

Hard Chimeras

– A Few Words on the Works of Surrealist Women Artists

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What writers should we read?

We should read unknown, forgotten, invented writers. Long live hoaxes! Above all, however, we should read the works of writers who do not describe the world realistically: that's what newspapers and social media are for. Let's escape into literature. Let's escape from reality which is overwhelming with its excess of facts and devastating news. It won't hurt if the writers you like have a soft spot for absurdity, eroticism, black humor, irony, and ambiguity. It's great if their books return to you in your dreams.¹

This is what Agnieszka Taborska, a literary scholar, art historian, and expert in surrealist art, tells us to do in her book *Świat zwariował. Poradnik surrealistyczny jak przeżyć* [The world has gone crazy: A Surrealist guide to surviving]. However, in the end, she also adds: "Among so many men, there are only two younger women who outlived all their fellow Surrealists: Leonora Carrington [...] and Gisèle Prassinos (with her 'automatic' short stories)."² Let us follow Taborska's advice but focus solely on women writers. Let us try to read the works left behind by Surrealist women artists.

Before we can do that, however, we must first attend to other matters. Surrealist women writers must first be "discovered." The history of avant-garde movements in literature and art from the first half of the 20th century is still predominantly a history of men, or at least it seems so to us when we look at the books published on the subject as well as at the catalogues of paintings, sculptures and artifacts. This is true for all avant-garde tendencies and directions, but this artistic masculinization is definitely most visible in Surrealism. The goal of this

¹ Agnieszka Taborska, *Świat zwariował. Poradnik surrealistyczny jak przeżyć* [The world has gone crazy: A Surrealist guide to surviving] (Olszanica: BOSZ, 2021), 16.

² Taborska, *Świat zwariował. Poradnik surrealistyczny jak przeżyć*, 17.

article isto answer two questions: Have there been any great Surrealist women artists?³ And, if it is true, where have they been hiding? Both questions are extremely relevant in the year 2024, a hundred years after the publication of *The Manifesto of Surrealism*.

Muses/Medusas

Although it seems that Polish and world literary studies have provided answers to the first of these questions, the conviction that the artistic avant-garde is predominantly a male-dominated field persists. The historical avant-garde's contribution to the canon (paradoxically, contrary to the avant-garde's greatest fears⁴) is the work of men. André Breton, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, Tristan Tzara, Luis Aragon – these names appear in almost all studies on Surrealist art. These names were most likely absorbed by the Polish research tradition under the influence of Adam Ważyk's *Antologia* [Anthology]⁵ and Krystyna Janicka, a Polish scholar who specialized in Surrealist art.⁶ Avant-garde women artists, although they are making a comeback and being (re)discovered in literary studies and art history,⁷ remain in the shadow. In the most popular and well-known studies, especially in school textbooks, they usually function as muses who inspired great avant-garde artists – we do not look at them as artists in their own right or as someone whose contribution defined the avant-garde. Of course, as Taborska points out, this situation changed in the 1990s; however, it should be clarified that this was as a result of large and important exhibitions organized in the late 1980s, which included the works of women artists. The aforementioned intensification of research in this area concerned mainly art history.⁸ In the history of literature, as Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik writes, the matter looks slightly different:

In literary studies there is a dominant tendency to situate women's poetry outside modern literature, and especially outside avant-garde literature.⁹

³ This question of course refers to the title of Linda Nochlin's famous essay "Why have there been no great women artists?" It is meant to be semantically playful. I start with a cognitive error of sorts and actually ask why we do not know anything about great Surrealist women artists or know so little.

⁴ Renato Poggioli, among others, wrote about the fear of becoming ordinary and classicized in the eyes of the audience. See Renato Poggioli, *The theory of the avant-garde* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

⁵ Adam Ważyk, *Surrealizm. Antologia* ([Surrealism. Anthology] Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1976).

⁶ Krystyna Janicka, *Surrealizm* [Surrealism] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1973).

⁷ Some publications only mention selected texts and paintings by avant-garde women artists; others try to offer not only comprehensive but also innovative approaches that do not place these works within the framework of stereotypical discussions on women's art or art by women. See: Jan Marx, *Grupa poetycka Kwadryga* [Kwadryga poetry group], Warsaw 1983; Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz, *Szesnaście wierszy Mili Elin* [Sixteen poems by Miła Elin], in: Andrzej K. Waśkiewicz, *W kręgu Zwrotnicy* [Zwrotnica circles], Krakow 1983; Agata Zawiszewska, *Między Młoda Polską, Skamandrem i Awangardą. Kobiety piszące wiersze w dwudziestoleci umiędzywojennym* [Among Young Poland, Skamander, and the Avant-Garde: Women poets in the interwar period], Szczecin 2014.

⁸ It is worth paying attention to the publications mentioned by the scholar: *Surrealist women. An international anthology; Surrealism and women; Mirror images. Women, surrealism and self-representation; Inverted Odyseys*. Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman, and also add new books: Sylwia Zientek, *Tylko one. Polska sztuka bez mężczyzn*. Muter, Rajeczka, Szapocznikow, Bilińska, Kobro i inne [Women only. Polish art without men. Muter, Rajeczka, Szapocznikow, Bilińska, Kobro and others] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Agora, 2023); Michaela Carter, *Leonora in the morning light* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021) and Whitney Chadwick's classic *Women artists and the surrealist movement*. The Polish translation was published in 2024.

⁹ Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, "«Trudne» wiersze. Konstelacje neoawangardy w poezji kobiecej" ['Difficult' poems. Constellations of the neo-avant-garde in women's poetry], in: *Stulecie poetek polskich. Przekroje. Tematy. Interpretacje* [A century of Polish poets. Cross-sections – themes – interpretations], ed. Joanna Grądziel-Wójcik, Agnieszka Kwiatkowska, Ewa Rajewska, Edyta Sołtys-Lewandowska (Krakow: Universitas, 2020), 421.

Is, as Marianna Bocian writes, women's poetry "doomed to be a failure"? For some reason, scholars do not pay as much attention to women writers. One may wonder whether that is because there were fewer women than men writers or because of the artistic qualities of their work, or, finally, because of manipulation [...] – the current *status quo* seems to say more about the mechanisms of reception and the politics of building a canon than about literary practice.¹⁰

What could be the possible excuses? Perhaps that it is impossible to write about everything/everyone: the poetics of a textbook, short and succinct, forces authors to make difficult choices. They often focus on the most distinctive works. However, the history of literature and art is not only full of gaps – it is often based not only on selection but on deliberate exclusion or, harmless as it may appear, silencing.

Let us begin the deconstruction of this model with a work of art that usually features in all histories of art of the interwar period. Everyone is probably familiar with *Fountain* – a work exhibited by Marcel Duchamp (although signed with the name of an unknown artist, R. Mutt). However, increasing evidence proves that it was not Duchamp's work. *Fountain* was probably created (as Duchamp wrote in one of the letters to his sister) by Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven – a writer and performance artist born in Swinemünde in Pomerania, who worked with techniques similar to the ones used by Duchamp.¹¹ This theory has not been confirmed, but I mention it because it raises an important question: Why do we know so little about the work of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven? After all, she could have contributed to the creation of one of the most important avant-garde works of art. Are we even able to create an alternative list of Surrealist women artists? In addition to the names mentioned above, it should also include: Dorothea Tanning, Meret Oppenheim, Leonor Fini, Eileen Agar, Remedios Varo, Erna Rosenstein, Zuzanna Ginczanka (whose work is usually associated with the Skamander group, although it exhibits surrealist features), and Debora Vogel. Most of them focused mainly on painting, sculpture, and installations. Still, quite a few left behind extremely interesting poems and books of prose. Łukasz Kraj has already discussed the specificity of women's writing within the avant-garde tradition.¹² In this article, I analyze the works by selected Surrealist women artists not to once again assign to them some general(izing) features but to showcase their diversity and artistic individualism within the greater trend. Respectively, I will not write about what feminists owe to Surrealist women artists. Some Surrealist women artists clearly strived for (both social and political) emancipation, while others distanced themselves from feminist movements.¹³ Still, it is worth taking a closer look at how different female characters were constructed, at the tricks that were employed to convey their individuality. We can compare them with the well-known, not to say canonical, Surrealist paintings and texts created by men. Indeed, women occupy an important yet peculiar place in the work of Surrealist men artists:

Max Ernst titled the first of his three collage novels from 1929 *La femme 100 têtes*, which phonetically means both *La femme cent têtes* (The woman with a hundred heads) and *La femme sans tête* (The woman without a head). Both interpretations correspond to the Surrealist vision of women, per-

¹⁰Grądziel-Wójcik, 443.

¹¹See: Zientek, 18.

¹²Łukasz Kraj, "Feminizowanie awangardy? «Na pewno książka kobiety» Wandy Melcer" [Feminizing the avant-garde? 'Definitely a book written by woman' by Wanda Melcer], *Pamiętnik Literacki* 3 (2019): 59–75.

¹³Agnieszka Taborska writes about this question. See: Agnieszka Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni. Surrealizm [Conspirators of the imagination. Surrealism]* (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria, 2007), 149.

ceived above all as enigmas and *femmes fatales*. Women are dangerous as hundred-headed hydras. They are haunted mediums who hear voices inaccessible to men. They are madwomen who – having lost their minds – connect with nature and secret rites. In short, they are women without heads.¹⁴

Women in Surrealist paintings are dangerous chimeras that men try to tame (by drawing them as objects, by decapitating them, by fragmenting their bodies, or by immobilizing their frames). In this context, let us emphasize the exceptional status of objects in Surrealist art – objects are subjected to transformation; their meanings change; they have their own unique identity.¹⁵ Unfortunately, presenting women as dismembered objects, depriving them of their faces, results not only in their objectification but also in their exclusion from the order of discourse. However, we will not analyze in detail the general features of Surrealist art, as many researchers have already written on the subject. Instead, we will look at how women artists create a Surrealist world. While they will all be called “Surrealist women artists,” in fact we will focus on extracting their individual poetics and ways of representing the world, as advised by H el ene Cixous:

But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the “dark” – that dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute – there is, at this time, no general woman, no one typical woman. What they have *in common* I will say. But what strikes me is the infinite richness of their individual constitutions: you can’t talk about *af*-female sexuality, uniform, homogeneous, classifiable into codes – anymore than you can talk about one unconscious resembling another. Women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible.¹⁶

“feed them cowardly stupidities, and you’ll see how they follow us ...”. Gis el e Prassinos

Few Polish readers have had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with Gis el e Prassinos’s novel, the content and meaning of which contemporary context rendered very timely. It is a novel about artificial intelligence. About artificial intelligence let us add that this construct fails, and at the same time forces individuals to develop not only new skills but above all a different way of looking at the world and their place in it. *Le visage effleur e de peine* [Face touched with sadness] is the story of a young woman who becomes, against her will, the wife of an eccentric scientist. Prassinos explains that the husband used artificial intelligence, the only one of its kind in the world, because when he was working as a miner, his skull was perforated in an accident caused by a methane explosion.¹⁷ Although initially husband and wife live separately, over time Esentielle becomes attached to her husband. Still, she is not able to give up on her freedom and independence completely, and the scientist fears losing his young wife. Interestingly, his perfect brain cannot cope with human emotions and weaknesses – strong emotions

¹⁴Taborska, Spiskowcy wyobra ni. Surrealizm, 119.

¹⁵See: Andr e Breton, “La crise de l’objet” [Crisis of the object], *Cahiers d’art* 11/6-10 (1936): 22; Jakub Kornhauser, *Całkowita rewolucja. Status przedmiot w w poezji surrealistycznej* [Total revolution: The status of objects in Surrealist poetry] (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2015).

¹⁶H el ene Cixous, “The laugh of the Medusa”, trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976): 876.

¹⁷Gis el e Prassinos, *Le visage effleur e de peine* [Face touched with sadness] (Paris: Grasset, 1964), 10. The Polish translation was published in 2005: *Twarz mu nieta smutkiem*, trans. Agnieszka Taborska (Warsaw: Pa stwowo Instytut Wydawniczy, 2005).

interfere with the mechanism. Although the effects of a breakdown are severe, the woman does not abandon her husband. First, she tries to find someone who will repair the artificial intelligence, and later she learns everything there is to know about it. Her goal is to help her husband. Ultimately, however, it is her feelings that help her save him (even when technology fails, the secrets of which she managed to explore; in fact, she knows more about artificial intelligence than other (male) scientists she meets). Ironic in its view of society, Prassinós also offers us something else in her prose. The novel is a parody of classical Enlightenment genres and scientific treatises. In addition, Prassinós constructs an image of a woman that is so different from the Surrealist visions of her mentors – a woman who is strong, independent, capable of enormous sacrifices, changeable, flexible, someone who enjoys life and challenges conventions. Above all and despite everything – she is also empathetic. Of course, as Taborska points out in the introduction to the Polish edition of the novel,¹⁸ instead of a happy ending the reader will be immersed in absurdity, nonsense and, ultimately, grey reality – when the scientist's brain is “repaired” by his wife, the man returns to his books and once again loses interest in what happens around him.

Prassinós was discovered by André Breton. However, this does not change the fact that the then fourteen-year-old Gisèle was treated by Surrealists as a muse, an object of observation, an idea – she was forever a child genius and in their eyes she was not their equal. Surrealists sought inspiration in the female body, but ultimately treated it as an object, as if they were trying to tame the fear of something (someone) they did not understand. They wished to possess the object of their dark desires.¹⁹

Using mainly black humor and the absurd, Prassinós inverts, as it were, the Surrealist myth of the womanhood – presented without a head, representing only the order of the body, defined as *femme fatale*. Although initially skeptical (he did not believe that such a young person may write so well), Breton eventually appreciated these features of her writing, reprinting Prassinós's texts in the *Anthology of black humour*.

One of them, entitled “A Conversation,” is a dialogue between a man and a horse. It of course challenges the myth of chivalry and knights: “In a wheatfield. The man is wearing an ochre lace tunic stained with red. The horse is naked. Hanging from its tail is a matchbox, from which a grasshopper's antennae are jutting. The man is sitting on a white cushion with green designs. The horse is on the man.” The conversation, which begins with the man asking whether they have come into the possession of a green diamond, seemingly makes no sense. It is supposed to be an attempt at automatic recording. It is not coherent and what really matters is what is communicated in the final lines:

THE HORSE: The love I've loved has always appreciated me!

THE MAN: Yes, me too.

THE HORSE: We have reached the same summits.²⁰

Prassinós parodies the philosophical tale and the animal fable, making the reader question their readerly habits. She deconstructs the world not only by rendering the animal human

¹⁸See: Agnieszka Taborska, “Wszystko to brzmi jak bajka...” [This all appears to be a fairy tale...], in: Prassinós, *Twarz muśnięta smutkiem*, 5–15.

¹⁹See: Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni. Surrealizm*, 140.

²⁰Gisèle Prassinós, “A conversation”, in: André Breton, *Anthology of black humour*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/andre-breton-anthology-of-black-humour#toc54>, date of access: 12 April 2024.

but also by making it the man's mentor. Quantifiers which are employed to talk about a completely unrealistic, absurd, and unpredictable reality are exposed as empty signifiers.

Metamorphosis of/in pain – affective effects. Leonora Carrington

Among the recycled objects, dreams, nonsense, juxtapositions, Surrealist images of objectified women without heads, Surrealist women who represented this trend in art were able to find their own distinctive language, creative philosophy (a kind of anti-representation of reality), and ways of exploring and engaging with the world. One artist who fearlessly breaks social conventions in this way is Leonora Carrington. She consistently employs two tricks/motifs in her work: animals and food.

Animalization is one of the more interesting artistic procedures, popular among practically all-Surrealist artists, both male and female. A wild animal, like other objects, was something that Surrealists did not so much intend to tame as release its energy – they wished to see themselves as one of them. People were represented in the company of animals and their two respective worlds created a thought-provoking whole, one where nature and culture came together. The wild and the elusive came to the fore. Taborska wrote about how the division between the human and the animal fades in Carrington's works.²¹ It is worth taking a closer look at selected examples of this process, for example in stories dominated by human characters who ultimately transform into (or actually return to their original form as) a horse, or more precisely, a mare:

In the hallway, Lucrecia began to resist and broke paintings, chairs, and porcelain jars. The old lady was stuck to Lucrecia's back like a mollusk to a rock. [...] I think that he had not noticed my presence. I hid myself behind the door and I heard the old man go up to the children's room. In a little while, I closed my ears with my hands: some frightening blows were heard upstairs, as if a beast were suffering unusual tortures...²²

This passage from "The oval lady" is not only a perfect example of the writer's unique style but also showcases the extraordinary power of metamorphosis, of transforming into an animal. This is something that the heroines (and heroes) of practically every story in *Six surreal stories* and *The seventh horse* go through. Interestingly, animalization is an escape, a reaction to violence and enslavement. However, it is not a fairy-tale act of regaining personal freedom, a transformation that puts an end to suffering. It draws instead on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where transformation is a punishment for transgressing the boundaries, a punishment for trying to free oneself from the constraints of what society calls obedience and conformity. Importantly, this punishment does not come from the outside. This internal transformation is triggered by physical attempts to oppose various forms of oppression – it is liberating and at the same time destructive:

After that, I picked up the cadavers and continued my walk. In a little while, I came across a friend: the horse that, years later, would play an important part in my life.
"Hello!" he said to me. "Are you looking for something?"

²¹Taborska, *Spiskowcy wyobraźni. Surrealizm*, 346–369.

²²Leonora Carrington, "The oval lady", trans. Rochelle Holt, in: Leonora Carrington, *Six surreal stories* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1975), 16–18.

I explained to him the object of my excursion at such an advanced hour in the evening. “Evidently,” he said, “from the social point of view it’s most complicated. Around here live two ladies who are occupied with similar questions. Your pursued goal consists in the eradication of your family shame. They are two very wise ladies. If you want, I will take you to them.”²³

The eight-year-old protagonist of “Uncle Sam Carrington” embarks on a journey, almost like a Campbellian hero(ine).²⁴ Her goal is to find a way to remedy family shame, which is brought on by her uncle and aunt’s vulgar and socially unacceptable laugh. The laugh is triggered by the sight of the moon and the setting sun. Right from the beginning, Carrington ridicules the great cultural myth of the vampire/werewolf, replacing the beast with the laughing aunt and uncle. As in a distorting mirror, instead of sin, corruption, and the fall of man, we come face to face with unstoppable laughter. The play with conventions does not end here. “The cadavers” are cabbage leaves – the remains of a “fratricidal” fight between two vegetables. Two “very wise ladies” who are supposed to help the girl free her family, although they usually “arrange only matters of the oldest and most noble families of England”²⁵ (i.e. descendants of the Duke of Wellington and Sir Walter Scott, that is “noble aristocrats of fine literature”), make a blood(less) sacrifice of carrots and zucchini. The girl is given an elixir that is supposed to help solve the problem. Thus, in this short story, Carrington not only challenges the conventions of fairy tales and fantasy literature, exposing the archaic and hermetic nature of “fine literature,” but also ridicules social conventions. She critiques a world in which laughing too loudly is considered vulgar bestiality and eating is considered taboo. The title of the short story is also a form of critique – Carrington reflects on the belief in the superiority of “the most noble families of England” over the people of the United States of America. The latter are represented by the vulgar Uncle Sam.

Culinary motifs may be found in Carrington’s late novel *The hearing trumpet*. In the very first scene, a woman is trying to save a starving wolf, disregarding the threat that the animal may pose.²⁶ Hunger and gluttony intertwine in the novel, just as the animal world intertwines with the human world – as Carrington matured as a writer, she repeatedly returned to these themes, using them to dismantle the artificiality of norms imposed on society in general and on women in particular. They also appear in a different short story, in which Carrington explores the idea of sisterhood more clearly than in her others works:

In the kitchen, cakes and enormous tarts were put to the flame and taken from the oven. Pomegranates and melons stuffed with larks filled the kitchen: whole oxen were turning slowly on spits, pheasants, peacocks, and turkeys awaited their turn to be cooked. Chests full of fantastic fruit cluttered up the corridors. Drusille walked about slowly in this forest of food, tasting a lark or a cake here and there.²⁷

The feast is meant to celebrate the return of Drusille’s beloved, a former king. Everything is prepared with great care, and the dishes are the returning ruler’s favorite. In accordance with the

²³Leonora Carrington, “Uncle Sam Carrington”, trans. Rochelle Holt, in: Leonora Carrington, *Six surreal stories* (Santa Barbara: Capra Press, 1975), 50.

²⁴See: Joseph Campbell, *The hero with a thousand faces* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968).

²⁵Carrington, “Uncle Sam Carrington,” 51.

²⁶Leonora Carrington, *The hearing trumpet* (London: Routledge, 19746).

²⁷Leonora Carrington, “The Sisters,” in: Leonora Carrington, *The seventh horse and other tales*, trans. Kathrine Talbot and Anthony Karrigan (New York: Dutton, 1988), 42.

conventions of the horror story, to which Carrington clearly alludes, the house hides a dark secret. It is Drusille's sister Juniper: "Drusille lit the candle, illuminating a dirty little attic without windows. Perched on a rod near the ceiling, an extraordinary creature looked at the light with blinded eyes."²⁸ The sister or Drusille's alter ego – a voracious and dangerous mythical siren, part woman and part bird – is kept in a locked attic. However, one time, Drusille is in a hurry and forgets to lock the door. When the hybrid sister escapes, the world so meticulously arranged by her socialized version is destroyed. Liberated from the bonds of convention, she may act on her animal, murderous instincts. Order transforms into chaos and death. The killing/animalization of the beloved, shown *via* a fantastically constructed *pars pro toto*, that is the head (or more specifically the man's beard), is combined with gluttony and overconsumption. All sensual experiences are activated – the abundance of tastes and smells, the texture of the sauces, the softness and consistency of crushed fruit: "The carcass of a peacock decorated Jumart's head. His beard was full of sauces, fish heads, crushed fruit. His gown was torn and stained with all sorts of food."²⁹

Liberation which Carrington's heroines pursue is therefore always a tragic choice – between the real world (and its annihilation) and the surreal. It is also, always, liberation from patriarchy – women reject the structures of power, reject the rules, choosing to focus on themselves and satisfy their own needs. Therefore, animalization usually manifests itself in the figure of a horse or more specifically a white mare, which often appears in Carrington's prose and paintings.³⁰ The mare is, above all, a symbol of the desired freedom. Transforming into an animal is the only way in which one may emancipate oneself. Joanna Mueller thus comments on this question: "Leonora Carrington would certainly agree with what Breton wrote in *The Manifesto of surrealism* in 1924: 'The mere word freedom is the only one that still excites me.' In fact, in each and every story in *The seventh horse* the heroines fight for their freedom."³¹

Metamorphosis is not the only way through which Carrington's heroines may find freedom. Pain (both physical and psychological), both the catalyst and result of metamorphosis, is even more important in this context. I am not talking about the pain experienced by Carrington's heroines, although it is important, but the pain felt by the reader. To draw on Claire Petitmengin's works³² (which Agnieszka Dauksza discusses in her essay on affective reading³³), the primal nature of Carrington's imagery makes us first and foremost *feel* the text and not only understand it. Striving for semantic

²⁸Carrington, "The Sisters," 44.

²⁹Carrington, "The Sisters," 49.

³⁰Agnieszka Taborska writes about it in *Spiskowcy wyobraźni*. Lucyna Urbańska Kidoń, an art popularizer, comments on this question in: "Między rzeczywistością a snem. Życie i twórczość Leonory Carrington" [Between reality and dream: The life and works of Leonora Carrington], *Niezła Sztuka*, <https://niezlasztuka.net/o-sztuce/miedzy-rzeczywistoscia-a-snem-leonora-carrington-zycie-i-tworczosc/>. Taborska and Urbańska Kidoń both refer to Carrington's biography and the figure of her violent father.

³¹Joanna Mueller, "Nightmare narowista" [Temperamental nightmare], *Mały Format* 3-4 (2022), <http://malyformat.com/2022/05/nightmare-narowista/>, date of access 20 April 2024. When the individual stories were published matters because they are a form of protest against the structures of power – a very specific manifestation of power or domination – of which Carrington and Ernst became direct victims. "Becoming-an-animal" is therefore a form of rebellion and hiding, of moving away from a world that has become unbearable. It is also a manifestation of individuality.

³²Claire Petitmengin, "Towards the source of thoughts: The gestural and transmodal dimension of lived experience", *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 14.3 (2007): 54-82.

³³Agnieszka Dauksza, "Przemoc wrażenia. Wstępne rozpoznanie literatury i sztuki afektywnej" [The violence of impression: A preliminary reconnaissance of affective literature and art], in: *Kultura afektu – afekty w kulturze*. Humanistyka po zwrocie afektywnym [Culture of affect – affects in culture. The humanities after the affective turn], ed. Ryszard Nycz, Anna Łebkowska, Agnieszka Dauksza (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2015), 553–591.

completeness, we, as readers, also tend to reflect on sensory impressions. The primary experience described by Carrington opens the door to understanding – of oneself, of one’s individuality.

In conclusion, taking into account the changing biographical and socio-political contexts, it is impossible not to notice that Surrealist women artists, Carrington in particular, write about emancipation in their works, even though they do not openly call themselves feminists. They fight against the physical and conventional forms of objectification. Both were the result of social roles imposed on them and the vision of the female body (as seen in Surrealist art created by men). Surrealist women artists transform themselves from objects into subjects in and through the body of the Other, the foreign body, the body of a wild animal.

Life from the beginning – The helplessness of words and the infinity of worlds. Zuzanna Ginczanka

Zuzanna Ginczanka is not an unknown or a forgotten writer. A lot has already been written about her works, a lot of work and energy has been devoted to finding her traces (I am thinking here primarily of Izolda Kiec’s book³⁴ and Jarosław Mikołajewski’s “investigation,” the results of which were published in *Gazeta Wyborcza* and then collected in a book³⁵). However, when scholars refer to avant-garde tropes in Ginczanka’s poetry, her work is usually associated with the Skamander group. Ginczanka’s biography and her contacts with Julian Tuwim, who became a kind of mentor to her, play a role in such a conventional reading. The poetess’s playful relation with classicism, rhythmic forms, themes, and the overall aesthetics of her poems also suggest a connection to the Skamander group.³⁶ In this section, I do not intend to challenge this classification, because it is hard to disagree with the existing interpretations – not only when it comes to Ginczanka’s relationship with Tuwim (it was a fact) but also when it comes to the aesthetic and formal aspects of her poetry. This does not mean, however, that Ginczanka was not influenced by Surrealism, which she did not have to learn from the “masters.” She could have sought it (and experienced it) “on her own.” One trope in Ginczanka’s poetry may be linked to the Surreal imagination. I am talking about metamorphosis – liberation from the bonds of convention and the pursuit of freedom:

Dni ostatecznych przetopień i ostatecznych spojeń
były podobne innym jak konie nad wodopojem – :
miały kwitnienie brzasków
i pączkowanie gałązek
– – lecz z mieszaniny pierwiastków –
– stałam się ścisłym związkiem.³⁷

³⁴Izolda Kiec, *Ginczanka. Nie upilnuje mnie nikt* [Ginczanka. No one will control me] (Warsaw: Marginesy, 2020).

³⁵Jarosław Mikołajewski, *Cień w cień. Za cieniem Zuzanny Ginczanki* [Shadow in shadow. Chasing Zuzanna Ginczanka’s shadow] (Warsaw: Dowody, 2019).

³⁶Several studies have already addressed how Ginczanka plays with literary conventions, how she draws on the experiences of modernism, utilizes avant-garde techniques, and experiments with language. See: Michał Głowiński, “O liryce i satyrze Zuzanny Ginczanki” [On the poetry and satire of Zuzanna Ginczanka], in: *Twórczość* 8 (1955), 117-119; see: Izolda Kiec, *Wstęp I* [Introduction I], “Szkatuła (1931-1936)” [Box (1931-1936)], in: *Zuzanna Ginczanka, Poezjebrane (1931-1944)* [Collected poems (1931-1944)] (Warsaw: Marginesy, 2023), 11-26.

³⁷Zuzanna Ginczanka, “Przemiany” [Transformations], in: *Zuzanna Ginczanka. Mądrość jak rozkosz. Wiersze wybrane* [Wisdom as delight. Selected poems] (Warsaw: Czuły Barbarzyńca Press, 2017), 35-36.

[The days of final meltings and final fusions
 were all alike like horses at a watering trough – :
 they had the blossoming of dawns
 and the budding of branches
 – – but all these elements –
 – made me a compact compound]

It would be difficult to define images Ginczanka conjures up in her poetry as unequivocally Surrealistic, but it does not invalidate the fact that her poems contain references and structures that are Surrealistic in spirit (although they might also be connected with Bolesław Leśmian's creative influence). While Surrealism never fully developed in Polish poetry, in the interwar period we still find its manifestations and transplants in the works of writers associated with different poetic groups. In the poem quoted above, the transformation (which also occurs in language) evokes both pain and a kind of dark delight. Dissatisfaction ultimately leads to unification and fulfillment. It progresses from language to the body, to its primal instincts. Fusion and melting, although seemingly final, do not bring fulfillment – it is only a stage, a process, the first step of an escape plan. This transformation stands in Ginczanka's poetry for inexhaustible transgression, which never brings relief: "Jak tyle razy wczoraj, jak tyle razy jutro, / znów będę się odradzać w nieustanności przemian" [Like so many times yesterday, like so many times tomorrow, / I will be reborn again in the incessant changes].³⁸

The motif of transformation, found in many of the poetess's works, is what connects Ginczanka to other Surrealist women artists. However, it is worth mentioning another correlation, namely the fusion of the human and the animal body. In the afterword to one of the editions of Ginczanka's selected poems, Agata Araszkiewicz draws on the findings of Józef Łobodowski and thus comments on the poetess's works:

In Ginczanka's poetry, "male-female" centaurs that "chase fulfillment" stand for androgyny, which unites the binaries of body and text. [...] All of her poetry – with its pulsating images and sensual metaphors – is represented in this doubled (male-female) and at the same time halved (human-animal) allegory. The centaur united with the centaress stands for the desire to reach the secret source of life, to capture an almost mystical delight, the "blind and brutal eternity of life that does not acknowledge the differences between man and animal."³⁹

Ginczanka, as a member of the Skamander group,⁴⁰ consciously or not, has a love affair with Surreal imagination, which Małgorzata Baranowska defines as a superhuman ability to "penetrate the mystery of things, to see hidden connections and analogies."⁴¹ The images she conjures up in her poetry prove that she reacts to the world and its complexities in a highly sensitive manner. Above all, however, these images become the driving force of poetic creation. Ginczanka's transformations and centaurs are such an act of creation. They inspire further investigations and explorations (also in linguistic terms) of the infinity of worlds.

³⁸Zuzanna Ginczanka, "Poznanie" [Knowledge], in: Ginczanka, 68.

³⁹Agata Araszkiewicz, "Rozkosz Ginczanki" [Ginczanka's delight], in: Ginczanka, 190,191.

⁴⁰This category is used by Anna Nasiłowska in her "updated" *Historia literatury polskiej* [History of Polish literature] (Warsaw: IBL PAN, 2019).

⁴¹Małgorzata Baranowska, *Surrealna wyobraźnia i poezja* [Surreal imagination and poetry] (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1984), 7.

Surreal sequences – what is left of Surreal imagination? Eliza Kącka and Małgorzata Lebda

Although it strongly developed in Europe and inspired a diverse group of artists, Surrealism never flourished in 20th-century Polish literature. Maria Delaperrière rightly notes that:

Each trend, in its own way, revolutionized imagination, rejecting description, narrative, and discursive language. In both cases, the role of textual collage should be emphasized, which freed poetic imagination from the constraints of *mimesis*. [...] There is nothing surprising in the fact that Polish poets constantly return to Breton's movement. Their original concepts of imagination and poetic language crystallized partly in relation to Surrealism, although most often on its margins.⁴²

This does not mean, however, that Surrealism was/is completely absent from it – as Jakub Kornhauser writes:

Regardless of how one defines the avant-garde, and Surrealism in particular [...], a need for a revolution lies at the heart of it. This revolution [...] has no end, because it is based on an oxymoronic desire to change the *status quo*, which cannot ever be satisfied. In place of one order, another order appears. It must also be critiqued and then overthrown. This cycle goes on forever.⁴³

In my account of these revolutions (it is difficult to speak of just one), I will deliberately skip the long and important history of the neo-avant-garde and the new wave-avant-garde in Polish literature, concentrating instead on how Surrealism has been reactivated in the latest works of Polish poetesses. I will quote two works below: a book by Eliza Kącka and a poem by Małgorzata Lebda. Although it is difficult to compare both works, this juxtaposition is not accidental. Kącka and Lebda both draw on a Surrealist technique of recording dreams, of creating worlds somewhere in between dreams and reality.

Taborska writes that:

Surrealists recorded dreams with great devotion. From 1919, Breton wrote down sentences that “knocked on the window of his mind” – sentences that manifested themselves when he was waking up. The painter Gordon Onslow Ford kept a notebook under his pillow to write down his dreams when he was still half asleep and half awake. They were his “guidelines” for creating drawings and paintings.⁴⁴

In this context, Kącka's *Po drugiej stronie siebie* [On the other side of me] is an extremely surprising collection of poems. The poems are not personal notes, something that could be later transformed into more complete works. Dreams recorded by the poetess are *bona fide* poems. Filled with intimate and individualized visions, referencing, most likely, extremely personal experiences and insider stories, this dream journal invites the reader to explore the writer's private dreams:

⁴²Maria Delaperrière, *Polskie awangardy a poezja europejska. Studium wyobraźni poetyckiej* [Polish avant-gardes and European poetry: A study of poetic imagination], trans. Adam Dziadek (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2004), 326–327.

⁴³Jakub Kornhauser, *Niebezpieczne krajobrazy. Surrealizm i po surrealizmie* [Dangerous landscapes: Surrealism and after Surrealism] (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2022), 171.

⁴⁴Taborska, *Świat zwariował. Poradnik surrealistyczny jak przeżyć*, 124.

I dreamed that I was a polar bear. heavy and indolent, I am sitting in the snow thinking that choosing “bear” on the immigration form was probably too much. I could have circled Madagascar, whatever, I could have stopped at relocating to a different place, but no, I had to change my skin. [...] third thought: can I keep eating the same things, or do I have to eat seals? and if so, will someone give me a piece? I won’t hunt, I’ll sooner die.⁴⁵

The reader explores clever and interesting linguistic constructions, but also the dynamics and plasticity of individual representations. Still, the most important feature of Kącka’s book is its unique and absurd sense of humor, which often verges on black humor.

The dreamlike nature of literature, the fusion of worlds and dimensions is not new or surprising in literature. Dreams as a poetic form have a long history. However, Małgorzata Lebda manages to avoid clichés by making dream visions private:

moje siostry przypominały chore ptaki
kiedy pierwszy raz zobaczyłam je nagie
ich ciała pokrywała wietrzna ospa

wystawiały wtedy fioletowe języki
do wiszącej nad boazerią Maryi.⁴⁶

[my sisters resembled sick birds
when I first saw them naked
their bodies were covered with chicken pox

they stuck out their purple tongues
at the picture of Mary above the wainscoting]

Individual and personal as these dreamlike human-animal images are, they are not hermetic. They are not inaccessible to readers. The reader is invited to explore a world full of raw primeval beauty and suspend their rationality. We do not know whether we are dealing with dream or reality – the atmosphere and structure of the collection make it impossible to judge whether or not, as Lebda writes, “śnię nas przywlezione przez psy łby uckermärkerów” [the heads of uckermärkers dragged by dogs are dreaming us].

Surrealist literature (or literature inspired by this artistic movement) written by women is very diverse and distinct (not to say isolated). Writing about avant-garde women writers, Anna Pekańec notes that “women writers did not create literary groups.” “That is why they remained (un)united and lonely, or united in their loneliness. But they were free – which became their strength.”⁴⁷ This freedom was neither obvious nor easy to gain, and the lack of bigger structures

⁴⁵Eliza Kącka, *Po drugiej stronie siebie*[On the other side of me] (Krakow: Lokator, 2019), 25, 26.

⁴⁶Małgorzata Lebda, “zbliżenie: fiolet” [close-up: purple], in: Małgorzata Lebda, *Sny uckermärkerów* [uckermärkers’ dreams] (Poznań: Wojewódzka Biblioteka Publiczna i Centrum Animacji Kultury, 2017), 7.

⁴⁷Anna Pekańec, “(Nie)solidarne i samotne? O polityczności literatury kobiet w pierwszych dekadach XX wieku (do 1939 roku)” [(Un)united and lonely? The politics of women’s literature in the first decades of the 20th century (until 1939)], in: *Polityki awangardy*[The politics of the avant-garde], ed. Agnieszka Karpowicz, Jakub Kornhauser, Marta Rakoczy, Aleksander Wójtowicz (Krakow: Jagiellonian University Press, 2021), 261–268.

was noticeable (although it is possible that this is what allowed avant-garde artists to be so aesthetically diverse). The works of the Surrealist women artists I have discussed point to an intersection. To a line that probably determined many of their creative choices, that is, the line that runs between the ways in which the male founders of the movement used the female body in art and the ways in which women artists used it. The bird woman, the girl who trades places with a hyena dressed in the skin of a devoured maid, the centaur-centauress, and the bear all represent bondage and the need to fight for freedom – the need to escape or experience a liberating metamorphosis.

In order not to end with such a dark conclusion, however, let me remind us that black humor, the absurd, and the grotesque are also part of the legacy of Surrealist women artists. They used them to ironically comment on reality and to deconstruct existing and archaic orders (not only historical and literary ones).

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

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women's art

ABSTRACT:

The article argues that the role of women artists is not fully acknowledged in the history of Surrealism. Works of women artists, located outside the canon, are overshadowed by the most prominent avant-garde works created by men. However, such Surrealist women artists as Leonora Carrington, Gisèle Prassinos, Dorothea Tanning, and Meret Oppenheim had a huge influence on contemporary art and literature. Surrealist women writers and visual artists create a different and extremely original world in their works, especially when judged against the background of canonical works. One example is Gisèle Prassinos's novel *Le visage effleuré de peine* [Face touched by sadness]. It tells the story of a young woman married to a scientist who relies on artificial intelligence in his daily life. The novel, although humorous, presents the woman as a strong, independent, and empathetic character, challenging the Surrealist visions of *femme fatale*. The article also attempts to show how Surrealist women writers influenced/still influence contemporary Polish literature.

contemporary poetry

LITERARY EXPERIMENT

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