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The Voice in the Bottle: The Love Poetry of Joyce Mansour and Robert Desnos

Katharine Gingrass

Joyce Mansour answers the call of male Surrealist voices from the 1920s by deforming their "own" images of women. In her self-portrayal, she takes up primarily the oneiric, disquieting themes of André Breton's poetry, in which the woman is desirable yet threatening, both mysterious and dangerous. In his famous "L'Union Libre," for example, the woman has an otter's waist, but the tongue of a doll—she is characterized as at once animalistic, and disturbingly inanimate.¹ For herself, Mansour accepts a role that is both alluring and strange. But in tone, her poems also reflect the influence of another Surrealist poet, one whose love poetry and whose approach to the woman is less assertive than Breton's—Robert Desnos.

Mansour's first collection, *Cris*, appeared in 1945—eight years after Desnos' death, and 23 years after his expulsion (or rather, excommunication) from the surrealist group by its "pope," André Breton. Despite this temporal distance between them, the intimacy of Mansour's lyricism and her interweaving of the themes of death and writing with desire remind us of Desnos. Here, I will examine principally the correspondences between Mansour's *Carré Blanc*,² from 1965, and "A la Mystérieuse" and "Les Ténèbres" by Desnos, from *Corps et Biens* (1930).³ I shall begin by situating Mansour in relation to Desnos.

For Desnos, the traditional distance between the poet and his beloved is an established tension between his narrative voice—*je*, and

his object of desire—*tu*. The desired woman lives in the marvelous world of the poet's dreams, which Desnos describes in "Les Espaces du Sommeil":

Dans la nuit il y a naturellement les sept merveilles du monde et la grandeur et le tragique et le charme.

Les forêts s'y heurtent confusément avec des créatures de légende cachées dans les fourrés.

Il y a toi.

(C & B 92)

For Desnos, the game of love consists in a continual launching of the self towards the Other—a projection he repeats ceaselessly. Although Desnos projects his longing for acknowledgement by his beloved throughout the poem "Si tu savais," he insists upon the persistence of his own sense of isolation:

Si tu savais comme le monde m'est soumis,

Et toi, belle insoumise aussi, comme tu es ma prisonnière

O toi, loin-de-moi, à qui je suis soumis.

Si tu savais.

(C & B 97)

The Other, the *toi* of the poem, he designates by the phrase, "loin-de-moi," and himself by "si tu savais." They are both in the poem, yet irreconcilable.⁴ He submits to her, but she is unaware of him; he acknowledges her lack of submission to him, while claiming her in words. Only in the text, as "loin-de-moi," is she his prisoner; only on the page may he juxtapose references to her with references to himself. This juxtaposition generates an image of estranged union off the page, reminiscent of Reverdy's definition of the poetic image later taken up by the Surrealists: "L'image est une création pure de l'esprit. / Elle ne peut naître d'une comparaison mais du rapprochement de deux réalités plus ou moins éloignées."⁵ The textual union of the lovers remains incomplete, perhaps underscoring the distance which separates them outside the text.

Desnos focuses on his feminine Other, permitting his own identity to fade behind his assigned role—that of the poet who lives only to record his love. Yet despite the apparent seriousness of such a role, in a manner characteristic of Surrealism in general, Desnos in particular mixes humorous self-parody with passion, as in "O Douleurs de l'amour":

Au réveil vous étiez présentes, ô douleurs de l'amour,

Ô muses du désert, ô muses exigeantes.

Mon rire et ma joie se cristallisent autour de vous.
 C'est votre fard, c'est votre poudre, c'est votre rouge,
 C'est votre sac de peau de serpent, c'est vos bas de soie . . . (C & B 96)

In effect, Desnos permits himself only one scenario of union with the feminine Other. He perceives his Other as truly near him, only when, like a creative spark, she is within him:

Loin de moi, une étoile filante choit dans la bouteille nocturne du poète.
 Il met vivement le bouchon et dès lors il guette l'étoile enclose dans le
 verre, il guette des constellations qui naissent sur les parois, loin de moi,
 tu es loin de moi. (C & B 96)

His poetic nocturnal bottle is a pedestal—not *on* which, but *within* which the desired love-object is contained. The imprisoning glass, crystalline and magical, effectively marks the distance between them, perpetuating his need to continue writing. Following the convention, his love is unrequited: the captured woman-star keeps her silence. Even within him, she and he remain separate and isolated. Elaborating the effect of this distance on himself,

Si tu savais comme je t'aime et, bien que tu ne m'aimes pas, comme je
 suis joyeux, comme je suis robuste et fier de sortir avec ton image en
 tête, de sortir de l'univers. Comme je suis joyeux à en mourir.
 (C & B 96-97)

he seems to be saying that for her he would suffer anything, even the solitude implicit in death.

Mansour takes up this theme of the lonely lover. But her *moi* does not focus on the object of desire in the same fashion. Like other women poets before her, (such as Christine de Pisan and Louise Labé), she concentrates more on herself than the male poet does, and consequently, the woman is still the object of focalization. For instance, in "Bruit dans la chambre à côté," she transforms into a refrain, the line: "Combien je suis seule avec ma folle envie" (CB 25). "Tu m'as abandonnée nuitamment" underlines her particular usage of the narrative voice. The possessive adjectives *mes* or *mon*, as well as the pronoun *moi* communicate her self-awareness. She focuses the reader's attention on her person, on her emotions:

Mes heures coulent impassibles
 Au fond du miroir moucheté de bronze
 Des nuages font la parade
 Dans la mare profonde où tremble mon visage

Glissant comme des pleurs sur le malaise qu'était hier
 Des feuilles frissonnent sur le treillis du souvenir
 Frissonnent et tourbillonnent et pourtant restent immobiles
 Quelque part au fond de moi un moule se cristallise (CB 28)

Often imprinted with sadness, her solitude nevertheless evokes real, bodily pain—which introduces another difference between herself and Desnos. Mansour's desire is based on an explicitly sexual relationship. She does not aspire as much to a sentimental union as to a spiritual liberation by means of sexual union.⁶ J.H. Matthews writes that eroticism constitutes, for her, the liberating gesture by which together two people resist the menace of extinction.⁷ She knows and describes the intimacy she misses.

Instead of cloaking her Other in mystery, she undresses him: "Votre pénis est plus doux / Que faciès de vierge" (CB 27). She also unveils her own desire in "L'Eau des sources": "Je ne saurais vivre / Sans brulant désir" (CB 41). Her dreams are anchored in a type of reality based on memory; they are more concrete than the gossamer fantasies of Desnos.

Earlier, in the same poem, "L'Eau des sources," Mansour invokes another image from the surrealist vocabulary: the woman/lover-mirror. In the works of both Desnos and Mansour, the man looks to the woman as to a mirror; as a subject, she is essentially absent. But where Desnos' use of the image is traditional, Mansour's is not. Desnos' most striking use of the woman-mirror image—in Surrealism, most common in the work of Paul Eluard⁸—occurs in his play, "La Place de l'étoile," where the hero affirms: "Tu es ce que je rêve et ce que, chaque matin, je découvre dans ma glace."⁹ Mansour refers to herself as a potential lover-mirror by formulating an unpunctuated question in parentheses: "(Es-tu réellement en moi / Ou est-ce par réflexion)" (CB 41). By means of the authority implicit in her (feminine) narrative voice, together with the formulation of the image as a question, Mansour subtly queries the validity of such an assumption of absence. Nevertheless she grudgingly acknowledges a female tendency to serve as a mirror for men.

Although contradictory to the original conceptualization of the Androgyne—a being in which members of opposite sexes are united into one—Breton's notion of the Androgyne dovetails with the fondness of the Surrealists for the woman-mirror image. From the male perspective, the mirroring woman grants the man a satisfying illusion of wholeness, even though in such a construct the woman's subject-

tivity is left out. By acknowledging the image of the woman-mirror ambiguously, in the form of a parenthetical question, Mansour grants a qualified response to Breton's appeal for the necessity of reconstituting the *primordial androgyne* in love, as a basic principle of "love," while simultaneously challenging it.¹⁰ She underscores the fact that only one party fully experiences the wholeness achieved by such mirroring in love, thus effectuating a "union" that remains essentially incomplete.

Seeing his lover as a mirror evokes an affirmative sense of reciprocity for the male Surrealist poet; however, this sense is lacking in Mansour's work. Furthermore, Mansour does not provide an opposite equivalent to the woman-mirror evoked by Eluard and Desnos; the man-mirror does not exist in *Carré Blanc*. Mansour seeks one, but in vain: "Vainement je cherche un reflet de ma joie / Dans le trou où je pensais trouver ton coeur" (CB 83). The transformation of Desnos' well-known line, "J'ai tant rêvé de toi" into, "J'ai rêvé de ton oeil" (C & B 92; CB 69), reminiscent of Bataille, implies the dominance of the male *regard* (or psychologically, of male potency).¹¹ Consequently, when Mansour seeks her own image, she sees no more clearly than when she sought her reflection in a man. In "La Griffes de l'animal," and "En Attendant minuit," the mirrors she seeks cloud over and turn to mud: "Cette eau qui tel un miroir attire les grimaces et les garde / Si maladroitement enlisées dans la boue" (CB 87); "Il faut que femme enlace / Son image dans la boue" (CB 89).

The victimization implicit in such a muddied view of her own reflection surfaces elsewhere in the form of despair, particularly in "Galop du Coquillage de Neige":

J'ai trop bondi trop rougi
Trop aiguisé ma rage
Je ne veux plus être le Goliath
De ta pierre (CB 62)

Mansour's characterization of herself as a victim is not unmitigated by anger. She musters the indignation necessary to denounce male prejudice concerning women, in a poem that recalls Rimbaud's "Aube":¹²

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 (CB 63)

These cries of pain are directed towards the poetic pedestal on which women have traditionally been placed. For Mansour, Desnos' crystalline bottle is imprecise, like a lens covered with gelatin, as in Man Ray's cinematic version of Desnos' poem, "L'Étoile de mer." Inside the bottle stars cannot survive; they must reduce such exquisite yet stifling prisons to shards.

Despite his creation of the image of the woman-star in the bottle, Desnos nevertheless proposes the possibility of shattering such a bottle in "Paroles des rochers." In a playful reference to Baudelaire, this poem is addressed to women's hair; its last lines anticipate Mansour's sentiments: "Les infinis éternels se brisent en tessons ô chevelures! / C'était ce sera une nuit des nuits sans lune ni perle / Sans même de bouteilles brisées" (C & B 139). Yet these shards exist without broken bottles; the liberating act of shattering the bottle is missing from Desnos' shimmering images. It is Mansour who demonstrates in her poems how enclosure in the bottle-pedestal feels: like a sentence to silence, if not to death.

The idealized yet distanced object of desire feels reduced by such adulation—manipulated, like the uncanny figures created by the surrealist game of the *cadavre exquis* (in which each participant draws a section of the "figure" on a folded sheet of paper without seeing the section that preceded it, or knowing how it will be continued). The drawing produced by the game is at once fascinating and disturbing. The resulting body is fractured, segmented—*un corps morcelé*. Entrapping the desired Other in a bottle is akin to transforming her into a fetish of herself—into a psychological being who has yet to form an individual identity. If she is to love back—to reciprocate—she must be allowed not only to breathe but to exist. Mansour's response to Desnos' message in the bottle is as follows: if you wish to meet your desired Other, you must break the bottle.

In Mansour, the shooting star within Desnos' nocturnal interior bottle finds a voice, but she does not always sing harmoniously. Indeed, her poetic dreams resemble nightmares. She takes up Breton's challenge from the conclusion of *Nadja*: "La beauté sera CONVULSIVE ou ne sera pas."¹³ Her anger is vehement, as at the end of the collection's final poem:

le crache sur ceux qui écoutent
Derrière leurs prunelles limpides

Leurs braguettes piétinées par trop de cerveaux fêlés
 Leurs portes salement closes
 Nomenclature du cauchemar
 Une seule goutte d'urine sur le trottoir
 Tous les museaux s'allongent

(CB 132-3)

Mansour has already referred to herself as a nocturnal bird of prey; she finds contempt delicious—a bitter aphrodisiac; and she portrays herself as an *amante/mante*: “Comme elle je dévorerais celui qui violerait mes flancs. . . . Il faut savoir attendre pour se venger / Imiter les insectes pour plaire” (CB 39, 53, 81).

Rosalind Krauss comments that the praying mantis is a common image in Surrealism: “the female mantis’ sexual practices—in certain species, its consumption of its mate after or even during copulation—and its voracity made it the perfect symbol of the phallic mother, fascinating, petrifying, castrating.”¹⁴ Yet, in science, the mantis is also a victim, which, as a standard procedure is placed under glass, and etherized, for the sake of observation and collection.¹⁵ Both potential victimizer and victim, the praying mantis acts as an ideal metaphor for Mansour. For while her poems abound in cries of distress, clearly she also savors revenge.

Her “Régions barbares,” answers to Desnos’ “Dans les espaces du sommeil.” Just as he had imagined, she lurks in the night. But far from being a wonder of the world, she is alone there, and lonely (CB 82). For Mansour, stars do not engender marvelous constellations, they are cold. By juxtaposition she compares the natural, supple phenomenon of a star-filled night (“la nuit gorgée d’étoiles”) to the rigid walls of her room. She describes herself not as celestial, but terrestrial: “Je suis l’animal de la nuit” (CB 119). To her the corridors of outer space are peopled by sleepwalkers petrified into “formes ultimes.” Only the damned live in glass bottles: “Les damnés sont à table dans leurs tristes habitacles de verre” (CB 120).

Mansour admits to thinking overly much of funeral ceremonies. Her preoccupation with death narrows the distance between herself and Desnos. She could have been the little girl from his poem, “Suicidé de nuit,” who goes off to school, reciting her lessons -- including a line about the transparency of tombstones (C & B 125)—except that Mansour sees the tombstones themselves as “femmes brisées.” Like Desnos, she ties death to love: “J’ai peur d’être seule dans ta tombe” (CB 110, 123-24). Also in the manner of Desnos, even when her images are morbid, surrealistically they are never far from

humour: "Seuls les morts n'apprécient guère les finesses de l'autopsie" (CB 100).

The most striking similarity between Mansour and Desnos is their shared reverence for the Rimbalesque "alchemy" of writing, which they both take seriously, despite their surrealist humour. In *La Liberté ou l'amour!* Desnos describes writing as an alchemical phenomenon, to which the poet must appeal if he hopes to transform the white page into a psychic mirror. For him, the page remains continually on the brink of changing into something more sinister—a cemetery of words. From such a melancholy state, the page may be saved only by "une écriture magique et efficace," capable of transmuting it into a reflective surface.¹⁶

This intensity in Desnos is matched by Mansour in her line: "Je me noie dans l'encrier du moindre mot" (CB 122). The page as mirror also appears, as "Papier d'argent" (CB 77). Further, in "Le Satin / l'opale / la blanche alchimie," a poem whose title echoes Mallarmé in both its rhythm and thematic suggestion, Mansour's images of a bejeweled woman evoke Desnos' feminine Other.¹⁷ Yet the love-object designated in the last line of "Contrée de mon immense amour" is not a person, it is a place: the page whose opalescent whiteness invites poetic alchemy.

For Mansour as for Desnos, love of the Other is always tempered by the love of writing. However, the positions of their voices differ. The white page of Mansour's title, *Carré Blanc*, proposes a reversal of the natural/cultural relation between margin and text. When we read Mansour, we hear Breton, Eluard, and Desnos in the margins, and her feminine "whiteness" takes its place as primary material. Her poetic voice answers Desnos' description of the feminine as a creative shooting star captured in a bottle. This response demonstrates the capacity of the feminine Other to do more than reflect back the wonder projected onto her. She is more than a mirror. Her creativity shines with all the flash Desnos could have desired, yet more modestly than he might have imagined, because it is more real. Mansour's poetry reveals a woman escaped from the bottle of male idealizations. She does render herself spectacular, but on a human scale, as in "Dans la forêt hors des gonds de la patrie":

J'ai envie
C'est ridicule
D'une distraction
D'une mélodie

De quelque griffonnage
Ou confiture de dame

(CB 78)

In contrast with the mute voice of Desnos' *Other*, Mansour's voice from within the bottle—far from being like homemade preserves—ought rather to be labelled a mysterious elixir, and bear the notice: Warning, contents will disturb as well as dazzle.

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Notes

1. André Breton, "L'Union libre" in *The Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Random House-Vintage, 1984) 182.

2. Joyce Mansour, *Carré Blanc* (Paris: Soleil noir, 1965). In the following pages this text will be referred to as CB.

3. Robert Desnos, *Corps et Biens* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968). In the following pages this text will be referred to as C & B.

4. Marie Claire Dumas, *Robert Desnos ou l'exploration des limites* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1980) 487.

5. Pierre Reverdy, *Nord-Sud* 13 (1918); André Breton in *Les Vases communicants* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1955) 129.

6. In this, her poetry is more in the spirit of André Breton's "L'Union Libre."

7. J.H. Matthews, *Joyce Mansour* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985) 33. [My translation]

8. Paul Eluard, "La courbe de tes yeux" in *Capitale de la douleur*, ed. Vera Daniels (London: Blackwell, 1985) 81.

9. Robert Desnos, "La Place de l'Etoile" in *Nouvelles Hébrides et autres textes 1922-1930*, ed. Marie-Claire Dumas (Paris: Gallimard, 1978) 356.

10. André Breton, "Du surréalisme et ses oeuvres vives" in *Manifestes du surréalisme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) 184.

11. Georges Bataille, "L'Histoire de l'oeil" in *Oeuvres Complètes I: Premiers écrits 1922-1940*, ed. Denis Hollier (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).

12. Arthur Rimbaud, "Aube" and "Illuminations" in *Oeuvres*, ed. Suzanne Bernard (Paris: Garnier, 1960) 284.

13. André Breton, *Nadja* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965) 190.

14. Rosalind Krauss, "Corpus Delicti" in *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*, eds. Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingstone (New York: Abbeville Press, 1985) 78.

15. I am indebted to Gwendolyn Wells for suggesting this analogy to me.

16. Robert Desnos, *La Liberté ou l'amour! suivi de Deuil pour Deuil* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) 47 & 58.


17. Stéphane Mallarmé, "Le vierge, le vivace et le bel aujourd'hui" in *Poésies* (Paris: Livres de poche, 1977) 75.

PAROLES GELEES

UCLA French Studies

Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de
rechercher si, par hasard, se trouverait
ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.

Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*

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