UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS

Joyce Mansour's Ambivalent Poetic Body
Author(s): Katharine CONLEY
Source: *French Forum*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (May 1995), pp. 221-238
Published by: University of Nebraska Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/40552120
Accessed: 05/03/2014 11:40

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

University of Nebraska Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *French Forum.*

http://www.jstor.org

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Katharine CONLEY

Joyce Mansour's Ambivalent Poetic Body

Joyce Mansour was a woman Surrealist poet of the second generation of Surrealists to gather around André Breton in Paris: after the war, in the 1950s and 60s—a loosely knit group which included André Pieyre de Mandiargues, his wife Bona, Julien Gracq and José Pierre. Women artists were active participants in the group of this generation. They may well have felt heartened by Breton's pronouncement in *Arcane 17*, from 1944: "le temps serait venu de faire valoir les idées de la femme au dépens de celles de l'homme."[1]

Women Surrealists cultivated the irrational in themselves as a protest against mainstream art and its marginalization of women. In this sense they anticipated the feminist movement of the 1970s which valorized hysteria in women as a subversion of patriarchal discourse and which hailed certain celebrated hysterics, such as Freud's Dora, as pre-feminist heroines.[2] Women Surrealist artists embraced the Surrealist vision of themselves as different from men in their greater facility for clairvoyance because that vision recognized them as artistically powerful. As Whitney Chadwick has stated:

> Surrealism offered many women their first glimpse of a world in which creative activity and liberation from family-imposed social expectations might coexist, one in which rebellion was viewed as a virtue, imagination as the passport to a more liberated life.[3]

At the same time, certain women in the latter generation acknowledged that many of the women praised by the Surrealists for their irrational powers at the outset of Surrealism—the hysterical patients of Dr. Charcot, for example, in Breton and Louis Aragon's 1928 "Cinquentenaire de l'hystérie,"[4] or even Nadja from Breton's 1928 book by the same name—were damaged in some way. In confronting often troubling images of women in Surrealist art by male artists,

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

women involved in Surrealism have had to make the choice delineated by Mary Ann Caws in "Ladies Shot and Painted": "Does the woman looking take the stance of another or of a same, and what pleasure does she take in spying"?[5] This dilemma led certain among them, including Leonora Carrington in her story "La Débutante" and most notably Joyce Mansour in much of her work, to enact what Susan Rubin Suleiman calls, after Irigaray, mimicry: "In mimicry, a woman 'repeats' the male—in this case, the male Surrealist—version of 'woman,' but she does so in a self-conscious way that points up the citational, often ironic status of the repetition."[6]

Joyce Mansour principally adopts the Surrealist tendency to idealize women for the purpose of subverting that idealization. As Maryann De Julio states in reference to the last poem of *Cris* (1953): "Although Mansour does not reject outright the image of the *femme-enfant*, the last text in *Cris* suggests that her reexamination of Surrealist ambitions and attitudes causes her to reinvent Surrealist images in the voice of a woman."[7] Mansour shows the price that many women pay for their beauty, for example, and the ways in which it can feel like a curse to be idolized. The female body in her poetry is surprising in its essentially ambivalent nature: beautiful on the surface yet ugly in the violence of its anger; glad of its power and scornful of those captured by its superficial charms. In her poems the victim is often also the victimizer; in love, anger and aggression mix with desire. No emotion is presented without an undercurrent intended to undercut assumptions about the nature of a woman's experience, in life or love. Janis Pallister puts it most succinctly when she comments: "The fusion of *jouissance* to speech, to *écriture* and to *lecture* is everywhere present in Mansour's work: the sex-tool answers the telephone, instrument of dialogue; the energized sex is alerted to the 'other' partner and reader."[8]

Mansour herself was the embodiment of the Surrealist female ideal in that she was both beautiful and exotic—having been born in England in 1928 of Egyptian origin, yet French speaking. She made her home in Paris and became an active participant in the Surrealist circle in the 1950s after Breton acclaimed the publication, when she was 25 years old, of her first collection of poetry in 1953, *Cris*. She was a regular at the café gatherings of the moment and it was at her apartment that the Surrealist event, the 1959 *Exécution du testament du Marquis de Sade*, took place.[9] Only recently has Mansour begun to receive serious critical

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

attention (her *Œuvres complètes* were published in 1991 by Actes Sud), in part because, as Judith Preckshot notes, "her tales . . . do not stage unequivocally what might be called the 'woman's experience,' portrayed by some as victimization, by others as dispossession by patriarchal society, or as madness."[10]

Certainly, in the poems of *Cris*, Mansour depicts herself as anything but a passive victim. On the contrary, she attaches heroic importance to the wounds she suffers in love and to the guilty hold she can consequently place upon her lover-victimizer: "Le clou planté dans ma joue céleste . . . Mes plaies saignantes qui ne guérissent jamais . . . Tout ceci fait de moi votre Seigneur et votre Dieu"; "Ailes glacées / Orteils cassés / Sexe transpercé / Cœur de lion décomposé."[11]

In *Carré blanc* (1965), dedicated to André Breton, Mansour compares herself to a mantis, who cannibalizes her mate after making love: "Comme elle je grignoterai mon frère / Il faut savoir attendre pour pouvoir se venger / Imiter les insectes pour plaire" (438). Not only does she not return a benign reflection to the male poet of sweetly reciprocal love, she announces her disappointment at the lack of mirroring she experiences from her lover: "Vainement je cherche un reflet de ma joie / Dans le trou où je pensais trouver ton cœur" (439).

Mansour deplores the necessity for women to sacrifice themselves for a socially sanctioned model of beauty:

> Tu dis que les femmes
> Doivent souffrir se polir et voyager sans perdre haleine
> Réveiller les pierreries embellies par le fard
> Changer ou se taire déchirer la brume
> Hélas je ne saurais danser dans un marais de sang (428)

She also denounces the sense that she has been transformed into a larger-than-life monster by the false flattery of Surrealist love poetry, which tends to cast the male poet as hero of the piece, when she writes: "Je ne veux plus être le Goliath / De ta pierre" (427). Given that it is hard to imagine being a woman in Surrealism without being aware of Nadja, the most iconic woman in Surrealism, and situating oneself in relation to her, it would be similarly difficult to conceive of a sharper response to Breton's slightly detached, analytical approach to Nadja and her pain.

In *Nadja* Breton distances himself from the object of his fascination, if not his affection, the moment he learns of her illness: "On est venu,

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

il y a quelques mois, m'apprendre que Nadja était folle" (736). Evidently, for him, Nadja had an ambivalent body most notably in her double mind: she was at once powerfully creative and fearfully unstable. As long as her sanity was dominant for him, he enjoyed her two-sided nature; as soon as she was put in a mental hospital, he never saw her again. Once he perceived her lack of sanity as predominant, he lost sight of the potential coexistence of a saner, possibly still creative perspective within her.

Perhaps as a result of his guilt, expressed in *Nadja*,[12] Breton developed a theory about madness that was less clear-cut than his response to Nadja would indicate. When he and Paul Eluard composed the automatic text devoted to the question of madness in 1930, *L'Immaculée Conception*, two years after the publication of *Nadja*, Breton became interested in the dividing line between sanity and the lack thereof, and in its apparent fluctuations as a source of poetic power.[13] It is this sense of the coexistence of opposing forces in a singular body that Mansour explores. Yet, true to the nature of the writing of other women Surrealists such as Leonora Carrington and Unica Zürn, she adds body to Breton's basically abstract interest in the potential of an ambivalent mind. In fact, the ambivalence that captivates Mansour is even more corporeal than mental, because, unlike Nadja, Carrington, and Zürn, her sanity was never in question.

Carrington and Zürn, in *En bas* (1944; 1973) and *L'Homme-Jasmin* (1971) respectively, examine closely ways in which they were creatively stimulated and victimized by their own propensity for madness as an escape from an unpleasant reality. They situate themselves within Surrealism in relation to Nadja by virtue of their descriptions of what it can be like to feel mad and to be incarcerated for mental instability. Studied side by side with Nadja—an emblem, for the men, of feminine creative madness—Carrington and Zürn show that their experiences were similar to hers, as if they had considered her in the manner described by Caws and seen not "another," but "a same." Furthermore, they counter Breton's rather abstract approach both to automatism and to Nadja and her illness by emphasizing the physical and painful nature of losing one's mind and even of the creative potential in such a process. They add body to a quintessential Surrealist experience: letting go of the rational, at times at will, in the interest of discovering what lies beyond consciousness. Mansour goes further than Carrington and Zürn in their

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

implicit sympathy for Nadja because when she describes instances of victimization she does so citationally, as Sulieman proposes, always self-aware of her own status. Moreover, because her sanity was intact, she focused on the body less as an aspect of a mental experience than as the central metaphor for her emotional state.

Mansour is more explicit than Carrington or Zürn in metaphorizing a painful mental experience as a physical one. The ambivalence inherent in her self-awareness as an object of desire, whose own desires disrupt the traditional interpretations to which her beauty might lend itself, is most emblematically portrayed in what could be considered her signature poem, "Pandemonium," published in 1976, ten years after Breton's death.[14] This poem (*OC* 519-25, and 233-37 of this essay) holds an important place in Mansour's work and in Surrealism because, despite the fact that it was published seven years after the official dissolution of the Surrealist movement in 1969, it vibrates with a Surrealist intensity that is also typical of Mansour's strongest earlier work. "Pandemonium" challenges established ways of thinking on multiple levels: from varying notions of the sacred to the notion of the impossibility of coherence within a singular identity or even a single body.

In "Pandemonium" Mansour invokes Africa—land of her family's origin—and corporealizes it as a grotesque figure that constitutes an embodiment of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque.[15] The Africa of the poem is an upside-down world which is ailing and whose borders are indistinct. It is characteristic of the cosmic "unfinished and open body" Bakhtin describes, "which represents the entire material bodily world in all its elements."[16] Bakhtin's "open body" is "open" in the sense that it shows how two bodies can exist within one—a premise which Bakhtin exemplifies with descriptions of ancient figurines of laughing pregnant women. Mansour's Africa represents an "open body" in the many ways in which it is a compilation of opposites. Pandemonium, the traditional capital of the Christian Hell, is a word which also signifies the chaos of the gathering of all demons—menacing creatures of genius. It is a place where chaotic nature reigns (emblematized by the god Pan who is present in the word's first syllable) and is also a place where only the Aucassins of this world would want to live, which provokes an ambivalent laughter typical of the carnivalesque, both joyous and sarcastic, which, according to Bakhtine, "asserts and denies, it buries and revives" (12).

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The substantives in the poem unveil the body described within it: "lèvres" appears four times, "gorge," "bouche," "dents," "cri," "déchets," and "sang" appear twice. Other repeated words characterize the body: "mort" (five times), "vent" (four times), "nuit" (three times), "pluie," "rêves," and "soleil," which is "noir" (all twice). The black sun ("le soleil noir") not only underscores the image of "night," the impression of nightmare, and of the frightening aspects of the unconscious, but is also an emblem for the Surrealists (after Nerval), and the name of Mansour's publisher. This body's beauty is horrible, capable of transfixing the reader in a manner straight out of Baudelaire's "Hymne à la beauté": "Que tu viennes du ciel ou de l'enfer, qu'importe, / Ô Beauté! monstre énorme, effrayant, ingénu."[17]

The poem opens with the incantatory phrase: "Offre ta gorge à la nuit / Obsédante Afrique." The corporeal, material aspect of the Africa addressed by Mansour manifests itself on several levels. First of all the poetic lines do not respect the ordinary rhythms of speech. They juxtapose phrases, practically in mid-breath: "Ululez chacals rhombes / Oblations de virginités / Circoncisions / La pluie." The act of reading this poem aloud with its assonances and abundance of plosive and sibilant consonants requires a physically energetic effort and insists upon the immediacy of the act of enunciation. Aside from the implicit distance in the use of the imperative in the first lines—"Offre ta gorge à la nuit / Obsédante Afrique"—the poetic voice seems to emerge from the din Mansour evokes. Everything about her is interconnected: another reference to the title—*pandemonium*—a specific yet disorderly place.

Certainly an ambivalent body in its most natural state is dramatized within the poem. The first stanza is full of references to a body at once capable of generating life and utterly worn out. From the "gorge" of the first line Mansour passes to a body which spits out "dents," "déchets," and "vertiges." Moreover, this body is both masculine and feminine, at once old and in a prenatal state, and it drinks as well as it spits: "La trompe de la Mouche à viande / Mince Priape ralenti / A l'eau amniotique / Se désaltère." There are several irreverent Christian references: the Haunting Africa of the first invocation is urged to spit *into* "la crème fouettée / De l'église" and to tear down "Une couronne d'épines." This body is in decline and hence lacks a sense of coherence: she describes the color "noir vermillon" as being like "les sept lampes / de l'embolie"

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

and thus transforms a reference to the mind into a reference to an ailing body. For the "sept lampes" remind the reader of the lamps of the foolish (and wise) virgins from the Bible (Matthew 25), except that "folie"—a mental disorder—has become "embolie"—a physical one.

In the second stanza there are more references to an unstable body in flux, and to the coexistence of life and death. The first such reference is amusing because the lines "Le vent le vent aux yeux de perroquet / Aux funèbres processions" conjure up an image of Félicité's stuffed parrot, Loulou, from Flaubert's *Un cœur simple*, who—despite its tattered state—is included in a religious village procession at the end of the story and who, for Félicité, has come to embody the Holy Spirit. Loulou's straw stuffing appears a few lines further, where the "flancs avides" are only capable of producing "foetus de paille." The "croupe" of this once avid body is now without teeth ("édentée") and its "gosier" is compared to a tomb in which birth is possible—but a potentially aggressive birth, for it is "Le regard perlé de l'araignée-loup" which is born "dans la tombe / De ton noir gosier sec."

The sexual ambiguity of the body is dramatized in the third stanza where there are references to both the clitoris and the penis in the context of traditional African sacred rituals: "Ignore les piaillements le cliquetis de l'oison que l'on excise / Soulève la calotte polaire / Offre le prépuce au couteau." But these revivifying rites have become emptied of traditional meaning because this same "prépuce" is then "écrasé comme une figue sous le talon urbain." Mansour suggests that it is only by transforming the formerly sacred African body into a textual body that her vision of Africa can survive and continue to reproduce itself—to reproduce in a textual sense. For she refuses to acknowledge the possibility of an orderly synthetic resolution of the oppositional forces at work in her imagined Africa or in her esthetic, poetic sense.

A simple act of physical reproduction would produce a child, a singular embodiment of hope for the future. But in "Pandemonium" Mansour insists upon a textual body which is not singular in any sense and which, furthermore, is the very opposite of the Occidental sublimated body because it refers constantly to its own materiality. A new esthetic is required to allow for the conflicts of our post-World War II era, suggests Mansour, one that incorporates a sense of multiplicity—of bodies, esthetics and cultures. The body in/of her text stumbles under the weight of the transformation of her native land into a new Babel, a

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

new reality that demands recognition: "Les déhanchements d'une langue jamais apprise / Appellent épellent élaborent / L'alphabet du cauchemar / Il faut caresser la gorge de celui que l'on occit."

The ambiguity of the body's specific sexual and corporeal identity in the poem is treated again at the end of the fourth stanza, the stanza which concludes the first half of the poem: "Il faut caresser la gorge de celui que l'on occit / L'arc-boutant du serpent d'airain est visible sous la soie / Offrir son sexe à la nuit." Is the body that of a victim or an aggressor, or both at once? For it is necessary not only to "caresser la gorge de celui que l'on occit" but also to "Offrir son sexe à la nuit." There are at least three possible conclusions to be drawn from these lines: 1) that the accent is on the throat, which is the same as at the poem's beginning, "Offre ta gorge à la nuit / Obsédante Afrique," and which here is caressed and then sacrificed together with the sex of the same body, by an unknown aggressor—which would symbolize the coincidence of a death and a rite of renewal (as well as the emblematic equivalence of the throat and the sexual organs: "offrir son sexe" is parallel to "Offre ta gorge," syntactically indicating that the voice and the sex are interrelated, and highlighting the body's function as the poet's instrument); 2) or, one could conclude that the emphasis is on the other body here, that of the aggressor towards the throat and sex evoked, the one who will "caresser la gorge" from the poem's first line then sacrifice both "gorge" and "sexe" that s/he might have them to "offer to the night"—this reading highlights the struggle within the body of the poem between many oppositional forces: sexes, religions, health and illness, etc.; 3) or, it is possible to conclude that the poet incites the aggressor to kill the throat from the beginning of the poem, tenderly, and then to renew him/herself by offering his/her own sex to the night; in other words the aggressor here turns on him/herself. All three readings involve two players in an act of propitiation, in which the sacred ritual touches both victim and aggressor so that they become practically indistinguishable, as though they were part of the same body enacting within itself a primal drama. In this central stanza the ambiguity of the characters described contributes to the sense already established that any victim and aggressor belong to the same movement of life and death and that within any single body various identities may be engaged in a life-and-death struggle without the possibility of a clear-cut resolution.

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

In the poem, Mansour examines a panoply of religious beliefs, particularly Occidental and African, with cynicism. We have seen her references to the Bible and to the interpretation of the rites of excision and circumcision: as existing only to be destroyed by the new urban reality. She does not judge these rites for their cruelty, as a contemporary feminist might well do, but presents them as irrefutable factors in assessing her continent of origin as realistically as possible. In the center of the poem there are references to the structures—that is, to the bodies—of Western churches, to "L'arc pointu pas l'ogive," to "la coupole et ses volutes" and to a "cathédrale gothique." But these images are undercut by the suggestion of a witch on her broomstick flying over a cathedral wall—of a female figure who represents the antithesis of everything the cathedral itself stands for:

L'étoile du soir
L'androgyne enfin
A cheval sur deux portes
Errent
Le soleil dans le couchant
La lune à pic dans l'entre-jambes
D'une cathédrale gothique

This witch-figure anticipates the carnivalesque presence of Gargantua in the following stanza.

There are two italicized statements in the poem: *Debout* (in the third stanza) and *J'éternue* (in the fifth), both of which draw attention to a body at once vigorous, possibly defiant, and potentially unwell. In effect, Mansour focuses on a permeable body in a state of transition, either on varying degrees of sickness, or on orifices—a "ventre tortueux," "l'hernie qui éclate," "La bouche étirée; La bouche / Qui vomit," "La grimace amère," "L'anus blême." After commenting that "Le sombre spectacle des cerveaux fuyant par les narines / Ferait rire Gargantua," Mansour states that death is a full mouth ("La bouche pleine / Qu'est la mort après tout") and cuts to the italicized declaration, "*J'éternue*." The juxtaposition of these images reiterates the grotesque presence of Gargantua, and also the degree to which the human body is unstable within the poem. Although she dignifies this body with poetic language, it is anything but traditionally beautiful. The ugly and the beautiful coexist within her sense of esthetics because everything is part of life,

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

even death. There is only a hair's-breadth difference between a full mouth and one grotesquely emptied out by a sneeze. In her conclusion, death and reproduction are superimposed: "Mieux vaut mourir en rut / Que renoncer à la luxure / Beau fruit de la révolution."

The ambiguous body which dominates the poem and which is emblematic of Bakhtin's notion of the "unfinished and open body" linked to the carnivalesque is clearly manifest at the end of the poem in the images of lips, which are at once those of the mouth and of a woman's genitals, sites of consumption and of creation:

> Mieux vaut baiser des lèvres fanées
> Lèvres de toile lèvres de cotonnade
> Lèvres sanglantes jamais closes
> Mieux vaut fermer la bouche
> Qui vomit
> Mieux vaut pénétrer la Mère
> Sa semence est le mâle désir

Mansour's Africa is a body that is both feminine and masculine: the Great Mother as well as the sperm and desire of her lover, opposites as antithetical as breathing in and out and as complementary as two parts of a whole. For "sa semence" which necessarily refers to "le mâle désir" is linked grammatically back to "la Mère," showing how, while separate by definition, they remain parts of the same in their humanity. The primal and sacred drama evoked in the central paragraph between the ambiguous aggressor and victim seems to be reinvoked here at the poem's end showing how the push and pull of opposing forces can evolve, if not resolve, into a dance in which they commingle while retaining an essential individuality. The urban reality which is changing the body of Mother Africa damages but does not destroy; in this body's fierce yet continuously vital decay an Africanized Baudelairian beauty flickers, a modern esthetic which refuses to be dismissed, which, on the contrary, demands a re-evaluation of physical and textual standards. For this body is also at once dying and ready to be born. It is both the victim of the opening lines and the refuge described as a primeval forest in the closing lines of the same first stanza: "Loin dans la forêt / Un scarabé / Scintille." Despite its ambivalence this body can still offer solace, in the manner of the Beauty from Baudelaire's "Hymne": "Ange ou Sirène, / Qu'importe, si tu rends . . . / L'univers moins hideux et les instants moins lourds?" (25).

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

The ageless scarab glinting in the forest at the end of the first stanza demonstrates how Mansour reserves a trace of nostalgia and indulgence only for Egyptian myth within the poem. The scarab is an emblematic sacred insect for Mansour because it protects its eggs in dung, showing how beauty can come from waste. She herself functions as a kind of Isis-figure within the poem, the goddess to whom André Breton makes admiring reference in both *L'Amour fou* and *Arcane 17*. Just as Isis united the fragments of her brother-lover's dismembered body, so does Mansour piece together her poem into a poetic collage concentrated on the speaker's voice. With her head leaning on "un vieux battant de songe," Mansour presents herself as the dreamer who, despite all her provocations, renders comprehensible the disparate parts of her dream. She even says so explicitly at the beginning of the sixth stanza: "J'ai souvent rêvé de ces rêves / De quais de gare / Le ventre du serpent se gonfle / Il sera mon char." Her own body is the only complete, whole body in the poem and her presence unifies it.

"Pandemonium," written after the official dissolution of the Surrealist movement, hums with an adapted Surrealism that is reinscribed in the body—a reinscription already anticipated independently by two other women Surrealists, Leonora Carrington and Unica Zürn. In *En bas* and *L'Homme-Jasmin* respectively, their narratives about their experiences in mental institutions, madness is not an abstraction but a physical experience. Nevertheless, in both, the ambivalent mind, vacillating between madness and sanity, dominates the evocation of an ambivalent body. A unified narrative identity prevails in their work, linked to their physical beings, despite a sense of multiplicity evoked by both of them: by Carrington for example when she acknowledges at one point that she felt herself to be, at once, "androgyne, la lune, le Saint-Esprit, une gitane, une acrobate, Leonora Carrington et une femme" (not to mention Queen Elizabeth I), or by Zürn when she describes a terrifying hallucination in which she was transformed into a scorpion who commits suicide.[18] Each of them acknowledges their hallucinatory experiences as aspects of themselves and returns to a sense of self contained within a singular body. With Mansour the body itself plays out the drama of multiplicity.

In effect, Mansour takes a step beyond the multiplicity of being evoked by Carrington and Zürn, and by Nadja, through Breton, before them (she loved to play roles such as Mélusine and Mme de Chevreuse).

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

"Pandemonium" builds upon the greater awareness of the body in the Surrealist process evident in the writing of Carrington and Zürn and concretizes it. Mansour vividly shows how a fractured state of mind plays itself out in the body. She can do so as fluently as she does because she is imagining and fictionalizing what was a lived experience for Carrington and Zürn, and thus can make even more deliberate links between mental consciousness and the whole experience of living in its most elemental forms. The body she evokes incorporates within it a consistent variety of contradictory dualities in which the corporeal dominates the mental. As an example, the two italicized expressions within "Pandemonium"—"*J'éternue*," and "*Debout*"—describe a defiant body and dramatize the physical, even sexual nature of breathing: of expelling/rejecting breath as well as inhaling and accepting life. For, despite the sense of unity conveyed by the presence of her own body in the poem, a complementary sense of multiplicity prevails in an unprecedented manner within Surrealism.

Mansour insists upon the lived reality of the surreal experience by dramatizing the "Afrique obsédante" of her origins according to the "grotesque realism" of the carnivalesque. The fundamentally ambivalent body described in the poem closely resembles the visual example given by Bakhtin of the grotesque, of "figurines of senile pregnant hags" (25). They show life "in its two-fold contradictory process; . . . [as] the epitome of incompleteness" (26). The body in "Pandemonium" is weak and generating; it is old and young; it is male and female; Christian, Muslim, and ancient Egyptian; at once ugly and beautiful; its passion both violent and exalting. Yet, like the laughing hags evoked by Bakhtine, this body is self-aware and essentially vital, as if Baudelaire's Beauty materialized suddenly, turned her head towards the reader and began to speak. For Baudelaire's coupling of evil and love, however, Mansour has substituted death and love, a coupling that has no absolute resolution. This desiring body, threatened by death, defies it with bold exuberance: "Mieux vaut mourir en rut" is its response. More explicitly than either Carrington or Zürn before her, Mansour, as wilfully independent as either of them, deconstructs the iconic representation of Woman in Surrealism, retaining that icon's inherent strengths in the style of what Suleiman calls mimicry, while demystifying and materializing them. The body in her poem also defines the body of her text as recognizably Surrealist, yet fundamentally altered by her proto-feminist perspective.

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Situated between the conscious and unconscious minds, the model Surrealist text as shaped by Mansour becomes reinscribed as essentially permeable: in flux, in transition.

Mansour's personified Africa seems to follow Bakhtin's definition of grotesque realism in its insistence upon heading "downward" in the poem, and dragging the reader along, since, according to Bakhtin's definition, degrading an object "does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place." Bakhtin completes his description of grotesque realism with a statement that appropriately characterizes the conclusion to Mansour's poem: "Grotesque realism knows no other lower level; it is the fruitful earth and the womb. It is always conceiving" (21). In a manner reminiscent of the Bakhtinian "unfinished and open body," Mansour creates a new body within the old *corpus* of Surrealist writing which transmutes it into a new kind of writing, a writing of the body, which situates her in league with other Surrealist women writers yet also shows how much she stretched the tendency in their work to bring Surrealist practice out of the realm of abstraction and into that of the material. Breton believed that surreality was as much, if not more, real than conscious reality. Mansour succeeds in meeting the challenge of Breton's vision.

Dartmouth College

PANDEMONIUM
Joyce Mansour
(1976)

Offre ta gorge à la nuit
Obsédante Afrique
Crache tes dents tes déchets
Tes vertiges
Dans la crème fouettée
De l'église
La trompe de la Mouche à viande

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Mince Priape ralenti
A l'eau amniotique
Se désaltère
Arrache une pierre du brasier
Une couronne d'épines
Noir vermillon comme les sept lampes
De l'embolie
Riez nomades La vieillesse casanière
Loin dans la forêt
Un scarabée
Scintille

Seule sur une dune éventée
L'asperge pousse une pointe
Un cri
Le vent le vent de perroquet
Aux funèbres processions
Et tournoiements de famine
Le vent flagelle tes flancs avides
Tes foetus de paille
Ta croupe édentée
Frénétique Afrique
Nulle cruauté dans le sang répandu
Nulle contrainte
Afrique grande nuit de la mort édénique
Le regard perlé de l'araignée-loup
Prend naissance dans la tombe
De ton noir gosier sec
Ululez chacals rhombes
Oblations de virginités
Circoncisions
La pluie

La haine aux mains palpitantes
Tambourine sur la peau
De la ténébreuse Ouganda
Debout
Que tes aisselles flamboient
Que ton sexe batte la campagne
Grise violacée démente de liberté
Ignore les piaillements le cliquetis
De l'oison que l'on excise
Soulève la calotte polaire
Offre le prépuce au couteau
Puis écrasé comme une figue sous le talon urbain
Fais pondre l'épinoche sans sperme déverser

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Le végétal
L'arc pointu pas l'ogive
L'arbre phallique
Des sanglots exorbitants comme des bonshommes de neige
Vissent leurs gueules de tromblon
Sur le dos du Têtard
Repos
Matinées luxueuses à la surface du lac enfantin

Sous la coupole et ses volutes
Les avatars et fissions du métal
Souvenir
Sur le tapis diaphane
Rutilant du sang qui s'irise
Les déhanchements d'une langue jamais apprise
Appellent épellent élaborent
L'alphabet du cauchemar
Il faut caresser la gorge de celui que l'on occit
L'arc-boutant du serpent d'airain est visible sous la soie
Offrir son sexe à la nuit

L'étoile du soir
L'androgyne enfin
A cheval sur deux portes
Errent
Le soleil dans le couchant
La lune à pic dans l'entre-jambes
D'une cathédrale gothique
Miroitent à se fendre l'âme
Dans la boue du chemin-faisant
Il faut étouffer le vent d'avant la pluie
Faire taire la chair des voyageurs
La pendre polluée
Sur le crochet du samedi soir
Les rats ailés
Les paradisiers Verroteries volcaniques
Déchets
Les envoûteurs aux gestes larges
Qui sur la face cachée du tombeau
Sèment l'éphélide
Tous planent en hurlant sur le fleuve noir de l'oreille
Placide
Tous Enflés de verdure et lents à vomir
Tous sectaires
Réveillez-vous Les brises alizées des plages d'Orient sont pommelées à jamais
Le sombre spectacle des cerveaux fuyant par les narines

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Ferait rire Gargantua
La bouche pleine
Qu'est la mort après tout
J'éternue

J'ai souvent rêvé de ces rêves
De quais de gare
Le ventre du serpent se gonfle
Il sera mon char
Mille mots imperméables se rallument et pétillent
A fleur de roche
La chicorée folle Plissée et toute frise
Entoure le soleil de ses feuillages intimes
Maladies friselis et dentelures
Ta forme sort de l'ombre
Je reste là Ma tête appuyée sur un vieux battant de songe
Pâteuse désolée
Dans l'ouate mouillée des heures mortes
Je n'attends plus qu'une silhouette au fond de l'allée
Cambouis
Qu'un profile au coin de l'oeil
Qui irrite et qui dérange
Comme une impression de fumée sur la vitre dépolie
Je n'attends plus que la nuit
La grande marée des scories
La mort océane

Demain l'Afrique
La vie
Entre la poussière et le cri perçant
Le pénis et la campanule
La prunelle du soleil levant saigne sur le sable
Nu
Le train part en arrière
Le ventre tortueux comme une corde tressée
Le sommeil en paliers remontent vers la vallée
C'était demain
L'appel
La hernie qui éclate entre les favoris
De la fortune
Aucun miroir ne saurait voir
La bouche étirée
La grimace amère
L'anus blême des alcooliques
Le triste purin de l'aube

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

Les dents elles-mêmes ne sauraient retenir
Les grandes lèvres
Les glissantes saisons
L'immense bâillement
L'horreur aspirante
Le venin
Le vomi
Le rictus écarlate
La mort Tarlatane
Mieux vaut baiser des lèvres fanées
Lèvres de toile lèvres de cotonnade
Lèvres sanglantes jamais closes
Mieux vaut fermer la bouche
Qui vomit
Mieux vaut pénétrer la Mère
Sa semence est le mâle désir
Son grand rêve salé
Tari
Mieux vaut mourir en rut
Que renoncer à la luxure
Beau fruit de la révolution
L'homme libre vaincra la mort

[1] André Breton, *Arcane 17* (Paris: Pauvert, 1971) 58.

[2] I develop the link between Surrealism and feminism further in my book, *Automatic Woman: The Representation of Woman in Surrealism*, forthcoming with the U of Nebraska P (1996), and also in my articles, "La Femme automatique du surréalisme," *Pleine Marge* 17 (1993): 69-80, and "The Spiral as Mobius Strip: Inside/Outside *Le Désert mauve*," forthcoming in *Quebec Studies*. For a discussion of the relationship between feminism and hysteria, see Elaine Showalter, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender," *Hysteria Beyond Freud*, ed. Sander Gilman et al. (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993) 286-344.

[3] Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1985) 67.

[4] André Breton, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet and Etienne-Alain Hubert, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard-Pléïade, 1988) 1: 948.

[5] Mary Ann Caws, "Ladies Shot and Painted: Female Embodiment in Surrealist Art," *The Female Body in Western Culture*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1985) 269.

[6] Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1990) 27.

[7] Maryann De Julio, "Joyce Mansour and Egyptian Mythology," *Dada/Surrealism: Women and Surrealism* 18 (1990): 119.

[8] Janis Pallister, "Introduction: Translating Joyce Mansour," *Shadows of Madness (Poems by Joyce Mansour)*, trans. Janis Pallister (Tunnel, NY: The Geryon P, 1991) x.

[9] From a conversation with former Surrealist, Jean-Pierre Lassalle (June 1993). See also *Obliques: La Femme Surréaliste* 14-15 (1977): 185-90, and André Breton, "Enfin Jean Benoît nous rend le grand cérémonial," *Le Surréalisme et la Peinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 386-90.

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions

[10] Judith Preckshot, "Identity Crises: Joyce Mansour's Narratives" *Dada/Surrealism* 18 (1990): 97.

[11] Joyce Mansour, *Œuvres complètes* (Arles: Actes Sud, 1991) 309, 313. All subsequent references to Mansour's poetry are from this edition.

[12] Attracted to Nadja's incipient madness as he was, Breton did not hesitate to retreat to the common sense he claims not to have realized she lacked, once her illness became manifest, to that "instinct de conservation—auquel je me suis déjà référé—et qui fait qu'après tout mes amis et moi, par exemple, nous nous *tenons bien*" (741). Breton also distances himself from her physically, by suppressing the line from the 1928 edition which acknowledged the night they spent together in Saint-Germain at the Hôtel du Prince de Galles (in André Breton, *Nadja* [Paris: Gallimard, 1928] 146). Marguerite Bonnet defends Breton, claiming that Nadja's financial and emotional needs far outstripped his ability to give. She asserts that Breton went further in his financial support than he describes in *Nadja*, that, with his wife Simone's approval, he sold a painting in order to give Nadja the money, arguing, no doubt correctly, that not even the "miracle" of his love could have "saved" Nadja. She also attests to his ongoing concern for Nadja after her incarceration, confirming that he intended to visit her while she was still in the Parisian area, although he apparently never followed through on those intentions ("Notice" in Breton 1512-15).

[13] Breton and Eluard insist in their Preface to *L'Immaculée Conception* that altered states of consciousness are not only accessible to the mentally ill, but that by experiments such as their own "simulations" of mental illness, they are proving the capacity of "l'homme normal" to recreate, poetically, "les manifestations verbales les plus paradoxales, les plus excentriques" without endangering, in any way, "sa *faculté* d'équilibre." André Breton and Paul Eluard, *L'Immaculée Conception*, ed. Marguerite Bonnet and Etienne-Alain Hubert (Paris: Corti, 1991) 62.

[14] My thanks to Richard Stamelman for suggesting the phrase "signature poem" to describe the importance of "Pandemonium" to the ensemble of Mansour's work.

[15] I am indebted to Gayle Zachman for proposing this reading to me during one of several fruitful discussions of this article.

[16] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Introduction," *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1984) 26-27.

[17] Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Claude Pichois, 2 vols. (Paris: Gallimard-Pléïade, 1975) 1: 24-25.

[18] Leonora Carrington, *En bas* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague-Eric Losfeld, 1973) 47; Unica Zürn, *L'Homme-Jasmin*, trans. Ruth Henry and Robert Valançay (Paris: Gallimard, 1971) 93.

This content downloaded from 128.103.149.52 on Wed, 5 Mar 2014 11:40:49 AM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions