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I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Maitland Sierra Dunwoody entitled "Les auteures surréalistes : French and Francophone Women Surrealist Writers -- Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose and Gisèle Prassinos." I have examined the final electronic copy of this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, with a major in French.

John Romeiser, Major Professor

We have read this thesis and recommend its acceptance:

Benjamin Lee, Chris Holmlund

Accepted for the Council:
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Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

Les auteures surréalistes : French and Francophone Women Surrealist Writers -- Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose and Gisèle Prassinos

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Maitland Sierra Dunwoody
May 2017

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ABSTRACT

The notion of the "author" and the purpose of its existence have been the subject of many contemporary debates, with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault as key. For Barthes, language defines a literary work and the author is relegated to a minor place. And he believes that certain movements, surrealism as an example, effectively aided in the "death" of the author. Though that may sometimes be the case, within the movement of surrealism the author and their language are of almost equal importance – which differs entirely from Barthes' view considering his notions on the surrealist movement and authorship. In addressing the validity of Barthes' and Foucault's views regarding the author, this work reveals the importance of the author for marginalized groups, specifically women surrealists. In looking at how researchers and critics regarded the works of Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose and Gisèle Prassinos, this work shows the importance of authorship for surrealist women. Additionally, their relationships with their male counterparts and each other are explored. Together, they show how the knowledge of their authorial presence furthers the understanding of their work and how the very nature of the surrealist movement hindered their recognition. Authorship creates a space for these women's voices to be heard. This work posits that the author cannot be dead, as it enables women surrealists to assert their agency over their works – separate from their male counterparts who dominated the surrealist movement.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTIONS, AUTHORSHIP AND SURREALISM

The Existence and Importance of the "Author"

The author. Present. Absent. Restricted. Unrestricted. Omniscient. Unknown. The author is a conception that can take on many different forms, or none. The author is also considered synonymous with the term "writer" (although Michel Foucault would disagree). A writer is sometimes only considered an "author" after having a larger *oeuvre*. Within the field of literature, knowing who the author or writer is, understanding the author of a work, regardless of genre, is considered an important aspect of any study. It is considered so because literature is "composed of [the contributions of many] individuals."[1] Literature is not one homogenized grouping or controlled by a hive-mind. The "author" is a tool through which understanding, as well as a variety of interpretations, can be cultivated with regard to an individual work or the *oeuvre*. As described by Staiger, the "author" can be approached in different ways – authorship as origin, as personality, as sociology of production, as signature, as reading strategy, etc. Yet, regardless of the approach, "authorship does matter."[2] And as much as any author may wish this not be true, a part of their identity is inevitably sewn into the words of their writing, particularly within works of fiction, and in turn their identity is found by the reader. Additionally, the identity of an author can show itself within works with subjects that have emotional ties.

Examples of such subjects are: *l'être, la mort, l'amour, l'angoisse, le désir, la souffrance, le plaisir*. They all are subjects that surrealists examined in their works. Such subjects evoke without fail a subconscious response from those writing about them. The author would and will be found within a work that approaches one of those subjects as they all evoke emotional responses deep within one's psyche. The relationships authors forge with those around them regarding said subjects influence their writing as well.

The author acts not only as an aid to interpretation and understanding but as a mark of ownership for a literary work or an *oeuvre*. The term "author" itself is even derived from terms relating to authority. Marie-Dominique Chenu explains

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[1] Alexander Nehamas. "What an Author Is." *The Journal of Philosophy*. 83, no. 11 (November 1986), 685.

[2] Janet Staiger, and David A. Gerstner. "Authorship Approaches." In *Authorship and Film*, 28-57. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2002), 28.

the etymology of the word "author" in relation to the words *auctor, actor, autor*. He notes that there is a direct relationship with *auctor* and *authenticus*. He maintains that the *l'auctor* is "celui qui a une autorité sur laquelle on peut faire fond pour l'examen et la solution d'une question, en grammaire, en droit, en philosophie, en théologie."[3] The author is the authority whom we reference when dealing with their work, because, despite views to the contrary, the work is in fact linked to the author and not completely autonomous.

The power of the "author" with its inherent authority gives the writer their own distinct voice through their writing. This voice supports the importance of the role of the author and thus aids one in the interpretation of their works. One almost always can recognize an author by a distinct, individual style; for example, one would not confuse the works of Flaubert with those of Proust. Recognizing the author creates a literary space that is extremely important for all groups but particularly for marginalized groups of writers: women, LGBTQ+, people of color, etc. It is a tool that gives credit to those who would not have had a voice otherwise, as well as it "break[s] down high/low culture distinctions."[4]

Therefore, the author is not only important in helping us understand a literary work but it acts as means to shine the light on those marginalized individuals who were pushed to the side during their respective literary movements (both at the time of the inception of the movements and after). Thus, the author is particularly important to women authors within the male dominated surrealist movement.

The Surrealist Author Lives

The notion of the "author" and the purpose of its existence have been subject of many contemporary debates, with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault as key. Barthes considered the purpose of the author first in his essay *La mort de l'auteur* in 1968 with Foucault following in 1969 with *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* For Barthes, language defines a literary work and the author is relegated to a minor place: "…it is the language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality…to reach that point where only language acts,

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[3] Marie-Dominique Chenu. "Auctor, Actor, Autor." Union Académique Internationale, Bruxelles, Belgique. (1927), 83.
[4] Staiger, and Gerstner. "Authorship Approaches." In *Authorship and Film*, 39.

'performs', and not 'me.'"[5] If you impose an author on a work you impose on it a limit.

Though that may sometimes be the case, within the movement of surrealism the author and their language are of almost equal importance – which differs entirely from Barthes' view considering his notions on the surrealist movement and authorship. Barthes proposes that the surrealist movement effectively "contributed to the desacralization of the image of the Author," through "entrusting the hand" with the writer's task (automatic writing) and by accepting the potential for collaborative works.[6] Surrealist poetry and writing, although founded on the rejection of the standard practices of writing, ironically rely heavily on the concept that is "author." Though Barthes finds authorship no longer relevant, its importance, specifically within surrealism, exists nonetheless. It is true that the meaning of surrealist works, whether literary or artistic, depends upon the interpretation of the reader/spectator/viewer. However, the authors themselves, as ironically defined by Foucault, are designations that assist the reader with categorization. This assistance allows various interpretations of what has been read to then be created. These interpretations, moreover, are the result of studied readings of the *oeuvres* of the author and *the author*. For the interpretation of surrealist literature and art, many levels of knowledge are needed, as prose and poetry are not simply based on a single idea but instead a multitude of ideas, some of which are derived from the unconscious – ideas that break free from the shackles of reality. As in the case of automatic writing, there is no preconceived idea or notion about what the result should be; the writer is "entrusting the hand" to produce some form of written expression (much like a stream of consciousness although that normally has a starting idea). The same can be said for surrealist collaborative writings. And despite Barthes' claims that surrealism was the "desacralization of the image of the Author," accepting the notion of an author is required for a complete and meaningful analysis of their works.

Unlike Barthes who believes the "author" is truly dead, regarding the Author in such a way as discussed previously goes both with and against the views of Foucault. In his essay/interview *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur?* he notes four functions of an author:

I. Le nom d'auteur : impossibilité de le traiter comme une description définie ; mais impossibilité également de le traiter comme un nom propre ordinaire

[5] Roland Barthes. English Translation: "La mort de l'auteur." *Manteia*, no. 5 (1968): 98.

[6] Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," 98.

II. Le rapport d'appropriation : l'auteur n'est exactement ni le propriétaire ni le responsable de ses textes ; il n'en est ni le producteur ni l'inventeur…

III. Le rapport d'attribution : l'auteur est sans doute celui auquel on peut attribuer ce qui a été dit ou écrit. Mais l'attribution – même lorsqu'il s'agit d'un auteur connu – est le résultat d'opérations critiques complexes et rarement justifiés. Les incertitudes de l'*opus*.

IV. La position de l'auteur : position de l'auteur dans le livre (usage des embrayeurs ; fonctions de préfaces ; simulacres du scripteur, du récitant…) Position de l'auteur dans les différents types de discours (…discours philosophique, par exemple). Position de l'auteur dans un champ discursif…[7]

Overall these functions refer to the practical uses of the author and the drawbacks of considering an author according to these functions, as Foucault points out in discussing the problematics regarding authorial presence. Foucault does not deny that the author is present in a work; marks and traces of the author are always found and one cannot ignore that fact. However, Foucault posits that the personification and personalization of an author (i.e., giving a work an "owner") gets in the way of the discourse one creates through writing. The author is simply the source of the writing and a contextual tool. Barthes' insistence on the language being that which speaks – and not the author – supports this view. Although it is an important contextual tool, the discourse is what is mostly important. He claims that there is a danger in seeing biographical traits within a work. And, ironically, this contravenes the importance of the author within surrealism. Despite the extent to which much the surrealist author seems to have distanced him/herself from their work, per Barthes, through the act of "automatic" writing or collaborative writing, important authorial traces and biographical traces are often found. Some surrealists go so far as explicitly saying that a piece of them is in their art/writing or that they are writing in search of something within them, as we will see when looking at Joyce Mansour and the other women surrealists. Contrary to Barthes, the author then becomes a valuable tool for interpretation.

Foucault asserts that the author is also a way of defining a work; and in the case of surrealism, it is an important definer, a tool to credit and give voice to those groups who are normally marginalized. Although it seems that surrealism furthered the "death" of the author, within surrealism the author takes on more importance than studies and criticism have given it. In the case of women writers and poets,

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[7] Michel Foucault. *Dits et écrits: 1954-1988*. Edited by: Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange. Paris: Gallimard (1994), 790

their works are not as studied and given credit to as those of their male counterparts, particularly when looking outside of the field of surrealism itself. Specifically, female surrealist writers/poets are more neglected in the overall study of the movement; the movement itself also was neglectful of them in a way, as it tended to be misogynistic. As Georgiana Colvile avers, "there is no lack of poetry by women, at any period, in any culture," for there have been many anthologies of women poets published since the 1970s women's movement.[8] It is just that they do not receive the same recognition as their male counterparts. In fact, it wasn't until the early 70s that the lack of consideration given to female surrealists was noticed. For example, in the book *Surrealist Poetry in France* (1969) by J.H. Matthews only one woman is mentioned - Joyce Mansour.

However, Barthes (Foucault in agreement) claims that when a text is given an author a limit is automatically imposed on that text and that limit closes the writing:

> Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter then allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the author has been found, the text is 'explained' – victory to the critic.[9]

In my opinion, although Barthes makes a valid point, with the knowledge of the author and the act of giving a text an author – particularly with surrealist women – the work does not close, it only opens further. With the knowledge of the author, the reader can expand their understanding of the works, and through the work themselves, understand the author in greater depth. This is both beneficial and detrimental to the surrealist woman writer. On one hand, attributing works to a specific woman surrealist gives them the credit and recognition for their contributions to surrealism. On the other hand, their recognition can lead to false or stereotyped interpretations of their works because of their gender – as the female surrealist was often a muse. Furthermore, this can lead to their works being judged on the fact that they are women and not on the quality of their writings. And this is most definitely evident within the surrealist movement at the time of its inception.

Accordingly, the author lives and is an important concept. And to understand how important the survival of "the author" is to these women as well as how it hinders their recognition, one must look at specific cases. Three French and Francophone female surrealists will be the focus of this study: Joyce Mansour,

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[8] Georgiana M. Colvile, "Through An Hour-Glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen," 32.
[9] Barthes, "La mort de l'auteur," 99.

Valentine Penrose, and Gisèle Prassinos. Looking at how researchers and critics regarded their works and understanding how the works are critiqued are essential in realizing the importance of authorship with surrealist women. I, additionally, explore their relationships with their male counterparts and each other. Together, they show how the knowledge of their authorial presence furthers the understanding of their work *and* how the very nature of the surrealist movement hindered their recognition. But before one can understand the importance of authorship for these women, one must understand the movement itself.

CHAPTER TWO

SURREALISM AND THE RESPONSE OF THE FEMALE SURREALIST

Surrealism is considered one of the most influential and revolutionary artistic and literary movements of the twentieth century. Yet, with surrealism, there isn't a distinct history but rather a presence– surrealism can still be found today. [10] Many theorists, artists and historians simply divide surrealism into periods of time, beginning in the early 1920s. The term "surrealist" was first coined by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1903, but it wasn't until André Breton that the movement was given a "name." Not only was it a movement but it was also an artistic and cultural revolt:

> Contrary to prevalent misdefinitions, Surrealism is not an aesthetic doctrine, nor a philosophical system, nor a mere literary or artistic school. It is an unrelenting revolt against a civilization that reduces all human aspirations to market values, religious impostures, universal boredom and misery.[11]

Surrealism, as described by the surrealists themselves, aimed at a "complete human emancipation" and "reconstruction of society" with personal desire and wants as the new governing process. Many of surrealism's participants had been a part of the dada movement. The dada movement began in 1916, during World War I, as a reaction to the slaughter and horrors of the war. The dada movement did not have a universal style or aesthetic. Dadaists were united in their shared rejection of idealism, nationalism and conventional artistic aesthetics. The dada movement did not have a clear direction. As both movements' inceptions occurred during and post-World War I, they were a direct response to the war itself and a means for people both to escape and understand the horrors that were occurring. However similar it may appear to the dada movement, surrealism took a more cohesive, focused, and programmatic approach.

Yet, it too was not a concretely structured movement. Significantly it did have an overarching aesthetic. Each individual artist or writer contributed in their own way to the movement as a whole, with no exact template to follow – except for those found in the three *Manifestes du surréalisme* written by André Breton. He wanted surrealism to be a more focused movement than that of its predecessor dada, and he did so through writing the three manifestos.

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[10] Gérard Durozoi, and Bernard Lecherbonnier. *Le surréalisme. théories, thèmes, techniques*. (Paris: Librairie Larousse 1971), 33.
[11] Penelope Rosemont. *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), i.

Breton describes surrealism as the absence of reason and maintains that the work – written, drawn, painted – was exempt from the normal concerns of art: the aesthetic and the moral. Surrealists believed that reason and morality imposed limits on the creative process. To truly understand oneself and the nature of the world, one must remove all shackles of "society" – society being the collective morals brought on by religion and capitalism. Accordingly, "le surréalisme est innervé par le désir de retrouver le secret, oblitéré par le rationalisme et déformé par le christianisme,"[12] allowing man (and woman) to transform their own realities and legitimize them.

Surrealism legitimizes the personal realities of its creators in the sense that images of dreams/dreamscapes and the unconscious mind are as valid, if not more so, than those of actual "reality." As Rosemont puts it:

> Surrealism aims to reduce, and ultimately to resolve, the contradictions between sleeping and waking, dream and action, reason and madness, the conscious and the unconscious, the individual and the society, the subjective and the objective.[13]

Reality in the realm of surrealism is the unconscious construction of the individual who is producing the works – be they written or not – with the objective being to free the imagination from all outside influences. This freedom is a very personal experience and therefore each writer/creator's experiences would vary. This legitimization of personal realities led to the participants of the movement feeling liberated. Therefore, surrealism was conceived as a kind of liberation movement. The works produced by surrealism went against previous conceptions of beauty and perceptions of reality, and each individual surrealist's conceptions differed depending on their own personal experiences:

> It has restored to men and women a vivid and profound sense of the hidden manifestations of human relationships, the latent content of everyday life; it has given them a sharpened consciousness of their own deepest desires and of their ability to realise these desires.[14]

The freedom to create and present desires did not cohere with the "art for art's sake" concept, which, according to Rosemont, has a way of shackling expression. "Art for art's sake" concept means that the function of a work of art is to be

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[12] Durozoi and Lecherbonnier, *Le surréalisme. théories, thèmes, techniques,* 11.
[13] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, i.
[14] Ibid., i.

aesthetically pleasing and superficial. Surrealist works always had a purpose, be it to express unconscious thought through automatic writing or to express deep inner turmoil through a painting – to free the surrealist from all aesthetic, moral and popular shackles. However, this freedom was often only attributed completely to the male surrealist. The role of the woman surrealist was twofold: the muse and the writer or the artist. Through a description of the female muse, one can see the importance in recognizing female surrealist writers. Women surrealist writers produced their works slightly differently from those of their male counterparts – they may have indeed had a muse but not in the same manner as the men. Although considered to have a seat at the proverbial table of surrealism, the woman surrealist had her own obstacles.

The Women of the Movement

Even before André Breton's first manifesto, women were active in the movement. As described by Rosemont, although women's participation and contributions were plentiful and at times their works were acknowledged, even *sometimes* celebrated within the movement, the topic of woman and surrealism is all too often:

> …narrowly concerned with a dozen or so "stars" – mostly painters and photographers whose work has finally, and most often posthumously, attained some standing in the art market. As a result, women surrealists whose principal vehicle of expression is the written word have been especially neglected. This neglect, in turn, has perpetuated old stereotypes and other misapprehensions of the surrealist project….about surrealism [being] based entirely on painters…[15]

It is easy to see how women writers became marginalized within the movement and afterwards. Surrealist women painters and writers were regularly included in publications by the movement – their works standing alongside those of their male counterparts. As critics have said, there is no comparable movement, cultural or artistic, outside of feminist movements of the twentieth century that have had such a high number of women participants.[16] Despite their bountiful presence within the movement, knowledge of these women outside the movement has been severely lacking with the fault falling on critics. Most critical writing about surrealists was admittedly done by surrealists, thereby creating somewhat of a closed circle exchange of information.

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[15] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, xxix.
[16] Ibid., xxx.

Additionally, I have noticed that many critics outside the movement disagree on where these women fall within the movement. For example, art historians and literary critics Mary Ann Caws and Gwen Raaberg maintain that these surrealist women, whose work came after the inception of surrealism, belong more properly to a "second generation of surrealists," and that despite their numerous valuable contributions, they were marginalized within "the ranks of the avant-garde." [17] Critics like Rosemont, in contrast, believe that they were not as marginalized, and that this "isolation" from the movement as a whole reduces "their work to the traditional aesthetic frameworks that surrealists have always resisted but worse yet [relegates] them to a sub-basement of the art world known as "Women's Art.""[18] Rosemont supports the idea of the inclusion of women into the movement, but perhaps, instead, she degrades the importance of such a separation in calling Women's Art a "subbasement of the art world." Although many like Rosemont want to believe that women can be included and equally revered within artistic movements, in accounts of surrealism, this is not the case. For women surrealists, I would argue that a specific designation is required for them to be given the same recognition of their male counterparts – assimilating these women into the (male) movement only furthers their marginalization. No matter how seemingly "equal" a movement is, the woman's role will always be considered less than that of the man – whether it is blatantly stated or not. Despite their so called "inclusion" in the movement, and their active participation, the role of the woman within surrealism, specifically as a muse, shows how marginalization can occur and support the views of Caws and Raaberg.

The Role of Women: The Woman as Muse

To produce the most inspired of works the male surrealist was always in want of a muse. Marcella Munson, in her article "Eclipsing Desire: Masculine Anxiety and the Surrealist Muse," describes the process of the male surrealist writer:

> Not only must the (male) writer receive ideas and make aesthetic, political, and literary connections whose origins lie beyond the rational (and indeed often arrive through the female muse), but he must seek a way to articulate these through language. Further, the surrealist author must let down his rational guard and allow the Other to enter him in order to receive these signals and reflect his own subjective process while still remaining in active

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[17] Mary Ann Caws, Rudolf E. Kuenzli, and Gloria Gwen Raaberg. *Surrealism and Women* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), 2.
[18] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, xxx.

> control of his own text, his own pen, his own muse…[The privileged surrealist muse] herself is displaced by the act of writing.[19]

Munson is essentially stating that the muse herself is the vessel through which inspiration is found by the male surrealist. Continuing, she states that upon understanding the privilege of the muse the male surrealist develops some anxiety: "for literary surrealists, desire for, but especially of, the female disrupts the authorial body and challenges that status of the authorial text," thus creating this anxiety.[20]

Women are reduced to mere objects – "woman as image or rhetorical trope"[21] for use in the male's creative process. The man realizes the importance and influence she has on his work, yet she is reduced to nothing more than an inspiration, a means to an end. The role of the woman is on display and her role in the production of the images describing her can be varied: creative and destructive, active and passive.[22] Although misogyny exists within surrealism, ironically, it is considered that "surrealist poetry celebrates women" more so than the other genres of work, yet subtle undercurrents of misogyny remain.[23] The result of such understanding of the role of the surrealist muse may be why so many texts, images, and metaphors by male surrealists are considered distinctly masculine, as they are trying to understand their own identity using a less privileged being – a female muse. The importance of the author is shown here as well. To understand the male writer's anxieties, you must recognize him as the author and the role of the muse in his creative process.

Paradoxically, this movement, which so often reduced women to mere objects or muses, fueled the creativity of "liberated" women. Women produced works in all areas of surrealism: poetry, automatic writing, and painting. Many of the women were linked to the movement through their relationships with the male surrealists – having been a muse, a lover, or a spouse or even having been discovered by a male surrealist. They were often defined as such: for example Valentine Penrose, *wife* of Roland Penrose. Also, many of the women surrealists "produced their most mature work after their relationships with the male surrealists and the movement had ended."[24] Be that as it may, the women whom I will discuss

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[19] Marcella Munson. "Eclipsing Desire: Masculine Anxiety and the Surrealist Muse." *French Forum* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2004), 19.
[20] Munson, "Eclipsing Desire: Masculine Anxiety and the Surrealist Muse," 20.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 3.
[24] Ibid., 2.

- Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose, and Gisèle Prassinos – had at some point a direct connection to the surrealist movement through a male counterpart.

Although some, like Joyce Mansour, were praised by André Breton and other male surrealists, full recognition of their creative contributions and intellectual prowess was utterly lacking. Women were objectified by the male surrealist. His needs "[were] in direct conflict with the individual woman's subjective need for self-definition and free artistic expression [and] the women writers and artists who chose to work within the framework provided by surrealist principles thus found their situation marked by contradictions."[25] Gwen Raaberg explains that even though some women's works were praised they weren't granted "autonomous artistic powers." And this was because surrealism depicted women as the object of man's desire, a mediator with nature and the source and embodiment of *amour fou*.[26] To be a woman surrealist and a woman surrealist *writer* was almost contradictory. For the male surrealist, seeing the woman as something other than an object and a muse was rare. Although women participated and were often praised by their male counterparts, the men of the movement considered the woman to exist in "a position of dependence, in the shadow of the better-known-men: René Magritte appropriately called the surrealist woman a "pin-up girl.""[27]

In accordance with the theories of Orenstein, Bakhtin and Suleiman, as a response to their role in the movement – as the "pin-up girl" or the muse – the work of many surrealist women writers adopted a "dialogic position."[28] Considered "a double-voiced discourse,"[29] this work was the women's attempt at navigating the parameters set forth by their male counterparts. Often, per Orenstein, the woman writer would undermine or reverse the authority of the man's position in the dialogue of surrealist works; and they would "recreate human experience in the image of female divinity."[30] The women personae, in women surrealists' work, would flip the role of male-female dominance, giving rise to the dominant female. Some women writers maintained the importance of their marginalized status within the movement by consciously representing their differences – as feminine being "Other." As Raaberg points out, they moved beyond the limitations of the male conceptions of the woman to reach "that point at which distinctions between external reality and inner self merge – the surrealist marvelous."[31] The

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[25] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women,* 2.
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid., 98.
[28] Ibid., 5.
[29] Ibid.
[30] Ibid., 99.
[31] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 8.

representation of their relationships with the male counterparts further supported these strategies.

Not only was it a necessity for these women to employ various literary strategies to assert their own presence in the surrealist movement but it was also important for them to be recognized for their authorship. A piece written by a woman employing strategies that present her own thoughts and impressions on the roles of man and woman is a prime example of how very much alive "the author" is for these women. The author cannot be dead, as authorship helps give these women surrealists the authority of their own voices – distinct from those of their male counterparts. This study of the relationships and works of Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose, and Gisèle Prassinos revives "the author." Using critiques of and writings about their works and authorship, one sees anew the importance of the author, and that, contrary to Barthes and Foucault, the understanding of the woman author behind the words is as important as the words themselves. These women were as much a part of their writing as their writing was a part of them.

CHAPTER THREE

JOYCE MANSOUR (1928-1986)

Biographical Notes

Joyce Patricia Adès was born in England in 1928 to Jewish-Egyptian parents and was raised in Cairo. Two years after the death of her first husband, whom she married at 19, she married an Egyptian, Samir Mansour. She and her second husband split their time between Cairo and Paris. Joyce Mansour was fluent in both English and French. Many of her early works were written in both languages; however after being influenced by the works, particularly the surrealist ones, coming out of France, she switched to writing purely in French. Her first two books were *Cris* (*Scream,* 1953) and *Déchirures* (*Torn Apart,* 1955). She became involved with the surrealist movement in 1954. Through André Breton, she became acquainted with other male surrealists. Her first volume of poetry was published the same year in *Médium*, a surrealist periodical, and was well received. She thus took part in the second-generation of surrealists in the post-war period that regrouped around André Breton.[32] She published many works during her time within the movement, and was an active participant in collaborative works with a host of other surrealists, among them Pierre Alechinsky (*Astres et désastres,* 1970).[33] She was known for her prose narratives and poetry, yet she played a marginal role compared to its male founders. She remained loyal and supportive of André Breton's notions of surrealism until his death.

The Works of Joyce Mansour

The works of the surrealist poets are shrouded in mystery, filled with distorted reality and plentiful metaphors. It is reasonable to affirm that one can never fully understand and interpret the works concretely. All the works are open to interpretation, and the knowledge gained from an understanding of the author and her self-described purpose aid in those interpretations. The works of Joyce Mansour fall within this area of lector interpretation informed by authorial influence.

Countless literary critics and art historians ask the question: who is Joyce Mansour? Judith Preckshot, in *Surrealism and Women*, considers the question as being deceptively simple. Preckshot states that Mansour cannot and will not be "defined other than through a writerly persona that integrates bi-national, dual-

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[32] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 97.
[33] Ibid.

linguistic and double-gendered characteristics."[34] She is as much defined by her writing as her writing is defined by her. According to Preckshot, Mansour herself even admitted that her works were autobiographical. Yet, the traits that would make the work autobiographical are veiled with metaphors and convey an obscured reality, a result of the work being surrealist; "so while clues to Mansour's identity may be discerned in a particular textual style, in (self-)reflecting narrative perspectives…much is still left open to interpretation."[35] Nonetheless, they remain.

When Mansour wrote, she was writing for herself. In the preface to *Joyce Mansour* by J.H. Matthews, Michaël Bishop explains this further:

> Si Joyce Mansour écrit, c'est pour elle-même, c'est pour chercher cette voix/voie radicalement inimitable obéissant à un besoin de liberté aucunement gratuit…Toute son écriture va dans le sens d'une libération de cela qui monte en elle, qui veut éclater. Chaque geste écrit lance un défi à la mort, fonde un espace où l'exorcisme puisse lutter contre la résignation, contre toute possibilité de calcification ontologique.[36]

Writing for Mansour was a form of liberation and self-exploration particularly in the realm of desire, as it was to many surrealists (male and female). Her works also present a personal identity crisis. "Écrire est acte de reconnaissance où Joyce Mansour finit par se reconnaître, parfois au cours du spasme sexuel illuminant, tantôt rassurant, tantôt effrayant."[37] Preckshot notes that her works adhered to the "aesthetic principles of male-dominated surrealism,"[38] and did not particularly reflect what some would consider a "woman's experience." Mansour did not subscribe to a complete rejection of patriarchal society or to an aesthetic that certain feminist critics might have preferred. She wrote what flowed from her "being" instead of subscribing to some aesthetic others required of her. Mansour spoke as herself; she freely surrendered to her personal role as writer.

Joyce Mansour, Author

As Matthews states, the writer must give themselves over to the material, which they might not necessarily have chosen. For Mansour, it was only after the material chose her that she could create. This surrender drove her into creating "tel

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[34] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 96.
[35] Ibid.
[36] J.H. Matthews. *Joyce Mansour*. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985) *Preface*.
[37] Matthews, *Joyce Mansour*, 8.
[38] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 97.

texte-témoignage."[39] She and her writing fused to become a persona who created; "Mansour is a poetess who permits her instincts to go well-beyond the limits of decency into the realm of desire unrestrained."[40] Her authorial instincts help define her works as specifically her own.

Because her works do not fall within the expected parameters of either surrealism or feminism, her late arrival to surrealism, and her too early arrival for feminism,[41] critics have noted that a clear identification of her aesthetic or authorial tendencies has been lacking. One can see this when looking at anthologies or works on surrealism – often Mansour's name is missing from the index. Therefore, literary critics and historians have been deprived of that which would aid them in a critical look at her work. Despite Matthews championing her, her marginalization within both groups hindered the recognition of her authorship. And due to this problematic of falling somewhere in between, Mansour's work is shrouded in ambiguity. And unfortunately, the authority given to her ownership of her works was lacking because of where she fell in time.

Therefore, as a work marked by emotion, among other traits, it is difficult for the reader to completely understand the writings of Mansour; "la poésie ne s'apprend pas."[42] Matthews states that: "[il] vaut mieux se contenter de l'incompréhension…de l'œuvre mansourienne."[43] As her writings were surrealist, it is understandable that there would not be a complete comprehension of what she was trying to evoke. Her works often involve the theme of love, the macabre, reflections and challenges toward sexuality, and ambiguity between male and female but all in a way that is uniquely mansourienne. An example of this can be found throughout *Cris*; the emotion of unrestrained desire is portrayed in a way that not only is considered feminine by literary critics such as Matthews, but goes beyond the norm of a poet searching, finding, and experiencing love. Mansour "speaks of desire purified of all sense of sin, unrepentantly free of inhibition."[44] This reflects the motives of the surrealist writer – to free oneself from the shackles of conventionality. Her works such as those found in *Cris* can be taken literally (as her language was sometimes unsettlingly blunt), as nonsense, or as metaphor, among other interpretations. In his article, "Not in the Reviews: The Poetry of Joyce Mansour," Matthews speaks about how her portrayal of unrestrained desire and

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[39] Matthews, *Joyce Mansour*, 8.
[40] J.H. Matthews. *Surrealist poetry in France*. Syracuse (NY: Syracuse University Press, 1969), 164.
[41] Matthews, *Joyce Mansour*, 8.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Matthews, *Surrealist poetry in France*, 165.

love were expressions of the surrealist *amour fou* and that perhaps it was her mode of portrayal which did not endear her to literary critics:

> Like Baudelaire, Joyce Mansour pays tribute to the satanic attraction of sensual pleasure. Unlike Baudelaire, however, she never shows signs of guilt, or a sense of sin, or the nostalgia of paradise lost. *Cris* is simply an assertion of the supremacy of desire.[45]

Matthews' description can be applied to many of poems found in *Déchirures*, as the themes found in *Cris* return. One can see these themes, and that she is motivated by erotic instinct in the following lines from *Cris*, and in the poem "Invitez-moi…" from *Déchirures*:

> Attends que mon plaisir s'apprête à mourir
> Attends que mon corps se glace se raidisse
> Avant de te divertir…[46]
>
> ***
>
> Invitez-moi…
>
> Invitez-moi à passer la nuit dans votre bouche
> Racontez-moi la jeunesse des rivières
> Pressez ma langue contre votre œil de verre
> Donnez-moi votre jambe comme nourrice
> Et puis dormons frère de mon frère
> Car nos baisers meurent plus vite que la nuit[47]

There is a dark morbidity, linked to erotic desire, that threads itself throughout her poems and reflects the "assertion of the supremacy of desire," mentioned by Matthews:

> Je veux me montrer nue à tes yeux chantants
> Je veux que tu me voies criant de Plaisir
> Que mes membres pliés sous un poids trop lourd
> Te poussent à des actes impies[48]

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[45] J.H. Matthews, "The Poetry of Joyce Mansour." *Books Abroad* 40, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 284-85. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40120803.
[46] Matthews, *Surrealist poetry in France*, 166.
[47] Jean-Louis Bédouin. "Déchirures." *La poésie surréaliste* (Éditions Seghers, 1970): 220.
[48] Matthews, *Surrealist poetry in France*, 166.

Mansour uses violent eroticism no longer "confined in its effects to pleasure alone" as a means "by which the self finds fuller liberation," and "to exorcise haunting thoughts of death."[49] As described by Matthews, guilt is not found within her works. She uses the language of desire to compel one to "recognize the violence [in her words] …as something different from incitement of hedonism."[50] Her erotic poems are often compared to those of Desnos and Éluard, as they too link love and death. Yet, her close identification of the erotic to violent imagery renders her works quite different from theirs, and reflective of her *univers mansourien*.

By going against standard aesthetic conventions of how to express desire, Mansour did not entirely "fit." Essentially, one could also say that the way which she described desire and *l'amour fou* could be considered unfeminine; her portrayals of such desires did not fit the conception of femininity that the surrealists embraced. Her works could have provoked their "masculine anxiety," using Munson's terminology, and in turn disrupted the ability of critics to accept her work. So, not only did the time during which she wrote hinder the reception of her works but so did the subject matter. Mansour was *coincée au milieu*, unable to truly fit within either the surrealist conceptions of their aesthetic or the feminist movement. Indeed, she belonged to her own world.

Insight into her role as a woman surrealist writer within the movement offer suggestions for interpretations of her work. As the critical reception of her work, particularly in America, was ambivalent, Preckshot proposes that if that fact is correlated with looking at the "ambiguous characterizations" in her narratives, it could suggest that "the very confusion of male and female roles portrayed in her texts may reflect more than a personal identity crisis; it may also be the signature of a woman writer caught between literary generations and diametrically opposed ideologies."[51] Female characters in her narratives often seize the position of dominance but do not escape Mansour's scrutiny. Matriarchal figures are sometimes not portrayed as better than the patriarchal ones. This literary choice could reflect Mansour's feelings towards her in-between status with the movements. It is remarkable too that her narratives often ignore gender differences, a trait of the conventional surrealist aesthetic propagated by the men of the movement. Her role as an author within the movement, both praised and marginalized, offers insight into her works. The language of her poems and prose narratives is not all that should be regarded when looking at the works of Mansour, but rather we should consider the motives behind them. Her role as an authorial

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[49] Matthews, *Surrealist poetry in France*, 167.
[50] Ibid.
[51] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women,* 98.

figure within the surrealist movement is equally as important as the language of the *oeuvre* itself.

Mansour discovered herself through language – creating a mansourien universe. She is considered an author who liberates a "language within." When regarding her work, both the poetic and the narrative, it is clear that one is engaged in a "terrain sauvage…et [on] finit par voir le monde de Joyce Mansour sous un éclairage qui en accusent certains aspect sombre."[52] This is the world that she herself wanted to portray: "Je veux me montrer nué à tes yeux chantants…"[53]

[52] Matthews, *Joyce Mansour*, 40.
[53] A line at the beginning of a poem in *Cris*.

CHAPTER FOUR

VALENTINE PENROSE (1898-1978)

Biographical Notes

Valentine Boué was born in Mont-de-Marsan, France, in 1898 and died in 1978, in England, at the age of 80. She is described as having a rebellious heart, rebelling against her parents' values in her youth. Since that moment, she "never reconciled herself to any sort of conventional family life."[54] Given her rebellious nature, it only made sense that she would find herself a part of the surrealist movement. She married an Englishman, Roland Penrose, around 1923-1924.[55] Taking her husband's name she was then known throughout the movement as Valentine Penrose. Not only did she participate in artistic and social movements in her lifetime but she defended the revolution in Spain in 1936. During World War II, she fought for the French Resistance. She was one of the first female surrealists, her participation dating back to the late 1920s, even earlier than Joyce Mansour. She is known for her poems, prose, and collages. She was involved in the publication *La révolution surréaliste* (1924-1929), one of ten other women – eight of them writers. Her first publications include a response to the 1929 inquiry on love in *La révolution surréaliste* no. 12,[56] and in 1935, her first book of poetry *Herbe à la lune*, prefaced by surrealist Paul Éluard. In the 1940s she began her work with surrealist collage, publishing the book *Dons des féminines* in 1951. Her relationship with fellow surrealist Alice Rahon additionally influenced her creative works. Yet, despite her full involvement in the surrealist movement – artistic and literary, her most well-known work had nothing to do with surrealism; *The Bloody Countess* (1962) is a study of Eresbet Bathory, a medieval Hungarian murderess, and is written in a style quite different from that of her surrealist works.

The Works of Valentine Penrose

Just as the works of Joyce Mansour were shrouded in mystery and filled with surrealist metaphor, the works of Valentine Penrose also fall within a chasm of mystique and uncertain meaning. As Colvile says, Penrose's work is "impregnated with…automatisme, images insolites, érotisme, mythes, légendes et magie."[57] Her

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[54] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, 35.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Antony Penrose, Valentine Penrose, and Georgiana M.M Colvile. *Écrits d'une femme surréaliste: Valentine Penrose*. Compiled by Joëlle Losfeld. (Éditions Joëlle Losfeld, département de Mango Littérature, 2001.), 11.

production of such thematic works was greatly dependent on her relationships with others. As discussed previously in this study, many – among them Mary Ann Caws – consider surrealist women's work as thriving after their separation from their male counterparts and/or from the heavily masculine influence of the early surrealist movement. It is as if surrealist women, once set free from the shackles of masculine surrealist influence, are able to author works that directly reflects her own *âme*. This notion is exemplified in the works of Penrose. Renée Riese Hubert, in his book *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership,* argues that:

> The disruption of her marital relationship may therefore have played a more important part in her literary and artistic production than did partnership itself. In any case, the breakup of her marriage was followed, in her texts and collages, by the invention of new protagonists and the discovery of new genres.[58]

This disruption and invention of a "new" style can also be linked to her new relationship forged with Alice Rahon, which will be discussed later.

As mentioned in "Biographical Notes," Valentine Penrose married Roland Penrose in the early 1920s, five years before her initial involvement in the surrealist movement. They both associated with the surrealists around the same time. Her development as a poet occurred a short time after her marriage to Roland Penrose. Roland Penrose was a visual artist, Penrose primarily a poet and novelist. However, she did compose collages, and a collage novel, *Dons des féminines*. Both Penrose and her husband were supporters of the avant-garde. Yet Roland Penrose was the more distinguished one of the pair for his efforts championing the avant-garde. Hubert (and Colvile) argue that Penrose "remained in relative obscurity even during her years of association with the surrealists."[59] She struggled to separate herself artistically, and to gain her own artistic authority – which as noted was paradoxically was achieved through her relationship with her husband. It was a life-long creative artistic relationship that went beyond marital vows.

And although all her published works, as Hubert puts it, "boast" prefaces or frontispieces by male surrealists, Penrose too was marginalized as being a mere muse and vessel of inspiration. This was a role she played when she sat as the subject for numerous portraits by male surrealists. Despite her so-called acknowledgement by male surrealist counterparts, she remained "en termes

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[58] Renée Riese Hubert. *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 87.
[59] Ibid.

bretoniens, *follement oubliée;"*[60] not only were her works often forgotten but even after her separation from her husband relatively little is known of her life.

Penrose's authorial development was directly correlated to her relationship with her husband. She was an independent woman, much like her female surrealist contemporaries. Antony Penrose, son of Roland Penrose and Lee Miller, described Penrose as being a "mystère impénétrable" who often took walks in the woods and who had "une fascination très particulière, unique, vis-à-vis de la nature."[61] He even claimed that Penrose's marriage to his father would have lasted longer had it not been for their differing ambitions – an ambition which led Penrose to leave for India for "une longue période contemplative."[62] However, this independence is considered by many – particularly Hubert – to have come from her partnership with Roland, for she did not "from the start disrupt genre and gender or free her writings from conventional images of woman."[63] She developed a poetic style that diverged from her husband's creative process.

Penrose's early work, such as *Herbe à la lune*, did not manifest a surrealist style. As Hubert notes, the work did not contain the "concentration of surrealist metaphors," nor did it "mediate the passing of thresholds to the surrealist *ailleurs* (elsewhere)."[64] The work describes the disconnected tales which thematic elements include nature, joy, love, death, dream, and violence;[65] thematic elements which are often portrayed in surrealist works. Examples of such thematic elements can be seen in the following verses from *Herbe à la lune*:

> Il est le feu il brûle et je suis l'eau je noie
> ô froide fille.
> La terre est mon amie
> La lune aussi sa servante
> Ainsi nous visitant au fond de nos cavernes
> nos repos nos langueurs loin de tout accoudés
> nous passons longuement les nuits à nous connaître
> autour de nos trois feux mysterieux et frères.

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[60] Penrose, Penrose and Colvile. "Ecrits d'une femme surréaliste: Valentine Penrose." Complied by Joëlle Losfeld, 12. Colvile references the final page of *L'amour fou* by André Breton in which he wishes his daughter to be "follement aimée."
[61] Ibid., 8.
[62] Ibid.
[63] Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership*, 88.
[64] Ibid., 95.
[65] Ibid.

J'ai les plus belles fleurs
j'ai le plus beau mirage
j'ai le plus beau miroir
je suis l'eau qui se chante.

Rondes plumes rond soleil
la boule de feu de joie
je m'étrangle de ma joie.
Douce femme douce au lac
l'air si tendre à ce satin.

Au milieu de moi tu bats
ô toi qui me noues au jour.[66]

Despite her usage of natural and surreal imagery, figurative language and juxtapositions, however, the verses do not go to a level "beyond." Throughout, the poem meditates on the relationship between the "nous" of the verses but "thresholds to the surrealist *ailleurs*" are not included, as described by Hubert. Although, according to critics, her early works did follow the surrealist forms and principles, *Herbe à la lune* (and many of her other works), provides the readers with a false sense of security of understanding; they "have the illusion of finding their bearings, [but] their false sense of orientation will soon disappear."[67]

As Penrose continued to develop her poetic and authorial voice, her relationship with her husband moved passed the confines of matrimony. It is suggested that perhaps their divorce had to do with their conflicting views and attitudes towards gender and artistic conventions.[68] Roland Penrose's work reflected the stereotypical surrealist usage of the woman as muse and figure of inspiration, Penrose's did not.

Yet Penrose did not sever her ties with her ex-husband even after he married Lee Miller. Penrose remained close to those who had helped her develop her voice. To become the poet/writer/author she wanted to be she had to first realize it through her relationship with Roland Penrose. Penrose understood a creator's relationship to their work differently than Roland Penrose as shown in her homage to the painter Tàpies, someone whom she and her husband are known to have

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[66] Penrose, Penrose and Colvile. *Ecrits d'une femme surréaliste: Valentine Penrose*, Complied by Joëlle Losfeld, 44-45.
[67] Hubert. *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership*, 95.
[68] Ibid.

greatly admired. She describes the importance of commitment to the imagery of a work.[69] Penrose considered works not as an end in themselves and autonomous but, in fact, as doors which access the experiences and self-identification of the creator. A writer's/creator's inner self merge with his/her works.

Unlike her husband, who often portrayed women in stereotypically male surrealist fashion, Penrose offered different approaches to women in her poetry and her prose that were linked to her own artistic conventions. Rosemont describes her as having a "resolute cultivation of poetic insolence, a refusal to say and do the ordinary and expected…"[70] This refusal to say and do the ordinary stemmed from her family background and her relationship with her ex-husband. An example of such refusal in her work is the frequent reflection and usage of imagery and metaphors reflecting lesbianism, which can be found in *Dons des féminines* (1951), as well as some of her other later works. In this work, the visual (the collages) and the lesbianism aspect both function as "disruptive semiotic force[s]."[71] Hubert and Colvile, each respectfully, remark on this occurrence. Moreover, this appearance of lesbianism as a theme within her works is seen to correlate to her relationship with Alice Rahon – a relationship that is still considered to be shrouded in mystery.

Valentine and Alice Rahon-Paalen

As her marital relationship to Roland Penrose ended, a relationship emerged this time with Alice Rahon. Forged in mutual fascination, this relationship also aided in Penrose's emancipation as a female surrealist writer. Alice Rahon was born in 1904, as Alice Marie Yvonne Philippot, and grew up in Paris. Known for both her poetry and painting, she began her involvement with the surrealists in the early 1930s and she ended up marrying Austrian painter Wolfgang Paalen shortly after. She wrote many volumes of poetry under her married name, such as *A Même la terre* (1936), *Sablier couché* (1938) and *Noir Animal* (1941). Although she was noticed by the surrealists, her writing "sank into total oblivion in France from 1938 to 1986."[72] She was most well-known in Mexico for her painting, there as Alice Rahon.

Penrose had left for India following the conclusion of her marriage, and she is also known to have visited India several other times. She found the way of life there appealing. As for Alice Rahon, according to sources, she too went to India

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[69] Hubert. *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, & Partnership*, 95.
[70] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, 7.
[71] Hubert, *Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism, and Partnership,* 86.
[72] Colvile, "Through An Hour-Glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen," 94.

but only once in 1936. It was during her visit that some sources noted their being together. At the time of their convergence, both were not involved with men. Colvile postulates that Alice Rahon was there to move on after her relationship with Picasso ended. Penrose was there following her decision to be independent. Colvile in her article, "Through An Hour-Glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen," analyses their relationship as expressed through their poetry. The lesbian eroticism of their poetry suggests a love affair and, although Colvile states that are sources that believe that one did take place, she did not want to confirm such a relationship. She only confirms their relationship as far as what is represented and alluded to through their poetry (and artwork in the case of Alice Rahon).

Clearly an understanding of the authors' circumstances and relationships weighs heavily on their works. As it ended up being reliably suggested that they had a relationship (a lesbian liaison) that only fuels the fire of interpreting their works, particularly the aspects dealing with lesbianism. Penrose and Rahon's works even allude to each other – through referencing lines from the other's work, imitating each other's style, and the usage of the colors blue and green. Despite their time together in India, they never saw each other again.[73] Colvile even goes as far as to say the two "wrote a kind of duet,"[74] using lines from different poetic works each wrote to form one long fragmented narrative poem created while they were apart. Additionally, Colvile remarks that their exchange of various kinds of correspondence influenced their later works as well. She notes the use of the colors blue and green as an example; Rahon included those colors in the backgrounds of her paintings, and Penrose included them in her works, such as in her later work *Les Magies* (1972).

Knowledge of Penrose's relationship with Alice Rahon gives the reader of her works another way to interpret them, as did her marriage to Roland Penrose. Through the two influential relationships within her life, her unique authorship was created. These unusual relationships and her rebellion against the (male) surrealist conventions are fused. Ironically a male counterpart within surrealism describes her works well in this context; in his preface to *Dons de féminines*, Paul Éluard describes the work of Penrose and appropriately reflects on how the understanding of women rests with women:

> J'aurais aimé, avec Valentine Penrose, passionnément rejoindre, reconnaître l'inconnue, celle qui entre dans ce livre et qui en sort, toujours distante,

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[73] Colvile, "Through An Hour-Glass Lightly: Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen," 107.
[74] Ibid., 105.

> toujours lointaine, et, ne fût-ce qu'en rêve, me confronter à elle, au prix de toutes les métamorphoses. Suis-je tellement moi-même? Suis-je tellement mes yeux? *J'en ris en pleurs.* Née dans l'ombre féminine, ses robes de saison ne m'enveloppent qu'à peine…Ce que l'amie pourtant conte à l'aimée a plus de charmes graves que les histoires des hommes. **La connaissance des femmes appartient à la femme.**[75] Pour dire: *appartenait*, il faudrait abolir, radicalement, tout un monde bizarre, absurde, agrippé au passé et qui ne tient presque plus au présent. Il vit de souvenirs, il a perdu de vue la terre…[76]

Éluard essentially expresses that only a woman can truly understand another woman for she is beyond this world and beyond others understanding. She is the authority on her works and self. Éluard's sentiment, I feel, reflects the importance of Penrose's female authorial status and those of the other female surrealist writers as well.

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[75] Emphasis by the author.
[76] Valentine Penrose. *Dons des féminines*. Paris: Librarie "Les pas perdus", 1951.

CHAPTER FIVE

GISÈLE PRASSINOS (1920-2015)

Biographical Notes

Gisèle Prassinos was born to a Greek and Italian family in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1920. The family emigrated to Nanterre two years later. In 1934, at the age of fourteen, her brother introduced her to the surrealists, and she was discovered by André Breton. Enchanted with her poetic works, they took her under their wing as a child prodigy. Of the women mentioned in this work, Prassinos truly had a "life-long" relationship with surrealism: her earliest texts were published in *Minotaure* in 1934. One year later, in 1935, she published her first book, *La Sauterelle arthritique*. This work was "followed by eight other volumes in the next four years."[77] She composed both poems and automatic writing. Her works were considered the epitome of automatic writing, and they illustrate that automatic writing proceeded from the unconscious.[78] Prassinos and Leonara Carrington were the only two women to appear in Breton's *Anthologie de l'humour noir* (1940). Her first adult work was an autobiography, *Le temps n'est rien* (1958). She continued to write and publish during the rest of her lifetime, but her association with surrealism was limited after World War II. Of the women discussed in this work, she is the most well-known, undoubtedly due to her lengthy involvement with surrealism and her role as a child prodigy.

Gisèle Prassinos in Her "Monde Suspendu"

Gisèle Prassinos' affair with surrealism started much earlier than did those of Joyce Mansour and Valentine Penrose. Unlike Mansour and Penrose, she came into the surrealist movement with a distinct authorial voice already in formation. André Breton and his fellow surrealists considered Prassinos to be a child prodigy: "l'enfant révolutionnaire."[79] Per Hedges, Breton compared her to the surrealist ideal of the child-woman – uncorrupted, pure talent – and believed her works created beautiful, revolutionary imagery brought forth by her age. Her works were namely examples of automatic writing. However, literary critics have detected in her works differences from the automatic writing of male surrealists. Hedges signals, nonetheless, that "Prassino's texts do have some similarities to automatic writing,

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[77] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, 78.
[78] Inez Hedges. "What Do Little Girls Dream of: The Insurgent Writings of Gisèle Prassinos." *Surrealism and Women*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991) 27.
[79] Whitney Chadwick. *Les femmes dans le mouvement surréaliste*. (Paris: Editions Thames & Hudson, 2002) 46.

yet they are distinctive in that the semantic incompatibilities occur mostly on the level of narrative and representation."[80]

In ways similar to Mansour's oeuvre, Prassinos' works were considered to be a part of her own "ecstatic [universe] [where] the reader ends up feeling that she is standing outside herself, at least of her adult self."[81] Her works have a youthful quality in relating surreal stories, and they could only really have come from the mind of a child. There is also a darker level as she rebels against and twists fairy tale morals, familial ties and even mocks the French literary canon (e.g. works by Baudelaire and Chateaubriand[82]).

Prassinos' works break free of the shackles of the stereotypical dream of the little girl and progress into the "(sur)real" unconscious mind. They take on "…un ton libre, tout de spontanéité, et les images surgissent s'enchaînant les unes aux autres…du découpage du lieu de l'enfance fondé sur la séparation entre un espace commun et un espace sacré."[83] In surrealist fashion, she went against the conventional norms of thematic governing age and sex. Not only do her works incite an outer-self experience for the reader, but there are often bizarre lapses in logic which the reader needs to interpret on their own. In doing so, they accept that it simply is a side-effect of Prassinos' "ecstatic universe." This is most apparent within her work "chevelure arrogante" (1934). It is considered exemplary in its lapses in logic, even ending with a "mystery":

> When I woke up there were no more children. But on the carpet lay a bandaged male foot, some moldy hair, and some nuts.
>
> Children are afraid of idols.[84]
> (Translation by Fabienne Lloyd)

When reading Prassinos' works, often one finds unexpected things. Prassinos herself considered her works "Venda et le parasite," "My Sister," "Description of a Wedding," "The Young Persecuted Girl," "Transformation," and "Finding What You're Not Looking For," as full of the unexpected.

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[80] Hedges, "What Do Little Girls Dream of: The Insurgent Writings of Gisèle Prassinos." *Surrealism and Women*. 27.
[81] Ibid.
[82] Ibid., 28.
[83] Anne Richard, *Le monde suspendu de Gisele Prassinos* (HB Editions, 1998) 13.
[84] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, 78. Translation from French by Fabienne Lloyd.

The "Enfant-Femme" Author

Not only did Penrose go against aesthetic norms, she also recognized the restricted, marginalized nature of her sex early on. In her book *Le monde suspendu de Gisele Prassinos,* Richards quotes Prassinos' comments on her relationship with her father:

> Je rêve d'une vie où il m'aurait prise au sérieux, où j'aurais compté pour son orgueil autant que le Chef, où j'aurais appris de lui tout ce que je ne saurai jamais, grâce à sa patience et sa douleur.[85]

This relationship is considered to be linked to her rejection of conventional literary endings and thematic material. Moreover, she recognized her own spotlight within the male dominated world of surrealism. Evaluating her early surrealist works, many critics and translators disagree on whether they contain a common thread of feminism throughout – and as each reader's interpretations differ, this creates the disagreement. Some consider her works to have a tendency towards the submissive and others disagree. Others hesitate to consider her work feminist because she wrote at such a young age. Despite agreeing with their hesitation, Hedges appropriately maintains that we see constantly throughout her works the theme of stolen power: "…a truly Promethean urge to steal power from its jealously guarded source – be that canonical texts, discourses of authority (of school, of parents, of the state), or patriarchal controls. Once seized, that power is exposed and demystified."[86]

An example of a relationship between both thematic threads, submission and feminism, can potentially be seen in a reading of her work *Description of a Wedding* for the bride both leads her husband down the aisle, which reflects dominance, and yet "on the whole, she gives the impression of a wounded dove."[87] The prose ends with "then comes the father of the bride with his wife buttoned to his vest."[88] A juxtaposition between the role of the female author (the bride) and the submissive ("buttoned") wife reflects both a sense of submissiveness and the author's assertiveness.

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[85] Richard, *Le monde suspendu de Gisele Prassinos,* 13.
[86] Hedges, "What Do Little Girls Dream of: The Insurgent Writings of Gisèle Prassinos," 27.
[87] Prassinos, "Finding What You Are Not Looking For." *Surrealism and Women,* 34. This chapter provides six translations of her works in their entirety, including *Description of a Wedding*.
[88] Ibid.

Furthermore, this feminist thread could be linked to *l'interrogation identitaire* presenting itself and found in both her works and her *plastiques*. Through her rejection of the conventional literary canon, and of to a degree surrealism itself, she explores self-understanding. As alluded to in the discussion of her relationship with her father, her writings are a reflection of aspects of herself. Prassinos discovered the power of words can have when modeled, moved, and arranged in different ways; yet, she found it problematic that this was brought forth by external influences such as "les maîtres;" as Richard describes:

> Dès les premiers textes, se déploie la dimension problématique de l'œuvre, entre l'image de soi renvoyée par les maîtres, l'image reçue qui est douloureusement à la fois le chemin de l'amour et de l'aliénation et l'image de soi à créer, aux contours indéfinis et angoissants.[89]

Though Prassinos may have been embraced by the (males of the) surrealist movement, her works are considered as having been appropriated by them: "…Prassinos' early writings were coopted by surrealism, which deflected her revolt into theirs, [yet] contemporary readers may recognize the impossibility of completely subsuming these texts within that movement."[90]

All the thematic traits of her works considered, Prassinos' authorial influence is clear (or as clear as one could get within the works of surrealism) on her creations. As noted by Breton, her automatic writings reflect their relationship with the unconscious mind. With the unconscious mind being linked to her personal experiences, her conscious rejection of the conventional norms adds to the understanding of her seemingly incoherent texts. Notably, many literary critics, such as Richard, Hedges and Rosemont, describe her works as being a part of *her* world. They accord ownership to her, and one could not separate her from her works. Prassinos' works may be considered on their own as autonomous from their "mother" source, but a closer understanding of her works emerges from recognizing her voice as well. For example, the disagreement between whether or not her works are submissive or feminist stems from a lack of understanding of her as an author and her artistic choices. Although her works came from the unconscious mind in the form of automatic writing, her relationship to the world around her – i.e., her place in surrealism, her relationship with her father, her age – all affect what she wrote. Through her works, she strives to take back authority. And despite her marginalization, her tales did attract wide notice and are awarded

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[89] Richard, *Le monde suspendu de Gisele Prassinos,* 29.
[90] Hedges, "What Do Little Girls Dream of: The Insurgent Writings of Gisèle Prassinos," 31.

the status of “surrealist classics” today. However, outside the realm of surrealism she is relatively unknown.

Her struggle for authority is no better explained than through the words of Prassinos herself in the final lines of *Dans ce monde suspendu*:

> Je pourrai ensuite entrer n’importe où, me faire reconnaître comme l’un des leurs et respecter peut-être plus qu’aujourd’hui ; m’initier à leur langage de silence, me joindre à eux enfin, pour grignoter sans conviction un temps qui se renouvellera à l’infini.[91]

[91] Gisèle Prassinos, "Dans ce monde suspendu." (In *La lucarne: nouvelles*, 182-83. France: Flammarion.) 183.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The Surrealist Female Author, Can She Speak?

> The reader is the space on which all quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origins but in its destination. Yet this destination cannot any longer be personal: the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all traces by which the written text is constituted.[92]

Contrary to the belief of Barthes (and Foucault), for the woman surrealist writer a text's origins and its destination are inseparable. Readers cannot separate themselves from that origin, regardless of a work's obscurity. As seen with the works of Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose and Gisèle Prassinos, sometimes the destination is predetermined; their works are influenced in by their environment and by their own self as response to their place in the surrealist movement. In looking at the works and lives of Mansour, Penrose, and Prassinos, one finds similarities between them that go beyond the fact that they were all women in a male dominated movement. They all defy the prevailing male aesthetic in one way or another, and they elevate the "woman" beyond being a mere muse. They utilize their works as a means for self-exploration. Still, each approached this defiance differently to create their own unique "worlds." These women employed various strategies to assert their own presence in the surrealist movement, as it was important for them, and for us as readers, that they to be recognized for their authorship. Even if their works reflect similarities to those of the male surrealists they are not equivalent. Mansour's work reflects a personal identity crisis. Despite being caught between two surrealist movements and like the original male surrealist aesthetic, her works' use of confused gender roles and ambiguous characterizations indicate her desire to create an *univers mansourien*. For Penrose, the disruption of the conventional representations of the woman, and her consideration of a creative work as a door to the inner self also create a distinct world. Prassinos' rebellion against the ideal little girl and conventional dreamscapes, early recognition of the inequality between the sexes, and demystification of power lead to her own *monde suspendu*.

Yet, their authority as writers and creators was in a way overridden by the male aesthetic during the surrealist movement. Their aesthetics and views are

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[92] Barthes, "The Death of the Author," 100.

always being compared and filtered through or against those of the male surrealists. Nevertheless, they succeeded in navigating the parameters set forth by the men. And as shown through the examples of these three women, female contributions to the surrealist movement were plentiful. From its inception to its end, women surrealists provided the movement with many notable volumes of work (written and *plastique*); between 1930 to 1939 women surrealists published a total of 26 volumes of work.[93]

The surrealist movement, despite its seemingly egalitarian nature, was institutionally dominated by men. Though women were "recognized," their works were often assimilated as being a part of the grand revolt in general – as seen with Mansour's works but particularly with Prassinos' works. One could even go so far as to say that the men who gave them so much praise only did so to show them as products of surrealism – in a sense presenting them as muses. In fact, André Breton formally recognized only two female writers as being key in the surrealist movement.

Although the three still have not yet received the full recognition they deserve, their works have begun to be recognized. They defied surrealist conventions and expressed their own personal voices. It is not that the woman surrealist is more important than the male surrealist but rather of equal importance because of their differing approaches, as shown through the examples of Joyce Mansour, Valentine Penrose and Gisèle Prassinos. As Caws appropriately puts it:

> *Let them stand on their own two feet: they had two.*
> And were not necessarily the runners-around with or the runners-after their male companions, if they had or wanted one. They were capable of going, and of going fast and often first. We have wanted to let them choose and take their stride. Are they, then, strident women? Yes, sometimes, even frequently. And does this bother us? Nope…
>
> …It is not so much that I want to begin reading surrealism over, as that I see increasingly the problematics of the surrealist woman within that reading. We have wanted, here, to *make free* with the reading, and to let her creations make free. Let it not be taken as a negative for surrealism and its male leaders, but as a positive revisioning, rethinking, and call to re-reading.[94]

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[93] Rosemont, *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology*, 45.
[94] Caws, Kuenzli and Raaberg, *Surrealism and Women*, 13.

Reviewing and *revisioning* the critical literature on and the works of Mansour, Penrose, and Prassinos, one sees the importance of the author for these women, and that the understanding of the *auteure* behind the words is equally as important as the words themselves. The women's works came from their innermost souls and their unconscious minds. They portray a personal feeling, a rebellion, and they display a feminist eye that goes against the conventional surrealist (male) aesthetics. These women surrealist writers are as much a part of their writing as their writing is a part of them. And although that too can be said for the male surrealist, the author is of particular importance for the woman surrealist. The author cannot be dead, as it enables these women surrealists to assert their agency over their works – separate from their male counterparts who dominated the surrealist movement. More than that, recognizing their authorial influence and the importance it has on interpretation, not only gives them a distinct voice and representation of their own worth, but it allows other woman (writers, authors, etc.) to visualize their worth through the work of others. The author is not only important to the women who wrote but also to the women who read.

The ***auteure*** is a powerful and valuable tool that should never die.

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VITA

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