post-war poetry, from Creeley to Ginsberg through Ashbery, Rich, Brooks, and Baraka, we could say that formally it was little more than an expanded footnote to Surrealism. With a little reflection, we can see that not only is this not arguable, but that *it must be so*.

My reasons for such a claim are simple enough. Surrealism is the classic *deliberately irrational* reaction to industrialization. Its use of bizarrely incongruous juxtapositions opened a treasure trove from which later generations of poets have continually withdrawn jewels.

In this sense, the Surrealists created a new form. Have the Language poets, despite their picturesque *detournements* (using the process developed by the Situationists of taking banal

phrases out of their normal settings and twisting their foci); the Beats, despite their vatic pronouncements; the Feminists, even with their invigorating mythic visions; or the 60s Black Art poets, even with their drawing in a culturally nationalist way from their African dowry—have any of these stepped even an inch beyond them?

How can new poetic means be forged when the governing situation, the reign of implacable, unjust, and deadlocked bureaucracies (which the Surrealists fiercely protested), still overwhelms and crushes our lives?

Sharon Mesmer and Katherine Arnoldi are squarely in the business of critiquing Surrealistic imagery, aided by their point of view, shaped within a progressive writers' organization.

The chances of an isolated individual breaking with a dominant paradigm are slim indeed; but once an individual joins a collective, the possibilities of such breaks increase exponentially. This was one of the points of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn argues a paradigm shift may occur under the banner of one innovator, such as Galileo, but only because a large group of like-minded scientists are gathered and buttressing him, fighting under the standard bearer's colors.

Mesmer and Arnoldi are identified with the loosely knit collection of New York writers called the Unbearables. This group, in which other women (such as Carol Wierzbicki, Jill Rapaport, Tsuarah Litzky, Bonnie Finberg, Susan Scutti, Liz Resko, and Lorraine Schein) play a prominent part, engages in readings, put-ons, and street actions, like their sit-in at *The New Yorker*, where they demanded the magazine publish more socialist realism.

In discussing the Unbearables in the Sept./Oct. 98 issue of *ABR*, I drew attention to the

existence of parallel avant gardes in different periods of history. One, like Surrealism, is concerned with tweaking the conscience of the middle class. Another, like Dadaism or the Unbearables, centers on disturbing the slumber of the working class. This doesn't mean either vanguard is necessarily drawn from or attached to the class it pokes fun at (although it is true in both Mesmer's and Arnoldi's cases. Mesmer grew up in the Back of the Yards slums of Chicago, daughter of an often out-of-work butcher. Arnoldi was thrown out of the home of her impoverished mother at 17 when she was impregnated by rape and thereafter supported herself working in a rubber glove factory). It means the group assembles its techniques and viewpoint from the class tweaked.

***Arnoldi and Mesmer ask the question:
Can Surrealism be stretched beyond
the borders of the embattled middle?***

In this context, we might ask what has been the working class' attitude toward Surrealism. Of course, for the most part, your average working stiff doesn't give a damn about Surrealism or any other -ism. But it is safe to say the working class has always shared the middle class' aversion to industrialization and had nothing to gain from the homogenization of life that it brought in its wake. The difference is that the underclass was less interested in the monotony that the Surrealists decried than they were in the fact that they didn't have piddling control over, as our old pal Karl would put it, "the means of production."

Arnoldi and Mesmer want to shift the French techniques toward this latter concern. They ask the question: Can Surrealism be stretched beyond the borders of the embattled middle?

Mesmer's book's title, *Half Angel, Half Lunch*, gives away the game; for the hybrid creature described in this phrase is the Surrealist image. Where Arnoldi will simply embed strong Surrealist images in her virtuosic narrative, setting them at various crests in the story, Mesmer unrolls an argument in three sections (or drafts) in each of which the image is contemplated from a different angle. In the first section, amid pen portraits of lovers and salty digs at bluestockings, the Surreal

image shows its comic potential. In *Cafe Ennui*, Mesmer describes a parade of syrupy writers at a local poetry slam, slipping in these touches: "Some moonstruck gorilla hefts a basket of bad sonnets....The words in his living trenchmouth make our Latin richer, // slide greasily into poetry." The high/low mixing of the primordial Surreal image here operates for a sendup.

In the second draft, she turns a corner in her subject matter, no longer concerned with poetasters but the emotionally and physically poor. In "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing, in Brooklyn," the story shifts back and forth between the apprehensions of the lovers.

She's a white girl dancing braless in his
teenage basement bedroom

He's a whey-faced Polack with his tonsils in
a bottle....

He put on his blond armor....

She fantasized a bath and baby powder.

The discovery this section affords is that when the images are set in this proletarian milieu, they are awakened to new powers. "Blond armor," for instance, which would be a vainglorious reference for a middle-class youth, becomes sad, haunted, and tawdry here, for two reasons. Where Surrealist poems commonly dealt with the quotidian, shown at the bus stop or in an office, most of the imagery in "Love" occurs in the couple's fantasies. It's as if their daily life is too depressing even to root the marvelous in. Secondly, adding to the pathos, their dreams themselves are pre-fab, made of the cardboard fustian provided by the "entertainment industry." In a brilliant irony, Mesmer undercuts the supposedly liberating effect of the artistic images by making it seem they were bought off the rack. They have been turned into commodities, and not even high-end commodities. Being so old, they've been cheapened.

In the last section, the story "Eleusis," she takes hold of this insight systematically, reiterating why the images have a fresh character when set in a new milieu. The narrator sits with her drugged-out, wiggled-out mother, who ladles out sour, stale aphorisms as she monitors the tube. The key juxtaposition is between (a) the lady surrounded by crackerjacks—

She stretches out across the bed to make contact with a blue box of ice cream cones, her favorite snack. Everything about her is vivid colors: the Wonder Bread bag, the little boxes of sugary breakfast cereals, the cheap striped cotton tops—

and (b) the speaking shadows on TV, which cement her in stupor: “The families in their big sweaters, in their comfortable homes, the women well-fed, their cherry lips perfect.”

Where the couple in “Love” deployed Surrealist images in a way that seemed tawdry to the degree that they were constructed out of the spoonfed fantasies of Hollywood, in “Eleusis” there is a further turn. The mother’s Donna-Reedish advice shows that she, like the couple, has imbibed her fantasy life from the small screen; but by now that is not the point. Rather it is that a and b make up the perfect Surrealist image, two worlds sarcastically joined. This means that, particularly in the United States, the lower classes are subjected to yet another indignity: *The poor must operate as one term in a Surrealist image*, appearing, as it were, in the mermaid tail of the general. As Mesmer suggests, there is a constant cruel juxtaposition of the have-nots and the pleasures of the haves that are shown in the media. The disinherited creep along like wounded crayfish past shop windows that funnel forth visions of happy, extruding, consuming lobsters.

Bluntly, Surreal tropes, which push the buttons of the middle class because they lament the loss of the marvelous, are less innocent for the workers who are actually incorporated into them.

Where Mesmer crafts an adventurous argument about the way a Surreal image will gain a different footing if placed in a new milieu, Arnoldi, in *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom*, is more interested in drawing up a genealogy. Why, she asks, has the yoking of violently unlike foci been such an ongoingly productive strategy, first for marginal then for mainstream writers?

Before revealing Arnoldi’s startling answer, a comment on the form of the book, which is an

adult comic, written and drawn by her. It was the French Freudian feminist Luce Irigaray who, in *Le sexe qui n’en est pas un* (1977), argued that there is an essential difference in the female and male imaginations (in the ideal case). Where the masculine organization of fantasy is unitary and tends to monologue, according to Irigaray, the feminine one is see-saws. Incapable of resting in a single moment, it is moved to dialogue.

Whatever the legitimacy of this view, one of the virtues of *Amazing* is just this kind of dualism. For instance, when the narrator gets a promotion at the surgical glove factory, she states, “Now I worked for quality assurance.” The accompanying illustration is a field of identical gloves standing on end. The unveiled connotation of the drawing is that this job, paid by piece work, involves, overwhelmingly, quantity not quality. Here, as so often in the book, there is a Magritte-like discrepancy between the image and its mask of words. Then there is the contrast of narrative impact and illustration (*histoire* and *recit*). At the heroine’s low ebb, after being assaulted by her boyfriend, at a moment that would seem to summon the most powerful imagery, she writes, “Who I was was a very small speck,” and draws a dot, a grammatical period.

When the heroine has to live on her own, she works in a restaurant and a glove factory. In the restaurant, she is often treated as a sex object by gloating male customers. Not only is she patronized as a woman, but her work schedule here and at the plant keeps her from sharing time with her child. Modern life is filled with alienation where you spend large amounts of time doing what is not in congruence with your heart. The surrealist image was born to convey this alienation.

The introduced alienation runs parallel to the violent confluence of unlikes we have seen at the heart of the Surrealist image. Working in a plant, such as at a glove maker, a woman will have to replace her natural rhythms to act in concert with the machine, just as, in Julia Kristeva’s description in *Desire in Language* (1980), the girl child has to repress her primal libidinal organization to enter the symbolic order

of patriarchal language.

The destructive principle limiting our society consists of this: basic incompatibility between human and the machine at which she works (whether drill press or computer). It is this divergence which, Arnoldi supposes, is the basic principle accounting for the rise and constant rejuvenation of the Surreal image.

Back to the group basis of creativity. If Arnoldi is able to grow as a worker, mother, lover, student, and artist throughout the book, it is not due to her own intractability so much as that she relies on a circle of women. When she is crying because she is doing poorly at her restaurant job, another waitress takes her aside and says:

“There you are. Hey, now. Do you want me to take your table? Come on now. It’s not worth smearing up your mascara.... You can take the next table. You’ll do fine. Honest. Trust me.”

Later, when the narrator is fleeing her abusive boyfriend, other women provide a support network for her. More broadly, we may remember that during the 1960s and 70s, when the book is set, the activity and proselytizing of feminist activists helped make teenage single motherhood less stigmatized. As Rosalind Petchesky writes in *Abortion and Women’s Choice* (1984), during the 70s it was this activism along with “later marriage, higher college attendance and labor force participation, and recognition by the courts of a girl’s maturity outside marriage (the ‘mature minor’ doctrine) [that] have combined to make teenage out-of-wedlock childbearing not easy, but more compatible with self-development.”

It is the same manner of support that the Unbearables writers’ collective has provided these two extraordinary creators, acting as a sounding board and resonator as the two fight to reformulate middle-class Surrealist doctrines in a way that made them compatible with the world view of the people. This is a fair turnabout. Breton and others took Zurich Dadaism and gave it a puppy-dog smile, diluting its vigor. These women have taken an opposite route with Surrealism, making it more like Dada as practiced at midnight.

Jim Feast has work in Cafe Review, Fall 1998 (Unbearable Issue), and Best of the Underground (Rhino eros Press).