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Parodies of Pleasure: Remedios Varo's Queer Surrealism in Narrative and Painting*

Parodias del placer: el surrealismo *queer* de Remedios Varo en la narrativa y la pintura

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Abstract: Remedios Varo (1908-1963) wrote numerous surrealist texts that dialogue with her prolific artistic production. Alchemy, feminism, and psychoanalysis have been studied as central themes in her paintings, yet this paper focuses on humor and parody in Varo's written works –including her letters, short stories, and dreams– to uncover the seminal ideas and images that emerge in her visual art. Humor and parody are fundamental links between Varo's narrative and paintings. She embraces the spontaneity of the surrealist *écriture automatique* and the illogical *amor fou* but at the same time pushes the limits of surrealist dogma and creates a uniquely nonpatriarchal universe in which the female has agency and the blurriness between the male and female anticipates current theories of queer sexualities. Seen through a theoretical lens of parody (Linda Hutcheon) and queerness (Jack Halberstam), Varo's works propose an alternate reading of surrealism.

Keywords: surrealism; parody; queer studies; sexuality; feminism.

Resumen: Remedios Varo (1908-1963) escribió numerosos textos surrealistas que dialogan con su prolífica producción artística. La alquimia, el feminismo y el psicoanálisis se han estudiado como temas centrales de sus cuadros, pero este artículo se centra en el humor y la parodia de las obras escritas de Varo –incluidas sus cartas, cuentos y sueños– para descubrir las ideas e imágenes fundamentales que surgen en su arte visual. El humor y la parodia son vínculos fundamentales entre la narrativa y la pintura de Varo. Varo adopta la espontaneidad de la *écriture automatique* surrealista y el *amor fou* ilógico, pero al mismo tiempo traspasa los límites del dogma surrealista y crea un universo singularmente no patriarcal en el que la mujer tiene agencia y la difuminación entre lo masculino y lo femenino anticipa las teorías actuales de las sexualidades *queer*. Desde la óptica teórica de la parodia (Linda Hutcheon) y lo *queer* (Jack Halberstam), las obras de Varo proponen una lectura alternativa del surrealismo.

Palabras clave: surrealismo; parodia; estudios *queer*; sexualidad; feminismo.

* All paintings can be viewed at: <https://www.remediosvaro.art/paintings/artist-photos/>

Remedios Varo (1908-1963) is perhaps one of the most recognized surrealist painters today for her warm honey-colored canvasses that depict worlds of fantasy and feminist imagination. The characters in her paintings are often androgynous beings, living in otherworldly spaces full of minute visual detail that convey a wry sense of humor. Varo also wrote extensively about her paintings and about her creative approach to surrealism. Her stories and notes not only gloss her visual works but offer an intriguing study of how visual and verbal texts work in tandem to craft a more wholistic artistic vision. Varo's works are deeply rooted in surrealism; however, her approach to the surrealist school of thought diverges from within the feminist orientation of other artists, such as Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington, to encompass both the visual and verbal arts with a strong parodical approach. A side-by-side analysis of Varo's written texts and her paintings reveals her defiance of surrealism as a totalizing concept. Her written words often redefine the visual content of her paintings and emphasize the parody of classic surrealist texts. Not only does she dismiss the often-criticized objectification of women as the *femme enfant* or artist's muse, but she takes the criticism one step further: she parodies gender itself. Her surrealism is not necessarily a call to arms for women to revolt against the blatant misogyny and deprecation of women seen in many surrealist writings and images, such as André Bretón's *Manifesto of Surrealism* from 1924, Man Ray's *Mannequin* from 1938, or Hans Bellmer's series of dolls, but rather it is a humorous, scathing rebuttal to the very notion of binary gendered norms¹.

1. Women and surrealism

Breton famously claims in the opening lines of his *Manifesto*: "Man, that inveterate dreamer, daily more discontent with his destiny, has trouble assessing the objects he has been led to use [...] what women he has had, what silly affairs he has been involved in [...]" (1924: 1). Breton's subordination of women, who he considers objects easily attainable and consequently discarded, reveals the general attitude toward the female presence in surrealist ideology as that of a disposable intermediary. Breton describes the waking state as "a phenomenon of interference" that "[t]his idea, this woman, disturb it, they

¹ See Rubin Suleiman for an extensive analysis of feminist artistic reactions to Man Ray and Hans Bellmer.

tend to make it less severe" (1924: 3). While he laments conscious existence, he does, however, credit women (or the mere idea of women) with the ability to ease the male suffering of waking reality by making it less severe through her ability to "disturb" it and inspire his artistic revelations. This idea of the female muse or inspiration is perhaps no more obvious than in the many works by Salvador Dalí that position his wife, Gala, front and center; at times an adoring Madonna figure and at others an oversized (overbearing) presence. Varo and other women artists reject the notion of an external source of artistic motivation and instead turn inward, and in the case of Varo, Kahlo, and Carrington, they choose to paint themselves. Carrington and Kahlo outright reject the label of surrealist, stating that they have nothing to do with the movement even though their paintings may deal with similar themes, such as oneiric geographies and sexual desire. In the novel *Leonora* by Elena Poinatowska, the artist firmly rejects surrealist patriarchy: "—No soy una femme enfant — [...] Caí en este grupo por Max, no me considero surrealista. [...] —¡Todo ese endiosamiento de la mujer es puro cuento! Ya vi que los surrealistas las usan como a cualquier esposa. Las llaman sus musas pero terminan por limpiar el excusado y hacer la cama" (Poniatowska, 2020: 91). Citing the influence of her partner, Max Ernst, the fictionalized musings of Carrington point to a very real animosity women painters felt toward the group. Frida Kahlo also rejected Breton's patronizing and colonizing labeling of her as a surrealist by famously saying "I don't paint dreams or nightmares. I paint my own reality" (García, 2022: n. p.). The presence of women on the canvas, often directly engaging the viewer's gaze, counters the passive role of the muse and gives the artist agency to determine her role within the composition and interpretation of art².

Instead of outright rejecting surrealism, Remedios Varo approaches the movement from a humorous and critical standpoint that mimics some of the misogynist misgivings associated with it. In an unpublished interview she claims that she is indeed a surrealist and that surrealism is "un sentimiento inherente" (Varo, 2023: 93). Her surrealist representations are ironic and often parody specific works of art. Very much in line with what Linda Hutcheon defines as parody's "target" text as another work of art "or more generally,

² Juan Javier Ortigosa Cano explains Carrington's reaction to surrealist discourse: "la posición de Carrington respecto al surrealismo será en todo momento crítica porque, si bien incorporará algunos rasgos de su poética, considerará inaceptable el componente patriarcal del movimiento" (2024: 76).

another form of coded discourse” (1985: 16), Varo takes on surrealist ideology to rethink not only women’s role within the movement, but the very idea of gendered power relations. Her surrealist beings are neither male nor female and she moves comfortably within varying degrees of erotic expression. Not only does Varo reimagine the surrealist woman as oftentimes androgynous, but she conceptualizes surrealist spaces as less hostile and foreboding and as more fantastical natural settings. Janet Kaplan observes that in Varo’s work “the surrealist stage is slyly shifted from the boudoir to the kitchen [...] she built an alternative language, both visual and verbal, based on domestic activities with which to explore creatively as a spiritual process and the fantastic as an element of everyday life” (1988: 38). Varo’s spaces are populated with references to alchemy, a domestic science, and emerge from the canvass in warm, jeweled tones reminiscent of medieval illuminated manuscripts rich in golden hues. Varo’s paintings often seem plucked from a fairy tale with fantastical creatures in movement supporting a visual narrative for the viewer to decipher. The following investigation will combine the visual interpretation of several paintings with textual analyses of written descriptions Varo wrote about her work. The two forms of text, the visual and the verbal, work together to redefine not only surrealist ideology but also the relationship between the text and paratext.

2. Queer parody

In Varo’s paintings as well as in her written work, parody and satire work to dismantle certain misogynist aspects of the surrealist school of thought. Woman as muse (Breton), as a body to be manipulated (Bellmer), or as devoted partner (Dalí) represent a general pejorative attitude toward female presence in the movement. Varo, who embraced surrealism as an art form and defended its importance, developed her painterly style surrounded by the surrealists, first in 1925 in Madrid at the Escuela de Bellas Artes and later in 1936 among the Barcelona based Grupo Logicofobista. Nevertheless, later in her career, Varo did not hesitate to poke fun at the early conceptualizations of radical creation such as automatism. She clearly parodies the practice of pastiche, popular in early surrealism as *cadavre exquis*, in a letter from the 1950s joking “one day [...] having accidentally spilled a quantity of tomato sauce on my pants, I found this stain so significant and moving that I quickly cut the piece of fabric and framed it” (Kaplan, 1988: 128-29). The tomato stain

accident turns into “significant” and “moving” art while the action of cutting up her pants to frame the stain parodies the cutting up of bodies, specifically female bodies, that comprise the exquisite cadavers. Varo’s language is not vengeful or accusatory but rather playful and humorous, something we see again and again in her paintings.

Varo’s distinct relationship with surrealism celebrates parody and humor to create alternative narratives in both her paintings and writing. Akin to many of her female contemporaries, “[c]ompelled either to submit to the public language of patriarchy or to invent private languages that kept them marginalized by asserting the uniqueness of their femininity, women often employed irony, humor, and confrontation to problematize their position within Surrealism” (Chadwick, 1998: 11). Women artists working within the surrealist movement oftentimes struggled with the blatant misogynistic images created by their male counterparts and in response either rejected the movement publicly or turned to self-portraiture thus inserting female experience into the visual conversation³. As we will see in Varo’s paintings and written work, the concept of chronological time is often challenged, and spatial relationships dismantled through parodies of movement and travel. This nod toward subversion echoes what Jack Halberstam defines as queer uses of time and space which are “in opposition to the institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. They also develop according to other logics of location, movement, and identification” (2005: 1).

As a part of this opposition to social institutions that categorize and separate gendered activities, Varo establishes a version of herself that is at times androgynous and at others a fusion of human and animal characteristics negating the very existence of the binary male/female. In many cases, as in her writing, gender is at the forefront, yet it is an alternative, subversive and parodic rendering of the surrealist notion of the *femme enfant* or artistic muse. It is a queer figure operating in a queer space and time. Queer in this sense does not necessarily indicate any kind of sexual preference, but rather a subversion, a deconstruction, and a revelation of alternative modes of being and seeing the world. In the analyses of paintings and texts that follow, we witness the flexibility and fluidity of time and space: androgynous or animal/human hybrid beings populate fantastical worlds where regularized notions of time and space cease to dominate.

³ As noted above, Frida Kahlo famously denied working within the surrealist movement and declared her paintings strictly autobiographical.

3. Time, space, and gender

In *Revelación o El relojero* from 1955 Varo populates a clockmaker's workshop with eight standing floor clocks, a figure at a table littered with metallic pieces of clockwork wheels and springs, a small, enclosed fire giving off heat, and an indifferent cat. Each clock reveals a scene of a historical figure in its base and the entire right third of the canvas shows a round hazy ball of blue hovering in an open window. In her comments about this painting, Varo states clearly "Aquí se trata del tiempo" (Varo, 2023: 131). The concern with time, both human and natural, immediately recalls Dalí's most famous image of the melting clocks in *La persistencia de memoria* from 1931. The barren landscape, organic fleshy figure, and menacing ants of Dalí's painting suggest an oneiric timelessness or an inability to comprehend the very human construction of time. Halberstam notes how Dalí's melting clock "reveals the artificiality of our privileged constructions of time and activity" (2005: 5), yet Varo's *Revelación* parodies Dalí's painting in several key ways: first she challenges the outright dismissal of concrete time suggested by the melting clocks and instead proposes the coexistence of two distinct times. As she explains: "hay un relojero (que en cierta manera representa el tiempo ordinario nuestro), pero por la ventana entra una 'revelación' y comprende de golpe muchísimas cosas; he tratado de darle una expresión de asombro y de iluminación. A su alrededor hay cantidad de relojes que marcan todos la misma hora, pero dentro de cada uno hay el mismo personaje en muy diferentes épocas" (Varo, 2023: 131). Concrete time exists alongside the revelation or mystical sphere floating through the window and the tall upright grandfather clocks all telling the same time from different eras suggest the same timelessness we see in Dalí's melted clocks, but here with scientific exactness, with the clockmaker witnessing the revelation of universal time as he works on the very mechanical, technical aspect of telling time. It is not clear if Varo intentionally parodies Dalí's clocks in this painting or if she was thinking specifically of his work, nevertheless, the image contributes to the *leit motif* seen throughout Varo's work: the arbitrary nature of time. The visual language of early surrealism is contested here with precision and directness. In this painting, as in the written description of the tomato stain on her pants turned artwork, Varo clearly stepped away from surrealism during her most prolific years, but she never denied surrealism or stopped drawing on its rich imaginary (Castells, 2023: 21). Another way Varo challenges surrealist discourse is that in many of her paintings she creates androgynous or hybrid beings. The clockmak-

er in this painting appears thin and gaunt with slender fingers and legs; he could be seen as a rather genderless being and clearly is not a stereotypical representation of masculinity. The creation of beings that do not fit squarely in traditional gendered molds speaks to Varo's exploration of and parody of femininity as presented by male surrealist painters.

In many of her works we see and read the fusion of genders. Visually her figures avoid displaying obvious binary gender demarcations such as dresses, pants, or jackets. Clothing in her works is an invention, drawing on the fantastical and presenting various forms of travel and mobility built into her characters' "costumes." For example, in her work *Tailleur pour dames* (1957) Varo dissects the austerity of high fashion by parodying the act of buying as well as wearing non-functional clothes. In the painting, three female models enter a *haute courtier* showroom wearing elaborate clothes that range from a boat shaped cape draping a one-wheeled dress with pulleys the wearer can use to steer the vessel. Another woman wears a light blue evening gown that doubles as a chair and has a small shelf to hold a drink: the ultimate cocktail dress. The last model wears all black suggesting a mourning coat that engulfs her frame and sports a large reptile tail. Observing the parade of style, a young woman looks on and her figure is replicated in shadowy images indicating her doubt about which style to choose (Varo, 2023: 159). Varo parodies works that eroticize the female body and emphasize female body parts as definitive of femininity; instead her clothes hide the body, covering up any indications of male or female, and focus on utilitarian aspects of clothes that offer practical solutions to the people wearing them.

In a similar vein, the painting *Exploración de las fuentes del río Orinoco* (1959) highlights a particularly innovative garment as the main figure sits in a boat-like vessel shaped like a large piece of clothing, resembling a man's vest, complete with buttons down the front and a small pocket. The androgynous figure wears a dark bowler hat that fuses with the boat at the back, and wears a grey raincoat cinched at the waist while steering the vessel with long delicate hands. The shock of red hair peeking out from under the hat suggests this may be a version of Varo herself, a decidedly serious navigator on an important expedition. As in *Tailleur pour dames*, the clothing here represents functionality and implies a rejection of more traditional women's styles such as skirts or high heels. Mobility takes precedence in a fantastical space that is defined by rising water in a submerged forest and the mythical chalice of water overflowing eternally in the hollowed-out tree to the right of the composition. More than an exploration, the painting is an encounter, the source of

the river discovered and revealed as a somewhat mundane, plain crystal glass nestled inside a tree. The image is humorous in its parody of exploration, of the greatness of discovery, and in the excessive gallantry associated with the Spanish “exploration” of the new world. Here, the encounter is quiet and mystical, observed only by two small birds peering from within distant trees.

Isabel Castells has made several observations about the similarity of *Exploración de las fuentes de río Orinoco* and a short story by Varo titled “Mistress Thrompston descubre por casualidad el origen de la tremenda humedad que reina en el condado de Kent”. She observes the similarities between the clothing in the painting and the description of the main character in the story, Mistress Thrompston, who “navegaba a bordo de su impermeable” (2023: 207). She suggests that perhaps the story was a kind of meditation for the painting, or an early rendering of what a fantastical vessel might look like. However, there are several other similarities in the story that inform and compliment the subversive themes in the painting; namely the spatial and temporal innovations. The comparison of the written and visual representations of a similar theme reveals how temporality can be more easily manipulated with the written word and conversely, spatiality more easily upended in a visual narrative. In the case at hand, time in the story moves between the specific and the fantastic as the narration opens *in medias res* explaining when the action took place: “Eso sucedió el día en que estrenó un impermeable último modelo para viaje y excursiones” (Varo, 2023: 207). The protagonist, Mistress Thrompston, contemplates an article she is writing as she rides aboard her functional vehicle/clothing. The story recounts the events surrounding a group of rejected birds and the discoveries Miss Thrompston makes during her excursion. The time frame of the story becomes confused as the narrator explains:

Pero todo esto, que en realidad tendrá que suceder dentro de nueve meses y que ya ha sido publicado por la revista *WTrous X y l*, que se ocupa de publicar únicamente el futuro, resulta inexplicablemente reflejado en un espejo que Mistress Thrompston halló en el recinto donde encontró la copa llena de agua pesada que fluye permanentemente. El espejo es del siglo XVI, sin duda alguna. La imagen quedó reflejada en esa época (Varo, 2023: 208).

In this short description, Varo incorporates a curious journal title that reads as some sort of mathematical expression and she describes the journal as only publishing “the future”. The purpose of the exploration becomes lost in the fact that the article Miss Thrompston is researching has already been published and is reflected in a sixteenth century mirror she encounters along

the way. The timelessness of Varo's conceptualization is seen in the glass of water that permanently flows into the surrounding river on which the waist-coat/vehicle floats and links the written story to the visual text.

The spatial relationships established in the painting create a claustrophobic environment as the figure is strapped in the vessel and unable to stand or move around. There is no land in sight but rather large leafless tree trunks growing up out of the surrounding river home to small isolated black birds who stare out from their perches observing the scene. As viewers of the image, we wonder how the figure was able to arrive at this remote location alone, in a small boat, with only a tiny compass to guide the way. The painting embraces the surrealist rejection of logic yet parodies the very idea of the surrealist muse as the figure embraces gender ambiguity and is an active explorer in what may be considered a masculine garment but with slender and delicate hands. The figure becomes even more interesting when we read Miss Thrompston's story that directly alludes to the river exploration and the overflowing cup of water. The figure in the story is gendered as female in name but clearly presents as androgynous in the visual depiction. Furthermore, Varo's naming the character with a slight change of the very English sounding Miss Thompson, creating some form of hybrid name in Miss Thrompston, emphasizes the blending of the familiar with the unfamiliar. The written text expands our knowledge of the figure, complicating any notion of binary gender identification and embracing a queer figure, who inhabits a timeless, curious, or queer space. Through this reimagination of gender, spatiality and temporality, Varo parodies not just the misogyny of surrealism, but the very idea of gender roles and waking versus dreamlike states.

4. Feminism and psychoanalysis

In another exploration painting by Varo, the figure this time enters uncharted psychological territory as she leaves the therapist dropping the ghostly male head into a deep well. *Mujer saliendo del psicoanalista* from 1960 parodies the early fervor and wholesale promotion of Freudian psychoanalytic tenets by the surrealists⁴. While Freud privileges male experience, sexuality, drives and desires in his theories, Varo upends this notion in her painting with an ele-

⁴ Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* published in 1900 posits the value of dream interpretation to uncover subconscious desires and phobias to diagnose and treat psychosis.

gant female figure leaving the therapy session and clearly throwing away her psychological baggage⁵. The warm tones of the building behind her contrast with the stormy sky overhead as she steps forward into the front of the frame moving toward the viewer while she stares straight out from the painting, looking above the striking green cloak she wears that falls away from her face. A mask of her face is imbedded in the upper folds of the cloak, signaling that her newfound identity has been unmasked in her session with the therapist. Women's liberation from patriarchal norms and newfound forms of expression come to the forefront in this image and create a parallel with Varo's text titled "Para provocar sueños eróticos". The image and text work together to create a dialog that embraces alternate sexualities and challenge Freudian concepts of female frigidity and the idea of women's sexuality as a "dark continent" that he famously espoused in *The Question of Lay Analysis*. Through a close reading of Varo's painting and her short recipe, we see how she dismantles the mysterious female sexuality posited by the surrealists and embraces an alternative, creative version of eroticism.

In the recipe to provoke erotic dreams, Varo adopts the instructive tone found in recipe books that belies the absurdity of her propositions. If we remember Kaplan's astute observation that Varo moved the surrealist discourse "from the boudoir to the kitchen" and created her own lexicon "based on domestic activities" (1998: 38) the recipe to provoke erotic dreams perfectly exemplifies this shift in surrealist imagery. Nevertheless, Varo's text embraces female sexuality and alternate sexual practices in her description, which not so much moves surrealist discourse from the bedroom to the kitchen but rather fuses the erotic experiences of eating and sex. The recipe to evoke erotic dreams takes a stab directly at Freud's publication from 1900, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, which the surrealists enthusiastically embraced. Freud posits the dreamworld as an active playground for suppressed and repressed desires and therefore a mirror into the neurosis and anxieties of the individual. Varo's recipe indicates a very deliberate creation of a dream state that would celebrate conscious and intentional erotic situations specifically designed by women: a pointed response to the mysterious, unknown female sexuality suggested by Freud. In fact, from the list of ingredients to the straightforward directions in the recipe, the text opposes any ambiguity or enigmatic approach to female sexuality.

⁵ See Teresa del Conde for another interpretation of Varo's painting and her relationship to psychoanalysis.

She lists at the beginning of the text 11 ingredients including “Tres gallinas blancas, Una cabeza de ajos, Un ladrillo, Dos bigotes postizos,” and “Un espejo” as a nod to Jacques Lacan’s famous “mirror stage” in psychological development⁶. These ingredients are boiled on the stove to be sipped before bed and used to set the scene in the bedroom: “Mientras hierven las aves, colóquese la cama oriental de noroeste a sudeste y déjese reposar con la ventana abierta. Ciérrase la ventana media hora después y colóquese el ladrillo rojo bajo la pata izquierda de la cabecera de la cama . . .” (Varo, 2023: 203). Other instructions include to spread 4 kilos of honey on the bedsheets, wear a corset and try on fake moustaches with a variety of hats in front of a mirror. The directions also include specific locations to place calves’ liver under the pillows or next to the bed for “casos de masoquismo” or “en casos de sadismo,” respectively. By incorporating sexual deviations such as sadism and masochism into a document that aims to instruct, Varo rejects any form of psychotic diagnosis regarding alternative sexual behaviors. She weaves humor and sarcasm into the text by mentioning these practices that in her professional and social circles were certainly considered taboos when she wrote the text during the 1950s in Mexico. The courage to even mention various types of sexual behavior openly stems from a place of systemic oppression. Varo parodies Freudian misogyny in her writing by granting the female character agency to contemplate deviant sexualities and control her sexual desires through deliberate actions. She queers female sexuality by taking it out of marriage and motherhood and by exploring various eccentricities. As Halberstam (2005: 1) explains, “the queer ‘way of life’ will encompass subcultural practices, alternative methods of alliance, forms of transgender embodiment, and those forms of representation dedicated to capturing these willfully eccentric modes of being”. The queer parody lies in the humorous and satiric reformulation of psychoanalytic discourse using cooking instructions, a distinctly female mode of communication originating in the domestic, female, space of the kitchen.

Another queering element lies in the instruction to “[s]iéntese ante el espejo, afloje su tensión nerviosa, sonríase, pruébese los bigotes y los sombreros según sus gustos (tricornio, napoleónico, capelo cardenalicio, cofia con encajes, boina vasca, etc.) (Varo, 2023: 203). The instructions literally play on the idea of cross-dressing and summoning some sort of fantasy man that will hopefully appear in the erotic dream. Thus, the woman becomes her own sex-

⁶ The mirror stage refers to the process in which we recognize our likeness as a very young child in a mirror and thus realize we are individuals and begin to act on desire.

ual fantasy by playacting the man that will appear to her once she falls asleep in the correctly positioned bed with honey smeared sheets. Furthermore, her switching of hats that become a synecdoche of a very particular identity such as that of the French soldier in Napoleon's army, a cardinal, or a man from the Basque country invites a multiple and fluid sense of gender; the female passing easily into various manifestations of masculinity, which in effect, breaks down the strict male/female binary. Her cross-dressing sustains a queer, fluid concept of gendering, not by suggesting homosexuality but by relocating gender outside the body: "the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice" (Halberstam, 2005: 5). Varo's text confirms that this practice, if followed correctly, will always have good results and that "normal" people can move easily between "[el] beso a la estrangulación, de la violación al incesto, etc. etc. Las recetas para casos más complicados como son los de necrofilia, autofagia, tauromaquia, alpinismo y otros, se encuentran en un volumen especial de nuestra colección: *Consejos discretamente sanos*". (Varo, 2023: 204). The disturbing mention of rape in the closing remarks of the text jolts the reader but also jars the sense of place and practice as suggested by Halberstam. Sexuality is marked not by the body but by the circumstance, and the unfortunate correlation made between sexuality and rape, which is more precisely an act of violence, may seem out of place here. By lumping together unrelated terms such as necrophilia, "tauromaquia", and "alpinismo" Varo uses sarcasm to create a parody of clinical terminology and the title of the collection, "discretely sane advice", contradicts everything we have read in the previous text: the advice is anything but sane. At the same time, the text parodies the consecrated advice from therapists, the traditional roles of active men and passive, submissive women in the bedroom as well as the seemingly innocent instructions found in a recipe book.

The subversive elements apparent in the recipe to provoke erotic dreams appear as subtle parodies of consecrated psychoanalytic tenants. Varo's parody lies in the viewer's ability to decode the allusions to patriarchal, traditional strains of early psychoanalytic discourse. Hutcheon confirms that "it is conventions *as well as* individual works that are parodied" (1985: 13) and if we remember the parody of "coded discourse" (ibid.: 16) proposed by Hutcheon we see that the coded discourse on display in *Mujer saliendo del psicoanalista* plays on numerous representations of oneiric landscapes and the revealing of monstrous internal desires in many well-known surrealist works such as Hans Bellmer's doll series, *The Great Masturbator* by Salvador Dalí from 1929, or

Rape by Rene Magritte from 1945. Varo parodies the imagery of dissected naked female bodies evident in these works as well as the violent conceptual approach to female sexuality. She rethinks the disembodied, threatening female sexuality posited in the images by Bellmer, Dalí, and Magritte by relocating sexual desire not within the male fantasy but instead within female agency. Varo's woman leaving the psychoanalyst's office parodies every notion of erratic, unknown female sexuality by dropping the father figure's head delicately and very deliberately into a deep well. Her actions are controlled, her movement determined, and her intentions very clear as she disposes quite literally the lacanian word of the father.

Hutcheon describes the double coded text as a form of imitation and inversion indicating that the viewer must understand a certain discourse in order for the parody to work and upend it. She describes certain works as having "multiple coding" and goes on to explain that these doubly coded texts appropriate a discourse while at the same time parodying the visual or verbal codes embedded (1985: 13). Varo's multilayered visual commentary on psychoanalytic approaches to male erotic fantasy requires previous knowledge of such approaches and the interpretive dexterity to deconstruct them. Her visual codes indicate clear references that work as both homage and ridicule; as Hutcheon explains: "imitation with critical ironic distance, whose irony can cut both ways. Ironic versions of 'trans-contextualization' and inversion are its major formal operatives, and the range of pragmatic ethos is from scornful ridicule to reverential homage" (1985: 37). The figure exits from a door that is marked with a plaque reading "Dr. F. J. A.," which Varo explains is a reference to Freud, Jung, and Alfred Adler (Kaplan, 1988: 155)⁷. The barren surrealist dream landscape is replaced by a circular courtyard within high walls that seems to suggest the labyrinth of the mind with several doors inviting explorations. The figure stares out from the canvass, large grey horn-like locks of hair extending out from her head, her green cape loosely covering her body and swaying with her movement. Her delicate hand holds the end of a long white beard connected to the upside down small egg-shaped head of a man with his eyes closed and we capture her in the moment of letting go, dropping the head into the abyss. Varo's enactment of the Oedipal killing of

⁷ Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961) was a Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst known for analytical psychology. Alfred Adler (1870-1937) was an Austrian psychotherapist and founder of the school of individual psychology.

the father gains dignity and grace satirizing the violence and tragedy imbued in the original Greek myth. Varo writes about her painting:

Esta señora sale del psicoanalista arronjando a un pozo la cabeza de su padre (como es correcto al salir del psicoanalista). En el cesto lleva otros desperdicios psicológicos: un reloj, símbolo del temor de llegar tarde, etcetera. El doctor se llama Dr. FJA (Freud, Jung Adler) (Varo, 2023: 177).

Here Varo explains the actions of the figure, connecting the disposal of the father to revelation and the items in the basket to certain anxieties such as the passage of time and arriving late. The direct connection to psychoanalytic discourse is a parody of the scientific certainty with which Freud, Jung and Adler approached the field. Here Varo plays with the image of the father, reifying the complicated concept of authority that can produce trauma in the individual. Upon leaving the session, the woman simply deposits the head and moves on with her day. The simplicity of the action as well as the assertion that throwing away the head of the father is the “correct” thing to do upon leaving the psychoanalyst poke fun at the labor intensive and time-consuming process of therapy, especially as posited by early practitioners. Varo’s image reduces the scientific accuracy of psychoanalytic discourse and diagnosis to a simple act of taking out the garbage, another reference to women’s space in the home and activities dealing with housekeeping and cleaning. “The humor in the painting, as well as in Varo’s short description lies in its hypercorrectness” (Everly, 2003: 59).

By suggesting the correct way to leave the psychoanalyst, which involves throwing away the father figure, Varo implies there are incorrect, erroneous ways to undertake psychoanalytic care and that the patient is ultimately responsible for acting appropriately. It would seem that this assertion belittles the work of the doctor and perhaps can be seen as a nod toward the one size fits all approach of early psychoanalysis that focused almost exclusively on male experience leaving female experience out of the equation. Nevertheless, Varo’s interest in alchemy and the occult, as evidenced in the recipe and in numerous images of organic creation, proves a skeptical attitude toward the traditionally scientific approach to the life of the mind, the emotions, and the desires. Janet Kaplan states: “Varo poked fun at the pretensions of science while commenting on the misunderstanding of alchemy as a futile manipulation of machinery [...] Alchemy had fascinated Varo since childhood, both as a literal process of laboratory experiment [...] and as a metaphorical process

of psychic transformation” (Kaplan, 1988: 124)⁸. As we will see in the final example of her work, the interplay of spatial and physical transformation leads to a greater understanding of human nature.

5. Queer transformations

Ermitaño from 1955 can be seen as a culminating image of gender ambiguity that also ties together Varo's innovative conceptualizations of time and space as seen most strikingly in *Revelación* o *El relojero* from the same year. Set in a deeply wooded space full of underbrush and slender leafless trees reaching to the burnt orange sky, *Ermitaño* evokes an otherworldly space emphasized by Varo's use of oil and incrustated mother of pearl on Masonite. Her use of the encrusted mother of pearl in this composition, as well as a select number of her other paintings, augments the materiality of the invented landscapes by adding a visible layer to the composition. In *Ermitaño* a solitary figure stands with arms crossed in a hollowed-out tree trunk serenely looking down contemplatively. The figure, wearing draped pants and a pointed hood, bears no socialized gender markers and the center portion of the body opens into a long hallway where a small yin/yang symbol floats suspended in the air. Varo explains in her description of the painting:

Este es un ermitaño; ya está fuera del tiempo y espacio comunes, su cuerpo está formado por dos triángulos que al cortarse, uno con el vértice para arriba y el otro para abajo, son una estrella de seis puntos, símbolo del tiempo y del espacio en las antiguas enseñanzas esotéricas; dentro del pecho tiene a Yan[g] y Yin, el más hermoso símbolo (a mi juicio) de la unidad interior, pues el símbolo está ya rodeado de un círculo y se ha convertido en unidad (Varo, 2023: 134).

Varo embraces the duality of the yin/yang symbol in the hermaphrodite figure of the hermit that embodies a genderless state. In this way, the male/female binary ceases to define corporeal existence and instead a mystical figure emanating peace and calm takes center stage, harkening back to Halberstam's reformulation of a body-centered identity that we have seen in other paintings and writings that “locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice” (2005: 5). As in many of Varo's composi-

⁸ For an extensive study of alchemy in Varo's work see Pottenger.

tions, the creation of a mythical place allows for the movement and existence of alternative forms of bodies that thrive in geographies not associated with dominant forms of social structure. Even Varo's imagining of nature conflicts with stereotypical lush, green open spaces full of vegetation and instead her palate of golden rust orange hues invites the viewer into an alternative representation of flourishing life.

The hermit, a symbol of solitary existence beyond the confines of socialized norms, occupies a central position in the composition, not looking out to confront the viewer's gaze, but looking contemplatively down, inviting the viewer to enter the long hallway of its open chest to explore the very heart of the being. The yin/yang symbol hovering in the center of the hallway not only represents inner unity, as Varo suggests, but outer balance in the perfect combination of opposing elements creating a single unit. The yin/yang can be seen as a fusing together of the gender binary male/female in order to produce a third genderless being. In Varo's painting the hermit exists within this liminality of embodiment, place, and practice defined by Halberstam as a welcome alternative to the *femme enfant* that defined early surrealism. Varo's parody of Bellmer's sliced and diced dolls comes to an eloquent highpoint in this painting that emanates tranquility, introspection, and intelligence in a non-binary figure set in a recognizable yet alternative space. Violent gender hierarchies have been replaced with a queer transformative geography.

As we have seen in the previous analyses of Varo's pictorial and written work, surrealism as a mode of interpretation takes on new meaning. What makes Varo's work unique and so compelling is her playful parody of surrealism's deep-rooted misogyny. Her approach to surrealism embraces many of the fundamental underpinnings of the movement including the representation of the oneiric, psychoanalytic discovery, sexual desire, and exploration. By including in her written work sketches of what she fully develops in the intricate details of her paintings, Varo provides insight into her creative process. Her process toward artistic expression is an intellectual endeavor that hinges on humor and parody to simultaneously demonstrate a high level of understanding of surrealist discourse and a witty criticism of its exclusionary tactics toward women. Varo also redefines female experience by writing about women's erotic fulfillment, exploration, and creation from a genderless perspective that embraces a multitude of spatial and temporal realities thus liberating the artist from strict societal expectations that limit her accessibility. Varo's written and visual work are a stunning example of parodic discourse

that carefully traverses the many levels of queer geography and expression to radicalize and rethink traditional surrealism.

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