

*Review of Effie Rentzou, Littérature Malgré Elle:
Le Surréalisme et la Transformation du Littéraire*
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Surrealism did not exist solely as a French movement, although the founder, André Breton, defined it from the perspective of a Parisian writer and intellectual. From the start it was an international avant-garde movement that expanded way beyond the borders of both France and Europe. Effie Rentzou's book, *Littérature Malgré Elle: Le Surréalisme et la Transformation du Littéraire* (Leuven: Pleine Marge, 2010), eloquently reminds us of this geographical reality that is also a cultural one. This scholarly work focuses on the historical development of Surrealism in Greece. This dimension of Surrealism remains largely unknown today, both in France and the United States. The author provides us therefore with original insights on a topic that has received little attention until now.

In the first part of her book Rentzou analyzes the preeminent modern Greek poet Elytis' critical writings on Surrealism. She demonstrates that Elytis and his fellow Greek poets attempted to assert their own identity by distancing themselves from the strict dogma set by Breton in his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" of 1924. Their own version of the movement lacked a true leader, for they were reluctant to submit to the rigid authority of a single personality. Moreover, they did not seem to support the ideological statements expressed by Breton in his early years. In other words, they devised an original aesthetics that was essentially independent from the political influence of the Communist Party and from Marxist theory. Instead, they focused their literary and artistic concerns on the study of the relationship between modernism and the Greek tradition stemming from Ancient times. It is quite

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obvious that in Greece, the burden of this legacy remains overwhelming even today and, therefore, that a radical break with the past could not be fully realized even by the most audacious and innovative writers of the first part of the twentieth-century. This is what Rentzou calls “the paradox of Greek Surrealism.” Elytis, in particular, linked Surrealism to the specifics of modern Greek history by taking into account the importance of Greek nationalism within the cultural context of both the Balkans and the Mediterranean world.

More precisely, the author shows that the issue of language was paramount in the construction of a surrealist literature in Greece. It reflected the ongoing conflict between a traditional and academic Greek language and a popular and oral form of the same language, which Rentzou identifies as the *Démotique*. Somehow, the Greek Surrealists were forced to recognize and to assert their *Grécité*, meaning a cultural identity that could not be reconciled with the artistic and political norms of the avant-garde. The author stresses the fact that Elytis’ discourse remained rooted in a literary and critical tradition of the 19th century, a tradition with which Breton, by comparison, strived to break. This is the main reason the Greek Surrealists were never officially accepted and recognized as such by the founder of the surrealist movement. One must therefore think of Greek Surrealism in terms of a set of aesthetic influences rather than of a full and unequivocal embrace of notions such as automatism (the unconscious dynamic of writing) and the revolutionary nature of surrealist poetry.

In other words, the Greek Surrealists were as much neo-classicists as they were true modernists, at least if one considers the work of Elytis. Indeed, Breton mistrusted the Greek tradition, to the extent that it was largely embedded in a rationalist vision of reality. In fact, his own celebration of the supernatural and of magical knowledge had much more to do with the medieval tradition of the marvelous and its own brand of mysticism than with the scientific mode of reasoning conceived by Aristotle and his followers. This fundamental philosophical tension makes the very notion of a Greek surrealism quite problematic: it is one of Rentzou’s main merits that she stresses this factor in her book.

Moreover, the Greek Surrealists were not firm believers in the idea of a *littérature engagée*, which Surrealism, in spite of all claims made by Sartre, still defended. In order to support such claim, one only has to consider Breton’s “Manifestoes” and Louis Aragon’s novels (as well as his famous poem “Les Yeux d’Elsa,” a true work of political resistance to oppressive domination of the French by the Germans during World War Two). The Greek Surrealists were mostly formalists and did not think that poetry could transform man’s material and social condition. In order to overcome the contradictions between center and periphery,

which are often associated with the forms of Surrealism that emerged outside of France, the author resorts to the metaphor of the pendulum. The pendulum, indeed, constantly swings and oscillates around an axis: its motion demonstrates thus a simultaneous attraction to and distancing from a center.

Rentzou's argument is in many ways dominated by an historical and a cultural perspective. She underscores the fact that Greece invented modern Western democracy and has also been troubled in the course of the twentieth-century by the political experience of fascism. This experience is what brings Greece closer to modern France, a nation that was after all founded on the democratic principles of the French revolution but that also went through the dark times of the Vichy period. To the extent that the Greek Surrealists fought the social and cultural conformity of their country, they inevitably asserted a form of radical thinking and remained located in the margins of their own culture, even though they seemed to depart from the so-called revolutionary politics of their French counterparts.

In the second part of her book, Rentzou focuses her critical perspective on the rhetorical dimension of Bretonian Surrealism. Rhetoric implies the construction of particular forms of discourse and speech. In the case of Surrealism, these forms enabled the expression of an original and eminently modern poetics. In many ways, the very word "rhetoric" contradicts the spirit and meaning of Bretonian automatism. As Laurent Jenny puts it, automatism constituted a "negative rhetoric," marked by the absence of control over formal discourse. Surrealist automatism existed beyond the power of figures within language and speech. In order to overcome these fundamental philosophical contradictions, Rentzou points to a surrealist *actio* that is essentially driven by love and sexual desire. According to her viewpoint, this allows for the junction of the erotic and political spheres within literature and art. As she writes: "Au-delà d'une simple érotisation du politique qui, comme l'esthétisation du politique, est plus investi de conformisme que de révolte, on a affaire à une politisation de l'érotique" (267).

The question that arises is the following: is the unbridled and free expression of desire truly compatible with the formal demands of rhetoric? If a critic like Georges Bataille could oppose Breton on the issue of automatism, it is precisely because such a theory of literature, although new and original for its time, was still abiding by rules that were not only aesthetic but also and maybe more decisively moral and ethical. In the French intellectual and literary tradition, rhetoric as a powerful force arose in the seventeenth-century, during a *grand siècle* that was profoundly influenced both by Cartesian rationality and by socially defined and rather conservative norms of speech, a time when the Catholic church was imposing its faith on the French people. In other words, if indeed one can conceive of a

political rhetoric, one will have a harder time reconciling the sovereignty of chance and randomness typical of surrealist aesthetics with the necessary predetermination of language and its figures stemming from the rhetorical perspective, no matter how open and apparently flexible this perspective might be.

It is quite clear that by linking Surrealism with a rhetorical approach to literature, Rentzou is inspired by the writings of scholars such as Michel Beaujour and Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron. At the same time it is clear that her perspective is anchored in the Greek philosophical tradition. She thus analyzes Surrealism's rootedness in the rhetorical tradition while simultaneously underscoring its radical departure from its conventional and preestablished rhetorical forms, which at times seems contradictory (258).

In her study of Andreas Embirico's work *Amour-Amour*, written in 1939 and published in 1960, Rentzou emphasizes the fluid quality of surrealist poetic writing through the ongoing metaphor of the river and of its flowing water. The surrealist *Inventio*, accordingly, lead to the creation of a *poème-événement*, of poetry as a sheer event open to the endless possibilities of human encounters and existential circumstances. Beyond rhetoric therefore, poetry existed within a time and a space that were essentially unpredictable. Such examples enable her to stress the dynamic and the ever evolving nature of surrealist poetic language.

In conclusion, Rentzou sheds welcome light on a rather obscure dimension of the history of Surrealism and covers this unfamiliar territory with skill and expertise. Despite some of its philosophical contradictions, her work is engaging and I personally look forward to reading more of her critical writings in the near future.