

Downloading Africa: *Fata Morgana* in Wilfredo Lam's Work

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I

André Breton wrote a long, book-length poem titled *Fata Morgana* towards the end of 1940, in Marseilles. His desire to have this future book illustrated was in keeping with the practices of the artistic coalition that he, himself, led and had organized. Wilfredo Lam, was a thirty-eight year old Cuban painter who Breton believed to have a great deal more to 'say.' Lam was unaware of the fact that the stange words that made up the poem's title would be a two-sided sword, a slippery slope.

II

*Fata Morgana*¹

Bretonian legends have it that the Princess Morgana is a changeable fairy, a active holdover from the magical and feminine universe upon which the Arthurian reign and Round Table are constructed. She is a passing illusion who is first one thing,

only to become another, thus plotting vengeance against the King, who she finally kills through his son. We need not go into detail about her relatively wellknown and hateful motives. Suffice it to say that Morgana is representative of dangerous metamorphoses and distortions in one's perception of space.

It seems that the so-called "Morgana effect," a mirage that can be explained by the normal separation that can occur between hot and colder, denser air, stems from the latter of the two phenomena. This separation acts like a refracting lense, producing an inverted image above which distant objects appear to float. This thermal inversion causes our eyes to perceive elongated reliefs on the horizon (coasts, ships, icebergs) that appear to be more stretched out and elevated than they truly are. In other words: under Fata Morgana's spell physical reality loses mass and density, and becomes fleeting and changeable. At least this is what our sense of sight makes us believe.

It is no coincidence that Breton chose this and no other title for his poem.

III

1940 was a year full of violent change. The poet's world evaporated amidst declarations of war, invasions and states of exception. Germany mobilized its army against six countries between September 1940 and May 1941. In less than a month and a half three fourths of France became occupied. Paris was evacuated on June 13 and by the sixteenth Marshall Henri-Philippe Pétain assumed control of a government whose decisions would be made from Berlin.

But this general, pincer-like metamorphosis that Breton saw coming over Marseilles did not represent just the fragile interwar period. It also referred to the noticeable changes in his immediate environment, in the intellectuals and, specifically, in the Surrealist Group. Breton, Aragon, Ernst, Masson, Desnos and others made it their goal to change reality via the exercise of free thought. This change came about by using art and literature to transform the bourgeoisie—particularly by the politicization of the Surrealist movement, in about 1925. They invented things like automatic writing, black humor, collages, exquisite cadavers, dangerous associations, sudden analogies, insane authorities and other subversive forms to achieve sufficient creative power and a cutting public voice: an inspired voice that spoke directly from the subconscious, and spoke to incite.

However, the City of the Surrealists, with its ample freedoms, became a constant coming and going of people, a tumult of explosive arguments and sworn disagreements, highs and lows, international expansion, new members, silent (or solidarious) distancings and even dishonorable expul-

sions, over time. The lengthy existence (almost 25 years) of something that could simultaneously be identified as revolution and surrealist was possible because of constant reinvention and the critical importation of new materials that maintained an attractive nature and high quality of presentation. Yet a quarter of a century can yield many different answers to the terrible doubts that plagued the purity of their intentions. Of course, the intellectual substance of the project suffered variations and there were those like Louis Aragón who considered those intentions essential and abandoned the group.

André Bretón and Lam had met in 1938....²

IV

...more or less around the time of Lam's exhibit at the Marchant Pierre Loeb gallery. Pablo Picasso, like a protective shadow, was behind Lam. The Spaniard had served as his 'passport.' Even Breton explained that Lam alone could not have reached Loeb. But Picasso saw qualities in Lam. They had lengthy conversations about African art. He advised him. He delighted in seeing his Cubist lessons so well reproduced in Lam's work. He introduced Lam as the "Cuban cousin" and even praised him in society circles. But even Picasso uttered nonsense once in a while, as the sharp-tongued Francis Picabia said: too smart to be a Cubist, but a Cubist nonetheless. This piqued Bretón's interest, thus he decided to look into him further.³

Lam came from far away, from Sagua la Grande, a Cuban town whose name was Ibizian and imperial, but he was not associated with any one, particular place. He was seen more as a sort of a "wandering Jew" around that time. This rootlessness must have

resonated with Bretón's confessed antipatriotism. He had suffered the Spanish Civil War on the republican side and had tuberculosis kill off his family. He had survived a boring recovery in Caldes de Montbuí, near Manolo Hugué, who in his time had crossed paths with Apollinaire. It was precisely the Catalan sculptor who sent him to Picasso. Lam finally arrived in Paris knowing everything any painter needed to know. His training was solid: schooling in Madrid under a director of the Prado Museum and updated under the influence of Cubism. And, Cubist tendencies were one of the most serious attributes an emerging artist could have, despite Picasso's displeasure with that.

Yet, one very visible detail perturbed Breton more than any of the others—Lam was the son of a Chinese man and a black woman. This detail could well be irrelevant today, but it was probably notable in early twentieth-century Paris, where jazzbands sizzled with the same fervor as intellectual racism. For Breton, Lam was like a hybrid being somewhere out of a medieval bestiary, someone who perhaps reminded him of a more authentic version of also an eccentric Baudelaire, with his green-tinted hair, and a mulatto woman on his arm. For the avant garde, Lam's biracialism was analogous to the chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table: he embodied that free associating ideal that guided all Bretonian creation, just as Isidore Ducasse, who wrote the poem "Canto de Maldodor", had suggested years before.⁴

Lam was a living example of "African arrogance," the embodiment of something as ambitious as it was lost. Breton quickly drew him into his inner circle: official histories put this at about 1938. Breton had published almost all his fundamental works by this time; Wilfredo Lam had published almost

none. Breton's instincts, honed by his constant dealing with painters, told him that Lam's asymmetry could yield good results in the creation of hypnotic dreams—and then he put that notion to the test.

V

The pages of the poem *Fata Morgana* are filled with memories of a constantly changing zone in which letters are prohibited and exact news is non-existent. It is a strange panorama in which the "wandering gaze" continually discovers and loses sight of colored tubes, sand-filled furniture at the bottom of the sea, nameless doors, hotels of green plants, coffee and sugar, as if "under an electric half light," A poet (today he would be a cyber-traveler) who is trapped in a hallucination becomes a geranium and "discharges," "almost fearfully," a long night of feelings, mediævally conceived animals, prow birds, changing skies, secret women, winged constructions, red-lined, solid stone pyramids on the horizon, thread-hung balconies and a grotesque and smallish party in the poem's final apogee, directly from the "bottom of his sealed box." A "series of women's heads appear" on the poet's neck and we cannot expect that he will explain what any of this means, not this or any of the whole amalgam of analogies that are the poem. The sun makes an appearance at the poem's end: the poet returns to the surface and recovers his wits.

We must now take into account not the clues to understanding this text but how the illustrator proceeded. After all, the poem is dedicated to Jacqueline Breton, who one would expect to have understood the feelings that André bared in each stanza. Generally, it is a mature use of the same sort of automatic writing that he developed in "Los campos magnéticos," "Nadja" or "El revólver de cabel-

los blancos.” It was rapid, sometimes two-handed writing Breton did, taking care to control the duration of each hand’s work, which resulted in interminably prolonged writing sessions that put him in a mystically modified state of mind that prohibited him from erasing anything at all. This was all about creating fractured and fragmented semantic entities while avoiding the use of the kind of logical connections that allow traditional metaphors to work. But, at the same time, it was about making those fractured ones a powerful and coherent image, a world as impossible as suggestive, believable and desirable.⁵

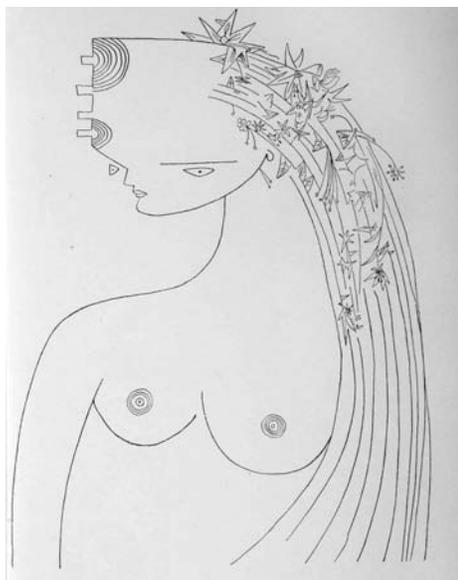


Fig. 7945

What did Lam do with this jumble of words?

VI

Ink, pen, and paper. Six drawings float above a river of adjectives and nouns. Six blank pages and we forget the river and remain only with them, since they already say it all. Pages drawn with fine, even delicate

lines, since the painter did not want to add major complications to something already complex.

1. The figure is female and half-length. She is thin, has long, straight hair, and a naked breast. Her eyes are sharp and serious. Her lips are small and say nothing because she lives in complete silence. [Fig. 7945]

Vegetation grows between tufts of her hair. A jungle that already announces the definitive one, the canvas Lam will finish in 1943. This one is still an impoverished forest, a handful of leaves that could hardly be compared even to the gardens that the heads of René Portocarrero’s Floras would arrange. A vegetable growth in back of the skull that balances the arrows impaled on the woman’s broad forehead.

André shoots his verses from the contiguous page and when they penetrate they create an expanding, head-in wave. Lam has tried to please us: we would not hesitate to fall in love with this woman, who is moved by a poem. This correspondence between stanzas and illustrations invites one to believe it is about Jacqueline...but Jacqueline was not exactly Sylvia Bataille. She was much uglier.

2. Here end the condescending actions of this painter who never produced more. For example, we would like a clear correspondence between the drawings. To follow the mutation without losing the sequencing of events, as is possible with Ovid’s metamorphosis. No: the next figure is a quadraped. It might be a geometrically simplified dog. An evocation of domestic memories, the poet’s family life, linked to the previous woman? When Breton confesses: “That thing I remember is so beautiful...,” he could be thinking about whatever conjures up this animal. [Fig. 7946]

Yet, two details shed doubt on the efficacy of those suppositions. A strange mane or

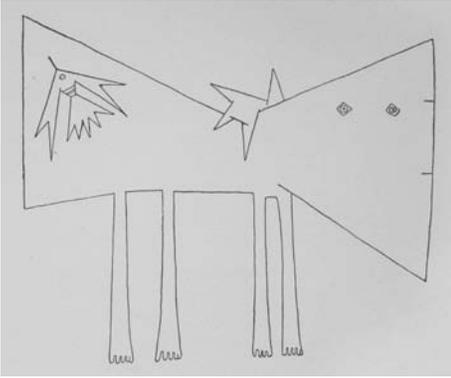


Fig. 7946

clump of hair growing between its head and back, and then a little bird near it, or maybe lighted on its skin or, because it is a transparent animal, the bird, which is actually a hummingbird, lives within it. A quadruped with a mane could be many things –from a donkey to a lion– but it would have more sense than the latter animal. When Octavio Paz describes his first encounter with André Breton, in Mexico, he recalls: “There was some other solar and lionesque element in him...” And Paz was not the only one to notice this.⁶ And if the quadruped represents the poet, then the bird must be the painter, sheltered near the first, like those fish who live while attached to sharks.

3. The unstoppable flow of discourse brings back a “Jacqueline” free of her earlier simplicity, shrouded in the circumstances of a disaster, of chaos, of the passing years. Now we see the future Lam emerging, a glimpse of the idiom he will later develop: a fragmented and deformed human figure, visible sexual attributes, a tense or openly violent relationship between the composition’s elements, truncated ellipses, sharpened half moons, little cult devils, worn out skin, pedestal-like squared feet, vertical elongations, terrified expressions, long hair like streams of water, vegetable motifs and masked games. The woman is no longer con-

crete but rather a distant desire, a chimera that may never be. Evil takes root in entwined motifs, so we can now see metamorphosis like a tunnel of horror at an amusement park. It is impossible to distinguish the mirage’s elements, useless to parse a labyrinth to identify the shortcut to the way out. The painter proves that he has understood the poetic message, he sketches it, recreates it,

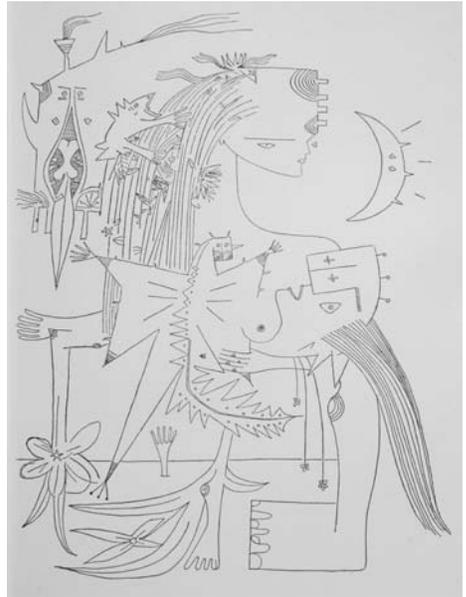


Fig. 7949

surpasses it. And, an interesting inversion is taking place. [Fig. 7949]

4. It is a two-headed and bisexual figure: two bodies in one. Its heads are otherworldly. Lam leaves no doubt in this delirium: the right side is female and the other is male. There are breasts and testicles hanging under its arms. Is this squared monster a sample of what is to come in the future? Or perhaps it is the present and we don’t want to see it? Are we that monster, the active principal of war that engulfs Europe? The use of the monster as a metaphor for real people contains a portrait of humanity that the painter sees as such, monstrous, reduced to the pri-

mordial: the sexual. The heads of this two-headed body cautiously look at each other, all the while sitting on the same neck. One can see them from within the thick words of the Fata Morgana. We are shown them to our own shame and they disappear with the turning of the page. [Fig. 7957]

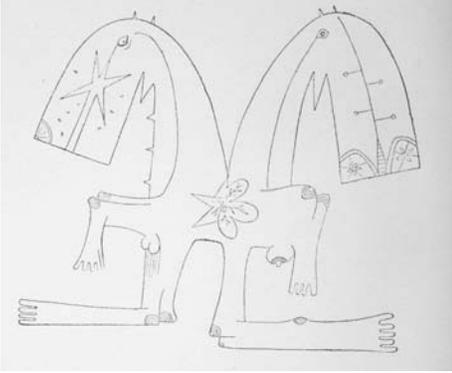


Fig. 7957

5. The drawings displace the words, they take control of the book, which is no longer an illustrated book but rather a book of annotated illustrations. The figure is now a being with two legs, three arms, one body,

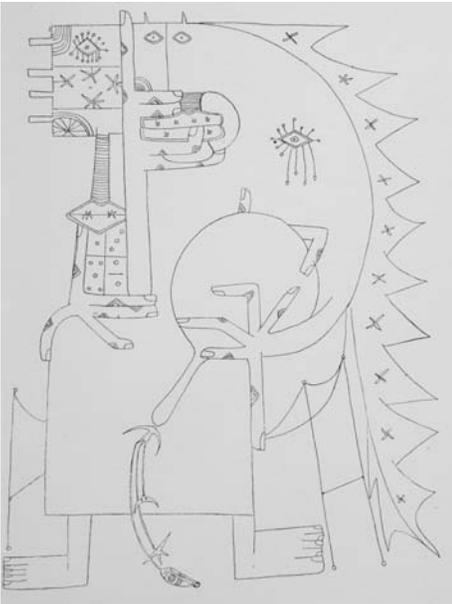


Fig. 7951

one head, two mouths, four eyes: residual earlier mutations into which a higher-numbered than usual domino tile is encrusted. A domino that always wins no matter how it lands, naturally: perhaps an allegory of our desires. The figure is holding a mirror in one hand and covering its mouth with the other, surprised by the consequences of its awkward ambitions. The hand that is holding the mirror is falling and the four eyes begin to look up at us: the figure is about to say something to us, the monster raises a finger, as if asking permission to speak, but cannot utter a single word.... [Fig. 7951]

6. Lam codifies its options in the mirror. It ends up as a soaring bird with a trifurcated tail. A half moon, a star and a mask hang from it. Elements that close a reflection indicating the doors of the European labyrinth that is ending and may perhaps remain completely destroyed in the following months. The painter knows this, hopes that this final phase ends soon for him. The last illustration is sufficiently eloquent. It has four birds that take flight, not the earlier bird but four powerful, spikey-plumed and fiery birds. Perhaps they are the four comrades who with the help of the American Committee for Aid to Intellectuals will escape from the Island of Martinique: the ethnologist Claude Lévy-Strauss; the painter of massacres André



Fig. 7956

Masson, Breton and Lam. The Capitaine Paul Lemerle sets sail. They flee in freedom. [Fig. 7956]

VII

This escape ends the series of drawings. A woman, a lion, an allegory of the threats, a monster, a mirror, a scattered bird. Lam has begun to tell a story, he gets off track and ends up telling another, which could happen in any fiction producing exercise. He had wanted to illustrate worries foreign to him but his own ended up imposing themselves, shaping the whole work.

It is precisely the power of this inner disquiet, shaped by elements of fear and desire that will mold a solid creative matrix in Lam. It is what forces his eyes to see things that don't really exist. It shows him beings so strange that he can paint them but not name them. It submerges him in some other place, "there, where there is insufficient light, where dark zones abound, like those oceanic abysses full of unusual, unknown fish, and where our freedom to imagine that world is complete."⁷ The painter enters the world's jungle, where he finds a chair waiting for him in its deepest depths. The Chair. He sits...and the power with which he "discharges" images from his enclosed box is so great that he manages to make those surly and spiny, constantly enveloping and shadow ruling beings he paints as cruel as they are believable, and as believable as they are distant from daily life. Breton had intuited something very impor-

tant in Lam: he had not lost poetry, that "terror of primitive vision." It lived within him. Professor Edouard Glissant calls this treasure "primordial art" and both seem convinced that the mestizo painter's work did not interpret magical realities: it was magical.⁸

But...what is this magic? In reality, not much more than the ability to demonstrate with the tranquility of an ethnologist (a terrifying combination, I know) the cultural legacy he received from his elders. Something that he learned while being observed from a position of difference by his intelligent European friends, trying to put himself in their position and devise what they saw in him that was strange. Inquiring into his natural-born strangeness, and that rarity he had never noticed in himself. Gazing upon himself from without brought on for him the catharsis of intellectual shaping. Breton, who was easily impressed by such things, saw the call of the primitive, like in H.P. Lovecraft's story.

The period marked by *Fata Morgana* represented the stirring of elements pertaining to that catharsis for Wilfredo Lam. It is contact or cultural exchange that allowed the painter to free that magic and come back to be truly great amongst his contemporaries, tearing asunder the persistent Cuban provincialism from which he fled many, many times. It is the creative freedom of those memories that is present in Lam's post-1940 work that makes us silently smile when we look at island avant-garde art of that period.

Notes and Bibliography

- 1- I used the Bibliothèque des Introuvables, de Paris, 2004, edition. The poem was written in Ville de Air Bel, near Marseilles. All the illustrations were taken from Breton, A. *Fata Morgana*. Paris: Bibliothèque des Introuvables, 2004.
- 2- Fouchet, Max-Pol. *Wilfredo Lam*. Paris: Cercle d'art, 1989.
- 3- Picabia never literally said this. But he was still a fierce critic of Cubism and, in particular, of Albert Gleizes. Nonetheless, there is no antipathy toward Picasso in his notes. See Picabia, F. *Escritos en prosa, 1907 – 1953*. Valencia-Murcia, Spain: IVAM – Colegio Oficial de Aparejadores y Arquitectos Técnicos de la Región de Murcia, 2003.
- 4- Breton documented his impression in his correspondence and essays. For example, *Le surréalisme et la peinture*, a collection of articles, came to be like Vasari's *Vida*, on Surrealism. It was originally published in 1928 by the *N.R.F.* publishing house and incremented over the years. My edition is the Gallimard 2006 edition. In *Fata Morgana* (Ed. Cit., Postface) there is an extract of a letter in which the issue of Lam's ancestors is mentioned.
- 5- André Breton's writing technique is well explained in Mauricio Pla's essay "Breton: L'analogia mística." Cfr: *Sobre la imaginación analógica: Lautrémont, Breton, Roussel*. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2003.
- 6- André Breton: "La Niebla y el Relámpago". I referred to a website for the journal *Letras Libres*, <<http://www.letraslibres.com>>. It has a pdf. version of the article dated March 1996.
- 7- Herrera Ysla, Nelson. "Wilfredo Lam y su contemporaneidad." In *Reflexiones de tanto mirar*. Ciego de Ávila, Cuba: Ediciones Ávila, 2004: 73 – 85.
- 8- Glissant, É. "Iguanes, busards, totems fous: l'art primordial de Wifredo Lam." In Christiane Falgayrettes – Laveau et al. *Lam métis*. Paris : Éd. Dapper, 2001.