Stirring the Sentient Dust: 
Marie-Rose Souci’s *The Grey Moth*

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“The grey layer of dust covering things has become their best part.”

— Walter Benjamin

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“Maybe meaning is in gazing till it hurts.”

— Santiago Vizcaíno

*The Grey Moth* (1968) is the only known novel by Marie-Rose Souci. While it is tempting to speculate that “Marie-Rose Souci”

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“Insects horrify me, not because of their alien monstrosity, but because I am wracked with guilt.

At the age of eight, I collected butterflies. Wonder turned to gnawing anxiety as their delicate corpses piled up in airless jars. I became aware of the human capacity for cruelty.

Years later, on a night in June, a pale green Luna moth landed just below my left collarbone. Its wings spanned the length of a large hand. The beast, quivering with exhaustion, was so fragile that any attempt to brush it away would crush it. The intimacy was excruciating. When it gathered the force to fly off, tears streamed down my face.
is a _nom de plume_—whose, we may never know.² Souci’s _The Grey Moth_ received mean-spirited reviews upon initial publication in France. Pierre Rocher, for example, wrote: “Box the old girl up with naphthalene. The rest of us are writers. Souci just gathers dust.”³ Souci’s style was repeatedly denigrated as an es-

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1 I learned that Luna moths do not possess a mechanism for eating. They cannot and do not consume. Their ravishing imago stage lasts for less than a week, time only to astonish with airy luminescence and to produce ravenous grubs that will gorge themselves on the tender leaves of sweet gum, walnut, and birch trees.

2 The writer’s name echoes “Rrose Sélavy” (itself the homophone of “Eros, c’est la vie.”). Rrose Sélavy was the female alter ego of artist Marcel Duchamp. He performed Rrose in drag and she often provided the signature for works attributed to him. Might Duchamp, modern art’s _éminence grise_, lurk somewhere in Souci’s environs? Once one has caught whiff of dada hijinks, associations proliferate. It would do _The Grey Moth_ and its author a disservice to suggest overt affiliation with Duchamp, however.

3 Nevertheless, with the mere addition of an acute accent over a feminizing second “é,” the name Marie becomes “la mariée” (“bride”). One work begs noting here: Duchamp’s diabolically enigmatic _La mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même_ (The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even) — also known as _The Large Glass_. The work, begun in 1915, was left “definitively unfinished” in 1923. It is accompanied by copious annotations gathered in _The Green Box_. _The Grey Moth_ was completed in 1968, the year that Duchamp died. Ultimately, this reader would argue that any Duchampian allusions are illusions, perhaps meant to put the reader off the trail of the Author (or to kill him off altogether). Souci seems to prefer to raise the wraith of Rrose.

2 Pierre Rocher, “La mite poussiéreuse,” _La Planète_, January 4, 1969, 27. In what is likely a paraphrase, Rocher misconstrued the closing line of John Cage’s verbal composition, “26 Statements Re Duchamp” from 1964: “History / The danger remains that he’ll get out of the valise we put him in. So long as he remains locked up — / The rest of them were artists. Duchamp collects dust.” Cage knew full well that his conceptual conspirator, Marcel Duchamp, was art’s Harry Houdini. (John Cage, “26 Statements Re Duchamp,” in _A Year from Monday — New Lectures and Writings_ [Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968], 70).
pecially egregious instance of purple prose. Alain Robbe-Grillet was “bored stiff” by the book. He claimed that its writer failed to obey the rigid strictures of the New French Novel. When the English translation appeared in the United States in 1973, Norman Raymond chided Souci for “doing little more than conjuring up the tedious specter of a desiccated spinster.”

This reader would propose an alternative term to counter the disparaging term “purple prose”: l’écriture mauve. The coinage is meant to call to mind, glancingly, l’écriture féminine, associated primarily with the French theorist Hélène Cixous. L’écriture féminine is defined, essentially, as writing that issues from specifically female bodies. While the “too-much” of Souci’s prose style was derided by critics, the term l’écriture mauve means to describe writing like hers that issues from eccentric bodies of many proclivities. The chromatic tinge of this term takes on specific and powerful significance in The Grey Moth.

The affective tone struck by Souci’s pale purpling of the yellowing page calls to mind director Lars von Trier’s poignant palette in the twelve-minute, slow motion prelude to the film Melancholia (2011). In both, the eerie hue establishes crepuscular calm tinged with dread and anticipating a cataclysmic end. At the close of von Trier’s opening sequence, the planet Melancholia collides with Earth, sending up great plumes of dust.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel [1963], trans. Richard Howard (Evanston: University of Illinois Press, 1989). The writing that Robbe-Grillet called for was to be characterized by multiple visual perspectives, attention to the matter and surface of things, phenomenological orientation, and strict avoidance of expressions of interior states of being. There is no small irony in his critique since one is hard pressed to find a novel more fitting of this definition than The Grey Moth.

The English translation was published by Nightwood Press, which seems to have only one other title in its catalog: Georgina Peachter’s Mary Stuart’s Ravishment Descending Time (New York: Nightwood Press, 1972). The ear catches something uncannily familiar in Peachter’s “mesmeric” prose: “Mary’s eyes syncopated spectrums; orange coppered yellowed pumpkin ambered lava-fountained blued primrosed, rheostated golds in bold-er flakes… Irises thinned; gilded eminences embraced night jewels. Onyx breathed. Stars fainted” (5). No translator is credited for The Grey Moth.

One might make the cautious assumption that Souci translated the book herself. It seems possible that Souci may have been up to another Duchampian trick. The name Man Ray crouches within that of Norman Raymond. Given that the only mention of Raymond’s review occurs in Banes and Barnes (see note 8) without citation, this reader would speculate that Souci penned the review herself (Deirdre Banes and Susan Barnes, “Dust and the Moth’s Do-
and the French critics preceding him, were countered with tepid defense of Souci by feminist scholars.\footnote{Deirdre Banes and Susan Barnes, “Dust and the Moth’s Domestic Rebellion,” The Mistress of the House [New York: The Feminist Press, 1974], 178–97, at 182.}

While the assumption that Souci’s single character—the moth-artist—is a woman has long held, nothing in the novel overtly supports this. Souci avoids most possessive pronouns and eschews gendered pronouns altogether. Such difficult verbal maneuvering is particularly challenging in the original French. The writer performs a feat as deft as the linguistic acrobatics of the writers involved with Oulipo (\textit{Ouvroir de littérature potentielle}). Rumor has it that Souci was associated with the mysterious \textit{L’hache au cou}, the clandestine group within Oulipo, said to be comprised mainly of its few female participants.\footnote{The possibly mythic \textit{L’hache au cou} is said to have been the short-lived “Sister Society” within the Oulipo group, formed by the American writer Alice Bee. \textit{L’hache au cou} is a homophone for \textit{L.H.O.O.Q.}, Duchamp’s salacious send up of the \textit{Mona Lisa}. \textit{L’hache au cou} translates “Axe to the neck.” (For more, see Clementine Finn, Flamboyant Conceits [San Francisco: A Press of One’s Own], 2006).} But Souci’s
wordplay functions not only as a generative conceit, it clears space for other forms of force and agency to emerge. Souci radically challenges the traditional Western subject, queerly dislodging the obstinate gender binary that accompanies it, as well as the presumption of human control — manifested most markedly by the I/eye — over other worldly ways of being and becoming.

Marie-Rose Souci and this astonishing work — like its eponymous, anonymous moth-artist — have almost fallen beneath notice. This essay’s primary aims are to acknowledge the writer’s extraordinary literary achievement, to draw scholarly attention to the book, and to posit its considerable significance in the present moment. Otherwise, this reader hopes only to extend a retelling of the odd tale of the moth before it vanishes.

_The Grey Moth_ is a thicket of idiosyncrasies that is dense with literary, mythological, and art-historical allusions. Thus far, the knotty strands of its associative web have yet to be disentangled.\(^1\) The novel — now over half a century old — anticipated many contemporary bookish and artistic concerns. The literary genre of the New Weird, for instance, certainly owes much to the writer. Souci’s themes, narrative strategies, peculiar style, and dark tone haunt a growing number of artists, filmmakers, and writers, whether they recognize “the Souci effect” at work or not.\(^1\) In time, readers and researchers might catch up with the relentlessly patient Souci.

Deserving of particular consideration is Souci’s linguistic virtuosity. Taking on a subject that could not be more parched, her writing is plush with precise description and glimmers with poetic effects. Souci persistently struggles, struggles extravagantly,

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10 For example, art historians have yet to consider the work of Souci’s artist in relation to kin laborers. The moth-artist’s work calls immediately to mind Vija Celmins’s trompe-l’oeil drawing of a dustscape of in _Irregular Desert_ (1972).

to defy the limited capacity of words to register the multifarious substances of life. The challenge to render sheer matter legible is met by the writer’s surfeit of prose.

*The Grey Moth* opens with the figure of an ordinary moth\(^{12}\) warming itself on a slate windowsill. Camouflaged, it almost fades into stone. A slight twitch catches the eye of an artist on the other side of a dusty glass windowpane:

The residual markings of “false” eyes looked back. Inconspicuous as they appeared, the displaced eyes had the power to deflect the perilous gaze of a predator. The moth’s tiny setae, feathery and finely tuned, quivered and reached, but reached toward what? A kind of knowing of the world in a manner and at a scale that was altogether alien. Its wings tentatively [...] incrementally spread open, offering the revelation of pale pigment, a pinkish-purple reveling in the reserved dominion of grey. Harkened, the artist became something other — became determined to seek and to see harder.\(^{13}\)

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\(^{12}\) Vera Nadeau (who shares her initials with the avid pursuer of blue butterflies Vladimir Nabokov) is a lepidopterist based in Toulouse, specializing in the genus *Hyles*. She has determined that the moth Souci describes, in nearly forty pages of exhaustive detail (24–63), is of the species *Hyles verspertilio*. “*Vespertilio*” refers to its batlike appearance. Most would not find the creature visually appealing. It measures between two-and-a-half-to-three inches from wingtip to wingtip and has a stout, hairy body. *Hyles verspertilio* is awkwardly proportioned: its wings seem too small to lend flight to such bulk. It is uniformly pigeon-grey when its wings lie flat. However — and of utmost significance to the novel — when its top wings unfold, a startling glimpse of pigmentation appears on the hind wings. The color is an embarrassed blush pink. Important, however, is the fact that Souci describes the shade as *pinkish purple*. This slight color distinction suggests to Nadeau that the author refers to a subspecies of *Hyles verspertilio* that is now extinct.

\(^{13}\) Souci, *The Grey Moth*, 4. Roland Barthes’s words on color never seemed more apt than when applied to the swoon caused by the tender gift at the crook of those untucked wings: “But what is color? A kind of bliss [...] It suffices that color appear, that it be there, that it be inscribed like a pinprick in the corner of an eye [...] it suffices that color lacerate something, that it pass in front of the eye, like an apparition — or a disappearance, for color is like a closing eyelid, a tiny fainting spell.” (Roland Barthes, “*Cy Twombly: Works*
This tiniest of wing tremors is of greatest consequence. The artist senses the sentience of other-than-human existence and is driven to move toward it, closer to the “soft, glimmering grains of pollen that nuance trembling wings […] [their thinness] as bewilderingly slim as the space between the recto and verso of a leaf of tracing paper.”

This extraordinary instant of encounter flows in slow motion through the honey-dense span of a life spent searching for significance. Once the artist’s eyes shift downward to the walnut tabletop burnished by the pressures of hand heel and pencil on page, the humble specks gathering there upon it fall into focus. From that point on, the artist patiently strives to draw dust — just dust in all its humility — with pencils of sharper and sharper points:

Friable threads of lead encased in slivers of silvered wood, honed with a glinting razor to superlative fineness. The pencil-pin tips met specifications suited to registering particulate distinctions.

Thus the field of vision narrows as attention intensifies — magnifying, granting magnitude, to that which is infinitesimal and utterly abject.

The moth-artist remains nameless and faceless, back turned to the reader, hunched over the page. What emerges from the

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14 This phrase bears close resemblance to Duchamp’s “as thin as the space between the front and the back side of a sheet of paper.” For such nearly inconceivable intervals, Duchamp used the neologism, “the inframince.” The term gestures toward liminal passages in which the slightest degrees of material exchange occur: “when the smoke of the tobacco smells also of the mouth from which it comes” or “the warmth of a seat which has just been left.” (Marcel Duchamp, Notes, arr. and trans. Paul Matisse [Boston: G.K. Hall, 1983]).

shade of solitude, from the no-place with dust-felted contours, is a hand. What can barely be beheld is that the hand is never still. Its innumerable gestures are not meant to stave off dust's inevitable encroachment, but only to bear witness to the tiniest degrees of difference, nearly not there, in the stuff of the world. As a scrutinizing, haptic gaze attends to the nubby dustscape, an illegible microscript comes to flannel countless sheets of fine-grained paper. The marks are signs destined, perhaps, for other modes of sensing. Particles of graphite shimmer at the threshold of human perception.

16 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. Thomas Clerc (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 51: “[T]he Neutral is the shimmer: that whose aspect, perhaps whose meaning, is subtly modified according to the angle of the subject’s gaze.” The seminar Barthes taught on the neuter blossomed from the following incident. Barthes, while purchasing ink, became curious about what color was contained by the bottle labeled “Neutral” might be. So eager to find out, he spilled it all over his desk, and discovered that it was violet-grey.

17 While vision generally dominates the hierarchical scale of sensory perception, Souci attends on nearly every page to the sense of touch (and as the novel progresses, to smell and sound, as well). While turning the pages of the book, readers come to feel the dust clogging skin pores. Fingertips become tender from fine abrasion.

18 The book design of *The Grey Moth* is extraordinary in that it redoubles the shimmering effect. Whenever the word “dust” appears, it is printed in dark grey ink, just a degree or two lighter than standard black printer’s ink. Typographically, a slim margin of extra space has been left between the word “moth” and the words preceding and following it. In each instance, the page quivers; the gaze trembles. The latter is only one small example, among others, of the care Souci pays not only to words, but also to the meaningful silences between them.

This flickering of altered intervals on the page is nearly as subtle as that of film projected at twenty-four frames per second. The blank spaces between frames are nearly perceptible, extending into the realm Walter Benjamin described as “the optical unconscious,” the site of images that the brain thinks it does not see (Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art at the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, trans. Edmund Jephcott et al. [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008], 37).
Grey-scale gradations range from the most luminous white toward the most devouring black. And yet the grisaille is haunted by prismatic apparitions:

In this situation of drastically reduced sensory stimulation, it seemed to occur to the moth-artist, perhaps erroneously, that the enveloping dust was comprised in large measure of wing-loosed scales. This resulted in scintillating variegations of color. What seemed to a careless eye to be duly and dully grey, appeared to the artist as possessing infinite chromatic modulation, resplendent with fugitive flashes of violet and far rarer mercurial glints.

The narrative action of the novel, of a perversely protracted sort, can be summed up in two words: “becoming dust.” The verb here functions transitively and intransitively, doubly meaningful: “the moth-artist becomes dust” and “the dust merely becomes.” After the initial encounter with the moth, whatever

19 “Whether all grow black, or all grow bright, or all remain grey, it is grey we need, to begin with, because of what it is, and of what it can do, made of bright and black, able to shed the former, or the latter, and be the latter or the former alone” (Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable [1953], in Three Novels: Malone, Malone Dies, The Unnamable [New York: Grove Press, 2009], 295).

20 Souci, The Grey Moth, 94–95. The violet-ing of grey, occurring in the novel’s most moving passages, is so effective because the reader has, under Souci’s spell, come to inhabit this moth-grey realm. It is perhaps worth mentioning that moth vision greatly extends far beyond human vision into the ultraviolet range.

21 The impact of this encounter, accompanied by heightened sensitivity, might have been influenced by Virginia Woolf’s essay “The Death of the Moth.” Woolf extends compassion at its smallest scale as she witnesses the death throes of a moth and acknowledges its mortality (and her own). Consider the following passage: “Also, when there was nobody to care or to know, this gigantic effort on the part of an insignificant little moth, against a power of such magnitude, to retain what no one else valued or desired to keep, moved one strangely. Again, somehow, one saw life, a pure bead.” (Virginia Woolf, “The Death of the Moth,” in The Death of the Moth and Other Essays [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974], 6).

A similar instinct compelled filmmaker Stan Brakhage to make his cameraless, labor intensive three-minute film Mothlight (1963): “Over the
narrative action unfolds, unfolds at a table in the confines of a hushed room. At one point the author questions urgently: “What is the thrum of dust? Dry scratching at an itch? The su-rurrations of belabored breath? Insect wing beats? The seething of mites? Silence.” In this realm, the sound-dampening dust is the only marker of time — or rather, it serves not to measure but to thicken time.

Well into the narrative, an unexpected occurrence — quite momentous in this context — indicates that other spaces exist outside the room: “an errant, redolent scent — agitated molecules in porous air — insinuates itself.” The odor calls for a differently adapted means of perception. Drawing fails it.

lightbulbs there’s all these dead moth wings, and I hate that. Such a sadness; there must surely be something to do with that. I tenderly picked them out and start pasting them onto a strip of film, to try to give them life again, to animate them again, to try to put them into some sort of life through the motion picture machine.” (Stan Brakhage in a 2002 interview with Bruce Kawin, for By Brakhage: An Anthology, Volumes 1 and 2, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2003).


This reader also imagines, perhaps too romantically, the moth-artist’s room as a vision of intensified quietude much like the exquisite, nearly monochromatic painting Dustmotes Dancing in the Sunbeams (1900), by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi. The painter perfected the backscatter effect by which dust particles floating midair become visible and grant substance to light. Note also that the closed door depicted in Dustmotes Dancing lacks a knob.


24 The aroma Souci might have had in mind could have been that of Un Air Embaumé. The perfume — with a bouquet of ambergris, heliotrope, bergamot, and almond — was produced by Rigaud and sold between 1915 and 1968. It was initially packaged in a coffin-shaped box. A flacon of Un Air Embaumé was used by Duchamp for his Belle Haleine, Eau de Violette in 1921. The label featured Rrose Sélavy in a photograph taken by Man Ray. (For more see Bonnie Jean Garner, “Duchamp Bottles Belle Greene: Just Desserts for His Canning,” tout-fait: The Marcel Duchamp Studies Online Journal 1, no. 2 [May 2000], http://www.toutfait.com/issues/issue_2/News/garner.html.)
The moth-artist, for the first time, turns away from the work on the table. The frame of vision expands dramatically to register that the room has become a grey garden of shambolic grace. Specks have succumbed to electrostatic tugs. Impossibly delicate filaments have formed dust-spun webs, shivering with each faint gust of breath. Another force reveals its slow, incessant labor. Something apart from human endeavor is coming into play.

The lengthy, deceptively predictable denouement of *The Grey Moth* involves the attenuated process by which the artist slowly goes “dustblind,” then crumbles like a doddering entomologist’s specimen in a reliquary napped with grey velvet.25 As though in mourning, moths amass.

Countless ghastly woolen bodies scramble and softly thud their plump bellies against the window, leaving smudged blooms of pollen as offerings. Frenzied wings flutter in wild grief, glinting light and casting off swarms of untamed gazes.26

Then, in an instant, the moths disperse. Time becomes inconceivably slow. “The window panes thicken at bottom. In response to gravity’s tug, glass reveals its liquid nature. But reveals it to whom?”27

Like the moth-artist, Souci cloaks the page with attention. In passages as uncompromisingly perceptive as those drawn on the moth-frayed tatters of paper piled up and abandoned on the

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25 If one asks the enigmatic David Wilson, Director of the Museum of Jurassic Technology in Los Angeles, about museum conservation, he might recount a favorite incident (that might or might not have occurred). After the San Fernando earthquake in 1971, the museum’s display of extinct nineteenth-century French moths remained nearly intact. But one moth was reduced to a little pile of opalescent dust around an obsolete pin, “More beautiful than the others,” he might say, fiddling with his accordion. “Beautiful, just beautiful.”


27 Ibid., 289.
table, Souci feels her way through the dark to the moment when the gaze loosens its grip:

The artist faithfully recorded, but did not remember, will not be remembered. The moth-artist just barely existed at the pale of perception. It is as though the grey moth might never have alit on the warm sill, or as though the dust might never have settled, might never have been set upon by the most generous gaze. Each fleeting event occurred only as the tiniest particular teeming among countless others.28

At this moment, something else takes (its) place — with the turn of what might be described as “particulate gazes,” issuing from the entropic stuff of dust.29

What begins to stir upon the moth-artist’s death is something other than human. The most miniscule forces — of dust, of pollen, of spores, of mites — quicken to stave off the nullity of night. Draft-stirred motes are backlit by “faint vespertine incandescence,” gaining in intensity.30 The dust scatters the silver and violet light31 as it surges through widening fissures in the brittle

28 Ibid., 302.
29 Souci anticipates the power that Reza Negarestani would attribute to dust in his singular Cyclonopedia: “Each particle of dust carries with it a unique vision of matter, movement, collectivity, interaction, affect, differentiation, composition and infinite darkness. […] There is no line of narration more concrete than a stream of dust particles” (Reza Negarestani, Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials [Melbourne: re.press, 2008], 43).
31 The long-awaited unbridling of color has an overwhelming effect after the unrelenting immersion in grey. While color has appeared as foreshadowing — in the glimpse at the hind wings of the Hyles vespertilio, in the violeting of dust by wing scales — such glimpses have served only to make the reader’s yearning for color stronger. When chromo-luminescence breaks through, it is an exquisite gift to the patient reader, offering nothing short of the bliss Barthes describes (see note 13). By no other means than the postposterously thick felting of language could Souci have produced a reader so precisely calibrated to be ravished by color and light. The effect is reminiscent of the scene in director Andrei Tarkovsky’s film Stalker (1979) when a
Ultimately, the gloom of the artist’s moth-grey micro-
cosm—at once enchanted and horrific—twins the precari-
ous twilit world outside, as it ceaselessly, splendorously, grinds
down. Yet becomes, never still.33

In 1926, Duchamp’s *The Large Glass* cracked, too.

The novel’s ending is neither apocalyptic nor redemptive. Like the moth-
artist that Souci conjures, her work hovers wraithlike at a burgeoning
threshold.
Bibliography


