

ARTHRITIC GRASSHOPPER
COLLECTED STORIES, 1934-1944



GISÈLE PRASSINOS

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Gisèle Prassinos Reading Her Poems to Members of the Surrealist Group, 1934.

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Standing: Mario Prassinos, Henri Parisot, Benjamin Péret, René Char, Gisèle Prassinos

Seated: André Breton, Paul Éluard

“WHERE INNOCENCE UNLEASHES ITS FEROCITY AND ITS MONSTERS”

In the best-known photograph of Gisèle Prassinos (1920–2015), taken in 1934 by Man Ray, the young author is fourteen years old. She stands before a gathering of André Breton’s surrealist circle, her eyes turned down toward the papers in her hand as she prepares to read aloud a selection of her stories. The adult men positioned around her, leaning forward intently, include such “greats” of surrealist literature as Paul Éluard and Benjamin Péret. René Char, resting his weight against a shelving unit behind her, looms over Prassinos in a pose that is at once paternal and menacing. Breton, in another photograph from this same session, holds his chin and cocks his head as if contemplating a mystery or listening to a far-off, otherworldly voice.

At first glance, the Prassinos in this photo seems to fit perfectly the image of the idealized *femme-enfant*, or woman-child, a trope that appeared throughout the work of the male surrealist writers and artists associated with Breton’s group. The *femme-enfant*, as Whitney Chadwick articulates in her landmark study *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, was conceived of as a beautiful young woman whose liminal position between naiveté and sexual maturity made her the perfect muse.¹ She was seen as offering a gateway into the unconscious world of desires and dreams. If she made art of her own, as many so-called *femme-enfants* did, her work was largely dismissed as the product of an imagination without filter, agency, or intent.

Prassinos’s stories, especially those from this earliest period in her writing, do indeed seem at first glance to tap into some creative wellspring that lies beyond rhyme or reason. They are short, dark, absurdist tales—tales in which bodies disintegrate, animals and objects become sentient forces of menace, and the banal operations of daily urban life are peeled back to reveal a shadowy city overrun with the oozing and the abject.

Prassinos and the members of Breton’s group saw her writing in a very different light, however. In his *Anthology of Black Humor* (1940), which includes two of Prassinos’s stories, Breton describes her work as “automatic writing.”² Automatic writing, for the surrealists, described the process of pouring words onto the page directly from the

subconscious, of composing text without self-awareness or artistic preconception—the kind of creative process perfectly suitable for the supposedly naïve femme-enfant. This is what the men in Man Ray's photo had gathered to hear: the work of an enchanting young girl who surely could not understand what she herself had written. Unfortunately, this is also the ill-conceived image of Gisèle Prassinos that has come down to us through history. Most commonly, Prassinos is referenced as a footnote in the annals of the surrealist movement, a case study in the surreal potential of unwitting authorship. It is for this reason that Prassinos's name and her work are so little known to us today, though her stories are as rich, poetic, and unnerving as any writing by those surrealist "greats."

The truth about this prolific, powerful author is far more complex and far more subversive. To talk about her only as a child, as most historians of art and literature do, is to overlook the overwhelming majority of her professional life. Though Prassinos did begin writing and publishing as a teenager (her first book, *La sauterelle arthritique* or "The Arthritic Grasshopper," was published by Éditions GLM in 1935 when she was fifteen), her career as an author and an artist stretched far into her adulthood and across her long lifetime. Prassinos's final book, *La mort de Socrate* (The death of Socrates), a collection of short stories, was published in 2006 when she was eighty-six. In the second half of her life, she became increasingly passionate about making visual art. When I first visited her in Paris in 2008, working on pen and ink drawings was part of her daily routine. Apart from a period in the 1950s when she focused her creative efforts on translation, Prassinos made original work from the early 1930s until only a few years before her death in 2015 at the age of ninety-five. Her earliest works are her most surrealist, and arguably her most interesting, but the themes that underlie these early stories (family, animals, and a scathing humor) remained important throughout her career.

The relationship between Prassinos's work and the surrealist movement is a messy one. Later in her life, she would deny all artistic ties to surrealism. Yet understanding the tensions between Prassinos and the surrealists is key to identifying the stakes that underlie the stories in this volume—some of which are likely the very stories that Prassinos read to that group of enraptured men. These are not the ramblings of an unwitting child author. They are sharply conceived tales of curdled sweetness, creeping dread, and worlds in which the domestic becomes grotesque. They reject, mock, and playfully dismember the logics of the adult world.

Was Prassinos a surrealist? On the one hand, there is no doubt that these early stories embody many of the characteristics that Breton lays out in his surrealist manifestos: absurdist juxtaposition, a rejection of "the reign of logic," an embrace of the marvelous.³ At the same time, Prassinos was involved with surrealism as an official, self-regulating artistic movement for only a few short years after Man Ray took that first, fateful photo. Whether or not Prassinos was a surrealist, she was most certainly not an automatic writer. As the stories in this volume clearly show, even the writing from her teenage

years was done with artistic intention. “I didn’t know anything about what the surrealists were calling automatic writing,” she told interviewers in the early 2000s, reflecting on that period. “Personally, I never practiced automatic writing, at least not the way Breton described it.”⁴ Implicit in this rejection of automatic writing is also a rejection of the gender politics of surrealism. To be forcefully labeled an “automatic writer” is to have one’s agency stripped and one’s work repurposed for the creative agenda of male artists who did not see the women who produced this work as equals. For a young writer such as Prassinis, being involved with the surrealists would have meant gaining access to resources like publishers, but it also would have meant being fetishized and marginalized. This clash between creative expression and oppression, between the young girl as agent and the young girl as object, literalizes itself in the violent imagery of Prassinis’s work, where children are perpetually vulnerable but also frighteningly dangerous.

In another sense, Prassinis was already a surrealist before she met the surrealists. To the extent that surrealism names the deep, corporeal drive to upend reality and let loose what lies beneath, she was writing surrealist stories before anyone called her work by that word—and also long after the men who peered down at her, the fourteen-year-old with her writing in hand, were dead and gone.

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Let us begin anew then, not with surrealism or with the men who defined it, but with Prassinis herself and her work. Lifelong author and artist Gisèle Prassinis was born in 1920 and died in 2015. When she was two years old, her Greco-Italian family moved from Turkey to France.⁵ It was through her older brother, the painter Mario Prassinis, that she was first introduced to Breton’s surrealist circle in 1933. Though Prassinis is often mentioned as a Greek and/or Turkish writer (her husband was also of Greek and Egyptian heritage), she was herself first and foremost a Parisian. Prassinis lived in Paris and the surrounding area for ninety-three years, and the city of Paris, distorted yet still intimately discernible, forms the constant backdrop to her early stories. The sewers through which her characters trek are *les égouts de Paris*; the river along which her characters stroll, where they often find floating objects both unlikely and uncanny, is the River Seine. Like many celebrated authors before and after her, Prassinis writes her own version of the literature of Paris.

I began corresponding with Prassinis in 2007. I was an undergraduate at the time, completing a degree in creative writing, and I had read the small handful of her stories currently available in English in a course on female surrealists. Though she was only one of many women whose work we discussed, I was captivated by the rebellious undercurrents and eerie unknowability of her stories, and so I began tracking down and reading her many volumes in French. I was thrilled to learn that Prassinis was still alive; since she

had been so young when she first came in contact with the surrealist movement, she was, at that time, one of the only living writers and artists who had been associated with Breton's circle. I sent off a handwritten letter to the address listed for the publisher of her most recent book. A few months later I had her reply, penned in a shaky yet elegant hand. Among other things, I had asked her about her interactions with the artist Hans Bellmer, known for his sexualized depictions of young girls. A few of Prassinos's stories and poems seemed to me to be direct reactions to Bellmer's work, and I had read an interview that suggested the two had also interacted face to face. Had Prassinos and Bellmer exchanged letters, I asked? Did she perhaps still have them? In her response, Prassinos answered me coyly, "If I did receive any letters from Hans Bellmer, I have surely destroyed them." I admired her instantly.

Between 2008 and 2010, I visited Prassinos on three occasions at her retirement home in Paris. At the time of that first visit, in the spring of 2008, she had only recently left the apartment she had lived in for decades, and she struck me as aging but utterly vibrant. She wore her hair in a neatly brushed silver bob and her bright, wide eyes were a sparkling cornflower blue. I held up my audio recorder and asked her about surrealism. She waved my question away again and again throughout the day, preferring instead to tell me about her family, the people she had loved and those she had lost, the children she had wished for but never had. She pointed proudly to the paintings by her brother Mario that dotted the walls of her tidy room and pulled out a stack of her current drawings, spreading them across her bed to show me that she was staying active even within the walls of the *maison de retraite*. When I asked if I could take her photo, she leaned forward in her chair and smiled sweetly, with only the faintest hint of mischief. I thought I had come as a researcher, but I was twenty-two at the time, and in truth I think Prassinos saw my presence like a visit from a grandchild. What I took from the trip, more than any one biographical or artistic insight, was a sense of warmth and connection to her as a person.

I visited Prassinos twice more, once in the summer of 2009 and once in the winter of 2010. Unfortunately, little more than a year after my first visit, her memory and awareness of her surroundings had already taken a turn. Along with a younger friend of hers, we went to a nearby café to talk, but it became clear that the past and the present were blurring for Prassinos, and conversation was strained. Still, I made arrangements to come back soon to catalog the lifetime of documents and works in progress still stored in the apartment from which Prassinos had moved a few years before. When I returned that winter, however, my heart sank. I was too late. Prassinos no longer remembered me or our correspondence. When I appeared at her room at the appointed time, she shooed me away angrily. In 2015, Prassinos passed away. She was survived by few immediate relatives. If what she told me nearly a decade ago now still holds true, her papers and correspondence are now in the hands of her niece, Catherine Prassinos, and have yet to be made available. Like so much of Prassinos's writing itself, this collection represents a wealth of material that is largely yet to be explored.

Though more than eight decades have passed since her writing was first published in France, little of Prassinos's works has been made available in English translation. A handful of her early stories and poems, such as "Arrogant Hair," are occasionally included in English-language anthologies.⁸ Her 1959 novel *La voyageuse* appeared in 1961 as *The Traveller*, but was only briefly in print. The wealth of her work still inaccessible to English-speaking readers is vast. All told, Prassinos was the author of thirty-four book-length works, not including collections, translations, visual art, and correspondence. Even in the original French, much of her early writing is out of circulation, with limited copies now tucked away in the reserves of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France or in private collections.

We have chosen to begin Prassinos's contemporary English translation with the present collection because it serves as a robust and varied introduction to the work she produced during her most surrealist period. Originally published in 1976 as *Trouver sans chercher* (literally "to find without seeking"), the volume brings together a selection of her short stories written between 1934 and 1944, which initially appeared in smaller collections like *La sauterelle arthritique*. Roughly speaking, this time span represents the period from when Prassinos first met the surrealists as a young teenager to the liberation of France from the Nazi occupation when she was twenty-four.

Edited by Henri Parisot, with a dedication to René Char and an introduction from Michel Décaudin—a specialist in the work of Guillaume Apollinaire—the volume originally known as *Trouver sans chercher* seems to situate itself squarely within the surrealist tradition. Yet Prassinos herself gives us only a brief and fittingly ambiguous opening note. In this note, she reflects on the book's title, which is a reference to automatic writing—"to find without seeking," that is, to find the poetic image without consciously seeking it. Given Prassinos's history with the concept of automatic writing, it is unsurprising that her comments on the matter, written decades after her involvement with the surrealist movement, are deeply ambivalent. "To find what?" she asks. Even when the mind "doesn't know what it knows," she says, it speaks with an "astonishing voice" like a force of nature, a rallying cry that defies the boundaries of the real. It is what Prassinos finds in her own writing that tells us the most about how to understand her work: there she sees "the place where innocence unleashes its ferocity and its monsters. . . . Each of us can live there if we choose, in just the same way, without changing our names."

What is this place where innocence unleashes its ferocity and its monsters? The worlds contained in these stories are at once playful, uncomfortable, disruptive, familiar, and deeply strange. They are simultaneously the stuff of the gothic and the quotidian: twins, ghosts, and severed body parts, but also home cooking, bus rides, and sidewalk strolls. Each of these stories, though short, contains a dizzying density of dreamlike imagery; each beckons with the lure of interpretation and yet refuses to resolve itself into any

one clear meaning or message. With a few notable exceptions, little academic work has been done on these stories. They deserve many more readers, many more interpretations—many more moments of frustration, confusing, disorientation, and insight, all of which they engender by design.

To offer anything like a comprehensive analysis of these stories would take a volume far thicker than this collection itself. However, it is helpful to begin with a consideration of a few key thematic threads that run through these works. Think of these as points of entry, or perhaps provocations—but know that they barely scratch the surface of a body of writing that is at once wide, deep, and slippery: easy to become lost in but far harder to grasp.

First, there is the matter of fairy tales. It would be hard to read Prassinós's early stories without thinking of the gory storytelling traditions captured by the Brothers Grimm, and later sanitized by Charles Perrault. Many of the tropes most commonly associated with fairy tales appear in these early stories: unlikely encounters with animals, children in peril, fanciful adventures that soon turn deadly. However, to call Prassinós's stories "fairy tales" implies that they have a moral lesson, that they serve a specific social function. Angela Carter's feminist fairy tales work in this way, for example.⁷ They invert notions of good and evil in order to reclaim female sexuality, so often the downfall of conventional fairy-tale heroines. Taken individually, Prassinós's stories have no such messages. Taken collectively, their effect is a piercing cackle, a complete disorientation, rather than an ethical lesson. The politics of these stories are absurdist. They upend the world by making children dangerous, by reanimating the dead, by letting the carefully tended domestic deform, foam, and melt. No social structure holds power in the world of these stories—not on the basis of gender, or nationality, or class. The force that reigns is chaos. What we have here is the revenge of the *femme-enfant*: fairy tales written not for children, but by them.

Embodiment and the bizarreness of material flesh is another important thread in Prassinós's work. Bodies in these stories are disjointed, precarious things. Made from bric-a-brac and assembled organic bits, they combine the human with the animal, the vegetable, and the manmade detritus of the everyday. Often in these tales, enumerating the collage-like oddities of such bodies takes precedence over narrative. Stories like "Description of a Wedding" are perhaps best understood as luxuriating exercises in remaking that thing called the human form. The wedding scene opens thus:

The bride leads the way, holding her new husband by the arm. She is very tall and her veil only comes down to her waist. She has an enormous, round head and a splendid potato that serves as her nose. Her eyes are pierced nuts, out of which sticks red pencil lead. She has a very blue mouth and a row of black, doughy teeth. As she is naked, you can see the lumps of wool that cover her body and the flowery

little dandelion that hangs from her bellybutton. Her short legs don't end in feet, but in cow hooves. All in all, she looks like a wounded dove.

Prassinós's characters resist identification. Who can empathize with this bride? She is a constructed thing, an exquisite corpse in a dozen pieces, all lumps and bumps and fecund dark places. Who can empathize with her new husband, who has wilted carnations for eyes and whose aluminum legs, we are told, disintegrate when he laughs? These stories are entirely unsentimental. They offer no opportunities for emotional investment, and so they refuse to conform to stereotypes of women's writing. No one grows; no one loves. Or if they grow, they grow vegetables from their faces. If they love, they love frogs who eat their eyes.

As has perhaps already become apparent, one cannot talk about Prassinós's work without talking about gender. This is, in part, because of the context in which this writing was produced and circulated: the scene of young girl writing at the margins of the male-dominated surrealist movement. Beyond this, however, these texts themselves return again and again to gender as a center concern—gender and agency, gender and the body, gender as the absurd, the ecstatic destruction of gender. Among the humans found in these stories (animals and personified objects also abound), some of those who appear most frequently are young girls, mothers, or an identified "I" who refers to herself using French feminine word endings. If the prominence of such figures sounds empowering in any traditional sense, it is not. The role of mothers in Prassinós's early stories is often to mutilate or neglect their children ("The Fussy Fire"). Young girls are sometimes victims, but just as often they are strange, opaque entities who strike fear in the hearts of adults ("Two Beggars"). Men also make regular appearances, but commonly as a useless, meaty puppet mirroring the motions of the father, husband, or soldier. Prassinós's stories are feminist in the sense that they destabilize hegemonic male power at the same time that they destabilize reason itself. They reject the notion of women as caretakers, women as beauties, women as safe. The women in these stories are powerful, but commonly this means that they are powerfully strange, powerfully violent, or powerfully cruel.

Let these stories be a gateway—an open door onto the work of a writer who deserves far more attention than the history of art and literature has yet paid her, but also onto a shadow world where reason dissolves and surrealist fantasy lurks in the places we least expect it.

Bonnie Ruberg