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Excessive Bodies, Shifting Subjects and Voice in the Poetry of Joyce Mansour

Victoria Carruthers

In *Surrealism and Women*, published in 1991, three of the collected essays centred on the work of Joyce Mansour, producing one of the first focused studies of the writer's work in English. These essays situate Mansour under the rubric of surrealism, and indeed, from the publication of *Screams* in 1953, Mansour was very much a part of the surrealist group. Beyond this overarching categorization, however, it can prove rather difficult to situate or theorize Mansour's work. Some have explored her prose using feminist scholarship. Judith Preckshot, for example, discusses Mansour's narrative works through Hélène Cixous' texts on women, writing and subjectivity, and Maryann De Julio obliquely evokes Julia Kristeva's 'speaking subject' when discussing Mansour in her opening essay included in *Surrealism and Women*. Mansour's *poetry*, however, does not lend itself as easily to this sort of deconstruction. As a number of scholars (Ades, Cottenet-Hage and Preckshot) have pointed out, her poetry is more problematic to read through a notion of feminine subjectivity that is more obviously relevant to analysis of the women visual artists within surrealism. Part of the reason for this may be that Mansour "chose actively to side with the Surrealists, rather than simply passively accept Surrealism as a convenient platform" (Ades 111). Another reason might be Mansour's ambivalent attitude to "postwar French feminism" (111), in particular to the views espoused by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, published in 1949. As Beauvoir's text forms one of the bases for the inception of post-structuralist feminist writings, Mansour's work may well have not comfortably fitted into the postmodern discursive project.

Yet this ambivalence towards the feminine subject, and towards the slippery issue of subjectivity, becomes a common device used by Mansour, particularly in her poetry, to resist developing a 'voice' that espouses a single, consistent identity. All three of the contributions to *Surrealism and Women* focus on this practice as a way of exploring the theme of shifting identity in Mansour's work and the way in which this is deployed through

the ambiguous use of pronouns and swift shifts in viewpoint. However, while the voice in Mansour's work remains deliberately elusive, the evocation of an explicitly visceral, erotic language that directly portrays the powerful physical and emotional complexities of sexual desire and love is evident in her work until her relatively early death in 1986.

In this essay I reframe this focus on the conundrum of viewpoint in Mansour's poetry, suggesting that it is her very insistence on 'deconstructing' and fragmenting the body that creates a *disembodied* voice, one that layers disparate images together so compactly and lists parts of the body and bodily functions in such a repetitive mantra that they no longer imply a consistent whole, imaginative or otherwise. The body parts dissolve into bodily fluids, reducing them to an existence which underlines their reliance on words. The constant naming of the parts does not give them more substance, as it did for Adam when he named all the beasts in God's new creation in the opening chapters of Genesis. Rather, Mansour's repetitive naming of body parts denies the possibility of a neat, corporeal whole and allows them only a symbolic existence anchored through the all-encompassing voice. In this way the speaking voice within the poems is pervasive and ethereal. Mansour's poetic voice is sufficiently 'disembodied' to permit simultaneous but subordinate viewpoints all existing at various times within the texts. Female/male, child/parent, human/animal, creator/destroyer, intimate and universal are all multiple identities that coexist within a polyphonous, heteroglossic text (Bakhtin 82). I suggest that through this voice Mansour is able to invoke her connection with the mythology and poetic traditions of Egypt, conjuring a strong sense of the magic and mysticism of the pre Judeo-Christian era in Africa and the ancient Near East. I further develop a notion of Mansour's Egyptian speaking subject by revisiting Katharine Conley's skilful analysis of Mansour's poem "Pandemonium" in which she reads the poet's evocation of Africa/Egypt through an analogy with the 'open body' of the Bakhtinian 'carnavalesque.' I wish to extend this reading to suggest that Bakhtin's notion of the 'grotesque' may be better suited to explain how Mansour's poetic voice articulates a transformative process that subverts all expectations through its reliance on base materialism.

My overall aim here is to encourage renewed interest in Mansour's poetry, which has received less scholarly attention than her prose works or plays, first by exploring Mansour's connection to Egypt and then by touching on the shifting viewpoints in her poetry and on the recurring motifs of death and the 'grotesque body'. By far the majority of Mansour's work has been published only in French; however, throughout this short essay I have consciously chosen to use English translations in the hope that they might gain a wider audience. Unless otherwise indicated, all passages are quoted from Serge Gavronsky's edited collection *Essential Poems and Writings*, published in English in 2008, or from his translated version of *Cris - Screams*,

published in 1995. I am grateful to have been afforded access to Katharine Conley's translation of "Pandemonium," published for the first time in this issue of *Dada/Surrealism*.

Who the Devil is Joyce Mansour?

In the opening lines to her essay entitled "Identity Crises: Joyce Mansour's Narratives", Judith Preckshot asks, "Who the devil is Joyce Mansour?", a question that resonates all the more as there is so little knowledge of her life in French or English. The same facts are summarily reproduced across the literature: Mansour was born Joyce Patricia Adès in 1928 in England, the daughter of Egyptian Jewish parents one of whom (although it is unclear which one) was the child of a textile and clothing manufacturer in Manchester. She was raised in Cairo and married at nineteen, although her husband died soon after and she went on to marry Samir Mansour. Once in Paris, she soon became close to the surrealists, in particular Breton, who acclaimed her first publication *Screams* in 1953. The Mansours often hosted evenings for the surrealists, including the infamous 1959 event, *Execution du testament du Marquis de Sade*. Deliberately fashioning her hair and jewellery after the styles of ancient Egypt, "Mansour was the embodiment of the surrealist female ideal in that she was both beautiful and exotic" (Conley, *Automatic Woman* 131). Breton was particularly taken with her, not only because her writing was so clearly extraordinary in its frank and subversive sexuality, but also because she may well have symbolised the personification of the "victorious Orient" he had called upon years before, to "do with me as you please [...] lovely bird of prey and of innocence, I implore you from the depths of the kingdom of shadows! Inspire me!" (Antle 5). Less hyperbolically, his views on the subversive potential of the 'Orient', specifically Egypt, as the source of a "new myth" capable of "liquidating" the dominance of Western rationalism, became part of his wider political agenda (Antle 4).

The late French scholar and friend of Mansour, Serge Gavronsky, furnishes a few more rather startling facts in his introduction to the *Essential Poems and Writings of Joyce Mansour*. First, he indicates that Mansour was brought up as a strict Sephardic Jew who maintained adherence to her faith until the death of her first husband. From an early age she was taught to read the sacred texts in Hebrew and tutored in the wider mysticism of the Kabbala and the mythologies of the ancient Near East. In 1949, she married Samir Mansour and a year before *Screams* was published Mansour had her first son Philippe, to be followed by her second son Cyrille in 1955. I have not managed to find any further mention of Mansour's children. Gavronsky also mentions that her mother died when she was 15. In an interview with the photographer Marion Kalter in 1977, Mansour reveals a young adulthood overshadowed by grief: "I was a sportive girl in the sun until my mother died...then I got

married. My husband died also. At that point I became conscious of all this and started to see things. One sees that everything is not rosy. I wrote to get it all out."

Writing, then, is perhaps a means to gain some control over a life in which Mansour seems to be powerless – certainly against death. A picture emerges of Mansour as multicultural and polylingual, as orphan, wife, widow, mother and artistic creator. We might think that Mansour inhabits multiple, concurrent and shifting identities. One of these, the influence of Mansour's Egyptian ethnicity, may be a valuable way of understanding how multiple viewpoints might co-exist within the parameters of a single poem. In the three sections below I will look at some of the possible approaches to the issue of Joyce Mansour's poetical relationship to the transformative potential in the imagery of Egypt.

The shifting I

In Cairo, Mansour was actively involved with Georges Henein (1914-1973) and the surrealist group he founded in the 1930s. Mansour contributed to his review *Art et liberté* that was published until Henein's return to Paris in 1947, and she has been included in collected volumes with other poets involved with the group. Henein admired Mansour's poetry, commenting in particular on her use of black humor and the way in which she drew on surrealist accents to evoke "the rigorous cruelty of childhood" (Antle 8). Primarily, he saw her as an Egyptian poet. Gavronsky, too, acknowledges but does not detail a strong "Egyptian subtext." In her article "Joyce Mansour and Egyptian Mythology" (also in *Surrealism and Women*), Maryann De Julio convincingly demonstrates the way in which Mansour "draws heavily on the Egyptian cult of the dead to explore and express an inner psychic reality" (114). In fact Mansour invokes both Eros and Thanatos to describe a psychic, emotional and physical experience that is simultaneously creative and destructive.

At the start of her paper De Julio points out that Mansour evokes the Egyptian deity Hathor in her common representation as a cow on the very first page of *Screams*:

The nail planted in my celestial cheek
The horns that grow behind my ears
My bleeding wounds that never heal
My blood that becomes water that dissolves that embalms
My children that I strangle while granting their wishes
All this made me your Lord and your God. (De Julio 115)

The poem's allusions to the blood and body of Christ and to the ancient Egyptian spiritual practice of embalming may be seen as an implied reference to an all-encompassing and never-ending spiritual life. In turn these are

folded into the notion of a female deity that can as easily destroy as create, a deity both benevolent and malignant and all-powerful. De Julio explains that Hathor is often evoked by Mansour recalling her as both fertility goddess as well as destructive Eye. In this case the Eye of Hathor and the I of the poem are conflated into a single force that both redeems and destroys and is both male and female. Ades has commented on the maleness and femaleness of the 'I' in Mansour's poetry (113). As anthropologist Jonathan Marshall argues, "the Egyptian pantheon is different from all others in that ambiguity is embraced and the threat of disruption is accepted." De Julio, too comments how "bisexuality was common in the creation myths" of Egypt (116). Before the advent of a sky god Rê, more akin to Judeo-Christian monotheism, it was the female god Hathor, or commonly conflated with her, Nut, who ruled the sky. She was often depicted as holding the earth in a protective embrace. She was also the personification of the destroyer. Perhaps the most interesting part of this myth is that at the end of the day, Nut would swallow the sun and after it had worked its way through her body she would give birth to it again in the morning. This is a creation myth in which the feminine swallows the masculine (sun) and which celebrates both the creative and procreative process. An implicit understanding of a feminine which destroys and creates forms part of Mansour's distinctive understanding of female subjectivity.

In *Screams* Mansour slips between pronouns. Her "I" often implies that the speaker is using a male persona or subtly changes viewpoint during the telling:

She loves me selfishly.
Loves it when I drink her night spit.
Loves it when I slip my salted lips
Along her obscene legs across her fallen breasts.
Loves it when I mourn my youthful nights
While she tires my muscles which rebel
Against her abusive will. (25)

The speaker here could be male or female. The voice is aggressive, even loathing, yet submissive at the same time. More often, Mansour uses the second person and calls upon, brings into being, another who may be an eroticised Other through which the poet can focus purely on the rawness of sexual desire:

Between your fingers
My mouth
Between your teeth
My eyes
In my belly
Your ferocious rhythm
Peels my body
Of raw sensation. (45)

Or, more frequently, the Other is either dead or dying and Mansour establishes a scenario where the speaker summons a 'second person' who is resolutely physical but absent while providing a dialogue through which the poet can explore her own psycho-emotional state with an imagined, immortal Other:

I lift you in my arms
for the last time.
I lower you quickly into your cheap coffin.
Four men carry it aloft after nailing it shut
Over your broken face over your anguished limbs.
They carry it down cursing the narrow stairs
And you move in your tight little world.
Your head severed from your slit throat
This is the beginning of eternity. (16)

Again, the relationship between the 'I' and the 'you' is ambiguous. Whom do we lift up in our arms? A child, a fragile infirm parent, a murdered lover? The 'I' seems abstracted, split, yet at the same time is ultimately, through the poet writing the words, one and the same. Interestingly, in his essay on classical (pre-Islamic) Arabic poetry, Geert Jan van Gelder points out that there is a strong tradition in early Arabic verse of using the first and second person to refer to the self in sudden unannounced shifts sometimes over the space of a couple of lines. He argues that this shifting is most prevalent when "passions and emotions are recalled or when disillusionments are implied (separation, breach of promise [...])" (28) almost as if the very borders of the self were threatening to fall away or as if the only way to exact distance from the strength of sentiment were to view the self from the outside. Fluent in Arabic, a voracious reader and a part of Henein's group that promoted the traditions of the Arabic language, Mansour was presumably well aware of the large body of poetry to which Gelder is referring.

Mansour's use of the second person as a device for creating a dialogue which is ultimately from a single voice is common throughout *Screams* and throughout her work in general:

Last night I saw your corpse.
You were damp and naked in my arms.
I saw your shiny skull
I saw your bones kicked up by the morning sea.
On the white sand under a hesitant sun
Crabs fought over your flesh.
Nothing remained of your plump breasts
And yet that's the way I liked you
My flower. (21)

Here, in a dreamscape, the speaker manages to contain and control death through the imaginative function of memory. The decay of the body becomes part of the natural process of renewal. By evoking the inevitability of death of the Other, Mansour ensures the victory of single 'I'. She explains it best herself in a line from one of her own poems: "I am myself, I am the enemy. Alone" (*Essential Poems and Writings* 109). This sentiment is reminiscent of the way in which Mansour describes her isolation in the interview with Marion Kalter (quoted above), yet it also encapsulates the distillation of a single voice that speaks for both self and Other – another that is both multicultural and inherently part of the self.

Decay and excess

Death and decay loom large as recurring motifs in Mansour's poetry and prose. De Julio points to the influence of the Egyptian cult of Eros and Thanatos in her poetry, and certainly she mounts a convincing argument. At times the poet manages to collapse desire and the attraction to death seamlessly:

Wait for me
I hardly feel time fleeing
From my room where my tears sleep in my bed
I know your angular body
That never stops dancing to the sound of my laughter.
I know your vicious body
That cares only for the warmth of the dying
In his arms on his mouth between his hairy legs
Wait for my pleasure to prepare its death
Wait for my body to grow cold to grow stiff
Before taking your own pleasure. (*Screams* 24)

Here death is momentary orgasm; it is the natural end of us all and, yet it is usurped by desire. However, in *Screams*, it is Mansour's personal experience that drives her to seek imagery commensurate with destruction, decay and violence. To return to Mansour's interview with Kalter in 1977:

...I wrote to get it all out. Everything became disgusting for me. I spoke in English but wasn't very cultivated. I was strong in sports, which made me be with men all the time. Everything came out like a scream. That became the name of my first book. I didn't take myself very seriously. For me it was a way of getting it all out because of rage and vengeance. To get the bad blood out. It became the transformation of a problem. Then I met Sam and we came to Paris. It was with my meeting the surrealists, André Breton among them, that everything really started.

Although Breton loomed large in Mansour's life, her work has a much greater affinity, at least on the surface, with the approaches of Bataille. To the best of my knowledge this connection has not been fully explored, but even a cursory comparison between the types of imagery favoured in *Documents* and the texts written by Bataille for publication in the journal reveal a certain similarity: the emphasis on waste, meat, carcasses, decay, female body parts, anthropological and ritualistic artifacts, juxtaposed with texts on philosophy, tracts on poetry and the Bataille's own critical dictionary is as disorientating and subversive as Mansour's carefully compiled layers of imagery and linguistic ambiguity. For Bataille as for Mansour, these elements have a transformative potential. In *Death and Sensuality: A Study of Eroticism and Taboo* he claims that the final aim of eroticism is fusion, the removal of all barriers. He continually points out that this fusion is the unavoidable cycle which links Eros and Thanatos. In *Screams* Mansour repeats the words decay, blood, flesh, rotting, death, filth, dying and disgust over and over again like a hellish mantra. They appear on every page, in nearly every poem. As other scholars have pointed out, she also lists body parts, hair, breasts, legs, bellies, ears, anuses, penises, hands, eyes and mouths. As in Bataille, these last two feature heavily:

Sitting on her bed with her legs apart.
A bowl in front of her.
Looking for something to eat but seeing nothing
The woman whose eyelids were eaten by flies
Wails.
Flies came in through the windows
Left by the door
Hovered over her bowl
Red eyes black flies
Eaten by the woman
Who couldn't see a thing. (25)

Mouths become eyes. Mansour hints at the association with mouths and eyes and vaginas; at rotting and starvation and sex and poverty. Indeed, *Screams* focuses on all aspects of the mouth: the sounds, fluids, emotions and words that issue from it and the act of devouring. Bataille, too, refers to the mouth and its capacity to render a human more like an animal, spurting explosive impulses issued as screams (*Visions of Excess* 59). This excess of rage and disgust that leaves the body through the contortions of the mouth is precisely what Mansour was referring to in her conversation with Kalter. It is an experience sufficiently cathartic to be transcendent: the birth of a new life and a speaking subject.

The 'Open Body' and the Dominant Voice

To continue my exploration of Mansour's Egyptian speaking subject, in this final section I look at Mansour's long poem "Pandemonium" (1976) which is in one sense an evocation of Africa as the embodiment of transformative potential imagined by Breton. It is reminiscent of the marvellous itself, the point at which anything is possible. In this case, Mansour also evokes the Egypt of her imagination, "Poised between two doors", the Oriental and Occidental. In another sense, her imagery positions the desert as a site of real and violent 'magical' transformation, of primordeal, black magic. The poem opens with the familiar references to the throat and mouth and the use of the second person, but by the end of the first stanza we are aware that the tone of this speaker is quite different from the bile-spitting 'I' of *Screams*. This voice is calling to a vast, chaotic and wondrous place, dazzling in its color, potency and scale:

Offer your throat to the night
Obsessive Africa
Spit your teeth your waste
Your dizziness
In the whipped cream
Of the church
The blowfly's trunk
Skinny sluggish Priapus
Satisfies his thirst
With amniotic fluid
From the burning coals pulls out a stone
A crown of thorns
Black vermilion like the seven lanterns
Of the embolism
Laugh nomads, old age is sedentary
Far away in the forest
A scarab
Glistens.

From the outset, the reader is confronted with layers of allusion - Christian, bodily, classical, reproductive, ritualistic, pantheistic, sacrificial ("Offer your throat") and distinctly Egyptian. The rhythm of the language is perfectly metered to slow down to the last two words. Not only does Mansour evoke the very heart of Milton's chaotic but charismatic Hell; she creates the body of an Africa with few constraints, an Africa that defies rational order. It is a space in which the "Evening Star" co-exists with the "sad stink of urine." Over the eight stanzas Mansour amasses the stark language of bodily function set against allusion to Edenic Paradise and sacred African ritual. "Spit", "waste", "sperm", "urine", "vomit", "blood", "bleeding", "rump", "anus",

“penis”, “mouth”, “flesh”, “ears”, “foreskin”, “lips”, “teeth” and “throat” are all repeated over and over like a rosary of base physicality which stands in opposition to repetitions of “paradise”, “stars”, “sky”, “night” which thread celestial allusions throughout the poem. In this vacillation between earth and sky, low and high, lurk references to ancient rituals of transformation, “tattoos on the skin” and a call to “offer the foreskin to the knife” that imply an older, more visceral and transgressive unification of body and spirit than the later Christian notion of transubstantiation.

In her essay on “Pandemonium” Conley argues that Mansour depicts the ‘body’ of Africa and the many characters within ‘her’ as being in a state of transition or flux. She draws an analogy with Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘carnavalesque’, a space or moment in which the boundaries between high and low culture are blurred, allowing for the parody and subversion of high culture, accepted norms and established institutions by the ‘lower’, less cultivated orders. Carnival thus symbolises a world turned upside down in which the social hierarchies are freed from their normal social constraints (Bakhtin, *Rabelais*). For Bakhtin, this temporary inversion represents a transitional state which Conley refers to as an “open body” (Joyce Mansour’s’ 225). However, what drew me to the relationship between “Pandemonium” and Bakhtin was not the openness of the ‘carnavalesque’ but Mansour’s mention of Gargantua in the fifth stanza:

Wake up the trade winds from Oriental shores are forever dappled
The somber spectacle of brains draining from nostrils
Would make Gargantua laugh

According to Bakhtin, Rabelais’ tale of Gargantua and Pantagruel critiques social and political life in the Renaissance through the grotesque giants’ frank exchange of the everyday language of bodily function and sexual innuendo and ribald humour. Through an analysis of Rabelais’ work, Bakhtin develops his notions of the ‘carnavalesque’ as a *social order* and the ‘grotesque’ as a *literary trope*. The latter, focused on the realism of the grotesque body, is a way of lowering, parodying or subverting the values entrenched in the overly-mannered, petty-aristocratic and religious hierarchies of the day. It is the capacity for the ‘grotesque’, for language, to dissolve the distinctions between all things that seems to correspond best with Mansour’s intention here, as she imagines the transgressive laughter of Gargantua. Indeed, the very nature of language as a creative yet mystical force, capable of absorbing and describing both the base and the lofty, is captured in stanza four, “One thousand impenetrable words alight and sparkle.”

All these layers of reference in “Pandemonium” combine, Conley suggests, to create 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” (“Joyce Mansour’s”

227). I agree that Mansour's Africa is clearly a textual body that refers to its material nature if only to list over and again its many and various parts. Yet the constant repetitions are almost hypnotic and seem to be more akin to the subversive and transformative power of words. The very uttering of the words blood, mouth, teeth, flesh, spit, vomit and cry constantly creates a song of excess which denies corporeality and exults imagination. Rather than presenting a polyphony of different viewpoints and speaking voices as in the earlier poetry in *Screams*, Mansour distils a speaking voice that is both self and many others but is arguably still "Alone." Bakhtin refers to this process of distillation as 'heteroglossia', many languages speaking as one, part of his concept of the dialogic imagination in which all language (and therefore ideas) is dynamic and relational, constantly extending and informing itself. For Mansour, the mouth is a recurring motif, one that has the power to create the words that issue from it. The full mouth, on the other hand, appears to represent the Other. In "Pandemonium," Mansour states categorically that the full mouth, the swallowing mouth, "is death, after all." I am reminded of the deity Nut who, every evening, swallows the sun, affecting 'his' demise for that day. Death is equal to a subject not free, even momentarily, to speak.

The Final Utterances

In this essay I have suggested that an examination of Mansour's poetry through the lens of her relationship to Egypt is a fruitful way of better understanding some of the constant recurring motifs and imagery throughout her poems: the often ambiguous relationship between the 'I' and the 'you' in her works, the insistence on the primacy of death and decay, and the emergence of an omnipotent speaking voice that acts as a disembodied conduit for a range of other speaking identities within a single poem. Indeed, the peculiarities of subjectivity that Mansour explores produce some of the boldest and most stunning of surrealist poetry. The voice that emerges from these complex articulations of cultural identity indicates that the poet's Egyptian background and personal identification with Africa are of paramount importance.

By way of concluding, I would like to look briefly at one of Mansour's final poems:

Untitled Poem
Never tell your dream
To the one who doesn't love you
The hostile ear is dried up
The bitter mouth maligns
Hatred vomits the sand in the hourglass
Faster always faster
The betrayed night aborts

A passion in the present already passed
And fear only augments
The rage of the caiman
The size of the cancer
Bury your dreams in the bags under your eyes
They will be safe from envy
They will be safe from the adage
That the African babbles
And the old are wise. ("Four Poems")

Even in the last years of her illness when death is drawing near Mansour still relies on the language of excess to convey her outrage at the thought of not being able to create through words: of being thought of as a babler. I would suggest that the 'you' in this poem is a caution to the reader but also an address to self, or even multiple selves as she appears to be talking to her own reflection (looking at the "bags under your eyes"). In response to the difference between the male gaze and the way in which a woman might see herself, Mansour once wrote "I think woman should hide herself in the imaginary, indecisive folds of her own reflection." (Ades 112). There are two people in this poem, the self and the Other-self. Both are real and both are imagined; however, it is the imagined self, buried under the surface who remains an 'African' and a singular speaking subject. I recall again Mansour's words that perfectly capture the way in which multiple selves/voices are synthesised into the arrangement of an imagined whole: "I am myself, I am the enemy. Alone."

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