

# Romaine Brooks and the Drawing of Self

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When the American expatriate Romaine Brooks was a young child, her mother gave her to the laundry woman. Brooks recounts her suffering in this excerpt from her unpublished autobiography *No Pleasant Memories*:

It has always been my fate to be punished for fraternizing with any particular group of human beings. . . . At that particular moment of which I am now writing the tenebrous children suddenly rose against me. It was not merely dislike but actually hate that agitated them. They would point their dirty little fingers at me and call me "Saucer-eyes" and other names for worse.<sup>1</sup>

Although Brooks was eventually rescued from this situation, the anger and disgust that she felt at being abandoned in the slums of New York is only one example of how her mother abused her. Brooks expresses similar emotions of resentment throughout her memoirs. With each new abuse she reasserts her belief that these painful events caused her to become a very private person. Her vivid descriptions of these episodes, however, move them completely into a public space. It is this contradiction that probably kept the autobiography from being published, but at the same time makes it stunningly compelling. In contrast to the polished portrait paintings that Brooks is most famous for, the autobiography remains unresolved, and therefore more open. Through examining this unfinished project we can reexamine and reposition Brooks as a modern artist creating new conceptions of gender and self.

For the first fifty-six years of her life, Romaine Brooks was renowned for painting conventional portraits of high society characters in a subdued palette of grays. Her paintings were exhibited in Rome, Paris and New York, and between 1910 and 1939 her works were exhibited in more than fourteen shows. Her most famous painting is her 1923 *Self-Portrait* (Figure 1). In 1970, the National Museum of American Art mounted a retrospective exhibit of Brooks' paintings and drawings. The catalogue accompanying the exhibit, like almost all of the publications concerning Romaine Brooks, prominently displayed the 1923 *Self-Portrait* on the cover. Her drawings, including such works as *Emprisonée* of 1930 (Figure 2) are gathered in a diminutive format at the back.

The implication is that Brooks' painting, and the 1923 *Self-Portrait* more than any others, demonstrates her mastery of the interior experience, and is the consummate revelation of her identity. The painting lends itself to an overall impression of a strong cross-dressing lesbian artist. The predominant scholarship on Brooks supports this interpretation. Despite this reading, Brooks stands in her rumpled men's clothing in front of a derelict landscape with her hat pulled low over her eyes. The loose brushstroke of the painting emphasizes the disorderliness of both her clothes and the background. In its subtle desolation this autobiographical portrait hides more than it reveals. Its style is emblematic of Brooks' entire painting career. She was wholly unresponsive to the artistic upheavals of early twentieth century modernism until 1930. She then made an abrupt and unexplained switch to drawings such as this one (Figure 2) and writing as her primary modes of expression. This full circle turn into contemporary modernist practices like automatic drawing is exemplified in the pages of *No Pleasant Memories*. From 1930 on it is apparent that Brooks turned to drawing, not painting when she wanted to make a powerful and personal statement of self.

Despite the evidence of *No Pleasant Memories*, the predominant understanding of Brooks' identity has been situated by modern scholars in her personal relationships, not in her autobiography and its drawings. Beginning in 1915, Brooks was involved with Natalie Barney for almost fifty years. Barney, an American poet living in Paris, was known for her brief but intense relationships with many different women. Despite Barney's promiscuity, she and Brooks remained close most of their lives, often living in Paris together. Barney was noted for proudly displaying her lesbian lifestyle through socially important parties and conspicuously riding her horse around Paris like a man. Her salon at 54 rue Jacob was open to both sexes, but commonly functioned as a support group for the lesbian artistic community. Although Barney's prominent activities and self-advertisements of her life-style have become the usual filter through which Brooks' concerns and ideologies are read, Brooks actually had little patience with the social fumbblings of Barney's salon, and sought solitude whenever possible. Barney's libidinous lifestyle centered around the hyper-feminine female. Brooks, who wore clothing in the male style, was far removed from the idealized lesbianism

<sup>1</sup> Romaine Brooks, *No Pleasant Memories*. Unpublished, National Collection of Fine Arts. 5134. 18.

Barney characterized by her actions and poetry. Barney not only detested any behavior that might support the theories of sexuality put forth by such sexologists as Krafft-Ebbing and Havelock Ellis, but also spoke against any action or dress that implied “homosexual women were really men trapped in women’s bodies.”<sup>2</sup> She continually sought to identify new ways for lesbians to see themselves within a hostile society. Brooks, however, never made any overt attempts to classify herself as being individually lesbian, and her retiring nature and manish dress clashed directly with Barney’s agenda. Barney’s attitudes on lesbianism may reflect a general filter for the times, but they don’t account for Brooks’ sense of self. The main interpretation of Brooks’ portrait of 1923 relies on the assumption that Brooks and Barney used the same modes to express sexuality. However, if we acknowledge that Barney and Brooks did not have a common idea of lesbianism, then we must look elsewhere from the 1923 *Self-Portrait* to find how Brooks saw herself. In *No Pleasant Memories* Brooks uses text and image to closely explore not only her abusive childhood, but her difficulties in navigating the public life of an adult lesbian artist. The combination of these two elements creates a far more potent and original picture of how she saw gender, sex and self than either societal constructions or her famous painting.

Brooks had a powerful history of using drawing as an illustratory tool in her life. In her autobiography, she tells us that from the first time she picked up a pencil, she drew on every surface she could find, and even when forbidden to draw, continued to do so in private.<sup>3</sup> Few of Brooks’ childhood sketches remain, but one in particular has received the most attention. *La Femme et L’Enfant* is the drawing from Brooks’ childhood that scholars choose most often when discussing how her drawings reflect her life. At the age of fifteen Romaine’s conception of her relationship with her mother is obviously suffocating, and to some extent mutually destructive. The child’s feet are the mother’s arms, and though the child is looking back, the mother has turned her head down and away. The mother’s dress ends in a jagged line that shows much force but little control. We have a very clear picture of how Romaine and her mother interacted in her teenage years—they are interminably connected, and yet Romaine wishes to free herself. Her critics see the same theme manifested in the 1923 *Self-Portrait*, this time taking the form of a lesbian freeing herself from the strictures of society. However, in the drawings Romaine Brooks meant to accompany her autobiography, we find a mysterious disclosure that will ultimately prove to be a more profound expression of her identity.

*Emprisonée*, a drawing made for the autobiography in 1930, reflects the same theme of capture in *La Femme et L’Enfant*, but is an ultimately more sophisticated image of Brooks’ adult self. The figures in *Emprisonée* are created and confined by what Brooks called the “inevitable encircling

line.”<sup>4</sup> In the drawing we see two demons wrestling with an unwilling figure of indeterminate sex. One fire-haired monster pulls at it from behind, another grabs at its shoulders. Its torso, as if elongated by the struggle, stretches as long as its legs. The left foot of the figure arches to brace itself against an outcropping, the same one the demon behind uses for leverage. The figure’s right foot curves around the shoulder of a third fire-haired demon, who slouches disconsolately on the ground, his head towards the ground, and his eyebrow expressing bewilderment. Brooks has contained the entire scene within an outline made up of the backs of the demons and the outcropping of ground. Only at its right hand and foot does the figure join the exterior line. Otherwise, it is trapped in the linear inner space of the demonic struggle, its one visible eye turned outward in consternation. That same continuous line, however, stresses the figure’s involvement in the action, lending ambiguity to the figure’s movement. Although critics might want to call the demons her mother, the new body type that Brooks created for her drawings highlights an androgyny that moves beyond this interpretation. Only the hint of a breast allows us to read the central character as Brooks, but the rest of her body is decidedly androgynous. The elongated torso and arms of the main figure further distance it from a feminine identity. The white page also acts as a separator, removing the figure from the social and sexual positionings of the Salon. In this isolation she can remain an exile consumed in her own personal drama. The continuous line connects the demons and the figure—they can all be read as Brooks. Languid and relaxed, the figures are involved not in the tension of a struggle, as the title implies, but in the relaxation of acceptance.

Like many of Brooks’ drawings, *Emprisonée* had two other titles, *Caught* and *En Prison*. They are not significant so much for their number, as for their contrast in gender and meaning. While *Emprisonée* is the feminine form of the verb, *En Prison* is gender neutral. The last title, *Caught* is also gender neutral, as well as having a different meaning from its French counterparts. These contrasts highlight the ambiguity with which Brooks titled her drawings. In many cases, these titles are written in Brooks’ hand on the backs of the drawings. By joining the titles so concretely with the image, Brooks creates a further contrast that colors how we attempt to read this image. We are left wondering not only which title best applies, but if any of them actually identify what is truly happening in the drawing. Despite this incongruity, they clearly serve Brooks’ intense need to express herself, and their presence in the text of the autobiography only strengthens their power.

Of the drawings made in 1930, Brooks said they “should be read. They evolve from the subconscious. Without premeditation, they aspire to a maximum of expression in a minimum of means. Whether inspired by laughter, philosophy, sadness

<sup>2</sup> Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1986) 11.

<sup>3</sup> Benstock 17.

<sup>4</sup> Romaine Brooks, *Catalogue of an Exhibition of Original Drawings by Romaine Brooks* (The Arts Club of Chicago, January 11-31, 1935) 1.

or death these introspective patterns are each imprisoned with the inevitable encircling line. But the surety of outline and apparent freedom from technique are the unconscious evolution from a more material and direct form of art.”<sup>5</sup> Given this firm assertion by the artist, we could assume that the directness of the line itself will tell us the subject matter, emotion, and intent of the drawing simply by looking at it. However, the scholarship on women, lesbianism and Brooks that has developed since the drawing was made influences our interpretation. Using our modern filter, *Emprisonée* becomes an image of Brooks fighting against the demons of a heterosexual culture that continually seek to drag her back to their dominion. However, the way in which Brooks claimed to be drawing was not necessarily as freely expressive as she would have us believe. Arising from the unconscious, these drawings are private, and yet their titles and presence in the text of the autobiography makes them confessional. It is this manipulation of image and text that Brooks uses to confuse and mislead our interpretive gaze.

Brooks’ ambivalent verbal and visual messages leave us with few options for interpretation. One way of looking at these drawings is as a form of therapy. They were meant to be read in the context of the autobiography, and as such reflect her need to examine her inner self. When trying to understand what Brooks was doing in her drawings, one must acknowledge that in the intellectual world of Paris in 1930, Brooks had any number of ideas to draw from. Contemporary theories of psychiatry and Surrealism are the most effective. They both call on the same quality of ‘unpremeditated’ expressiveness that Brooks claims, and it is through using these two methods of action analysis that we can regain the tools to interpret Brooks’ drawing.

In 1922 Hans Prinzhorn, an Austrian doctor, published *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill*. The goal of his experiments was to understand the configurations of internal reality that drive the expression of the artist. The method Prinzhorn used to approach the ‘configuration’ of each artwork hinged on basic techniques of art historical analysis. In one part of his study, he gave biographical information for each patient, described interviews, cited original examinations of the patient, and did in-depth analyses of the compositional and stylistic aspects of the art objects. These categories almost directly parallel those that an art historian would follow to approach the analysis of an object from a cultural and historical context. Prinzhorn combined the results of his psychiatric/art historical analysis with his psychological body of knowledge to arrive at a description of the interior configuration of the reality of each patient he studied.

He found that with schizophrenic patients, meaning is internally defined by the object that the patient happened to draw. After the image has been completed, it is then his job to

examine the image and recognize the meaning. Because he is in control of defining the final result, the schizophrenic’s drawing can be as free, unmediated, *unpremeditated* as he wishes and the result will naturally hold meaning for him. In those instances where the schizophrenic assigns a title, Prinzhorn asserts that the words present a simplistic definition of an image purposely meant to conceal and hold private any interior meaning that the artist assigns to the image.<sup>6</sup>

Moving deeper into the objective meaning of the images by the schizophrenic, we learn that these artists assign no inherent societal value to what their drawings represent, but rather the drawings “serve as bearers and representatives for the psychic movements of the artists.”<sup>7</sup> We can discern the internal reality constructions of the patients through these ‘psychic movements.’ When the schizophrenic assigns a title the words present a simple definition of an image, meant to conceal and hold private the much more complex meaning for the artist.

If we extrapolate the placeholders of meaning for the schizophrenic patient, we see that the drawing itself is a symbol of his/her interior reality, and therefore its meaning is within itself. *Emprisonée* would seem to contradict this construction, especially considering Brooks’ reference to the automatic and unpremeditated. She claimed that all of her drawings were uncontrolled in their creation, but if that is the case, why did she give titles for each? Under this model, the ambiguity of the three titles for *Emprisonée* could be seen as an attempt to conceal meaning. Brooks may have fully intended her drawings to be free-association images, but the apparent existence of double meanings in both the image and text indicate something wholly different. It seems as if, on seeing the completed drawings, Brooks felt the need to conceal their objective meaning, and did so through her multiple titles for each piece.

Automatic drawing is at the heart of both Prinzhorn’s study and Surrealism, a major artistic movement that no doubt influenced Brooks. In the context of *No Pleasant Memories*, Brooks’ claim that she drew from the unconscious emulates the Surrealist act of self-therapy. Andre Breton claimed that “Surrealism expresses what goes on in the mind irrespective of any control exercised by reason or by aesthetic and moral preoccupations.”<sup>8</sup> If we combine Prinzhorn’s medical approach with Surrealism, we see that when Brooks releases reason her art becomes automated, unmediated, and she allows deeply-seated, private images to manifest themselves on the page. In some cases, these drawings were too revealing, exposing emotions that Brooks wished to keep private. When this happened, she used titles to redirect our interpretation, leading us to a pre-packaged, premeditated answer.

*Emprisonée*’s titles frame the drawing as a struggle against her childhood demons. It can also be read as Brooks’ desire to

<sup>5</sup> Brooks 1.

<sup>6</sup> Hans Prinzhorn, *The Artistry of the Mentally Ill* (Berlin: Singer-Verlag, 1975) 12.

<sup>7</sup> Prinzhorn 236.

<sup>8</sup> Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985) 25.



escape masculinized definitions of her gender. These readings are too simple. The contrasting genders and definitions of the three titles indicate that Brooks felt the need to mediate her 'unpremeditated' drawing, firmly establishing her control of our interpretation. Identifying this process does not help us understand how Brooks saw herself, however. We must combine how she controlled meaning in her drawings with how she controlled meaning in her life to approach a resolution. In *No Pleasant Memories*, she claims to have overcome her childhood with the same tone of resentment she used to describe those events. As a result, her childhood anguish is never resolved. The reader is left to decide which assertion is the more compelling. But because of the contrast between the horrible nature of her childhood, and her adult complacency, probably neither is the truth, but both are equally constructions. Her description of her childhood and her assertion that she has grown beyond it are both facades for a resolution that Brooks failed to achieve. In this sense, *No Pleasant Memories* acts as an elaborated title for the illustration of Brooks' life itself.

Where then, do we find Brooks' identity? In her participation in the lesbian expatriate world of early twentieth century Paris? Or in her adherence to an out-of-style portraiture in her paintings? Her ties to Surrealism through Man Ray, perhaps? All of these questions lead us to the modernism of Brooks' work. Brooks herself stated that her drawings were *unpremeditated*, spontaneous expressions of emotion. Yet at the same time she used multiple titles to control meaning. Her desire to control our interpretation is the key to both her identity and her modernism. In this manipulation, Brooks denied gender as a social construction and released it from being a biological indicator of difference. As woman she was subject to a multitude of exterior constructions that applied a specific gender permanently to her sex. Any attempt Brooks made to create an original conception of her identity was barred by preconceived explications of her gender. Unlike her male contemporaries, Brooks had only two options for identifying her sexuality—the cross-dresser or the hyper-feminine female. In *Emprisonée*, we can see that in turning to an abstract space to explore her gender, she was released from societal stereotypes and could create an androgynous body type. That new type removed her from all placeholders of society. With the freedom that such an action allowed, Brooks could examine the lesbian nature of her inner self. The result of her investigation acknowledges the innate interiority of her gendered being, and its separateness from all exterior conceptions of sexuality. In releasing gender from sex in her drawings, Brooks invented a compelling new language that was far in advance of her time. Ironically, because she never published her autobiography, what were meant to be public confessions remained private. And in their unresolved state, they allow us to witness the creative expression of a powerfully original, modern artist.

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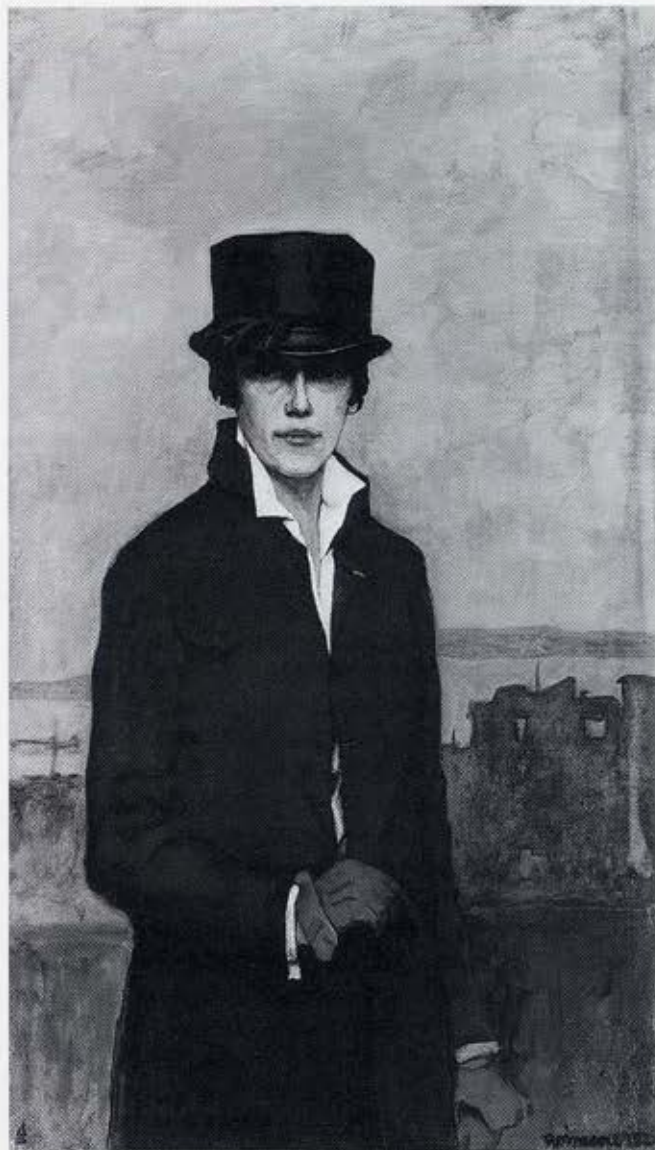


Figure 1. Romaine Brooks, *Self-Portrait*, 1923, oil on canvas, 17.5 x 68.3 cm, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of the Artist.



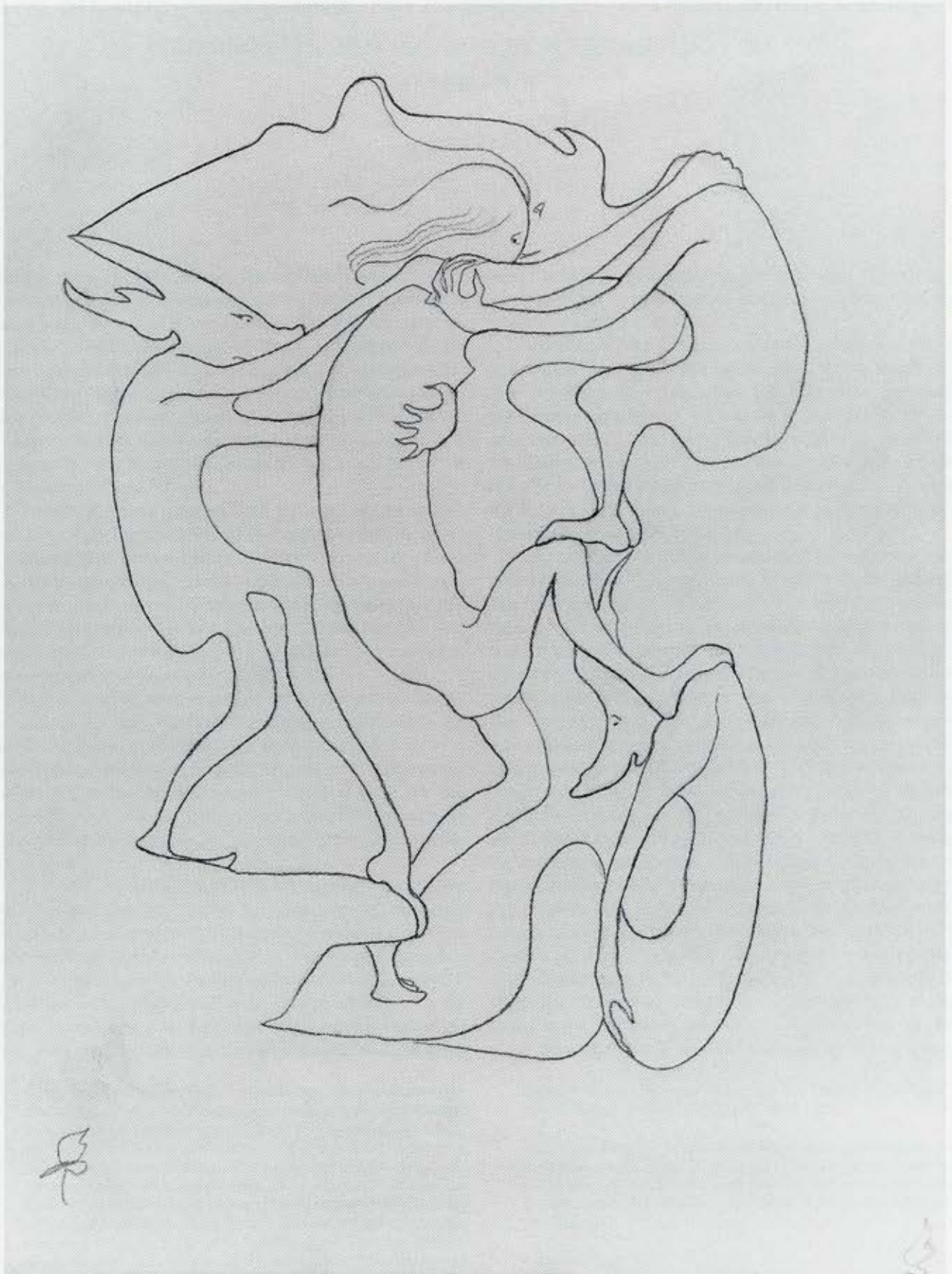


Figure 2. Romaine Brooks, *Emprisonnée / En Prison / Caught*, 1930, ink on paper, 27.9 x 21.6 cm, National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Gift of the Artist.