

Surreal and Canny Selves: Photographic Figures in Claude Cahun

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Ouvrir la bouche—en public, une
témérité, une transgression.

Opening one's mouth to speak—in pub-
lic, an act of temerity, a transgression.¹
—Cixous

In her 1975 essay, *Le Rire de la méduse* (*The Laugh of the Medusa*), Hélène Cixous enthusiastically announced that it was high time for women to enter into discourse. A full half-century earlier, Claude Cahun (1894-1954), a powerful writer and a haunting photographer and artist, was already inscribing herself, woman, and a woman's voice in visual and verbal self-portraits, photo-montages, prose texts, poetry, and aesthetic and political treatises. Cahun's uncanny interventions in both verbal and visual discourse cannily interrogate conventions of literary and pictorial representation and the constructions of self, gender and culture that they exhibit. Insistently asking readers and spectators, "What's wrong with this picture?," her carnivalesque play with the doxa and the politics of identity also destabilizes not only gender and genre norms, but the boundaries and distinctions between visual and verbal representation. Most immediately, however, Cahun's works pose the enigma of the artist herself: Who exactly is Claude Cahun? (See Fig. 1.)

Questioning the identity and destiny bestowed upon her at birth in 1894, a highly educated bourgeois woman named Lucy Schwob publicly and aesthetically disavowed herself when in 1916 she took on the ambiguous name Claude Cahun. Cahun incessantly and avowedly recreated and refigured herself: "Le propre de la vie est de me laisser en suspens, de n'admettre de moi que des arrêts provisoires" 'Life's peculiarity is to leave me in suspense, to admit only provisional stopping points of me' (*Aveux* 235). Imagining and imaging herself in both written and pictorial discourse, she valorized Woman, the self, and the body as sites of exploration and as worthy aesthetic, philosophical, and social subject matter. "Entre la naissance et la mort, le bien et le mal, entre les temps du verbe, mon corps me sert de transition" 'Between birth and death, good and evil, between the tenses of the verb, my body serves me as a transition' (202).

In fact, Woman as muse *figures* for and as Claude Cahun; she is vehicle, object, and subject of an exploration of the sites and limits of symbolic construction—visual, verbal and social. Accepting neither her own nor the other's boundaries as fixed, Cahun's works present a multiple muse and subject: "Mon âme est fragmentaire" 'My soul is fragmentary,' her narrator admits (202). Indeed, she questions why it should be otherwise: "Mais pourquoi nous hâter vers d'éternelles conclusions? C'est à la mort, non au sommeil (encore un trompe-l'oeil), qu'il appartient de conclure" 'But why rush toward eternal conclusions? It is up to death, and not to sleep (yet another trompe-l'œil) to conclude' (235). Thus, while Cahun may not provide any unified answer to the question, "Who is Claude Cahun?," she does respond—in multiple genres—to the question recently asked by Katharine Conley: "What happens when the muse speaks?" (See Fig. 2.)

Although Cahun was the niece of a well-known Symbolist, Marcel Schwob, little has been done to trace the impact of Symbolist and presymbolist aesthetics on her production—this in spite of the dense intertextual presence of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and Mallarmé in her works. Possessed of a high degree of literary self-awareness, Cahun was an actively engaged writer and visual artist during the 1920s and 1930s, and an "un-

official” associate of the Surrealists. She is sometimes quaintly remembered for a supposed unrequited love for André Breton, yet only rarely have critics considered how her work engages with the practices that he proposed. Additionally, she is remembered, anecdotally, for her same-sex relationship with her “life partner” Suzanne Malherbe, a relationship which Carolyn Dean has shown to have had profound and understudied effects on her aesthetic production. Most recently, Cahun has begun to gain visibility as the creator of disturbing photographic self portraits and photomontages and, to a lesser extent, for an extraordinary text entitled *Aveux non avenue* (*Disavowed Confessions* 1930). (See Fig. 3.)

Since I am here primarily interested in Cahun’s aesthetic framework and how she situates herself within and against convention, my discussion begins with an exploration of certain affinities between Cahun’s practices and Surrealist aesthetics as regards gender and genre. Thematically, at least, Cahun’s preoccupation with the female body in all its states (androgynous, mutant, or fragmented), invites comparison of her work with that produced by her Surrealist contemporaries. (See Fig. 4.) The main differences are that Cahun actually inhabited a female body and that her images respond to those of her temporal male counterparts in surprising and destabilizing ways. This said, it is highly germane to note that Cahun’s questioning of her self, her sexuality, and Surrealist representations of woman were part of a much more expansive adventure—one that freely questioned, and questioned more than femininity. The latter section of my discussion therefore moves on to trace how and what Cahun’s foregrounding of figuration and, more specifically, photographic figuration, might signify for the uncanny aesthetic practices deployed in the hybrid text *Aveux non avenue*.

In Surrealist works, women were typically represented by male artists as either muse, child, madonna, or as a grotesque figure of either monstrous hybridity or fragmentation. Feminist critics have railed against Surrealist depictions of women, denouncing these as either objectifying, idealizing, or mutilating women. Certainly, images with no heads, no eyes, no mouths or

arms abound. Critics such as Mary Ann Caws, to cite one example, call out, "Give them back their head: they had one" (*The Surrealist Look* 54). Others, like Suleiman and Conley, contend more subtly that the basic tenets of Surrealism—the insistent questioning of norms and conventions, as well as the freedom promoted by the movement—provided unprecedented opportunities for women artists. They argue that the movement was attractive to women because it allowed them a place of power by its very questioning of the hierarchies established by bourgeois society.

Flouting and abandoning conventions of autobiographical confession, Cahun's *Aveux non avendus*—disavowed confessions, or confessions that are null and void—destabilizes reader expectations as the first person narrator slides from first to third person and then to multiple voices. Further disorientation ensues as the work slides among disparate genres: verse poetry, prose poem, narrative, essay, dramatic dialogue, epistle, and aphorism. Generically speaking, the *Aveux* are, in fact, characterizable only by their resistance to any extant category of verbal representation. The proliferation of genres Cahun inscribes can, however, be justifiably defined by a term most often associated with the visual arts—montage. The seemingly self-generating multiplicity of the generic montage is matched by the plethora of issues and themes juxtaposed in the textual collage of the self and "woman."

Like the text, woman often appears as a mix or double—at least. (See Fig. 5.) Both woman and text emerge as hybrid creatures, analogous to the figures of the androgyne, presented in the *Aveux* as "un mélange aux proportions impondérables; et ce mélange peut produire un corps nouveau, différent de ceux qui l'ont formé, contraire, hostile à tous rapprochements" 'a blend of unfathomable proportions; and this blend can produce my new body, different from those that formed it, hostile to any connection' (53). The very shock of this monstrous text, its liberation from expected generic conventions, clearly implies the conscious acknowledgment of the multiple conventions it exploits and from which it departs. While such intentionality apparently diverges from Surrealist goals, the images Cahun presents in the *Aveux*

achieve, as Surrealist images often do, the effect of the uncanny.² The recognition, the moment of “étonnement” ‘astonishment’ and surprise she seeks to trigger in this exhibitionist text has undoubted affinities with surrealist practices and with what Breton described as “convulsive beauty.”³

The surprise of the verbal montage—its overturning of generic convention and the grotesque visions of the often androgynous self that it presents—is matched by another form of hybridity. *Aveux non avenues* plays with and takes to task not only gender and genre norms, but also the boundaries of visual and verbal representation.

Aveux non avenues, explicitly presented as an “invisible adventure,” is paradoxically, a text of some two hundred pages where careful attention is paid not only to the visual aspect of the *mise en page*, but to the role of ten photomontages. These accompany, divide, and ultimately emblemize the verbal adventure of the nine chapters of this grotesque. I would like to insist that my use of “grotesque” as a noun here evokes more than the sense of disturbance. While its etymological root suggests the “grotto” or “cave,” the term refers to the bizarre visual works uncovered by excavations that took place in Rome during the Italian Renaissance. In *The Female Grotesque*, Mary Russo accurately highlights the fact that “art historians have identified many examples of drawing and objects in the grotto-esque style which predate both classical and renaissance Rome” (3). She insists that the category of the grotesque already existed as indicative of a visual art form that became “a repository of unnatural, frivolous and irrational connections between things which nature and classical art kept scrupulously apart. It emerged . . . only in relation to the norms which it exceeded” (3). Once used as a category or noun to refer to a type of drawing found in Roman archaeological sites, the term “grotesque” came to be used as an adjective to characterize destabilizing images or objects that evoke multiplicity, transformation, the monstrous, fantastic, and unnatural. The effect provoked by the strange and unfamiliar hybridity associated with the destabilizing double nature of the grotesque is often considered akin to what Freud has theorized as the “uncanny” or “l’inquiétante étrangeté.”⁴

Russo distinguishes between two currents associated with the grotesque: 1) *the comic grotesque*, a “viril category associated with the active civil world of the public” which, drawing on Bakhtin’s analyses of the carnival, links the grotesque both to carnival and to “social conflict,” and 2) *the uncanny grotesque*, which “moves inward towards an individualized, interiorized space of fantasy and introspection” (8). Both of the above categories—which Russo insists are not “manifest poles facing off against each other” (10)—tend to figure the grotesque body as “open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing” (8). While I will certainly make use of both of these categories, my primary meaning for “grotesque” in this article retains, first and foremost, its original sense as a term used a) to describe a type of visual production characterized by hybridity and b) to metaphorize a type of verbal production that analogically mimics such visual creations.

With the defining characteristics of the grotesque thus established, I propose that photomontage functions in the *Aveux* as a type of grotesque. Simultaneously, it also offers an overarching metaphor for the composition of the grotesque that is the *Aveux non avenus*. Insistently calling up the visual self-portrait, this fragmented, verbal portrait mimics the uncanny multiplicity of the photomontage. In addition to its collage of transforming images of the self, its disjointed meditations, ever-shifting voices, and juxtaposed emotions, the montage of genres and the *Aveux*’s disturbing assemblage of intertexts and verbal and visual aspect becomes, by definition, a grotesque—the embodiment of hybridity.

It is at this juncture that Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque proves particularly germane to the grotesque *Aveux*. According to Bakhtin, the carnivalesque is associated with a freedom from established, official order, acted out through masks, masquerade, and a grotesque form of play and spectacle. (See Fig. 6.) A topsy-turvy world, or *le monde à l’envers*, characterizes these sanctioned parenthetical moments of *détente*, moments that expose, play with, and laugh at the doxa in a way that Cixous’s laughing medusa might. For the laughter that is inextricably tied to the concept of the carnivalesque is simultaneously ambivalent, revolutionary and regenerative. Finally, Bakhtin links the carnivalesque to a

privileging of the body as well as to that which is material and base rather than lofty—in aesthetic terms, that which is conventionally unworthy of representation. A reading and a view of Cahun's work profits from such a model of the carnivalesque, since the *Aveux* not only focuses on and levels the hybrid bodies of the female and the text, but also turns convention around. It destabilizes not only the official order of conventional narrative, but also the hierarchies and attributes of gender, genre, the visual, and the verbal. In short, Cahun has recourse to both the carnivalesque and the uncanny aspects associated with the grotesque—an index of the radical hybridity that permeates the *Aveux* as "grotext." (See Fig. 7.)

A carnivalesque spirit is quite literally evoked in Chapter 1, as the narrator recalls a moment from the past:

... c'était le Carnaval. J'avais passé mes heures solitaires à déguiser mon âme. Les masques en étaient si parfaits que lorsqu'il leur arrivait de se croiser sur la grand'place de ma conscience ils ne se reconnaissaient pas.

... it was Carnival. I had spent my solitary hours disguising my soul. Its masks were so perfect that when they happened to meet on the grand piazza of my consciousness they did not recognize each other. (15)

According to Bakhtin, the masquerade that the carnival moment permits implies a constant exchange of roles and a liberation from socio-political hierarchy and conventional identity—the recognizable, so-called unified self. For the narrator of Cahun's *Aveux*, the temporary overthrow of conventional order facilitates that playful yet disturbing escape from the socialized, socially acceptable self associated with carnivalesque spirit: "Tenté par leur laideur comique ... j'adoptais, j'élevais en moi de jeunes monstres. ... Et mon âme comme un visage écorché, à vif, n'avait plus forme humaine" "Tempted by their comic ugliness ... I adopted, raised within me young monsters. ... And my soul, like a face flayed to the quick, was no longer human in shape" (15-16).

While in the above example Cahun's narrator explicitly replaces herself at the carnival, a carnivalesque spirit pervades the

work more generally. Examples of the subversive power of carnivalesque play in the *Aveux* include evocations of the body and allusions to makeup, masks, and masquerade. They include, too, numerous mirrors that not only reflect extant roles, but playfully expose these roles as charades. The carnivalesque laughter of the *Aveux* does not, however, spare the text's own posings; the *Aveux* playfully turns back to undercut its own exhibitions, to retrospectively and actively expose them as mere vanity. The reach and ambition of these subversions extend to Cahun's own mockery and mimicry of her philosophical and literary forefathers. And finally, in formal terms, her fragmented graphic designs on the text and her unorthodox genre juxtapositions destabilize reading conventions and ultimately turn verbal representation and its codes à l'envers.

The grotesque photomontage rests ever more securely as emblem for the carnivalesque spirit and uncanny defamiliarization of this text when one recalls that the photographic lens actually does present for the gazing subject a *monde à l'envers*. Our imaging subject would not need to turn the world around to see it from another perspective, since merely to gaze at the focusing screen of conventional cameras of the time already provided a model that destabilized norms. Specifically, to glance at the ground glass screen of the camera was to be faced with an image that was, in fact, upside down and backwards. In what follows I address photography's subversive and surreal effects in Cahun's visual aesthetic, and I explore how visual elements inscribe themselves in her verbal aesthetic.

The cover page to the *Aveux* arranges word series to form intersections.⁵ (See Fig. 8.) *The mise en page* itself plays with the power and the place of the visual in the verbal text, already destabilizing the figurative distinctions between the two. The words of the title are set both vertically and horizontally, along axes that intersect at the central letter O—an opening, a circle, and a void. In each corner the “non” appear like windmills, generating the hypnotic effect of a spinning movement around the repetition of negativity. “Non” appears on the page, then, ten times. These repetitive intersecting refusals—our first encounter with the invisible adventure that is, in principle, the book—insist on the dual

visual and verbal impact of the *mise en page* as well as the photographic negative. Somewhat paradoxically, they are also visually evocative of the focusing grid of a camera. The main intersection of *AVEUX NON AVENUS* and *AVEUX NON AVENUS* presents what was commonly used to visually frame and align the selected pictorial image and, subsequently, the gazing eye of the spectator.

The focusing grid at first appears to call up the still or the freeze-frame—and by extension, the stabilized gaze—while the windmill-like negatives suggest a vortex. Uncharacteristically however, the viewfinder's cross-hairs, which typically stabilize and objectify, now literally *appear* as a visual and verbal gesture of double vanity because they spell out *AVEUX NON AVENUS*. The avowals promised in verbal art are “non avenues”—nullified and disavowed—and the gaze that the focusing grid promises—visually and metaphorically—to stabilize is doubly disorienting. The vanity (as impossibility) and the vanity (as self-love) of the quest for such a unifying vision is precisely what Cahun takes to task and eschews via verbal- and photo-montage, beginning with what appears to be a dual foretext, one that functions as a grotesque diptych.⁶

The first foretext, or panel one of the diptych, confronts the reader with the image of an eye in a photomontage. (See Fig. 9.) The image centers the eye held by two hands and to the right and to the left presents two further sets of hands: two fists with what appears to be a crystal ball and two hands holding a globe of the world. The eye in the text and its homonym, the I of the text, are immediately interpellated. So too is the “future” and “vision” in the series of evocations of crystal balls. While already a grotesque by definition, the photomontage is coupled with a verbal foretext (what I will refer to as panel two) to form another genre of grotesque diptych. Joining the verbal to the visual as they appear in tandem, each of the “panels” destabilizes the conventions that would distinguish how the other is read or decoded, indexing a further hybridization of the reading process of the visual and the verbal text.

Given the attention lavished on the visual and verbal conundrums of the *mise en page* of the cover of the *Aveux*, as well as

Cahun's insistence on the visual sensory impact of words, it is no surprise to see a similar level of articulation in the two-page verbal foretext that serves as panel two of the opening diptych. And yet, there is an immediate paradox. The adventure the text presents is explicitly inscribed by the very first words of the verbal foretext as "L'aventure invisible"—an invisible adventure. Interrogating the generic and aesthetic norms against and within which it situates itself, this verbal foretext disavows confession, rejecting the confines and descriptions of the autobiographical text as well as what Mallarmé called the "suite ordinaire"—the linear, rationalized development of the story (356). The narrator states: "tout l'attirail des faits, . . . Ce n'est pas intéressant" 'the whole paraphernalia of facts. . . It's not interesting' (1).

View and vision, the title of an earlier text by Cahun, are inextricably linked in the paradoxical visual foretext. However, this is not necessarily to denigrate the "aventure invisible" of the verbal one, but rather to suggest that the vision to which she aspires exceeds both the limits of the visual and those of the verbal symbolic and semiotic orders. Though aspiring to the unrepresentable and the unspeakable, the term "vision" in both its senses nonetheless betrays the fundamental place of the visual epistemology informing and articulating the quest.

Placing herself somewhere between autobiographical memoir, bizarre *Bildungsroman*, and the autobiographical essay, she seems, like Breton, to ask "Qui suis-je?" 'Who am I?' Yet, rather than asking only "Qui suis-je?," Cahun mockingly signals her discontent by preferring the ironic and apropos, "Que puis-je?" 'What can I?': "L'abstrait, le rêve, sont aussi limités pour moi que le concret, que le réel. Que puis-je? Dans un miroir étroit, montrer la partie pour le tout? . . . Refusant de me cogner aux murs, me cogner aux vitres?" 'What can I? Abstraction, dreams, are just as limited for me as the concrete, the real. What can I? Show, in a narrow mirror, a part for the whole? . . . By refusing to knock against the walls, knock against the windows?' (2). Flaunting and then flouting Surrealist convention, Cahun inscribes herself as not only the mere daughter seduced by Surrealist aspirations and contradictions, but as the legitimate heir to ancestral confessors

and explorers of the *moi* such as Montaigne, Descartes, Rousseau, and, only belatedly, Breton. While the narrator proposes to follow the errant path of her object of study—that of the subject—she is avowedly conscious of the vanity of the project: “C’est faux. C’est peu. Mais ça exerce l’oeil” ‘It’s false. It’s not much. But it exercises the eye’ (2).

This (double) vanity, already suggested by the title page, is condensed, displaced and transposed in this text onto a hand mirror (“la glace à main”) that crystallizes not only the vanity of the text’s objectives, but also the narcissistic vanity of the verbal adventure as mirror of the self: “Reparaissent la glace à main, le rouge et la poudre aux yeux. Un temps. Un point. Alinéa. Je recommence” ‘They reappear—the handmirror, the rouge, the eye shadow. A time. A point. A new line. I begin again’ (1). Evoked in this recreation are the mirror in the passage, the mirror of the passage, the mirror of the text and the myriad mirrors of the photomontages. These, in tandem with the verbal montage, simultaneously fragment, unify, shed light on, and kill the subject represented.

This is a vertiginous journey that will put out all the stops, exhibiting, exposing, and dismissing multiple codes of conventional representations of the self and, particularly, the confessional feminine self: “Faudrait-il *pour leur plaire suivre pas à pas l’inconnue*, l’éclairer jusqu’à la cheville?” ‘Must I, *to please them, follow the unknown step by step*, elucidate it right to the ankles?’ (1; my emphasis). Dismissing both realistic detail and the Surrealists’ aspirations to explore and exhibit “l’inconnue” (Woman, Woman as muse, and Woman as a figure for the male unconscious), the narrator belittles such voyeurism as nothing less than a desire for a “more real” mastery of the self—in this case mastery of the “mysterious,” feminine self. The evocations of “pleasing them,” showing it all, and exhibitionism reveal the narrator’s acute self-awareness, while her allusions to the vanity of the endeavor and the inevitably vain mask that one always assumes create a *mise-en-abyme* of mockery as the “je” re-commences—almost in spite of its self.

The adventure, though avowedly impossible and invisible, sets itself up as a quest for a self that will be “tracked”—in visual terms—by an *objectif*: “L’objectif suit les yeux, la bouche, les rides” ‘The lens tracks the eyes, the mouth, the wrinkles . . .’ (1). Articulated through the visual, the narrator’s gaze at the self and her aim are framed in terms of the photographic *objectif*, a lens whose individual snapshots function here like a poetic blason: a work that calls up the visual and the corporeal but in fact shows nothing. The narrator acknowledges the reader’s difficulty with such a project: “Mais quel manège ridicule pour ceux qui n’ont pas vu—et je n’ai rien montré” ‘But what a ridiculous round-about for those who haven’t seen—and I have shown nothing . . .’ (1).

Even after only three pages, it is clear that the lens of the *Aveux* does not exhibit a verisimilar image according to conventional verbal or visual codes. Its reorienting images of the self also reorient convention. In a burlesque and often grotesque fashion, they yield not the documentary lens of realistic representation, but rather the provocative, topsy-turvy inverted image of a carnivalesque photographic *objectif*. As Cahun continues to deploy her provocative sleights-of-hand (and eye) in her fabricated ventures, a radical, hybridized form of self-writing emerges.

In Chapter 2, verbal montage of the self is tied to, and ties, vanity and narcissism. The chapter opens with an eye surrounded by body parts arrayed in evocative poses. (See Fig. 10.) We look as if through the dilated iris at a pupil that reflects the inverted retinal image of a woman looking. The same woman reappears in the hand-held mirror at the top, provocatively looking with a hand expressly covering her mouth. This image prefaces a chapter entitled “MOI-MEME (faute de mieux)” ‘MYSELF’ (for lack of better)’ and epigraphed with “La sirène succombe à sa propre voix” ‘The siren succumbs to her own voice’ (24). Once again a diptych, “MOI-MEME” presents itself as a two-faced chapter and the self as a double-faced text. The visual image of narcissism and vanity evoked by the mirrors of its opening photomontage is inscribed in the verbal mirror first via Echo (or voice) and later in an ex-

licit discussion of narcissism.

The opening lines of the verbal montage in Chapter 2 take issue with the legend of the siren evoked in the epigraph and question the place of voice and verbal production in the constitution of the subject: “Les matelots sont bien trop occupés de la manœuvre du navire et du chant de leur chair. La sirène est la seule victime de la sirène. . . . Nul n’est pris qu’à ses propres sortilèges” ‘The sailors are too busy with maneuvering the ship and singing their songs of the flesh. The siren is the siren’s only victim. . . . No one is caught except by one’s own spells’ (27). Debunking the legend associated with these feminine hybrids, the narrator simultaneously places voice at the center of a “sortilège” ‘spell’ and self-love. In other words, she presents the narcissistic vanity and vanity of voice as akin to those associated with the visual image.

A few pages later, we are again confronted with mirrors and narcissism in two passages both bearing the same English title, “Self-Love.” The first specifically addresses and critiques the legend of Narcissus, proposing in the process another reading of the myth and still another plausible outcome:

La mort de Narcisse m’a toujours paru la plus incompréhensible. Une seule explication s’impose: Narcisse ne s’aimait pas. Il s’est laissé tromper par une image. Il n’a pas su traverser les apparences . . . Mais s’il eût su s’aimer par-delà son mirage, son sort heureux eût été, digne de l’envie des siècles.

Narcissus’s death has always seemed utterly incomprehensible to me. There is only one possible explanation: Narcissus did not love himself. He allowed himself to be deceived by an image. He was unable to get past appearances . . . But if he had been able to love himself beyond his mirage, his happy fate would have been worthy of the envy of the ages. (36)

In the second version of “Self-Love,” we see a more intimate discussion of narcissism; one that is related directly to the narrator. Figuring as both sibling and progeny of the first “Self-Love,” this passage explicitly takes up the myriad threads of the questions posed by its predecessor. Again, the vanity of the mirror crystallizes a fascination with the self, an effort to capture the self, and once again, vanity’s second sense—impossibility—is presented simultaneously. The vanity of the (futile) quest, however,

this time offers a limpid justification for the discontinuity and play of the text: “En somme, ce qui gêne le plus Narcisse le voyeur, c’est l’insuffisance, la discontinuité de son propre regard” ‘In short, what bothers Narcissus, the voyeur, the most is the insufficiency, the discontinuity of his own gaze’ (38). The desire to capture discontinuity—animation and lack of fixity—that provoked the death of Narcissus metatextually reflects the desire and the obstacles of the double aspirations of the narrator as well as those of the writing subject. It elucidates the functioning of discontinuity, fragmentation and montage with respect to genre and the depiction of the self, and continues to erode the boundaries of the visual and the verbal. The passage crystallizes how the photographic *figures* in this text operate as a series of ekphrastic effects or snapshots to constitute a grotesque montage which destabilizes gender, genre, the self, and the temporal development conventionally associated with verbal representation or narrative.

I will now return us to the passage in which the narrator first interrogates the gaze and the desire to look at and thus capture the self in the mirror: “Une main crispée sur un miroir—une bouche, des narines palpitantes—entre des paupières pâmées, la fixité folle de prunelles élargies . . . ce que je voudrais éclairer du mystère: le néo-narcissisme d’une humanité pratique” ‘A hand clenched around a mirror—a mouth, quivering nostrils—between the swooning eyelids, the mad fixity of enlarged pupils . . . what I want to elucidate about the mystery: the neo-Narcissism of a practical humankind’ (37-38). Referencing the mirror, eyes, and pupils, the narrator purports to discuss neo- or modern narcissism in an epoch that has practically perfected its mirrors: “Le bronze—l’argent—le verre: nos miroirs sont presque parfaits” ‘Bronze—silver—glass: our mirrors are almost perfect’ (38). Presented in visual terms—as a “tableau”—the discussion aspires to illustrate how the specter of Narcissus continues to mark society’s desire to capture an image: “Le mythe de Narcisse est partout . . . depuis le jour fatal où fut captée l’onde sans ride. Car l’invention du métal poli est d’une claire étymologie narcissienne” ‘The myth of Narcissus has been everywhere . . . since the fateful day when they captured the lightwave without distortion. For the invention

of polished metal is clearly of narcissian etymology' (38). This apparent allusion to mirrors and reflections may in fact be a reference, via a Baudelairean intertext, to photography.⁷ Both imply, as would the tableau, a visual image. And it is precisely this visualization of the self that the narrator interrogates: "Il faudrait maintenant fixer l'image dans le temps comme dans l'espace, saisir des mouvements accomplis—se surprendre de dos enfin" 'What is needed now is to fix the image in time as in space, seize completed movements—take oneself by surprise from behind' (38). To fix the image in time as in space, the Horatian doctrine of *ut pictura poesis* is called up and then dismissed, since if the image is to be presented in time as in space, the kinesis she alludes to by "saisir des mouvements" would be an attribute associated with the art of time, rather than that of space. To suggest movement in space would require the pregnant moment. To suggest that the temporal text should stop in order to present an image calls up a traditional realist bias associated with ekphrasis. The movement of the subject is presented here, however, as an image of the self that is always impossible to capture, as is its "image." This horizon of possibility beyond which an image in the invisible adventure cannot be found is foregrounded in the passage: "'Miroir,' 'fixer,' voilà des mots qui n'ont rien à faire ici" "Mirror," "fix," these are words that have no place here' (38). The narrator thus questions the desire to reflect and to fix; questioning also the place of these desires in her own endeavor.

Neither Narcissus nor Echo, visual nor verbal, mirror nor text, can completely snare that self in a fixed mirror or static image. The recognition of this appears in the title *AVEUX NON AVENUS* and in the insistence on the vanity of the desire to create a mimesis of the self. The only adequate representation of the self is one that would afford that which Narcissus lacked: a gaze that would account for the discontinuity of the gaze itself—its lapses, its "insuffisance" 'insufficiency.' Given the repertoire of uncanny effects so cannily and unerringly deployed by Cahun up to this point, one is prompted to ask: How might these *Aveux* endeavor to create such a discontinuous representation?

One response might be found in a passage bearing the distinctly Bretonian title “Fenêtre à guillotine.”⁸ In the context of this passage, the “fenêtre à guillotine” also invokes the window and the “vitre” of visual representation, linking mimesis and representation to execution and death. After the words “fenêtre à guillotine,” the passage immediately cuts to: “Une feuille de verre. Où mettrai-je le tain? En deçà, au delà; devant ou derrière la vitre?” ‘A sheet of glass. Where shall I put the silvering? On this side or that side; in front or in back of the pane?’ (29). The narrator weighs the drawbacks and then dismisses each of the possible responses to her question: “Devant. Je m’emprisonne. Je m’aveugle . . . Derrière, je m’enferme également. Je ne saurai rien du dehors” ‘In front. I imprison myself, blind myself. In back, I’m shut in too. I shall know nothing of the outside’ (29). Finally, she concludes: “Alors, casser les vitres . . . Avec les morceaux, composer un vitrail. Travail de Byzance. . . Quel aveu d’artifice! Toujours je finirai par prononcer ma propre condamnation. Je vous l’avais bien dit: remarquez l’enseigne—fenêtre à guillotine . . .” ‘So shatter the panes. . . And with the pieces, compose a stained-glass window. Byzantine work. What a confession of artifice! I’ll always end up pronouncing my own condemnation. Well, I told you: note the insignia—guillotine window’ (30).

This mosaic-like montage, a work of avowed artifice rather than a window onto any natural world links the narrative *aveux* to pictorial self-portraiture and to the window of death or the guillotine—an offering up of the self. But is the “fenêtre à guillotine” an admission, or avowal of impossibility, as the narrator seems to imply? This is highly unlikely since she nullifies the avowal only moments later, denying the admission and the faith that one should put in the “enseigne” by exclaiming: “Alors supprimer les titres. Ce sont des clefs. Fausse pudeur” ‘So suppress the titles. They are keys. False modesty’ (30). The adjective “fausse,” while certainly modifying the term “pudeur” not only suggests a form of vanity, but also (aurally) destabilizes the syntax of the declaration which precedes it (i.e. “Ce sont des clefs. Fausse”).

In momentary recognition of the impossibility of capturing the self without the textual execution provoking the death of the movement she seeks to present, as previously noted, she says: “‘Miroir,’ ‘fixer,’ voilà des mots qui n’ont rien à faire ici” ‘Mirror,’ ‘fix,’ these are words that have no place here’ (38). And yet, even in the face of this, the text aspires still to reward her Narcissus with what he desired. Questioning the temporal development of verbal narration, the narrator explores the possibility of yet another kind of action, “Le temps bat-il bien réellement en ce monde détraqué comme une vieille horloge? L’autre action—l’autre exécution—tout impossible que ce soit, me semble simultanée” ‘Does time really beat along in this broken down world like an old clock? The other action—the other execution—however impossible it may be, seems simultaneous to me’ (21). The “simultanée” here proves germane, suggesting a movement that is not only diachronic, but synchronic in the text. Not a single mirror but discontinuous reflections that overlay and destabilize the temporal unraveling of the text.

Cahun’s hybrid creation implies a recognition of the multiplicity of the hybrid self as well as the infinite possibilities to recompose the fiction that is the self and the fiction that is its representation—something akin to Descartes’s dream of a fictive *moi*, or a precursor to Cixous’s “qui sont-je” ‘who are I?’ This applies not only to the self portraits of Cahun’s visual corpus but also to her verbal self portraits and to the first person confession “qui n’en est pas une” ‘which is not one.’

The montage effect in this work counters conventions associated with the verbal text by figuring a reanimated *ut pictura poesis*. We might then take Cahun’s injunction: “Il faudrait maintenant fixer l’image dans le temps comme dans l’espace, saisir des mouvements accomplis—se surprendre de dos” in another way: as an aspiration to fix in time the only capacity for movement in the space of the pictorial arts—the pregnant moment. It is this overturning of the boundaries of visual and verbal representation, this hybridization that the verbal montage of the *Aveux* figures. The “se surprendre de dos” here accrues more prominence. It implies how the seizing of animation and

discontinuities in the aesthetic field metonymically mimes the movements of the hybrid self presented in these *Aveux*, suggesting somewhat optimistically, and well in advance of Cixous's theoretical call to advance, that "temerity" or "transgression"—the vanity of the multiple mirrors may not, in fact, be vain at all.

Notes

1 All translations by Gwen Wells, to whom I am indebted for many adventures in insight, here and elsewhere.

2 Recent works that deal with Cahun as both a visual artist and a writer include: David Bate's "The Mise en Scène of Desire"; Whitney Chadwick's *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism, and Self-Representation*; Carolyn Dean's "Claude Cahun's Double"; Honor Lasalle and Abigail Solomon-Godeau, whose article "Surrealist Confession: Claude Cahun's Photomontages," which examines how femininity is articulated within Cahun's work, also provides excellent "readings" of the photomontage and its aesthetic significance in *Aveux non avenues*; François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: l'écart et la métamorphose*; and *Mise en Scène*; Therese Lichtenstein's "A Mutable Mirror: Claude Cahun"; Elisabeth Lyon's "Unspeakable Images, Unspeakable Bodies."

3 I am specifically referring to the refusal of intentionality associated with automatic writing. Frequently practiced by the Surrealists, automatic writing proposed to subvert rational processes and processing and to transgress and shock bourgeois sensibilities. Although many texts flaunted the appearance of automatic writing, it is commonly acknowledged that numerous works that present automatic characteristics were inspired by the activity, rather than examples of it. Nonetheless, even pseudo-automatic texts, in aspiring to the texture of dreamwork sought: a) to destabilize the linear flow, the logical, temporal development of narrative; b) to do away with the "verisimilar" presentation of unified characters and narrators; and c) to dispense with the detailed scenic descriptions so often associated with narrative realism and traditional forms of ekphrasis. Additionally, automatic or not, surrealist works generally flouted generic conventions. The avant-garde in their most ludic textual moments sought to surprise, to transgress and to subvert.

5 It is, in this regard, somewhat amusing to note that the text was published by the *Editions Carrefour*.

6 Diptych, which typically refers either to hinged leaves of an ancient writing tablet, or more commonly to two hinged, folding panels of a painted work, is particularly apropos here. Etymologically linked to that which is double, the term captures the double hybridity of a dual foretext which “unnaturally” couples a visual panel with a verbal one.

7 Baudelaire’s well-known essay, “Le Public moderne et la photographie,” presents Daguerre as the vengeful god of the public, and with a snide, slightly apocalyptic turn, announces that it was from this moment forth that “la société immonde se rua, comme un seul Narcisse, pour contempler sa triviale image sur le métal” ‘filthy society came running, like one single Narcissus, to contemplate its trivial image on the metal,’ 617.

8 *Manifestes*, 31.

9 The allusion is, of course, to Luce Irigaray’s paradoxical title, *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*.

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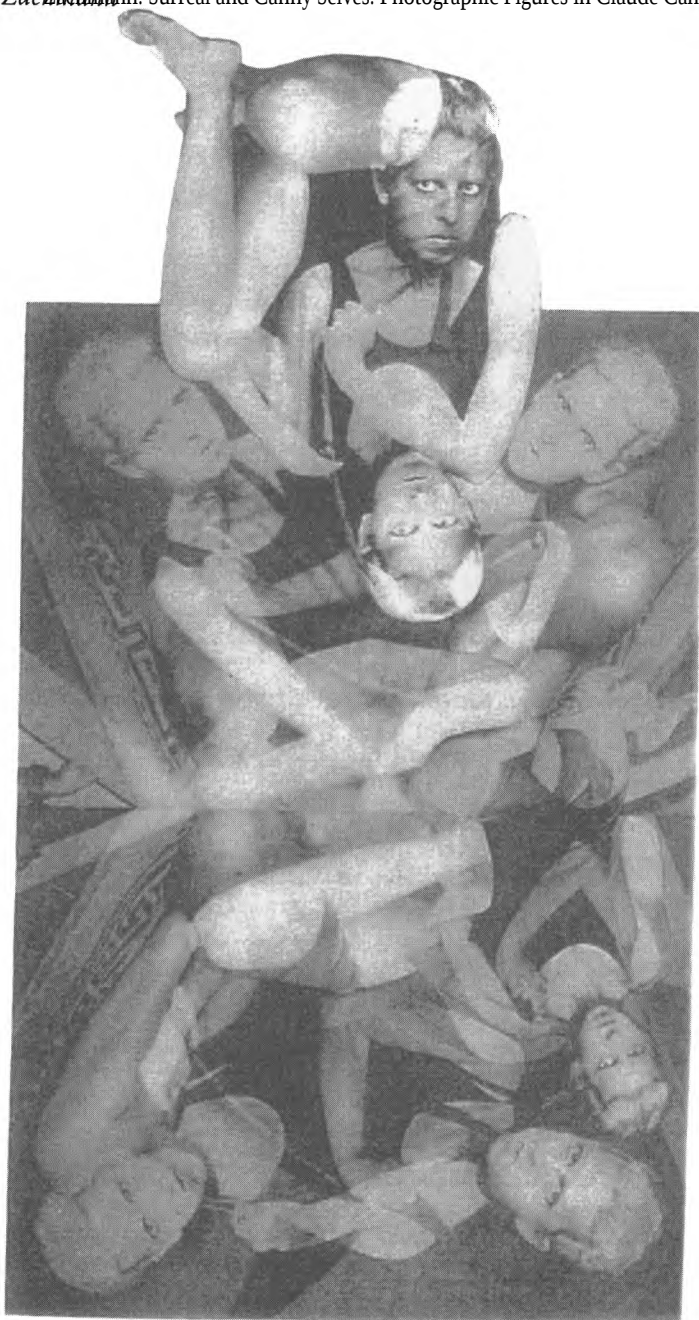


Fig. 2. Claude Cahun (with Marcel Moore), photomontage, 1929-1930. Frontispiece for Chapter 8 of *Aveux non avenues*.
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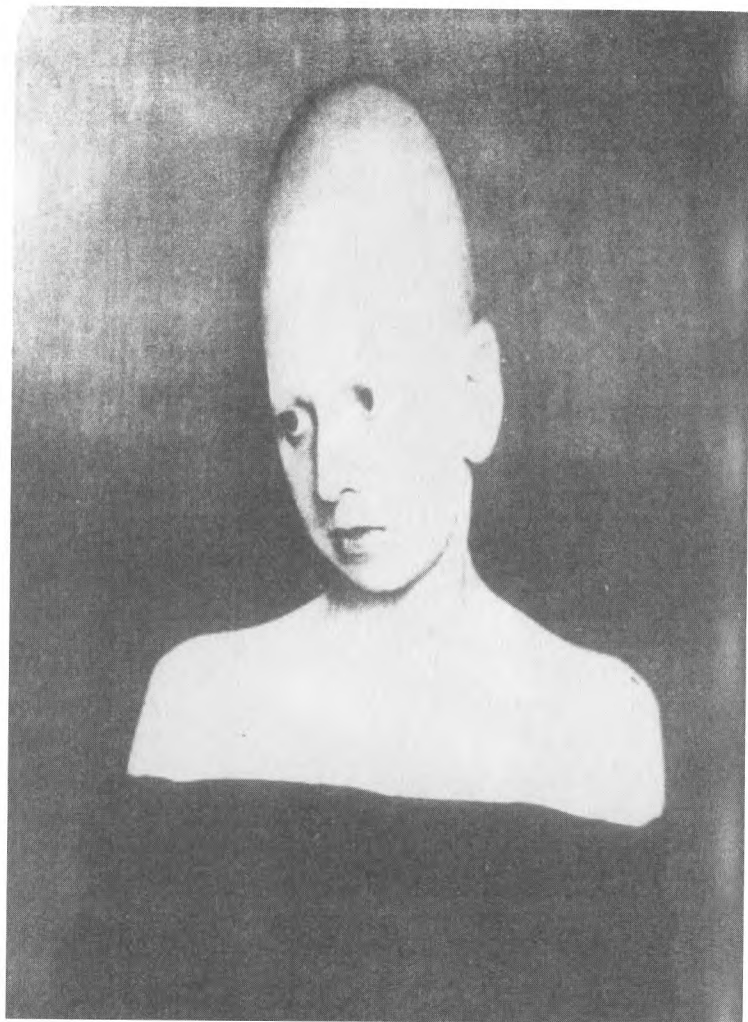
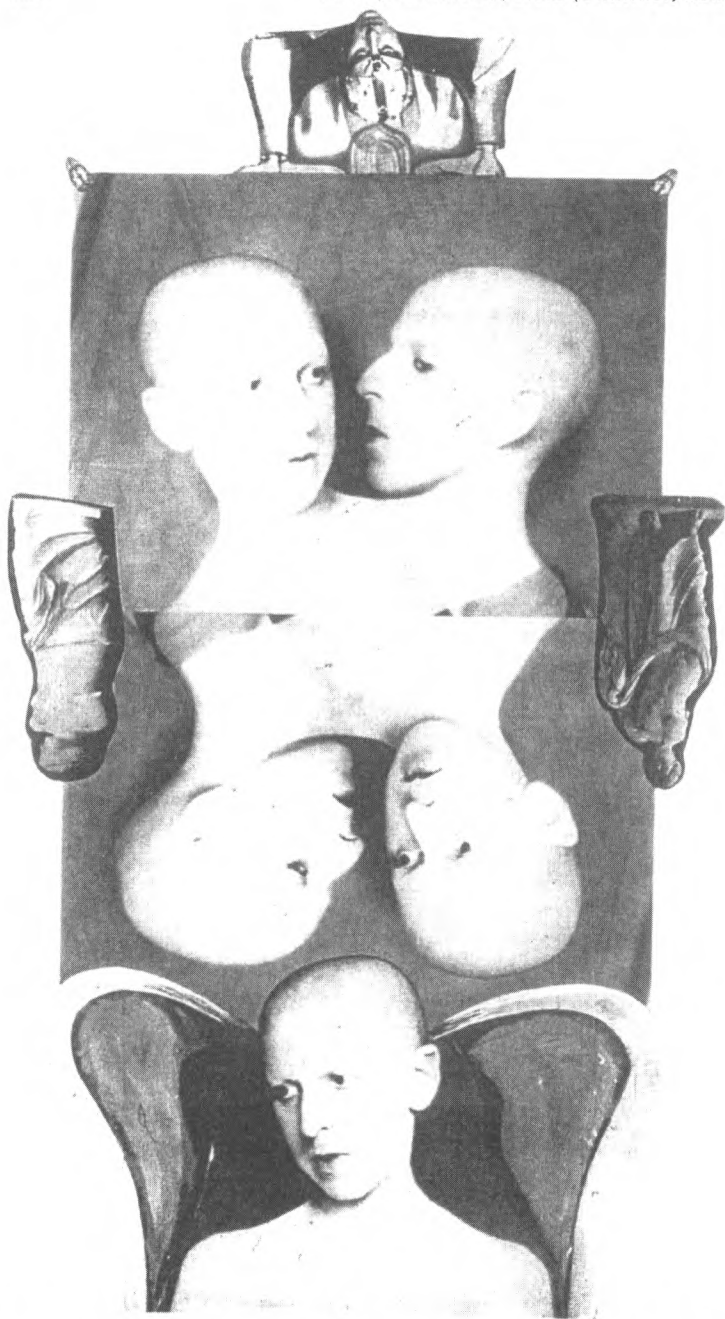




Fig. 4. Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1921. Private Collection.
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Fig. 5. Claude Cahun (with Marcel Moore), photomontage, 1929-26
DOI: 10.4148/2334-4415.1563
1930. Frontispiece for Chapter 3 of *Aveux non avenus*.



Fig. 6. Claude Cahun, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1927. Jersey Museum Ser-
vices. Published by New Prairie Press



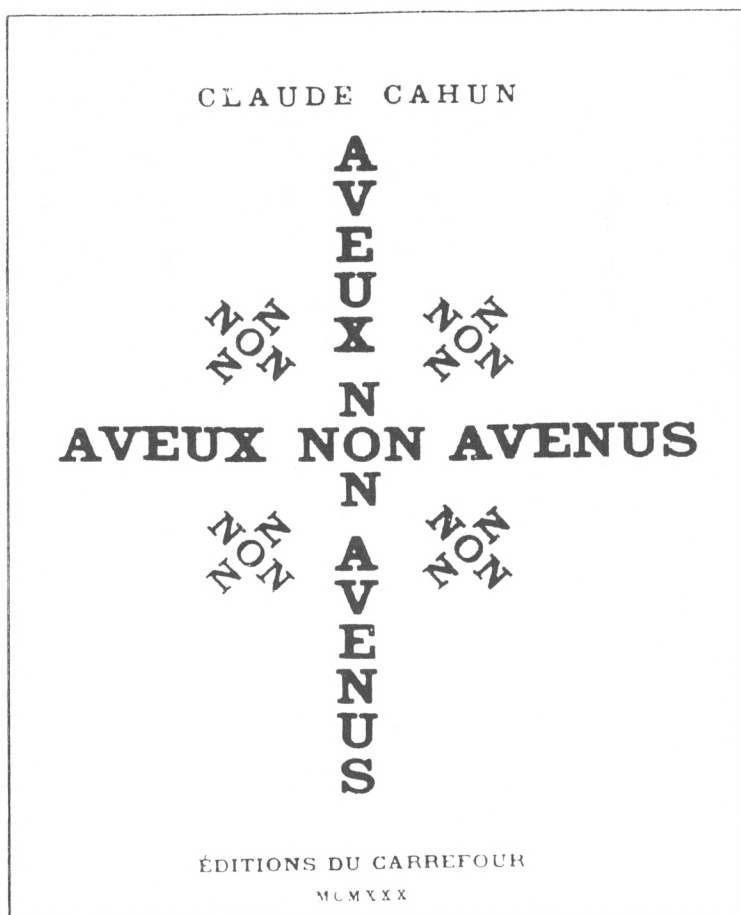
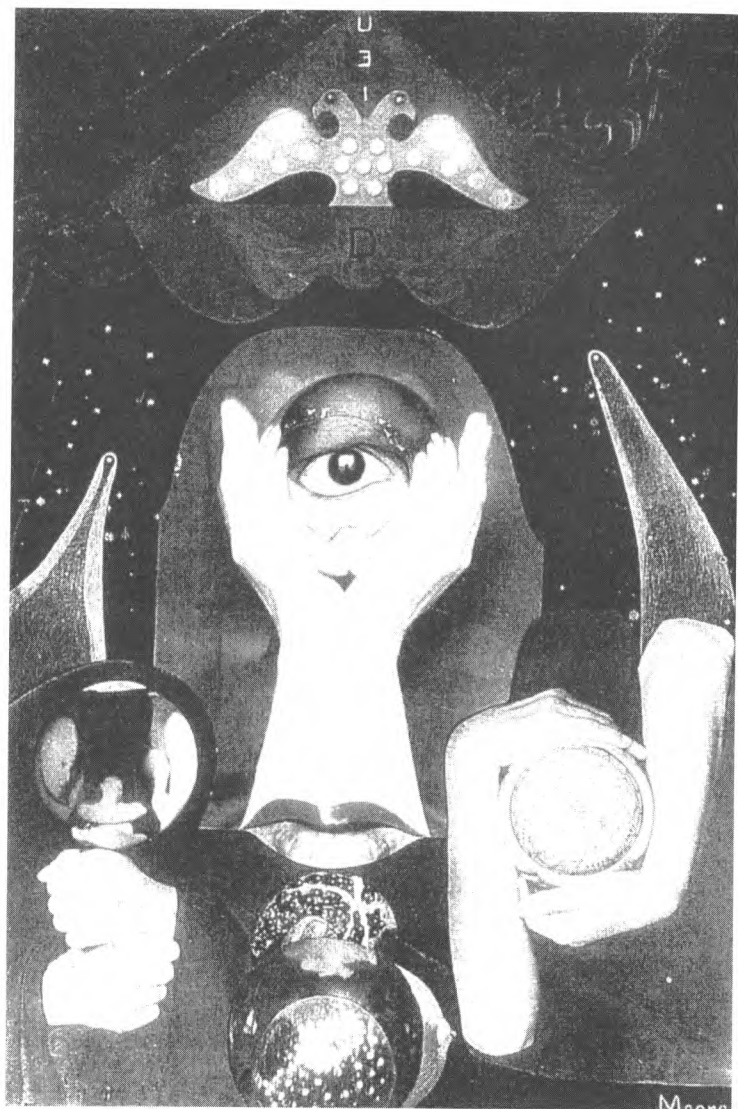


Fig. 8. Cover, *Aveux non avenus*, 1929-1930.



<https://newprairiepress.org/stcl/vol27/iss2/11>
 Fig. 9 Claude Cahun (with Marcel Moore), photomontage, 1929-1930. Frontispiece for 1919-1925 of *Aveux non avenue*.



Fig. 10. Claude Cahun (with Marcel Moore), photomontage, 1929-1930. From *Frontispiece* for Chapter 2 of *Aveux non avenus*.
Published by Frontispiece for Chapter 2 of *Aveux non avenus*.