

A Comparative Study of Technical Expression and Self-Consciousness in Modernist Novel: Taking *Nadja* and *The Soul Mountain* as Examples

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Abstract. This paper focuses on two twentieth-century writers, André Breton and Gao Xingjian, comparing their early lives. Through textual analysis, it contrasts their respective representative works, *Nadja* by André Breton and *The Soul Mountain* by Gao Xingjian. It concludes that both writers share similarities in three aspects: their opposition to literary tradition, their creation of the figure of the wanderer, and their construction within literature of an Other that reflects the self. Furthermore, the article examines the divergence in their literary attitudes towards the modern world, suggesting that underlying social factors—particularly pressures from the political environment—may account for these differences. This article investigates how each goes beyond typical writing methods and narrative purposes. The novels shape the image of a traveler through fragmentary happenings, while the author's own spiritual universe is represented through the presence of the Other in the works.

Keywords: Modernist Novel, Technical Expression, Self-Consciousness, writing methods, narrative purposes.

1. Introduction

Modernist literature emerged in the Western world at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. At that time, Europe faced the development of modernity, manifested through industrialization, new technologies, the expansion of cities, and the widespread adoption of new lifestyles brought about by urbanization. On the other hand, cultural traditions play two roles in this scene: they may retain their powerful influence, sometimes clashing with the operational models of modern society, or they become something that is constantly passing away, only to be recalled when people lament its irretrievability. Furthermore, the more intense the modernization process, the more vehemently it demanded that people seek new ways to observe and adapt to new forms of life and reform traditions. and the more urgently it compelled individuals to examine their self-awareness within a shifting society.

This essay focuses on the interplay between literary techniques and self-consciousness within modernist literature. In this textual analysis, I compare two representative works: *Nadja* by André Breton, a French writer active in the 1920s, and *Soul Mountain* by Gao Xingjian, a French-Chinese writer active in China during the 1980s. Given the distinctive prose-like narrative of both works and the recurring theme of self-consciousness, a considerable body of research has explored these aspects separately and established connections between them. However, no existing research has yet undertaken a comparative analysis of the two, seeking their differences to arrive at new conclusions. This essay aims to fill this gap in the field.

This essay begins with a comparison of the early creative careers of the two authors. It then transitions into a textual analysis, examining three key aspects: first, the authors' intentions behind using a prose style interwoven with commentary for narration; second, the characteristics of the wanderer figures depicted in their works; and third, how both texts utilize the figure of the Other to articulate the author's self-consciousness. The paper then concludes by analyzing the distinct differences between the two works, going beyond their similarities and exploring the underlying causes of these divergences. This facilitates a clearer understanding of how the cultural contexts of both works influence their respective narratives.

By examining the similarities and differences in narrative and self-expression between *Nadja* and *The Soul Mountain*, this essay seeks to contribute to cultural understanding within the context of globalization.

2. The era in which the two authors lived

Before delving into the works of the two authors, it is necessary to compare the similarities and differences between the eras in which they lived.

André Breton was active in France from the 1920s. By this time, France had emerged from the shadow of World War I and entered a period of rapid economic growth. With advances in material civilisation, culture was revitalised. Paris stood as one of Europe's most populous cities and served as the continent's cultural centre. The city attracted a gathering of outstanding artists, writers, and critics. Within this milieu, three cultural currents exerted significant influence on Breton's creative work.

Realist literature, which aimed to reflect and critique society through detailed, objective depictions of reality, maintained its profound influence. However, realist techniques increasingly struggled to address the complexities of modern life. Secondly, the Dadaist movement emerged as a rebellion against literary and artistic traditions across the Western world, with one of its centres situated in Paris. Finally, Freud's theories began gaining prominence in Europe. His approach treated mental activity as a new object amenable to analysis.

Meanwhile, Gao Xingjian commenced his literary career in 1980s China. However, his literary background must be traced back to the Cultural Revolution era. A defining feature of literature during this era was its adherence to the narrative traditions of Socialist Realism in content, alongside a commitment to portraying the noble proletarian figure to serve the political imperatives of class struggle. Content was required to possess a certain degree of narrative coherence [1, 2]. Following the downfall of the Gang of Four in 1976 and the initiation of Reform and Opening-up in 1978, political pressure on the writers loosened. This societal shift meant artists faced fewer constraints and enjoyed greater creative freedom. Meanwhile, writers were partially retained, creating a preference for the preceding era. As an illustration, the highly influential "Scar Literature" movement of the early post-Cultural Revolution period, while shifting its focus from class struggle to social issues, still treated literature as a tool for political campaigns rather than an artistic endeavour, and continued to undervalue the use of literary technique [3]. Technical innovation thus became a crucial task of the Reform and Opening-up era.

A comparative analysis reveals similarities between the environments faced by China's young writers and their French counterparts after World War I. Firstly, both societies shared comparable economic contexts, emerging from periods of turmoil into phases of rapid economic development as modernity permeated daily life. Secondly, both operated within mainstream creative environments committed to a realist paradigm focused on depicting social issues.

Differences were also pronounced. Firstly, French writers operated within a Western cultural context and a capitalist political framework, whereas Chinese writers remained within the traditions of Centralism and a socialist political context. Secondly, French writers of the early 20th century had to forge a new literary theory from scratch, lacking precedents to reference, while Chinese writers in the early Reform and Opening-up era could build upon and refine the foundations laid by their predecessors.

3. Early works and explorations in creative concepts

From Breton's life experiences, two other intellectual currents of the twentieth century impact the author. Firstly, from 1917 onwards, Breton worked in the psychiatric ward of a hospital. There he encountered and was attracted by Freud's psychoanalytic writings. Secondly, he participated in Dadaist activities in Paris, absorbing elements of Dada's rebellious spirit and creative techniques. Through these circles, he befriended contemporary artists such as Aragon and Soupault. Years later, Breton

gradually diverged from the Paris Dadaist group, later founding the Surrealist movement alongside artists he had known earlier. Breton's creative philosophy during this period is evident in the Surrealist Manifesto he drafted in 1924 and in *Le Poisson soluble*.

A crucial point in the Manifesto is Breton's profoundly negative, even contemptuous, attitude towards realism, which he criticised for neglecting the psychological dimensions of human experience. For this same reason, Breton held Freud's analysis of human dreams in high esteem [4].

In the Manifesto, Breton described a technique known as automatic writing. The writer must rapidly transcribe sentences that come to mind without any predetermined purpose [4]. Breton applied this technique to his work *Le Poisson soluble*. The entire novel consists solely of sentences Breton wrote through automatic writing, unedited and without subsequent explanation. The connections between these sentences existed only in the author's mind at the time of creation, rendering the text virtually incomprehensible to readers. This reflects the inherent failure of automatic writing in literary creation. Nevertheless, it is evident that Breton championed automatic writing precisely because he valued the spiritual coherence within his novel.

Gao Xingjian studied French at Beijing Foreign Studies University. He can also read Russian and English. This ability to engage directly with foreign works meant his understanding of modernist literature preceded that of most of his Chinese contemporaries, who lacked foreign language skills [2]. His approach to novel-writing is glimpsed in his early 1980s essay collection 'Preliminary Exploration of Modern Novel Techniques.' Unlike contemporaries who dismissed literary technique—even viewing modernist methods as bourgeois affectations—Gao placed great emphasis on craft, particularly championing and being influenced by stream-of-consciousness techniques [2].

This demonstrates Gao Xingjian's equal emphasis on the spiritual dimensions within literary works.

Gao Xingjian's early dramatic works also reflect his literary inclinations. His debut play, *The Station* (1982), indicates that while not entirely free from realist influences, he drew greater inspiration from French absurdist theatre [5]. The group of people waiting for a Bus in *The Station* can be seen as a mirror image of the two protagonists in *Waiting for Godot*. Moreover, it is not difficult to discern that the crowd's eventual decision to abandon their wait and walk into the city, in contrast to the persistent waiting in *Waiting for Godot*, reveals Gao Xingjian's optimistic attitude towards the new era of reform and opening up. It also indicates that Gao Xingjian still sought to influence politics through literature.

Common ground between the two authors was evident in their early works. Firstly, both held negative views towards realism within their respective literary spheres, emphasising the importance of novel literary techniques. Secondly, Breton's admiration for Freud and his experiments with automatic writing, or Gao Xingjian's championing of stream-of-consciousness techniques, indicate that both authors placed particular importance on literature's portrayal of the spiritual dimension.

Differences also exist, most notably in their contrasting political environments. Compared to France's relatively liberal cultural climate, the early 1980s in China saw greater political interference in literature during the initial phase of reform and opening-up. In 1983, *The Station* was officially banned, and publication of Gao Xingjian's other works faced restrictions. This series of political interventions fundamentally altered Gao Xingjian's Writing style.

4. Textual analysis: similarities in writing techniques and personal expression between *Nadja* and *The Soul Mountain*

This essay examines André Breton's *Nadja* and Gao Xingjian's *The Soul Mountain* as two modernist texts. It analyses the influence of modern society on the authors' textual expression techniques and content.

4.1. Non-linear narrative

Both *Nadja* and *The Soul Mountain* are modernist novels that break with linear narrative, employing a prose-like writing style.

Nadja is divided into three sections. The first part begins with André Breton's surrealist aesthetic principles, where he describes a distinction between “slope-facts” and “cliff-facts”.

I intend to mention, in the margin of the narrative I have yet to relate, only the most decisive episodes of my life as I can conceive it apart from its organic plan [...] I am concerned with facts of quite unverifiable intrinsic value, but which, by their absolutely unexpected, violently fortuitous character, and the kind of associations of suspect ideas they provoke, are a way of transforming gossamer into spiderweb [6].

This is the kind of event that liberates one from the shackles of reason. The latter part of the First part recounts moments of “cliff-facts” experienced by Breton during his wanderings through Paris. The second part is written like Breton's diary. Talks about an encounter with a woman named *Nadja* on a certain date. The third part commences with the author's conversation with another woman and concludes with his reflections on his own perception of beauty.

The main content of *The Soul Mountain* alternates between two narrative threads across chapters. The first follows a first-person narrator traveling across China. The other centres on “you”, who is similarly travelling across China. Within “you's” narrative, another significant female character, “she”, emerges; the emotional relationship between “you” and “she” forms the core of this secondary storyline. Both main threads are interspersed with numerous folktales and the author's critical words.

A key reason both authors adopted a non-linear narrative was their shared conviction that literature required renewal to address neglect of human psychology caused by excessive external description. Though Breton no longer employed pure automatic writing, he still prioritised the experience of beauty over narrative tradition. Similarly, in Chapter 72 of *The Soul Mountain*, Gao Xingjian anticipates a conservative critic posing this very challenge to his creative approach.

“This isn't a novel!”

[...]

“A novel must have a complete story.”

[...]

“They're all fragments without any sequence; the author doesn't know how to organize connected episodes.”

[...]

“You're a nihilist!” [7].

To reiterate, he opposes the excessive pursuit of external narrative coherence.

4.2. Wanderer in two novels

Both works are regarded as novels rather than collections of essays. This is because each text is driven by the figure of a wanderer, guided by an indefinite aim. This figure establishes a spiritual coherence that replaces the narrative continuity characteristic of earlier novels.

In *Nadja*, the wanderer character is the author himself, roaming Paris. He observes buildings and dwellings throughout the city, conversing with diverse individuals. He possesses no explicit purpose, just seeks experiences unavailable elsewhere, selectively recording them [8]. The author disrupts narrative continuity through fragmented accounts, preserving a psychological consistency in the pursuit of “cliff-facts”.

Correspondingly, the first-person “I” and second person “you” in *The Soul Mountain* both move as a wanderer. These dual perspectives roam China's mountainous regions and county towns, encountering diverse characters and tales. Their driving force is the quest for a vaguely defined place called Ling Shan (*Soul Mountain*). The author never specifies its location throughout the novel. Nevertheless, it is through this quest for the *Soul Mountain* that the actions of “you” and “I” achieve a mental coherence of motive.

Through this shared wanderer's perspective, both works articulate a way of life within a vast and complex world: abandoning explicit external goals and external critiques of societal issues, instead drawing from one's deepest motivations to glean more direct and pure sensations from the outside world.

4.3. Reflections of self through the other

Nadja's opening lines pose the question: Who am I? If I were to rely on a proverb this once, then perhaps everything would boil down to knowing whom I 'haunt.' [6]. Within *Nadja*, the author employs two primary others to reflect the self. One is the pivotal secondary character of the second section, *Nadja*. In the real world, *Nadja* is not particularly remarkable. What truly captivated Breton was the freedom symbolised by *Nadja's* irrational behaviour and the surrealist experience it imparted to him [9, 10]. Thus, their interaction became an act of Breton's self-examination. In the monologue concluding Part Two, the author describes his self-observation initiated through *Nadja*:

Who goes there? Is it you, *Nadja*? Is it true that the beyond, that everything beyond is here in this life? I can't hear you. Who goes there? Is it only me? Is it myself [6]?

In the first half of Part Three, *Nadja's* role is supplanted by another woman. Yet this time, the author goes further, refraining from describing this character in detail and addressing her solely as "you". The text consists solely of Breton's unilateral monologue. This further illustrates Breton's understanding that, at times, human interaction with others serves not to comprehend them, but to affirm oneself through action.

Within *The Soul Mountain*, two similar figures also appear. One is "her", whom "you" befriend whilst journeying towards *Soul Mountain*—a character sensitive and timid, entangled in love with "you" yet tormented by the uncertainty of that affection. The other is "you"—a soul sharing the same quest for *Soul Mountain* as "I". As to why these two characters were conceived thus, Chapter 52 of *The Soul Mountain* offers this explanation.

You know that I am just talking to myself to alleviate my loneliness. You know that this loneliness of mine is incurable, that no one can save me, and that I can only talk with myself as the partner of my conversation.

In this lengthy soliloquy you are the object of what I relate, a myself who listens intently to me – you are simply my shadow.

As I listen to myself and you, I let you create a she, because you are like me and also cannot bear the loneliness and have to find a partner for your conversation.

So, you talk with her, just like I talk with you.
[...]

I have established for myself this way of sequencing, which can be thought of as a sort of logic or karma. Ways of sequencing, logic or karma, have been established by people in this vast unordered world in order to affirm oneself, so why shouldn't I invent my own sequencing, logic or karma? I can then take refuge in this way of sequencing, logic or karma, and be secure in my own actions and have peace of mind. [7]

The figures of "you" and "she" are literary constructs that Gao Xingjian employs to explore aspects of his own self. Through the dialogue between these distinct personas, he is able to affirm his existence. The common thread linking both works lies in their observation that communication in life does not always serve to understand the external world. Rather, through interaction with others, one may examine one's own psychological state inwardly, thereby achieving self-reflection and self-affirmation.

5. Differences in work and their underlying cultural causes

The distinct cultural backgrounds of the two authors also fostered divergent creative mindsets. When Breton conceived *Nadja*, the Surrealist movement was at its zenith, surrounded by colleagues such as Soupault and Aragon. Within the broader European context, not just in France, diverse new artistic currents were emerging. This secure and inclusive environment significantly shaped Breton's creative philosophy.

The backdrop to Gao Xingjian's writing of *The Soul Mountain* in the 1980s was different. Firstly, despite profound societal upheaval, public thinking remained relatively conservative. This explains why Chapter 72 of *The Soul Mountain* features a character questioning Gao Xingjian's role [7].

Moreover, while China's economy experienced rapid growth following deregulation, the government's strict control the art and literature persisted. Applied to literary creation, this manifested as stringent restrictions on published content.

The differences between these two works provide an entry point for this essay to explore the disparity in the authors' creative mindsets.

In *Nadja*, Breton incorporated numerous illustrations complementary to the textual content. His aim was to replace the lengthy and imprecise descriptions inherent in realist techniques with the precise documentation afforded by photography, thereby conveying his experiences directly. Secondly, the narrative stage of *Nadja* is situated at the very heart of modernity: the bustling metropolis of Paris. Finally, although the *Nadja* depicted by the author is a character infused with his imagination, she ultimately exists within the real world. Breton's active embrace of modern technology and modern life indicates his fundamentally positive attitude towards contemporary society. The self, though subjective, remains a genuine entity that can be pursued and discovered within modern existence.

Gao Xingjian, however, diverges. His insertions comprise numerous folk legends and religious tales drawn from Buddhism, Taoism, and popular beliefs – narratives not directly tied to his personal experiences. These narratives stem not from Gao's personal encounters but from China's diverse regional cultural traditions. Simultaneously, the stage of *The Soul Mountain* is scattered across China's mountainous regions and county towns – the margins of modern life. Ultimately, the “she” and even the “you” in Gao's text are entirely fictional characters created by the author. The story's setting reveals Gao's own stronger rejection of modernity, a mindset of withdrawal. This stance does not stem from the value confusion brought by modern life, but rather from another facet of modernity: the excessive political intrusion into personal existence. Seeking bodily safety and mental peace, he chose the path of withdrawal. Simultaneously, his fragmentation of the self and juxtaposition of multiple traditions reveal his belief in the absence of a fixed self and the non-existence of truth [11].

For similar reasons, Breton issued a more politically charged statement in the Second Manifesto of Surrealism in 1929. Meanwhile, Gao Xingjian chose exile in France during the creation of *The Soul Mountain*. After acquiring French nationality, Gao recalled the history of the 1970s in his second novel, *The Bible of One Man*, written in France, making it even clearer that he had previously deliberately avoided discussing political issues.

6. Conclusion

Both *Nadja* and *The Soul Mountain* employ techniques ahead of their respective creative eras to achieve similar forms of self-expression. This paper examines how each transcends traditional writing methods and narrative objectives. Within the novels, the figure of a wanderer is shaped through fragmented events, while the author's own spiritual world is reflected through the presence of the Other within the works.

In contrast, the authors' distinct cultural contexts shaped divergent creative personalities. Breton flourished in 1920s France, characterized by cultural inclusivity, whereas Gao Xingjian operated within 1980s China during its reform era, where political pressures persisted. These contrasting writing environments forged unique authorial identities. Breton embraced the transformations of modern society, actively advocating for lifestyle reforms and literary innovation. In stark contrast, Gao Xingjian found the pressure exerted by the Chinese government through content censorship intolerable. Consequently, he continually drifted to the margins of Chinese society, ultimately choosing to leave mainland China to pursue his career in France.

Readers of modern literature sometimes adopt a preconceived “myth of modernity” perspective. This posits that all literature addressing modern life automatically positions itself in opposition to modernity itself. Yet we must recognize that the productive and social transformations brought by modernity do not automatically engender negative sentiments towards modernity itself in every author. What truly shapes an author's individual character and their assessment of modern society's

merits and demerits is the particularity of their own historical context. Understanding this prevents readers from falling into the trap of the grand narrative of the “myth of modernity” when interpreting all modern literature. Furthermore, one ought to respect and thoroughly comprehend each individual's particularity to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of a person. This approach replaces the reliance on grand narratives such as ethnicity, gender, or class that tend to flatten complex human experiences. The capacity for such nuanced individual understanding not only aids readers in interpreting modern literary works but also fosters the ability to empathize with others from diverse backgrounds within our globalized modern society.

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