Chapter 9

The Manifesto of Céline Arnauld

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je ne veux aucun maître

Céline Arnauld was a prolific contributor to avant-garde journals at the flashpoint of Dada’s heyday in Paris. Her poetry and prose appears in publications including 391, Action, Ça ira, Cannibale, DADAphone, L’Esprit Nouveau, Littérature, Le Pilhaou-Thibaou, Le Phare de Neuilly, Proverbe and Z. In May 1920, additionally, she brought out her own journal, Projecteur, which, though appearing as a single issue, featured the work of key Dadaists and future surrealists, including Aragon, Breton, Eluard, Picabia and Ribemont-Dessaignes. Between 1914 and 1948 she published eleven volumes of poetry, one anthology, and an experimental novel. This output-based evidence points to a vigorous participation in, and association with, Paris Dada. Yet Arnauld’s name barely features in critical literature on the avant-garde, and her name scarcely registers even with scholars of the avant-garde.

Michel Sanouillet’s comprehensive history, Dada à Paris, includes the most useful references to Arnauld of any Dada history, but even in the longest passage, she is “la femme de Dermée” and “dadaïste active dont le nom paraît dans toutes les revues où écrivait son époux” (Sanouillet 1993: 225). In L’Aventure Dada, Georges Hugnet includes Arnauld’s name in his alphabetical list of protagonists, but in place of the short biographical entry that appears under every other name, he writes: “CÉLINE ARNAULD (voir PAUL DERMÉE)” (Hugnet 1971: 131). This phenomenon, whereby a
woman writer or artist features primarily in relation to a male relative (in this case, her husband) is a familiar trope in literary and art histories, and already implicates gender as one factor in the treatment and reception of Arnauld in secondary accounts. She is marginal even in relation to the marginal: the little-known avant-garde writer’s even lesser-known wife.

It appears that Arnauld glimpsed, at an early stage, her vulnerability to being sidelined by history-writers, beginning with those colleagues who had been key players in the Dada movement. In October 1924 she wrote a letter to Tristan Tzara, which opened on a note of disappointment: “Mon cher ami, Je suis très étonnée que dans votre historique du Mouvement Dada – où vous vous montrez assez généreux même pour vos adversaires actuels – vous oubliez mon effort tant dans le lyrisme que dans l’action” (Arnauld 1924). Apart from its critique of Tzara’s selective, and ultimately exclusive, approach, its prescience regarding the way these memoirs would shape Dada history, and its forthright demand for acknowledgment, Arnauld’s expression also draws out two sides to her own input: lyricism and action. Although she herself does not situate them as opposites, they might be interpreted nevertheless as two distinct—sometimes conflicting and sometimes converging—aspects of one writer’s production, encompassing the struggle between aestheticism and politics, art and anti-art, reflection and action, inherent in Dada.

In Subversive Intent. Gender, Politics and the Avant-Garde, Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990: 15) raises a similar dichotomy, and links it to gender. She has proposed that: “The avant-garde woman writer is doubly intolerable, seen from the center, because her writing escapes not one but two sets of expectations / categorizations; it corresponds neither to the ‘usual revolutionary point of view’ nor to the ‘woman’s point of view.’” This statement neatly encapsulates the problematic in situating Arnauld, with the spectres of such normatively capitalized adjectives as “Radical”, “Avant-Garde”, “Political” and “Iconoclastic”, on the one hand, and “Lyrical”, “Feminine”, “Private” and “Personal” on the other. The default has been to overlook women’s contributions, but for the feminist critic seeking to recover Arnauld’s work, the question of how to situate her work endures, and is no less difficult to navigate in the so-called post-feminist context. The case of Céline Arnauld offers not only an unexplored body of work through which to revisit avant-garde themes