

**A FOREIGN MIRROR: INTERTEXTS WITH SURREALISM IN
TWENTIETH-CENTURY U. S. POETRIES**

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ABSTRACT

In the latter half of the twentieth-century, fewer U. S. poets translated foreign poetry than their modernist predecessors. The scope of their translation projects correspondingly narrowed. Gone, for example, were projects like Ezra Pound's reaching back to thirteenth-century Italy to see how U. S. poets could push forward. Instead, translations of European and Latin American modernism prevailed. Often, multiple translations of the same author were produced by different translators at the expense of presenting a more well-rounded vision of national literatures. Of these translations, a surprisingly large number were of poets who were either loosely or explicitly connected to surrealism as a literary movement. My dissertation locates this explosion of interest in surrealism as an attraction to the surrealist emphasis on reconciling binaries. This emphasis allows American poets a convenient frame through which to confront the difficult questions of place and nation that arise as the U. S. position in the field of world literature shifts from periphery to core.

Previous researchers have traced the history of surrealism's early reception in the United States, but these studies tend to not only focus on the movement's influence on American art, but also stop shortly after surrealist expatriates returned to Europe following WWII. My dissertation extends these approaches both by bringing the conversation up to the present and by examining the key role that translation and other forms of rewriting play in mediating the relationship between surrealism and American audiences. As surrealism enters the U. S. literary system, the transformed product is often not what one might expect. U. S. rewritings of surrealist literature are primarily carried out by poets and critics whose

fundamental interest in the movement lies in finding a foreign mirror for their own aesthetic or ideological preoccupations. This in turn provokes the development of a strand of surrealist-influenced writing whose aims and goals are vastly different from those of the movement's founders.

The first chapter, "What is Surrealism?," relays three separate histories that intertwine in the understanding of surrealism in the American context. First, the story of the competing definitions of surrealism by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who is generally credited with inventing the term, and André Breton (1896-1966), the self-proclaimed leader of surrealism as a literary movement. The discrepancy between their definitions illustrates that the cultural significance attached to the term was in flux from its very inception. This dispute sets the stage for the U. S. reception of the movement, in which the division is generally figured as a competition between "orthodox" and "dissident" surrealisms. I then turn to the American context to examine the anthologizing of surrealism, tracing a history from Michael Benedikt's *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (1974), the first English-language anthology of surrealist poetry, to Mary Ann Caws' more recent *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (2001) to argue that the U. S. conception of surrealism has gradually transformed from a francocentric, male-dominated interpretation to a distinct favoring of dissident figures who employ surrealist techniques to challenge prevailing cultural attitudes toward such issues as race and gender. This shift is consistent with the trajectory of U. S. criticism of the movement, with earlier works rehashing the orthodox-dissident debate and more recent works extolling the virtues of surrealism as a lyric mode highly suited for the development of a poetics of social and institutional critique.

The final three chapters present case studies of American poets who engaged in extended intertextual relationships with specific foreign works via the acts of translation or

adaptation. When taken together, their work constitutes a mini-narrative of the larger structure of twentieth-century U. S. literature's changing position in the field of world literature and illustrates how that change altered U. S. poet-translators' stance toward foreign works. The third chapter, "William Carlos Williams: Translation in the American Grain," is a reading of William Carlos Williams' translation of Philippe Soupault's surrealist novel *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (1929), one of the earliest book-length translations of surrealist literature available in English. This translation is rarely mentioned in critical discussions of Williams' oeuvre, largely because it does not readily conform to the prevailing critical emphasis on Williams' desire to cultivate an "American idiom" distinct from English literary tradition. In comparing Williams' translation of *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* with his own *A Novelette* (1932), which he was writing at the same time as the translation, I find aesthetic and ideological correlations that suggest Soupault's novel was a direct influence on *A Novelette*. At this point in his career, Williams' conception of the American idiom was much less focused on opposing English literary tradition than it was—much like the country itself—with constantly expanding and reimagining itself as it accommodates foreign influx. As the United States rises to the status as a major player in the field of world literature, however, and Williams' theory of the "American idiom" becomes codified, his attitude toward foreign literature becomes increasingly xenophobic, causing him to revise and distance himself from his earlier statements on translation.

A major subtext to Williams' translation strategy is the desire to place himself among an international cadre of likeminded artists. This desire is explored even further in chapter four, "Clayton Eshleman: Translation as Spiritual Rebirth." As the century progressed, poet-translators like Eshleman found themselves with the ability to anoint foreign writers by translating their work into English. Although Eshleman is cognizant of the colonizing power

this situation presents, his interest in surrealism and choice of source texts nonetheless rests on the desire to inhabit the subject positions of authors whose lives were antithetical to the conservative aura of his mid-century suburban upbringing. By examining the translations and statements on translation published by Eshleman in his literary journal *Caterpillar* (1967-1973), I find that Eshleman and his cohorts use translation to build an alternative tradition for their own work. In his poem “The Book of Yorunomado” (1964), Eshleman figures the act of translation as a battle between master and apprentice in which the translator must kill the translated in order to emerge as a mature artist.

The final chapter, “I see you better than you do / Because I’m foreign?: Alice Notley’s *Désamère* (1995),” reads Notley’s appropriation of the French surrealist Robert Desnos (1900-1945) as a form of adaptation, with the inevitable losses and gains that accompany such an act. The book begins as a conversation between Desnos and a female character named Amère, a stand-in for the author whose name is metonymically linked to the United States of America. Throughout the course of the book, the two fuse into a figure named Désamère, whose subjectivity can be read as an allegory for the cross-cultural and transhistorical bond created in that fusion. Notley presents this bond as solution to the social problems confronted in the book: U. S. cultural and political imperialism, the horrors of the Vietnam and Gulf wars, impending environmental disaster, and gender conflict in contemporary U. S. culture. In adopting stylistic and thematic conceits from Desnos, Notley not only comments on the previously mentioned issues, but she also criticizes the idealized portrayal of women in the work of Desnos and his surrealist cohorts. Notley’s adaptation in the service of ideological critique is ultimately a more progressive model of U. S. relations to foreign literary works than the appropriation for the sake of psychological or aesthetic gain put forth by poets like Eshleman.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Belgian surrealist René Magritte's painting *La reproduction interdite* (*Not to be Reproduced*, 1937) depicts a man standing in front of a mirror. On the mantle next to the mirror is a well-worn copy of the French translation of Edgar Allan Poe's novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1838). The book is reflected correctly in the mirror, but the man can only see the back of his own head, at the same angle and proportion that the viewer would expect to see his face. The unsettling nature of the image is amplified by the drab color scheme and the otherwise realistic attention to detail. The figure is Magritte patron Edward James, and the painting was commissioned to hang in the ballroom of James' London home. If it were not for the reverse image of James' head, one might easily categorize the piece as a relatively undistinguished work of portraiture.

The presence of Poe's novel in the painting points to the inherent difficulties in assessing U. S. relations to surrealism: why is a hundred-year-old novel by an American author who died in poverty, relatively unknown in his own country, given such a prominent place in a work by a Belgian painter?¹ Understanding Poe's place in the painting involves not only understanding Poe's place in early-nineteenth century American literature but also Poe's relationship to surrealist art and literature in twentieth-century France and Belgium, a daunting task that requires knowledge of poetry, prose, and art from two different continents and two different centuries. Although occasionally cited a source of inspiration for Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* was

poorly reviewed in the United States, often spurned for being insufficiently realistic and thus not compatible with the norms of U. S. fiction at the time, and had a stronger, more lasting impact on French literature. The version on the mantle in *La reproduction interdite* was the 1857 translation, *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym*, by the French poet Charles Baudelaire. Elements of Poe's novel, in turn, soon found their way into Baudelaire's poetry, most notably the poem "Un Voyage à Cythère" (A Voyage to Cythera, 1857), which features an image of birds feasting on human flesh that parallels a scene in Poe's novel.

The intertexts between French literature and *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* do not stop at Baudelaire. In 1897, for example, the science-fiction writer Jules Verne wrote a self-professed sequel to *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, *Le Sphinx des glaces* (generally translated as *The Sphinx of the Ice Fields* or *An Antarctic Mystery*). And threads of Poe's novel extend beyond the nineteenth century, at least as far as Georges Perec's infamous 1969 novel *La Disparition* (*A Void*), notable for not containing a single use of the letter *e* (a daunting task when one considers the prevalence of that letter in the French language), which contains an *e*-less rewriting of Poe's most well-known poem, "The Raven," attributed to Arthur Gordon Pym in order to avoid using the multiple *es* found in Poe's name.

More central to the presence of *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* in Magritte's painting, however, is André Breton's brief reference to Poe in his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924). Poe's name appears in the middle of a list of twenty writers that Breton considers precursors to surrealism. Each name in the list is followed by a description of the element of his work that Breton considers to be the most surrealist. Poe's entry reads, "Poe is Surrealist in adventure" (27). If we consider that the title of Baudelaire's translation contains the French term "*aventures*" (adventures) in place of the English "narrative," we can

see that the fabulist sense of “adventure” in the book, the very trait that left U. S. reviewers cold, is what attracts Breton to Poe. In this case, the aesthetic quality that causes a work to be unceremoniously discarded in one culture is the same quality that allows it to take root in another, a curious process that begs to be explored. It is worth noting, as well, that Poe is the only American writer on Breton’s otherwise francocentric list and that Poe’s position on the list is immediately prior to Baudelaire’s: “Baudelaire is Surrealist in morality” (27), suggesting that Baudelaire’s work comes after—or out of—Poe. What does this crossing tell us about the difference between the interrelated—yet divergent—paths of French and American literature in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

If anything is clear about Magritte’s placement of *Les Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym* in *La reproduction interdite*, it is that the French Poe is very different than the American Poe. Not only is *Les Aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym* a translation, with the usual losses and gains that accompany the enterprise of translation, but even Poe’s name is changed, from “Edgar Allan Poe” to simply “Edgar Poe.” As superficial as it may sound to focus on the dropping of Poe’s middle name in the French context, it is a salient example of the fact that we are dealing with a totally different animal. Because the painting foregrounds a work of translation, its title can be read as a commentary on the act of translation itself—or if we choose to speak more generally, the process of cross-cultural, intersemiotic exchange—for translation is nothing if not a form of reproduction. What you get is never a mirror image or stand-in for the original. Like the book in *La reproduction interdite*, certain aspects of the source text may be reflected in the target language, but often at the expense of other aspects (i.e., James’ face). As a portrait, Magritte’s painting not only interrogates realist aspirations in painting, suggesting that mimesis is a pipe dream, but it also suggests that any form of cultural reproduction will inevitably refract in unexpected directions. In short, understanding

the full reverberations of Magritte's placement of *Les Aventures d'Arthur Gordon Pym* in *La reproduction interdite* involves an ability to look forward and backward in time on at least two different continents and in several different mediums. It involves knowledge of several *isms* which, even if having the same name, might be quite different in features—from the Romanticism of Poe to the symbolism of Baudelaire, from the surrealism of Breton and Magritte to the Oulipian constraints of Perec—a project whose scope extends beyond the expertise of most specialized literary and art historians.

Surrealism: Where World Literature Meets American Poetry

Magritte's painting is an excellent example of both the ideology and aesthetics of surrealism, one of the twentieth century's most enduring and influential avant-garde movements, which finds its impetus in the unexpected and in the bringing together of opposites. I give a more thorough discussion of the term *surrealism* and the more salient aspects of the movement in the next chapter, but it is worth noting here that the movement's founder and chief theorist, André Breton, believed that these gestures had immense liberatory potential for the human subject. Although officially founded in 1924, the movement was slow to make a significant impact in the United States. The most intense period of interest in surrealist literature among American poets, critics, and translators came in the last three decades of the twentieth century, with a flurry of translations and monographs producing a small—but veritable—industry of its own. Previous researchers have explored the social, political, and aesthetic ramifications of surrealism in its French context and traced a history of the movement's early reception in the United States. The most comprehensive of these works is Dickran Tashjian's *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950* (1995). Tashjian, an art historian by training, is one

of the few critics who examines surrealism in American in both its literary and art historical contexts, a necessary move when considering a movement whose branches were as intertwined as surrealism. For all its positive attributes, however, Tashjian's study rarely makes use of close reading, nor does he consider the effect that translation choices—both the translator's methodology and choice of source text—had on U. S. reception of surrealism. Tashjian's study also stops at 1950, shortly after Breton and other expatriates returned to Europe, so it does not examine the explosion of interest in surrealism since the late 1960s. This study extends these previous approaches both by bringing the conversation up to the present and by examining the key role that translation and other forms of rewriting play in mediating the relationship between surrealism and American audiences. As surrealism enters the U. S. literary system, the transformed product is—like Magritte's painting—not what one might expect. Often, what we get in these translations is a clear view of what lies at the back of the translator's own head. For U. S. rewritings of surrealist literature are primarily carried out by poets and critics whose fundamental interest in the movement is in finding a foreign mirror for their own aesthetic or ideological preoccupations, in turn aiding the development of a strand of surrealist-influenced writing whose aims and goals are vastly different from those of the movement's founders.

When I use the term *surrealism* throughout the course of this text, it is always with a lowercase *s* because I want the reader to think of surrealism as a mode of writing that extends beyond the spatial and temporal domains normally associated with the term as it generally refers to *Surrealism*—with a capital *S*—as a literary and artistic movement. Of course, the boundaries of Surrealism as a literary movement have always been subject to debate. In terms of time, the movement is usually positioned in relation to the biography of André Breton, and shifts in the movement's ideology are commonly viewed as

corresponding with shifts in Breton's own ideology—his flirtation with the *Parti communiste français* (French Communist Party, hereafter referred to as PCF) in the late 1920s and early 1930s, for example, and his increasing interest in mysticism and the occult in the 1940s. As far as space is concerned, however, the debate is a little more interesting. I go into this topic in more detail in the next chapter where I discuss anthologizing surrealism in the U. S., but it is worth noting here that the poets and artists who have gained widespread critical acceptance as part of the group has risen exponentially over time from the handful of cohorts officially christened by Breton himself—who were almost always white, male, heterosexual, and French—to a wide variety of writers from all over the globe.

This rise has precipitated the need for a study that addresses the role that the surrealist mode has played in the development of modern U. S. poetics. In *A Boatload of Madman: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde 1920-1950* (1995), Dickran Tashjian does an excellent job chronicling the early years of surrealism in the U. S., but his study also focuses on writers—such as Parker Tyler and Charles Henri Ford—who had varying levels of direct contact with Breton and his French cohorts, even if the lines of contact were sometimes tenuous or testy. Tashjian's study leaves little room for writers who were outside the official lines of the movement or who were writing after 1950 when there was a boom in surrealist-oriented writing in the United States. David Arnold closes the gap somewhat in *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (2007), but Arnold's specific focus is on uniting surrealism and “language poetry,” two modes of writing that have been long considered to be at odds with one another.² As Arnold notes:

When Surrealism appears in the writings of Language's ‘poet-critics’, it often features as a well meaning but compromised enthusiasm which touched upon some useful techniques without realizing their true import. Portrayed in

this fashion, it usually merits brief mention rather than extended discussion.

(13)

He cites, for example, Charles Bernstein's ambivalent response to surrealism, as Bernstein emphasizes its aesthetic techniques in favor of its ideological stance, praising the formal advances of the surrealist image in an interview with Tom Beckett (1986), which he claims paved the way for the paratactic approach of the language poets: "Surrealism is to be credited with opening up new possibilities for images and perhaps more crucially for the transition of image to image (unit to unit) within the total organization of the poem—opening up, that is, the domain which we now work" (qtd. in Arnold 19). At the same time, he is very careful to transfer the phrase "image to image" to "unit to unit," ultimately emphasizing the linguistic emphasis of language poetry over surrealism's image base. In his essay "Stray Straws and Straw Men" (1984), Bernstein also criticizes the surrealist assumption that "consciousness existed prior to—aside from—language and had to be put into it" (qtd. in Arnold 19). This criticism of surrealism, however, is anachronistic at best, as it rests heavily on poststructuralist thought that was not yet circulating when Breton and his cohorts got their start. Arnold, on the other hand, offers incisive readings of surrealist texts, Charles Henri Ford's little magazine *Blues*, and the works of several poets associated with the language movement to demonstrate that Bernstein's critique of surrealism's lack of linguistic self-awareness is based on a narrow view of surrealism's aims and output and that there is much more in common between the two groups than Bernstein and others acknowledge.

Because Arnold admirably covers the lines of kinship between language poetry and surrealism, I will make few nods in that direction in this study. Instead, I hope to construct a wider network of poets whose work can be said to be influenced by surrealism and show that, although surrealism sometimes manifests in their work in divergent ways, use of

surrealism in American poetry is almost always motivated around questions of place and nation. This is one of the most intriguing aspects of the history of surrealism in U. S. poetry, as American surrealism is generally regarded as depoliticized in comparison with its earlier French counterpart, focusing primarily on the importation of such aesthetic techniques as automatic writing, the unexpected juxtaposition of disparate images and discursive registers, and an interest in dreams and dream-like imagery minus the ideological import that Breton and his cohorts attached to such techniques. These techniques are prevalent in surrealist-inspired writings in the U. S., but they are also far from depoliticized. Although U. S. authors' ideological preoccupations are not synonymous with those of Breton and company, this does not necessarily mean that surrealist techniques are not being deployed in a localized fashion germane to the preoccupations of the person who was serving as the particular conduit.

As I explain in more detail in the next chapter, I am operating according to an expanded definition of surrealism, similar to the one espoused by James Clifford in *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988): “to circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious” (118). A few of the poets in this study might object to the classification of their work under the rubric of surrealism. Indeed, I briefly discuss the work of Bernadette Mayer, who when making her “Idiosyncratic Poetry Pyramid” (a guide to an aspiring poet’s daily reading choices humorously modeled after the food pyramid), places surrealism in the fats and oils section with the instructions to “use sparingly.” Despite this classification, it is difficult to argue that works such as Mayer’s *The 3:15 Experiment* (2001), in which Mayer awoke every day at 3:15 A.M. and wrote in a stream-of-consciousness manner,

bears no resemblance in method to the timed automatic writing experiments of the surrealists. Mayer even uses the term “experiment” in her title, a favorite word of Breton and company, who considered acts of automatic writing to be a form of psychic research.

My preference for viewing surrealism as a general mode rather than a fixed literary movement with clear boundaries is inspired by Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain’s discussion of the term “nexus” in the introduction to their edited collection *The Objectivist Nexus: Essays in Cultural Poetics* (1999):

To talk in terms of a literary movement is, for literary production, to identify boundaries of time or location, to examine manifesto, meetings and membership, marks of solidarity, a specific lexicon of debate, and, in reception or consumption, to stress questions of conformity to or variation from some extractable or centralized norm of aesthetics or practice. [...] However, when writers think of themselves as a nexus, or when critics proceed with this formation in mind, they no longer demand conformity of the literary materials or producers, nor a temporal and philosophical consistency of application, but rather a continued interest in the grounds for debate. (22)

DuPlessis and Quartermain acknowledge that their notion of the nexus stems in part from Foucault’s observation that literary history is, in DuPlessis and Quartermain’s words, “a shifting place of dialogue, debate, and reconfiguration” (22). The term allows DuPlessis and Quartermain to engage in what they call—after Stephen Greenblatt—“cultural poetics,” which essentially means offering “culturalist interpretations of poetry, readings inflected with sociopolitical concerns” (20). To examine a cultural phenomenon like surrealism in terms of its status as a literary movement leads to focusing almost exclusively on aesthetic features,

using Breton as a weathervane to determine whether or not others conform to his current conception of the movement. Such discussions lead to categorizing works in one of two categories: orthodox or dissident surrealism. The meaning of these categories is straightforward. Orthodox surrealism is Bretonian surrealism. Dissident surrealism is not. While these are useful categories, they are—like most such categories—only useful up a certain point, as they often fail to account for certain nuances that become apparent through the historically and culturally grounded readings that DuPlessis and Quartermain champion. And those nuances are where the really interesting story of surrealism in the United States lies. Not in whether certain poets conformed to Bretonian surrealism, but in how U. S. poets who served as conduits for surrealism reflected—or helped shape—their own cultural moments.

My stance with regard to surrealism in the U. S. has more to do with recent developments in the study of world literature than anything happening in the field of American poetry studies, which—other than a few notable exceptions—tends to treat national borders as a form of taxonomy. I am particularly indebted to the thinking of Wai Chee Dimock, who questions the view of American literature as an autonomous entity, the rhetorical move of stripping the adjective *American* from its status as “a territorial jurisdiction and turn[ing] it into a mode of literary causality, making the latter reflexive of and indeed coincidental with the former” (3). In making this leap, Dimock claims, “we limit ourselves, with or without explicit acknowledgement, to an analytic domain foreclosed by definition, a kind of scholarly unilateralism. Literature here is the product of one nation and one nation alone, analyzable within its confines” (3). As the antithesis of this framework, Dimock challenges us to think on planetary terms, far beyond the idea of territorial sovereignty:

what we called “American” literature is quite often a shorthand, a simplified name for a much more complex tangle of relations. Rather than being a discrete entity, it is better seen as a crisscrossing set of pathways, open-ended and ever multiplying, weaving in and out of other geographies, other languages and cultures. These are input channels, kinship networks, routes of transit, and forms of attachment—connective tissues binding America to the rest of the world. Active on both ends, they thread American texts into the topical events of other cultures, while also threading the long durations of those cultures into the short chronology of the United States. (3)

In this formulation, the relationship between planet and America is seen as the relationship between set and subset. American literature, in other words, is a mere part of the field of world literature, and in order to grasp the full dimensions of its duration and extension, we must consider the various pathways that move in and out of it.

Along with expanding our conception of space, Dimock also asks us to expand our conception of time beyond the usual division of literature into centuries or decades. She coins the term “deep time” to describe this phenomenon, claiming that this new term highlights “a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations, a densely interactive fabric” (3-4). Dimock’s thinking here is, as she openly acknowledges, indebted to the scholarship of Fernand Braudel and other historians of the *Annales* school, particularly their conception of the *longue durée*, which—for all practical purposes—is relatively synonymous with Dimock’s “deep time.” The *longue durée* throws events into a different perspective, bringing to light pathways and intersections that might have otherwise escaped observation. In Braudel’s words:

For the historian, accepting the *longue durée* entails a readiness to change his style, his attitudes, a whole reversal in his thinking, a whole new way of conceiving of social affairs. It means becoming used to a slower tempo, which sometimes almost borders on the motionless. (qtd. in Dimock 4-5)

Looking at literary history through the slower tempo of the *longue durée* is a particularly revealing way to examine the activities of the twentieth-century avant-garde, which is often read as a rapid succession of competing literary movements. Every few years, the story usually goes, a new avant-garde was born, with each successive movement clanging and clamoring to differentiate their work from the history of their predecessors. The division of literary history along such lines dominates university curricula, although perhaps not without practical reasons. Not only are shorter durations easier to digest in a semester or quarter, but it is also much more reasonable to ask that professors obtain the necessary qualifications to teach the literature of only one country and one century than the literature of multiple countries over the span of several centuries. Not surprisingly, short durations also tend to dominate the topics presented at professional conferences. The Association for the Study of Dada and Surrealism, for example, an allied organization of the Modern Language Association, frequently arranges its panel at the annual MLA convention around the work of a particular decade, as if the work of that decade could be effectively sealed off from that of the decades surrounding it. Of course, a decade does not necessarily connote a movement, but as Magritte's *La reproduction interdite* illustrates, a single work can easily point a hundred years in either direction. Thinking by decade, I argue, encourages thinking of literary history in terms of movements and enables debates such as the one that rages over orthodox and dissident surrealism. If we slow literary history down, however, to the point where it "almost borders on the motionless," it is easier to see how and why depoliticized strands of

surrealism took root in—and were more successful in—American soil. If we think of world literature in terms of the kinship networks and lines of transit that Dimock urges us to consider, we can see that the question of whether or not surrealism in the U. S. conforms to orthodox surrealism is ultimately an uninteresting question. The really interesting questions are how and why these transformations took place and what effect they ultimately had on the field of American poetry.

As I have argued elsewhere, the study of world literature and the study of modern and contemporary American poetry have rarely crossed paths.³ This is largely because the study of world literature—in both its micro and macro forms—has leaned more heavily on popular forms like the novel. On one end of the spectrum, for example, you have works like Wendy Grisworld’s fascinating *Bearing Witness: Readers, Writers, and the Novel in Nigeria* (2000), which chronicles the rise of a literary culture in Nigeria, as sparks fly in unexpected directions when first-world forms like the novel are adapted to the local conditions of a rapidly developing country. At the other end of the spectrum, we have Franco Moretti’s *Atlas of the European Novel 1800-1900* (1998), a bold attempt at applying quantitative methods from the social sciences to chart the evolution of the novel in Europe in the nineteenth century. Moretti coins the term “distant reading” in his essay “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000) to describe this methodology. Drawing on Immanuel Wallerstein’s world-systems approach and its characterization of the planet as a set of mechanisms that redistributes resources from the periphery to the core, Moretti advocates a synthesis of preexisting work on the development of national literatures, a “second hand” approach that he describes as “a patchwork of other people’s research, *without a single direct textual reading*” (57; emphasis in original).⁴ An obvious challenge to the institution of “close reading,” a practice that dominates poetry scholarship, this approach eschews discussions of individual

authors and works in favor of charting large-scale shifts and trends in the development of world literature.

At the same time, I would like to advocate a method that takes Moretti's concept of distant reading into account *without abandoning close reading as a valuable critical tool*. Moretti's account was developed in order to explain the process by which Western forms like the novel migrated to smaller—one could even say “minor”—literary systems in Africa, Asia, and Latin and South America. In Moretti's conception, this process forms a triangle between “foreign *plot*; local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*” (65; emphasis in original). On the other hand, as Lawrence Venuti points out in “World Literature and Translation Studies”:

This account aims to describe original compositions whose constitutive materials are assumed to be readily identifiable as foreign or local in origin—an assumption that may not be in fact be upheld by analysis because literary texts tend to be heterogeneous cultural artifacts. (182)

Venuti turns to Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981), a British novel set in Venice, as a case in point. Despite the foreign setting and foreign characters, Venuti argues, McEwan's text would have been interpreted as local by a British audience not only because it conforms to the classic realism that has dominated the English novel since the eighteenth century, but also because it participates in a tradition of travel novels set in Italy that reinforce the “stereotype of Italians as immoral, inclined to deceit, lasciviousness, and violence” (182).

One could make a similar argument for the presence of Poe's novel in *La reproduction interdite*. Despite the fact that we are dealing with a foreign source, Magritte shows us a translation of that text by a highly visible local poet, and those contemporary viewers who saw the painting in Edward James' ballroom would likely have understood the intertexts between Baudelaire and Poe to the point where Poe's work would have taken on an air of familiarity. Because of

the inherent difficulties posed by the heterogeneity of literary works, then, I would like to suggest that the most fruitful method for understanding surrealism's role in the development of modern U. S. poetics is one that combines both close and distant reading strategies. As Venuti notes, "Corpora of translations can be analyzed at a distance, so as to consider how patterns of exchange influence receiving traditions. But individual translations can also be submitted to close reading, so as to consider how specific interpretations of the source texts shape that influence" (186).

Lyric poetry, a cultural form that has become increasingly marginalized since its displacement by more popular forms such as the novel and—more recently—cinema, is easily lost in a large-scale approach like Moretti's. Largely the result of this ghettoization, scholarship on American poetry has taken a much narrower—one could even say conservational—approach, focusing heavily on issues of poetics. When the study of American poetry does extend outside national borders, it often—like Marjorie Perloff's *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), which traces the influence of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud on American poetry—fails to venture far from the world of aesthetics. It only seems logical that the examination of the product of one culture's influence on the products of another culture should take a more culturalist approach. Of course, much interesting work *is* being done on American poetry from a cultural studies perspective, but such discussions rarely extend outside national borders.⁵ In the present study, I hope to take a small step toward uniting the fields of world literature and American poetry. There have been, of course, other travelers who have explored this direction, chief among them Jahan Ramazani, whose *A Transnational Poetics* (2009) presents a dizzying, multivalent, global network pulsing into and out of twentieth and twenty-first century English-language poetry. One of the most valuable aspects of Ramazani's study—beyond the fact that he is one of the

few scholars in the field of transnational studies who works with poetry—is the range of poets he discusses, from well-known postcolonial poets like Derek Walcott and Kamau Braithwaite to canonical Western poets like T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In doing so, he illustrates that cross-cultural concerns are a dominant force in modern English-language poetics, not simply the province of minority, postcolonial strands. Ramanzani’s study is particularly useful for his formal analysis of poems, which illustrates, for example, how quick shifts between line breaks can serve as an allegory for the sort of cross-culturality in question. This approach shows how close reading can work in conjunction with Moretti’s transnational notion of distant reading.

I must disagree with Ramanzani, however, on one important issue: his argument that scholars have viewed the formal materials of poetry less conducive to cross-cultural use than other cultural media, which has led to it largely being ignored in the budding field of transnational studies. As I have above, I would argue that the increasing marginality and large-scale “irrelevance” of poetry within the social sphere has played a much larger role in that issue. Nonetheless, I must acknowledge Ramanzani’s work as foundational to my own, and because of that foundation, I feel that it is not necessary to display how widespread this sort of transnationalism is in modern English-language poetics. Instead, I can focus on what I consider to be one of the richest and more prevalent sites of cross-culturalism in twentieth and twenty-first century American poetry: its various correspondences with the poetics of surrealism, which has become a dominant force coursing through various strands of American poetry.

This study focuses on three particular poets—William Carlos Williams (1883-1963), Clayton Eshleman (b. 1935), and Alice Notley (b. 1945)—whose work displays varying levels of engagement with surrealism. This study could just have easily included any number of

poets from the last century whose work also exhibits intertexts with surrealism, including—but not limited to—Charles Henri Ford, Parker Tyler, Kenneth Patchen, Philip Lamantia, Jack Spicer, Barbara Guest, and John Yau. Lamantia’s use of surrealism in conjunction with Native American mythology and an idealized vision of the American West, for example, fits well with this book’s argument that U. S. poets used surrealism to think their way through questions of geographic space, as does the Asian-American poet John Yau’s *Crossing Canal Street* (1983), which explores the metaphor of Canal Street in New York as a physical border between Chinatown and the art world of Soho. For the most part, I have chosen the particular poets represented here because their engagements with specific foreign texts were more sustained or pronounced and because their work has been woefully underrepresented in poetry criticism (or—in the case of Williams—that his work in translation has been woefully underrepresented). Ford and Tyler’s complex relations to surrealism, for example, are covered in depth by Tashjian, and Jack Spicer’s most sustained engagement with surrealism, *After Lorca* (1956), has received its fair share of criticism as well. More importantly, I have chosen to focus on Williams, Eshleman, and Notley because together they present a narrative of U. S. engagement with surrealism that I would argue is symbolic of a more general U. S. response to surrealism, as it shifts from borrowing heavily from surrealism’s cultural capital (Williams) to using surrealism to critique U. S. cultural and political imperialism (Notley). Williams and Eshleman both translated surrealist works. Notley’s rewriting takes a different form, as she adopts the voice of the late Robert Desnos, an early member of the surrealist movement, in one of her recent books. A constant theme, however, in the work of all three is that each—in their own way—turns to surrealism as a way to think about what it means to be an American poet. The fact that each turns to foreign sources in their efforts speaks volumes about the transnational essence of American

poetry. In the case of Williams, this quest takes on a hint of nationalism, as he becomes engaged in cultivating a homegrown avant-garde separate and—in his mind—superior to the work of the European avant-garde. For Eshleman and Notley, on the other hand, surrealism allows them to interrogate mid-century American values and late-century American foreign policy respectively.

In part, my methodology also draws on theoretical precepts from André Lefevere's *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (1992), in which Lefevere argues that non-professional readers increasingly experience texts through various methods of rewriting, be it translation, criticism, or anthologizing. Lefevere assumes a systems approach to literature, which he breaks into two categories: patronage and poetics. The patrons, Lefevere claims, are those who have the power to control the production and dissemination of texts. Systems of patronage, of course, vary widely from culture to culture, but these patrons all have the immense power to shape and limit the poetics of their given cultures, which Lefevere defines as “the dominant concept of what literature should (be allowed to) be” (14). The poets who serve as conduits for surrealism discussed in this study engage in this vary sort of rewriting, and their acts have a significant impact not only on U. S. perceptions of modern foreign-language poetics, but also on the future direction of U. S. poetics.

Reading modern U. S. poetry in an international context has become increasingly popular over the last decade, but these studies tend to lean in such directions as examining the ‘Orientalism’ of twentieth-century U. S. poets like Ezra Pound, Kenneth Rexroth, and Gary Snyder or examining the influence of a singular foreign author on U. S. poetry, as in such works as Jonathan Mayhew's *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (2009), which looks at the immense popularity of the Spanish modernist Federico García Lorca among late-twentieth century U. S. poets. Rarely, however, do these works consider recent

developments in the field of comparative literature and in the study of world literature. This study is conceived as an intervention designed to unite these critical tendencies, drawing on such works as Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), which looks at world literature from a national-competitive standpoint. Casanova uses economic metaphors borrowed from Pierre Bourdieu and from world-systems theory to explain the evolution of world literature, claiming that those parts of the globe least endowed with literary capital borrow heavily from those areas that are most endowed in order to gain wider acceptance within the literary system.

In speaking of the literary environment of the 1920s, for example, Casanova claims that "the United States in the 1920s was a literarily dominated country that looked to Paris in order to try to accumulate resources it lacked" (42). In the light of this national-competitive model of world literature, it becomes imperative to study the U. S. relationship to France and to surrealism in particular, as the aesthetic movement *du jour* in 1920s Paris. This study explores—and partially contests—Casanova's thesis by examining in detail the uses to which U. S. poets have put surrealism over the course of the twentieth century. The central poets in this study—William Carlos Williams, Clayton Eshleman, and Alice Notley—were chosen not only because each represents a different era in the twentieth century—early, middle, and late—but also because the uses to which each places surrealism exhibit certain commonalities and significant differences. I find that for these three writers surrealism, as the culmination of early-twentieth century avant-garde activity in Europe, presents a model that is both innovative and bound to Romantic notions of the individual imagination that U. S. poets find appealing and easily adaptable to personal circumstances and preoccupations. This freedom of interpretation gives each the latitude to construct their different—and sometimes competing—national narratives.

Why Surrealism? Why Now?

One of the most obvious questions that the premise of this study raises is: why surrealism? And why now? Art historian Hal Foster asks a similar question in the preface of *Compulsive Beauty* (1993), which looks at surrealism in the context of international art. His answer:

Over the last decade surrealism has returned with a vengeance, the subject of many exhibitions, symposia, books, and articles. Lest I merely add another line to the list, I want to begin my essay with a reflection on the past repression and present recovery of this movement. For not so long ago surrealism was played down in Anglo-American accounts of modernism (if not in French ones). (xi-xii)

To a certain degree, Foster is right, although his prognosis is perhaps more applicable to the field of art history than literary history. Surrealism *did* return with a vengeance. Nearly every book by the movement's founder and chief theorist André Breton, for example, is currently available in English translation. Only a few other twentieth-century poets can say the same thing about their work. Search for the term "surrealism" in the MLA International Bibliography and you will find dozens of monographs and hundreds of articles on the movement. Much of this work, however, focuses on surrealism in its original French context, on Breton and his immediate cohorts. Why surrealism? Why now? Well, because surrealism is still played down in Anglo-American accounts of literary modernism, at least insofar as its relationship to Anglo-American literary traditions is concerned, despite several strong and rather obvious connections between surrealism and modern and contemporary U. S. poetries.

Work on surrealism in the U. S. context occupies a small shelf in the library of secondary sources on the movement, and the bulk of this literature focuses primarily on art history, on the influence European expatriates during World War II had on the formation of abstract expressionism in New York. Serge Guibaut's *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983) and Martica Sawin's *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School* (1995) are perhaps the most extensive works in this direction. Guibaut's study is particularly relevant to my own, as he approaches the topic from a social perspective, examining the why here and why now of abstract expressionism's emergence and subsequent popularity in postwar America:

Avant-garde art succeeded because the work and the ideology that supported it [...] coincided fairly closely with the ideology that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential elections. This was the “new liberalism” set forth by Schlesinger in *The Vital Center*, an ideology that, unlike the ideologies of the conservative right and the Communist left, not only made room for avant-garde dissidence but accorded to such dissidence a position of paramount importance. (3)

My conclusion, however, is slightly different than Guibaut's, likely because my period of study is much longer, from William Carlos Williams' response to surrealism in the late 1920s to Alice Notley's in the mid-1990s. For the poets discussed in this book—and I would argue most, if not all, U. S. poets attracted to the movement—surrealism offers a convenient frame from which to conceptualize a response to specific personal and political issues. Accordingly, the aspects of surrealism that attracts each writer is often germane to each author's specific concerns. This fluidity, the fact that surrealism takes on different meanings and different guises depending on the social position of the person who was serving as a particular

conduit made this a much more difficult study to undertake than I had initially thought when I first set out. My initial impulse was that it was possible to tell a linear history of the intertextual relationship between surrealism and U. S. poetry, that the work of later conduits would exhibit clear signs that those authors were building on the work of their predecessors. Often, however, that did not turn out to be the case, as if each new conduit discovered surrealism on his or her own and put specific facets of the movement to idiosyncratic use. The story of surrealism in U. S. poetry is the story of disparate poets picking and choosing components that suit their purposes and discarding the rest, ultimately resulting in mutated strands of surrealism that may have gotten these poets excommunicated from the official movement had they been writing in the same time and place as Breton himself.

As such, I hope this book shows that we cannot always turn to Breton as a weathervane when asking the question, to quote the title of his 1934 lecture, “What Is Surrealism?” The answer to that question might be that surrealism is not a movement at all, which is why I will generally use the term in its non-capitalized form, but a mode, subject to morphing to local conditions as it travels through space and time. I discuss the shifting definitions of the term *surrealism*, from its first use by Guillaume Apollinaire in 1917 to early twenty-first century uses of the term in the U. S., in more detail in the next chapter. For now, I would like to return to an earlier question left partially unanswered: why surrealism? The impetus for this project came from my interest in contemporary American poetry and from observing the evolving translation patterns of U. S. poets. One of the surest methods of finding out what U. S. poets were up to, I thought, was by looking at what foreign works they were translating. I noted that, as the twenty-first century drew nearer, fewer poets were translating compared to their modernist predecessors and that the scope of their translation projects had correspondingly narrowed. Gone, for example, were projects like Ezra Pound’s

reaching back to thirteenth-century Italy to see how U. S. poets could push forward. Instead, translations of European and Latin American modernism prevailed. Often, multiple translations of the same author were produced by different translators at the expense of presenting a more well-rounded vision of national literatures—Rilke and Lorca are perhaps the most egregious examples of this trend. Of these translations, a large number were of poets who were either loosely or explicitly connected to surrealism as a literary movement. This raised a few flags for me. Was surrealism a dominant global trend in world poetry? Or was there something about American poets that made them seek surrealist texts as source material? This study started out with these questions in mind, and it is these questions that it tries to answer.

My logic for narrowing the project to its current scope was both an attempt to return the project to the original source of my curiosity—specific rich nodes of intertextuality—and providing commentary on texts that—by and large—have previously escaped critical attention. Many histories of surrealism are burdened by a romanticized view of the movement’s ideological goals. Indeed, it seems at times like admiration of surrealism is prerequisite for writing about it. This is a trap that even some of the more rigorous chronicles fall into, including, for example, Martica Sawin’s *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginning of the New York School*. Sawin notes in her introduction: “I learned in talking with so many people that Surrealism left no one that came in contact with it unaffected, myself included. In many ways it was an advance guard for a revolution in consciousness that has been ongoing for the last half-century” (xv). Like Sawin, I believe that surrealism has cut a wide swath. Unlike Sawin, I do not think surrealism has affected me in any way other than the fact that I have spent several years studying it. This study is in no way meant to be a championing of the surrealist spirit. As such, I have tried to make it as objective as possible

(true objectivity, of course, is always an impossibility). I do not think, as some do, that the goal of literary criticism is choosing the winners, and for this reason it is not my intention to condone or condemn the work of any of the writers discussed in this book.

The first chapter, “What is Surrealism?,” by far the longest chapter, relays three separate histories that intertwine in the understanding of surrealism in the American context. First, the story of the competing definitions of surrealism by Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who is generally credited with inventing the term, and André Breton (1896-1966), the self-proclaimed leader of surrealism as a literary movement. The discrepancy between their definitions, I argue, illustrates that the cultural significance attached to the term *surrealism* was in flux from its very inception. Surrealism, in this sense, has always been a disputed border. This dispute, in turn, sets the stage for the U. S. reception of surrealism, in which the division is generally figured as a competition between “orthodox” and “dissident” surrealisms. I then turn to the American context to examine the anthologizing of surrealism, tracing a history from Michael Benedikt’s *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (1974), the first English-language anthology of surrealist poetry, to Mary Ann Caws’ more recent *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (2001) to argue that the U. S. conception of surrealism has gradually transformed from a canonical, Bretonian interpretation divorced from its ideological imperatives of social liberation and based in issues of poetics to a distinct favoring of dissident figures who employ surrealist techniques to challenge dominant cultural attitudes towards such issues as race and gender. This shift, I find, is consistent with the trajectory of U. S. criticism of the movement, with earlier works such as Dickran Tashjian’s *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (1995) rehashing the orthodox-dissident debate and Andrew Joron’s more recent *Neo-Surrealism; Or, The Sun at Night: Transformations of Surrealism in American Poetry, 1966-1999* (2010) extolling the virtues of

surrealism as a lyric mode highly suited for the development of a poetics of social and institutional critique. This chapter ends by considering a dissenting opinion to Joron's: contemporary poet-critic Ron Silliman's deployment of the term "soft surrealism" to describe the gradual separation of surrealism from the progressive political goals of the avant-garde as generic aesthetic techniques adapted from the movement are absorbed into mainstream U. S. poetics, particularly in the failure of such works to challenge "poet-reader relations." In turning to the example of James Tate, who Silliman singles out as being the central figure of so-called "soft surrealism," and illustrating how Tate's work can be seen to in fact challenge poet-reader relations through its ambiguous use of declarative sentences, this chapter maintains that such work has the potential be read as the sort of personal-political lyric that Joron claims characterizes the contemporary U. S. response to surrealism.

The final three chapters present case studies of three American poets—Williams, Eshleman, and Notley—who engaged in extended intertextual relationships with specific foreign surrealist-oriented works via the acts of translation or collaboration (reading Notley's appropriation of the lyric voice of Robert Desnos as a form of collaboration). In *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (1997), James Clifford writes, "Surrealism traveled, and was translated in travel" (30). In the context of Clifford's argument, this quote appears in conjunction with his discussion of Paris as a site of *détour* and *retour*—to borrow two terms he adapts from Edouard Glissant's *Le Discours Antillais* (1981)—a place where foreign writers spent brief sojourns before returning to their home countries armed with new cultural forms to augment their native cultural traditions. Clifford speaks, for example, of Alejo Carpentier (1904-1980), who "moved from Cuba to Paris and then back to the Caribbean and South America, to name *Lo real maravilloso*, magical realism, Surrealism with a difference" (30). Clifford uses the word *translated* in an expanded sense to describe the

transportation of cultural products from one zone to another. The implication, of course, is that the transported product is inevitably altered in contact with the receiving culture. I would like to suggest, in addition, that *translation*—in the more “literal” sense of transferring language—also plays a fundamental role of the transmission of surrealism from culture to culture, particularly in the United States, as the increasing monolingualism of U. S. culture requires surrealist texts to be translated in order for their effects to take root. I envision the work of Williams, Eshleman, and Notley as an alternate form of *détour* and *retour*, one that does not necessarily involve travel to a foreign clime (although all three did spend significant periods of time outside the United States). When taken together, their work constitutes a mini-narrative of the larger structure of twentieth-century U. S. poetry and its shifting position within the field of world literature.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT IS SURREALISM?

[I]t's been said that there's more surrealism in 15 minutes of MTV than in the last 20 years of the art world. We have absorbed so much surrealism, almost without realizing it, in our advertising and our media culture that it's hard to think outside of it. [...] The problem is that we are likely to put blinders on and just sit in our cubicles, hiding from the marvelous in our lives.

—Eric Lorberer

By proclaiming a fundamental discontent with reality, Surrealism bespeaks a posture of alienation which has now become a general attitude in those parts of the world which are politically powerful, industrialized, and camera-wielding. Why else would reality ever be thought of as insufficient, flat, overordered, shallowly rational? In the past, a discontent with reality expressed itself as a longing for another world. In modern society, a discontent with reality expresses itself forcefully and most hauntingly by the longing to reproduce this one. As if only by looking at reality in the form of an object—is it really real, that is, surreal.

—Susan Sontag

We begin with two quotes, both on the international spread of surrealism in the twentieth century. Each comes to a similar conclusion, that it is difficult to look around today and not see cultural forms that have been tinged by the movement, but the similarities end there, as the two writers feel very differently about the phenomenon of global surrealism. The first comes from an article by Jon Spayde called “The Surreal Life” (2005), a pun on the title of the then-active reality television series that followed a group of former celebrities as they lived together in a Hollywood mansion. The term “surrealism” in the title of the show seems to mean, as it usually does in American culture, “unreal.” The show

follows the blueprint of MTV's *The Real World* (1992-present), often credited for ushering in the modern reality television craze: one of the characters will be gay, one of the characters will be homophobic, and so on. Sparks inevitably fly. When forced to live under the same roof, the lives and actions of a group of celebrities with different backgrounds are seen as so outrageous, so unreal that they become "surreal." Although published in 1977, Sontag's *On Photography*—the book from which the quote above is extracted—seems to eerily anticipate the explosion of reality television. As numerous cultural critics have suggested, one of the biggest draws of the reality genre is the sadistic enjoyment viewers get from watching others publicly humiliate themselves: no matter how bad your life may seem, the argument usually goes, you can take comfort in the fact that it is nowhere near the train-wreck you are witnessing on television.⁶ The lives of celebrities in *The Surreal Life* are presented to us as the antidote for the viewer's "insufficient, flat, overordered, shallowly rational" reality, but the entire operation—like most so-called "reality" shows—also feels elaborately scripted and choreographed, thus manipulating the viewer's expectations. Sontag's view treats surrealism as a cultural epidemic germane to modernism—particularly in post-industrial, politically powerful places like the U. S.—a relatively pessimistic view of the way we conceptualize reality in the age of mechanical reproduction. For Sontag, surrealism becomes something to both celebrate—she does speak quite positively of many of the artists mentioned in her book—and interrogate, as we step back and examine the larger, global forces that shape the contemporary attitude toward reality. As we will see shortly, this is a radically different view of the term *surrealism* than what we find in both the work of Guillaume Apollinaire, who founded the term, and André Breton, who popularized it. Both, in their own ways, brought positive—one could even argue utopic—aspirations to their definitions of the term. The central question, then, is: how did we get from point A to point B?

The ambiguous attitude toward surrealism in the U. S. leads many poets whose work is often associated with the term to cringe whenever it is brought up in reference to their work. When asked in a 1979 interview from the literary journal *Durak* if he considers himself a surrealist, for example, the poet James Tate (b. 1943) replies:

I get called that all the time. It's the most simplistic put-down in the mouths of those who say it. They think that it dismisses any serious objectives. It's funny that surrealism has always been totally lacking any respect in this country. It's just ignorance and a refusal to learn anything about its serious motives. The term *Surrealist* is used so loosely; it's really meaningless. People will name Charles Simic, Bill Knott, Tom Lux, and a list of other poets as though they had some common style, objective, or belief. It's hard to include the poetry of Mark Strand in the same breath, but that's how loosely the term is used. Most of those poets have very little in common. We read the same people, love the same people, and care about a lot of the same things, but it comes out differently. Look at George Hitchcock—he's absolutely unique in the American sense. I don't think anybody writes with his total commitment to the spontaneous moment of creation. (*Route* 106-07)

For Tate, Hitchcock and his “total commitment” to the surrealist technique of automatic writing becomes the gold standard of surrealism in the U. S. and eventually informs his own work. In an interview conducted between 1975 and 1978 and published in *New Orleans Review* in 1980, for example, Tate acknowledges Hitchcock's influence when asked about poems in his book *Hints to Pilgrims* (1971) that “have the appearance of automatic writing” (*Route* 50). Tate claims that he was staying with Hitchcock during the summer of 1970 and Hitchcock turned him onto the technique. He continues:

[I]t taught me something about the great quality of spontaneous, accidental combinations. It's not new discovery at all, but for me I think that, despite the density of my imagery in my earlier books, I still had more rational connections. So I was trying to loosen up. (*Route 50*)

Surrealism, then, is seen by Tate as a way of “loosening up” against the stranglehold of “more rational connections.” In Tate’s formulation, surrealism becomes a set of aesthetic advancements divorced from the ideological goals of Breton and the movement’s other founders, particularly their emphasis on the emancipation of the human subject. This is the dominant view of surrealist-inspired poetry in the U. S., a view that informs such labels as contemporary poet-critic Ron Silliman’s (b. 1946) term “soft surrealism,” which I discuss at the tail end of this chapter. But it also, as we will again see at the tail end of this chapter, might not be the most accurate assessment, as even Tate’s work can be read as more politically-oriented than Tate himself lets on.

Younger poets seem to have equal disdain for the term, although it often manifests in a desire for a more historically grounded definition of the term that points back to Breton and his cohorts. In a panel of young poets discussing the influence of surrealism on their work organized by Hannah Gamble for *Gulf Coast* (2009), for example, Matthew Zaprunder (b. 1967), a former student of Tate’s at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, notes:

Mainly when my work is referred to as “surreal” I feel a mixture of resistance and self-consciousness: Resistance, in that the term surreal is often used just to ghettoize any act of the imagination. It seems dismissive and unthinking, and the use of it makes me want to rescue its original definition, and think harder about what poetry is and could be doing today. Self-consciousness, because unlike me or anyone I know, the French Surrealists in the 1920s and

'30s, led by Breton, were engaged in a comprehensive attempt to alter themselves and humanity. They were, for better and also definitely for worse, true revolutionaries, willing to throw everything away; their commitment was total.

For Zapruder and the other poets in the panel, Breton is the beacon by which surrealism must be measured, and the term must not be separated from its political goal of “a comprehensive attempt to alter themselves and humanity.” Seen in this light, Zapruder finds association with the term flattering, but ultimately acknowledges that his work is far less ideologically motivated than Breton and company, so the moniker does not apply.

Ultimately, however, Zapruder adopts an ambivalent attitude toward surrealism’s ideological goals, claiming that they were “for better and also definitely for worse, true revolutionaries.” He does not elaborate on this issue, so it is difficult to surmise the reasons why he thinks their revolutionary aspirations made them “worse,” but he is possibly referring to such events as Louis Aragon’s turn to social realism after breaking from Breton to join the PCF, as many readers consider the work from Aragon’s latter period to be inferior to his earlier, surrealist-oriented work. If that were indeed the reason for Zapruder’s claim, his interest in the movement—like Tate’s—privileges its aesthetic elements over its ideological ones.

Spayde takes a different approach in “The Surreal Life,” ultimately conflating surrealism with a celebration of cultural diversity. Spayde’s article was published in *Utne Reader*, a bimonthly magazine that collects and reprints articles on politics, culture, and the environment from alternative media sources. At the time of its publication, Spayde was an editor at *Utne Reader*, and the piece was written specifically for the magazine. As such, it was written with the ideal *Utne Reader* audience in mind—educated, self-consciously liberal, high-middlebrow readers. *Utne* has its base in Minneapolis, and Spayde turns to Eric Lorberer,

editor of the surrealist-friendly literary review *Rain Taxi*, another Minneapolis publication, as an authority on surrealism.⁷ Lorberer and Spayde see the spread of surrealism as a positive trait, one that—like the original surrealists believed—has the power to liberate the working populace by changing the way people think about the world. Spayde identifies the central trait of surrealist art and literature as the “reveling in odd juxtapositions—visual and verbal non sequiturs that [create] a sense that ordinary life and dream are two sides of one thin coin,” and he urges readers to pay active and critical attention to the discontinuities of everyday life: “the Arabic we hear at the corner store, the anime comics in the bookstore rack, the bizarre profusion of the supermarket, mixed with our dreams and fantasies.” Ultimately, Spayde comes close to equating surrealism with a celebration of the multiculturalism that is a by-product of our global economy, but he tries to bring the conversation back to aesthetics and the original goals of the movement by claiming that “[a] transition from being overwhelmed ‘consumers of images’ to empowered artists of the everyday could begin with the shift in attitude from postmodern prostration to surrealist elation.”

Spayde’s call to action carries with it some of the original thrust of surrealism, the idea that surrealism is available to all who are willing to pay attention to the uncanny, that art is the province of the many, not a select few. But Spayde’s is also a broad definition, one that could include almost any cultural product (hence Lorberer’s claim that many believe there is “more surrealism in 15 minutes of MTV than the last 20 years of the art world”). It would be easy, then, to dismiss Spayde and Lorberer’s definition for being poorly grounded in historical specificity, but I would like to argue that their definition is endemic of what the term “surrealism” has come to mean in the United States during the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. It is, for example, very similar to the definition put

forth by the anthropologist James Clifford in his chapter “On Ethnographic Surrealism” from *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988):

I am using the term *surrealism* in an obviously expanded sense to circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities drawn from the domains of the erotic, the exotic, and the unconscious. (118)

In Clifford’s case, his expanded definition is linked to his project in that chapter—tracing the co-evolution of surrealism and ethnography in France between the two world wars. “If I sometimes use familiar terms against the grain,” he claims, “my aim is to cut across retrospectively established definitions and to recapture, if possible, a situation in which ethnography is again something unfamiliar and surrealism not yet bounded province of modern art and literature” (117). In a sense, one could argue that Clifford advocates a surrealist form of anthropology, as he seeks to make the familiar strange. By necessity, his discussion cannot be limited to Breton and his relatively narrow spectrum of cohorts, and he focuses instead on “fellow travelers or dissidents who broke with Breton” (118). This becomes the story of surrealism in America. On one hand, you have those who insist on a rigid definition of the term, sticking with Breton as a beacon to define surrealism and measure those writers associated with the movement. On the other hand, you have those—like Clifford—who turn instead toward “fellow travelers.” For this reason, it is extremely difficult to speak generally about what surrealism signifies in the American context. It becomes the sort of issue one must approach on a case-by-case basis.

Jonathan Mayhew exemplifies the strict approach in his *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (2009), an interesting and thorough investigation of the unparalleled influence

on twentieth-century U. S. poetry by the Spanish poet Federico García Lorca (1898-1936). In Mayhew's opinion, the U. S. vision of Lorca is a reductive one: his essay "Play and Theory of the Duende" (1933) and a small sample of his early work are read as a romanticized image of Andalusian folk traditions, while *Poet in New York* (written in 1930, posthumously published in 1940) is seen as an exemplary text in the vein of so-called "Spanish surrealism" (18), regardless of whether or not Lorca and the other writers whose work that tag applied to had any significant connection to Breton and his cohorts. In Mayhew's words:

It is undeniably true that the historical Lorca, "Lorca himself," was not a member of the movement, but it is also an historical fact that the term *surrealism* has been used in a looser, *improper* sense in Spain, Latin America, and the English-speaking world for many decades, to refer to many poets influenced by surrealism at one or two removes from André Breton's movement. (20; emphasis in original)

The italicized "*improper*" is telling. Although Mayhew tries to make clear early in the book that "[t]he opposition between my own ideas and the apocryphal Lorca of U. S. poetry does not [...] imply that I think I know who or what Lorca really is" (1-2), he undermines this effort by casting frequent judgments on other Hispanists and U. S. poets whose reading of Lorca differs from his own. Mayhew's pedantic insistence that "Lorca himself," which functions in Mayhew's formulation like an unwavering ur-Lorca, can be somehow separated from the years of baggage that has built up around Lorca as a literary figure, ignoring the fact that literary works have a definite afterlife and that cultural products are always irrevocably altered as they cross national boundaries and shift from one signifying chain to another. Before turning to the U. S. context to illustrate how this orthodox-dissident binary was codified and examine the effect its codification had on the development of surrealist-

inspired poetry in the U. S., it seems imperative to first tell the story of how this battle was already being fought in the French context from the very inception of *surrealism* as a literary term.

What Is Surrealism?

This chapter takes its title from a lecture given by André Breton in Brussels on 1 June 1934. The lecture was a public meeting arranged by members of the Belgian wing of the surrealist movement, and in typical surrealist fashion, a transcript of the lecture was published soon after as a pamphlet. The occasion of the lecture offers Breton the opportunity to reflect on both the development of the surrealist movement over the past fifteen years and the present state of the movement's concerns. It also offers him the chance to ruse on a topic very close to the heart of this current study, the evolution of surrealism outside France, as Breton is happy to note at the outset of the lecture that, despite their "disagreement with us on particular points" (151), close alignment with their Belgian "comrades" (as Breton referred to them at this stage in his career) offers Breton and his Parisian cohorts

a constant reason for thinking that the surrealist project, beyond the limitation of space and time, can contribute to the efficacious reunification of all those *who do not despair of the transformation of the world and who wish this transformation to be as radical as possible.* (151; emphasis in original)

Breton's emphasis on the "transformation of the world" suggests that the interests of surrealism are primarily extraliterary, geared as much—if not more—toward a political revolution than an aesthetic one. This is a concern he makes sure to emphasize throughout the course of the lecture:

the *liberation of the mind*, the express aim of surrealism, demands as a primary condition, in the opinion of the surrealists, the *liberation of man*, which implies that we must struggle against our fetters with all the energy of despair; that today more than ever the surrealists rely entirely, for the bringing about of human liberation, on the proletarian revolution. (155; emphasis in original)

And later: “I repeat, we hold the liberation of man to be the *sine qua non* of the *liberation of the mind*, and we can expect this liberation of man to result only from the proletarian revolution” (172; emphasis in original).

Of course, it is important to note that this lecture was delivered in 1934 and, despite Breton’s pretense of giving a historical overview of the movement, is very much concerned with the current state of Breton’s thought. He stresses the fact that surrealism is “a *living movement*” (158; emphasis in original), suggesting that it is open to evolution and change, and notes his desire to move “as quickly as possible to its present attitude” (160). And the present attitude in 1934 was very much concerned with aligning the movement with the aims of the PCF and against the spread of fascism in Europe. As such, this alignment led the movement to pass from what Breton calls its “idealism phase” to its “reasoning phase” (157). The idealism phase, according to Breton, operated according to the belief that “*thought is supreme over matter*” (157; emphasis in original) and marked the early years of aesthetic experimentation and parlor games. The turning point, Breton claims, was the French involvement in the Rif War (1925-26), which ushered in the need for more explicitly political action and “the necessity of crossing over the gap that separates absolute idealism from dialectical materialism” (157).

Breton quotes extensively from his previous writings, challenging and revising his earlier assumptions in order to bring them up-to-date with his current position in relation to

the PCF. At the same time, he is careful not to appear like a slave to party dogma, of which he had been accused by former members of the group who had either voluntarily left or been excommunicated. Breton wanted to be seen as a serious revolutionary and a devoted party man, while retaining the freedom to gather with his friends at cafés and continue to conduct surrealist “experiments.” “I cannot see,” Breton claims:

a few narrow-minded revolutionaries notwithstanding, why we should abstain from taking up the problems of love, of dreaming, of madness, of art and religion, so long as we consider these problems from the same angle as they; that is, the angle of revolution. (174)

Of course, it is not hard to see why the official marriage between the surrealists and the PCF was relatively short-lived, but this is neither the time nor the place to recount the tumultuous relationship between the two. Helena Lewis’ *The Politics of Surrealism* (1988) already does an excellent job of that, as does Gerard Durozoi’s *History of the Surrealist Movement* (2002). The important thing to note here is that—even in the eyes of its supposed founder—surrealism transformed rather drastically over time. Not only did the movement change over time, it changed as it spread across national boundaries. Breton admits as much himself when he acknowledged the “agreement or disagreement with us on particular points” of the Belgian surrealists at the outset of the lecture.

If we shift from one time and place to another, the question “What is surrealism?” suddenly becomes much more difficult to answer. Does “surrealism” mean the same thing, for example, to the young Martinican poet Aimé Césaire (1913-2008) as he writes his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*) in 1939 as it does to the young Chinese-American poet John Yau (b. 1950) as he writes his first book *Crossing Canal Street* in 1983, a book that explores the geographic metaphor of Canal Street as the barrier between

New York's Chinatown and the art world of Soho? Despite the fact that each of us carries an idea in our mind of what the term means, defining *surrealism* is no easy task. Breton takes thirty-seven pages to do so in "What is Surrealism?" If that is not enough, the English translation of Gerard Durozoi's *History of the Surrealist Movement* (2002, initially published in France in 1997) is a scant eight hundred and sixteen pages, most of which focuses on Breton and those writers and artists officially christened by Breton. If we turn to the term's coining by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, however, the picture gets even murkier, as his definition of surrealism is very different from Breton's, which Breton himself notes in his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), where he claims that surrealism was "a word fallen from the lips of Apollinaire, which we had diverted from the rather general and very confusing connotation he had given it" (161). Most of our understanding of surrealism is filtered through Breton, but I would like to suggest that Apollinaire's all but forgotten surrealism may be equally—if not more—relevant to the U. S. context, particularly in the way that his definition privileges aesthetics over ideology and the way that his work negotiates questions of space and nation. As we will see in the next chapter, for example, Apollinarian surrealism is certainly much closer to William Carlos Williams' conception of the term than Bretonian surrealism, particularly in the emphasis both writers place on the cultivation of a modern idiom capable of representing the complexity of the modern world and on the primacy both writers accord to the transformative powers of the imagination. Before turning to U. S. poets like Williams, then, I will first distinguish between Bretonian and Apollinarian surrealism and sketch a brief history of the critical response to the movement in the United States.

Guillaume Apollinaire Coins a Term

The word *surréalisme* was coined by the poet Guillaume Apollinaire in the program notes for *Parade*, a ballet with music by Erik Satie and a one-act scenario by Jean Cocteau. The ballet was written for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and it premiered on May 18, 1917 at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, with costumes and sets by Pablo Picasso and choreography by Léonide Massine. Picasso's bizarre designs included costumes of solid cardboard that severely restricted the dancers' movements, but *Parade* is most notable for the scandal it produced, largely orchestrated by Cocteau and his addition—much to Satie's chagrin—of several noise-making instruments to the score, including a typewriter, a foghorn, and an assortment of milk bottles. The ballet was ridiculed in the press, and Satie responded to one critic, Jean Poueigh of the *Carnet de la Semaine*, who had written a particularly unfavorable review with a postcard that read: “Monsieur et cher ami, Vous n’êtes qu’un cul, mais un cul sans musique. Erik Satie” [Monsieur and Dear Friend, You are an ass, but an ass without music. Erik Satie.] (qtd. in Shattuck 153). Poueigh subsequently sued Satie. At the trial, Cocteau was arrested and beaten by police for repeatedly shouting “cul” in the courtroom, and Satie was eventually sentenced to a week in jail.

In the program notes, Apollinaire described *Parade* as:

a kind of surrealism, which I consider to be the point of departure for a whole series of manifestations of the New Spirit that is making itself felt today and that will certainly appeal to our best minds. We may expect it to bring about profound changes in our arts and manners through universal joyfulness, for it is only natural, after all, that they keep pace with scientific and industrial progress. (*Apollinaire on Art* 452)

Here Apollinaire conflates what are perhaps the two most important terms of his late period criticism: “surrealism” and the “New Spirit.” In order to have a thorough understanding of

what these terms mean to Apollinaire, it is necessary to trace their evolution within his critical vocabulary. In “From Surrealism to Surrealism: Apollinaire and Breton,” Willard Bohn notes that from the publication of *Alcools*, Apollinaire’s first substantial collection of poetry, in April 1913, “references to modern means of communication (telephone, telegraph, cinema, phonograph) and transportation (automobiles, airplanes, oceanliners, etc.)” literally permeate both his critical and creative writings (198). Additionally, Bohn points out that in Apollinaire’s critical works of 1914, “words such as *nouveau*, *audace*, *puissance*, *moderne*, *imprévu*, *énergie*, *choc*, and *inattendu* recur with predictable regularity” (198). This language, Bohn argues, extends from Apollinaire’s optimistic faith in both scientific and artistic progress, two realms that he views as increasingly connected in a constantly evolving modern society. Not until 1914, however, Bohn claims, does Apollinaire develop a term under which to collect these various synonyms: *surprise*.

But at this stage, the term *surprise* is still a vague, catchall term Apollinaire uses to describe formally innovative modern art and writing, and the implication seems to be that work which reflects the newness of the modern world must also formally convey that newness to the reader. The first appearance of the term in Apollinaire’s writing appears in a paragraph on Giorgio de Chirico from a 15 March 1914 piece on “The 30th Salon des Indépendants” in *Les Soirées de Paris*: “The strangeness of the plastic enigmas posed to us by M. de Chirico still escapes the majority of viewers. To depict the fateful character of modern things, this artist relies on the most modern device: surprise” (*Apollinaire on Art* 366). Apollinaire fails to offer a more precise definition of surprise as an artistic device or explain how it functions, but he does acknowledge that the meaning of de Chirico’s strange, oneiric cityscapes “escapes the majority of viewers,” suggesting that surprise is an elite response available only to a minority of viewers. Apollinaire does not offer a more cogent indication

of how the term *surprise* functions within his critical vocabulary until three years later in “The New Spirit and the Poets” when he actually uses the term to help define his new pet term *the New Spirit*:

What is new exists without being progress. Everything is in the effect of surprise. The new spirit depends equally on surprise, on what is most vital and new in it. *Surprise is the greatest source of what is new*. It is by surprise, by the important position that has been given to surprise, that the new spirit distinguishes itself from all the literary and artistic movements which have preceded it. (*Selected Writings* 233; emphasis in original).

For Apollinaire, the force of surprise functions within a neo-romantic conception of reality, resting on the artist’s ability to subjectively refashion the material world. Apollinaire is willing to admit that his aesthetic is less of an ideological progression beyond the fantastical imagination of a Romantic poet like Gérard de Nerval, whose work he explicitly positions as a predecessor, as it is a shift in emphasis toward more modern aesthetic forms. In fact, Apollinaire claims that the New Spirit “strives [...] to inherit from the romantics a curiosity which will incite it to explore all the domains suitable for furnishing literary subject matter which will permit life to be exalted in whatever form it occurs” (227). In other words, the New Spirit is less of a break from literary tradition than it is a way of using models from literary history to construct new methods of responding to the rapid changes of modern society.

In this effort, Apollinaire specifically positions the New Spirit in response to scientific and artistic progress, claiming that the recent inventions of cinema and photography release the poet from an inclination toward mimesis: “one can predict a day when, the photograph and the cinema having become the only form of publication in use,

the poet will have a freedom heretofore unknown” (228). This freedom, Apollinaire argues, “cannot be less than that of a daily newspaper which on a single sheet treats the most diverse matters and ranges over the most distant countries” (229). In other words, surrealism, which Apollinaire figures as a reconceptualization of the way we view the external world, is intimately connected to cosmopolitan conceptions of space, as scientific progress and advancements in the forms of transportation and communication alter modern conceptions of territorial sovereignty.

In this regard, Apollinaire’s work illustrates why Dimock’s call to expand our scope of space and time is useful in the study of literature, as he reaches back to ancient Greece for models to represent the complexities of the modern, urban experience. In his discussion of fantastic imagery in modern poetry in “The New Spirit and the Poets,” for example, Apollinaire claims that such work “is no more extraordinary or unbelievable than those of the Greeks, which show Minerva coming armed out of the head of Jupiter” (233). In Apollinaire’s view, the works of Greek antiquity become a standard by which surrealism should be measured, as he advocates “the foundation of a new realism which will perhaps not be inferior to that so poetic and learned realism of ancient Greece” (232). For Apollinaire, surrealism becomes a question of interpretation, of presenting a vision of reality that—like the stories of ancient Greece—functions allegorically or analogically in relation to the external world.

The terms that Apollinaire uses to describe surrealism in the program notes for *Parade*, however, are very similar to those he had used to describe cubism four years earlier in *The Cubist Painters* (1913) in the sense that Apollinaire claims both *isms* strive to find new forms to analogically represent reality. Because of this fact—and because Apollinaire was a fervent advocate of cubism and his career trajectory overlaps with cubism’s most active

phase—Apollinaire’s work is generally seen in the U. S. context as constituting a form of literary cubism.⁸ Here is Apollinaire on cubism in *The Cubist Painters*:

When depicting conceived-reality or created-reality, the painter can obtain a three-dimensional effect, can, so to speak, *cubify*. He could not do that by just representing seen-reality, unless he resorted to trompe-l’oeil, with foreshortening or perspective, which would distort the quality of the conceived or created form. (25)

And here is Apollinaire on surrealism in the program notes for *Parade*:

Here the aim is, above all, to express reality. However, the motif is not reproduced but rather suggested by means of an analytic synthesis that embraces all the visible elements of an object and, if possible, something else as well: an integral schematization that aims to reconcile contradictions by deliberately renouncing any attempt to render the immediate appearance of an object. (453)

Both positions reflect a certain distance from “seen-reality,” as Apollinaire’s claim that surrealism “embraces all the visible elements of an object” echoes cubism’s deliberate flattening of perspective in the effort of depicting the subject from a multitude of viewpoints in order to represent it in a fuller context. He even uses the phrase “analytic synthesis” in his discussion of surrealism, which echoes the art historical term “analytic cubism,” generally associated with cubism’s first phase in which artists “analyzed” natural forms from multiple perspectives, reducing these forms to their most basic geometric parts. Unlike other methods of replicating a three-dimensional effect, cubism makes no pretense toward mimesis, aggressively calling attention to its artificiality in the same fashion that surrealism, in Apollinaire’s terms, “aims to reconcile contradictions by deliberately renouncing any attempt

to render the immediate appearance of an object.” Contrary to the popular U. S. association of “surrealism” as simply denoting “unreal” that I discussed at the outset of this chapter, in Apollinaire’s terms surrealism—as fantastical as it may be—is figured as an attempt to forge a new attitude toward realism, one not bound by mimetic desire.

As innovative as Apollinaire’s thinking may have been, his openness to foreign works from the past is also at odds with his extreme nationalism, itself an odd quality considering that he was not a native Frenchman and that he became a journalist largely because it was one of the few professions available to foreigners in France at that time. He begins “The New Spirit and the Poets,” for example, with the suggestion that the “New Spirit” was an inherently French quality:

The strong intellectual discipline which the French have always imposed on themselves permits them, as well as their spiritual kin, to have a conception of life, of the arts and of letters, which, without being simply the recollection of antiquity, is also not the counterpart of romantic prettiness. (227)

The term “spiritual kin” allows foreigners like Apollinaire and Picasso to be grouped under the banner of the New Spirit, but it is clear that Apollinaire has a very precise notion of what can and cannot be classified that category. He makes, for example, disparaging remarks against German cultural production (229), which like Apollinaire’s nationalism itself is perhaps symptomatic of immediate post-WWI sentiments, and uses Marinetti’s own terms to differentiate the New Spirit from both Russian and Italian Futurisms: “you will not find in France the ‘words at liberty’ which have been reached by the excesses of the Italian and Russian futurists, the extravagant offspring of the new spirit, for France abhors disorder” (228). The latter is a particularly curious move considering the fact that Apollinaire himself wrote a Futurist manifesto, “L’Antitradition Futurist,” in 1913, although his critical writings

on the movement demonstrate a more ambivalent attitude. This nationalist sentiment runs somewhat counter to Apollinaire's interest in modern means of transportation and communication, which went a long way toward facilitating connections across national boundaries. It was these modern forms of communication and transportation, for example, that allowed Breton to commune with the Belgian surrealists in Brussels and for the transcript of his lecture to be published and disseminated so soon after his delivery of the lecture. This nationalist sentiment, as we will see in the later chapters, is one of the elements of Apollinaire that carries over into the American context.

We can see many of Apollinaire's ideas about surrealism at work in his play *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, first performed on 24 June 1917 in a small theatre in Montmartre, which takes the patriotic duty of repopulation as its topic and makes overt references to the ambiguous gender of the classical Greek figure Tiresias. In the introduction to the play, Apollinaire gives a much more thorough definition of *surréalisme* than he had a few weeks earlier in the program notes for *Parade*.⁹ He also somewhat apologetically delivers this definition, although the playful tone of the preface as a whole makes it clear that this apology should be taken with a grain of salt:

I have used a neologism to describe my drama, something I hardly ever do, so I hope I will be forgiven: I have created the adjective 'surrealist'. It doesn't at all mean 'symbolic' as M. Victor Basch assumes in his review article, but it quite accurately defines an artistic tendency which, while it may be no newer than anything under the sun, has at least never been used in the formulation of a creed, or a statement of artistic or literary faith. (153)

The way that Apollinaire discusses surrealism here is, of course, very similar to the way that he had discussed the New Spirit in "The New Spirit and the Poets." In both cases,

Apollinaire places himself in a prophetic position as the first to observe, describe, and formulate a critical vocabulary for the central tendency that binds all modern art. In the preface to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, however, Apollinaire more aggressively positions himself in opposition to the works of the past, particularly the melodramas and light-hearted farces that grew to dominate French theater in the nineteenth century. Apollinaire claims that in attempting “to renew theatre,” he “felt impelled to return to nature itself; though I did not imitate it as a photographer does” (153), offering in opposition to photographic realism one of his more famous statements on surrealism: “When man resolved to imitate walking, he invented the wheel, which does not look like a leg. In doing this, he was practicing surrealism without knowing it” (154-54). In the case of the invention of the wheel, scientific progress signals a fundamental change in the reality of transportation. A leg does not physically resemble a wheel, but both serve similar functions as means of transportation, although the wheel, a constructed surreality, achieves its task in a far more efficient and superior manner than the leg.

In short, surrealism is seen in Apollinaire’s analogy as the subjective refashioning of reality through the powers of imagination, and the path to achieving this analogical form of realism is through the unbridled exercising of the poet’s creative faculties, a method he figures as akin to scientific inquiry. In keeping with the analogy developed in the notes on *Parade*, Apollinaire again presents the surrealist method as a form of interpretation: “I have chosen to give free rein to fantasy, my own way of interpreting nature” (154). The content and actions of the play certainly bear the fruit of that free rein. The plot irreverently follows a woman who sprouts a moustache; whose breasts detach, turn into balloons, and float away; and who eventually runs off to join the army, leaving her husband to take care of the family and give birth to 40,049 new infants. The play’s sexual ambiguity and ambivalent attitude

toward authority are enhanced by the appearance of a policeman who attempts to woo the husband upon learning of the husband's fertility. A number of the play's minor details also reflect Apollinaire's concept of surrealism: the audience is shown a chamber-pot and told that it is a piano, supporting characters are killed, then get up and continue speaking, and the dialogue is punctuated with such bizarre similes as "It's as simple as a periscope" (195) and "The printing presses are like trees" (196). In addition, we can sense an urgency in the play's many comic references to recent developments in communication: one of the characters is a journalist obsessed with getting the scoop before anyone else, at one point commercial posters displaying telegrams announcing new developments in the arts are carried out as a stage prop [one such poster reads "OTTAWA // MAJOR FIRE JCB ESTABLISHMENTS STOP / 20,000 PROSE POEMS CONSUMED STOP PRESIDENT / SENDS CONDOLENCES" (199)], along with numerous other references to printing presses, newspapers, and telephones.

All of this bespeaks an emphasis on immediacy and the simultaneity of experience, so it is not surprising that Apollinaire varies the tonal register radically and constantly throughout the course of the play, and that the text is full of wordplay, often breaks in to rhyme, and uses refrains that are recycled with song-like consistency. The play begins with an opening speech by the director, in which Apollinaire gives an explanation for these startling juxtapositions:

As in life often linking unrelated
 Sounds gestures colours shouts noise
 Music dance acrobatics poetry painting
 Choruses actions and multiple sets (166)

This is an excellent example of the parity of form and content that Apollinaire strives for in the play, as he describes his attempt to capture the simultaneity of modern life in an unpunctuated list that extends for several lines.

This lack of punctuation leaves a considerable amount of interpretation of the tone and tenor of certain lines open to the director and the individual actors, and the play's cuts and juxtapositions seem heavily indebted to cinematic techniques like montage. As Apollinaire claims in the preface, "I should like my art of the theatre to be modern, simple, fast-moving, with such short-cuts or exaggerations as are necessary to make and impact on the audience" (157). There is also an overt theatricality to the play's action and stage directions. The characters, for example, speak at times through megaphones, and Apollinaire describes his ideal venue for the play in the director's opening speech:

A theatre in the round with two stages
 One in the middle the other like a ring
 Round the audience that would give us scope
 To display our modern art to the full (166)

The circus-like atmosphere reflects the essentially joyful attitude that Apollinaire attributes to surrealism and surprise. Were such a venue realized, this set-up would allow Apollinaire the ability to reproduce a three-dimensionality roughly equivalent to the three-dimensionality achieved through the flattening of perspective in the cubist paintings that he so ardently advocated.¹⁰ The three-dimensional theater in the round also strips the production company of the ability to hide what goes on behind the scenes, both emphasizing the artificiality of the medium and heightening the play's allegorical content, allowing the audience to assume a more participatory relationship toward that content.

Les Mamelles de Tirésias is very much a poet's play, difficult to stage and more concerned with textual elements like collage than such dramatic qualities as narrative development and characterization, and we can see many of the same aesthetic techniques at work in the simultaneity of subject matter and discursive registers in Apollinaire's poetry. Consider, for example, the following lines from his famous "Lundi Rue Christine" (1913), which splices together bits of conversation overheard in a Paris café:

Ces crêpes étaient exquis
 La fontaine coule
 Robe noire comme ses ongles
 C'est complètement impossible (Revell 50)

Here is the same passage in Donald Revell's 2004 translation:

Those crêpes were exquisite
 The water's running
 Black dress black as her fingernails
 It's completely impossible (Revell 51)

Like the dialogue in *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, each line in the poem may or may not have a logical connection to the other lines around it. The blending of bland commentary ("Those crêpes were exquisite") and observations ("The water's running") with the more traditionally poetic ("Black dress black as her fingernails") creates a polysemic texture that Apollinaire believed more accurately captured the realities of modern, urban experience.

As much as Apollinaire's aesthetic was an attempt to capture of the complexities of contemporary urban life, however, it was also an attempt to keep pace with the times and help poetry stay relevant in the face of the very same artistic and technological developments that he claimed gave poetry such newfound freedom: the inventions of photography,

cinema, and the phonograph. In the conclusion to “The New Spirit and the Poets,” for example, Apollinaire expresses his desire “to mechanize poetry as the world has been mechanized...to provide a totally new lyricism for these new means of expression which are giving impetus to art—the phonograph and the cinema” (237). Apollinaire’s argument, however, is a little lopsided, as it was not poetry that provided a “totally new lyricism” for the phonograph and cinema, but vice versa: cinematic techniques, especially montage, provide a totally new lyricism for Apollinaire, allowing him to stitch together such radically polysemic works as “Lundi Rue Christine.”

This recombinatory technique can be seen in the work of a number of contemporary U. S. poets whose writing—to varying degrees—has been critically linked to surrealism. Consider, for example, the poem “What Is Poetry” (1977) by John Ashbery (b. 1927), who once jokingly referred to popular perception of himself as “a harebrained, homegrown surrealist whose poetry defies the logic of Surrealism” (*Selected Prose* 164):

The medieval town, with frieze
 Of boy scouts from Nagoya? The snow

 That came when we wanted it to snow?
 Beautiful images? Trying to avoid

 Ideas, as in this poem? But we
 Go back to them as to a wife, leaving

 The mistress we desire? Now they
 Will have to believe it

As we believed it. In school

All the thought got combed out:

What was left was like a field.

Shut your eyes, and you can feel it for miles around.

Now open them on a thin vertical path.

It might give us—what?—some flowers soon? (*Selected Poems* 236)

In a interview with Daniel Kane published in *What Is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde* (2003), a book intended to be a primer on contemporary poetry for high school and undergraduate creative writing students, Ashbery explains the disparate experiences and sources from which the poem is constructed. He notes, for example, that the first sentence of the poem (“The medieval town, with frieze / Of boy scouts from Nagoya?”) combines a recent experience—a trip to the Empire State Building in which he shared an elevator with a group of boy scouts from Nagoya, Japan—and one that happened twenty years earlier—a trip to Chester, England that was also impeded by a group of foreign boy scouts (33). He also notes that, as in “Lundi Rue Christine,” the final line of the poem (“It might give us—what?—some flowers soon?”) is a piece of speech that he overheard in a bookstore (34). According to Ashbery, the line was spoken between a man and a woman who appeared to be lovers, and the sentence seemed to have special significance to them. Ashbery claims that he hoped including the line would “take the curse off flowers” (34), stripping them of centuries of baggage as a poetic image and allowing the reader’s interpretation to approximate the intimacy the sentence seemed to carry for the two lovers.

Of course, the subject matter and cumulative effect of “Lundi Rue Christine” and “What Is Poetry” are different. Ashbery’s poem, after all, is not entirely composed of overheard speech, nor are all the collaged events and bits of speech culled from the same time and location as they are in “Lundi Rue Christine.” Each poem, however, in its own way articulates a poetics of simultaneity. “Lundi Rue Christine” strives to represent the modern, urban experience by splicing together bits of unconnected speech overheard in a café. The poet is figured as a passive observer, yet as the organizing force of the poem is ultimately anything but passive. The same can be said for “What Is Poetry,” which slows down the time frame, but constructs a similar vision of poetic subjectivity in the ordering of different memories. The emphasis falls on restructuring and interpreting memories, experiences, and perceptions.

The element of surprise in both Apollinaire and Ashbery can also be seen in such formal elements as the pronounced and ambiguous use of enjambment. As I noted earlier, Apollinaire’s work generally lacks any hint of punctuation, making his syntax difficult to parse at times. The well-known “Le Pont Mirabeau,” for example, begins: “Sous le pont Mirabeau coule la Seine / Et nos amours” [in Donald Revell’s translation, “Under Mirabeau Bridge the river slips away / And lovers” (13)]. The ambiguous syntax makes one wonder whether the lovers are simply under the bridge or whether they, too, are slipping away like the Seine. The remainder of the opening stanza does little to answer that question: “Faut-il qu’il m’en souviene / La joie venait toujours après la peine” [Revell: Must I be reminded / Joy always came after pain” (13)]. The sense of pain suggests that the lovers are, at least metaphorically, slipping away, but one can never be entirely sure.

Except for the title, Ashbery’s “What Is Poetry” employs punctuation, so his syntax is easier to parse than Apollinaire’s, although he is able to get a similar feeling of surprise out

of his use of couplets and heavy enjambment, as the meaning of his sentences are often delayed or shifted as the reader puts the lines together. Consider, for example, the following lines:

Now they
Will have to believe it

As we believed it. In school

All the thought got combed out (236)

Despite the punctuation, the reader could interpret the phrase “In school” as being connected to the first sentence because of the way it dangles at the end of the line, easily misreading the sentence as: “Now they will have to believe it as we believed it in school.” Once the reader gets to the fourth line, however, it is clear that the two sentences may not have any direct or logical connection to one another. There is an odd tension in the poem between line and sentence, between phrases that initially appear connected because of their proximity within the same line and sentences that have little apparent connection to one another. The overall effect is such that the reader’s interpretations must continually be revised as one makes one’s way through the poem.

This sort of ambiguity is the very feature of Apollinaire’s work that drew poet-translator Donald Revell to translate Apollinaire:

I chose to distort certain moments of syntax deliberately to reproduce Apollinaire’s verbal and thematic strayings. The French verb *errer* describes his method well; *Alcools* is intentionally aimless, preferring to find rather than to fashion its forms. And aimlessness, the total surrender of language to the immediate moment, is what made Apollinaire an inspiration to American

Modernism. [...] I chose to translate many passages in *Alcools* as “incorrect” mixes of high and low diction, of latinate and slang, of abstracted concretes and concretized abstractions, because it is just such mixes that have made Apollinaire so enabling to our contemporary poets. (x-xi)

The emphasis throughout Revell’s introduction is in presenting Apollinaire as a contemporary, and he even goes so far as to draw an explicit connection between Ashbery and Apollinaire, claiming that works like Ashbery’s *The Double Dream of Spring* (1970) “would have been unthinkable without the example of Apollinaire’s verbal indiscretion” (xi). And in the effort of drawing a parallel between Apollinaire and contemporary American poetry, Revell strips place-specific markers from Apollinaire’s work. In the opening of “Le Pont Mirabeau” quoted above, for example, “la Seine” in Apollinaire’s source text is simply translated “the river” (13). Although Apollinaire was born in Rome to a Polish woman and a father whose nationality was unknown to Apollinaire himself, a fact that Revell curiously wields as justification for some of the liberties taken with Apollinaire’s texts, his adopted city of Paris assumes a central thematic position in much of his work, so losing such Paris-specific place markers is a significant alteration of the poem’s context. Revell does retain the name of the actual bridge, which is probably less instantly recognizable as a proper noun by most Americans than the river it traverses and thus more easily ignored if one does not recognize the reference, but removing the iconic Seine from the poem reduces its geographic local to a generic anywhere, at least to those readers unfamiliar with Paris geography.

Revell continued his domestication of Apollinaire in his next volume of translations, *The Self-Dismembered Man* (2004), a selection of poems from Apollinaire’s *Calligrammes* (1918). In the “Translator’s Afterword,” Revell draws similar parallels between Apollinaire and

postmodern U. S. poets as he had in the introduction to *Alcools*, including an additional reference to Ashbery:

If in these lines we hear a forecast of [Jack] Kerouac's and [Allen] Ginsberg's onomatopoeic ecstasies, if in this darling newness we get a sense of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetries' syntactical urgency, if in this goofy intensity we preview the cartoon mayhems of Ashbery and [Ted] Berrigan, [Joe] Brainard and [Kenneth] Koch, then perhaps we begin to know how very, very wide were Apollinaire's final horizons. (141)

At first glance, it appears as if Revell were merely underscoring the need for producing yet another translation of Apollinaire (Anne Hyde Greet's translation of *Calligrammes* for the University of California Press had been continuously in print since its initial publication in 1965), as doing so sheds light on the transnational influences of contemporary U. S. poetries. A retranslation, after all, should have some reason to be, should offer a new interpretation that is relevant in some way to the current moment in the receiving culture. If we dig deeper into Revell's afterword, however, we see that he is presenting an image of Apollinaire that conforms both to his own aesthetic preferences and to contemporary norms in U. S. poetry:

From *Calligrammes*, I have simply chosen to translate my favorite pieces. Of the concrete or visual poems, only one, "La Petite Auto," seemed really essential to the timeline and tenor of my poet's Great War. The others, vivid and witty as they are, remain pictorial works, dispatches to the eye. (141)

By 2004, visual poetry in the U. S. had long since been coded as a primarily avant-garde activity, practiced only by a handful of writers who existed far from the literary mainstream. As the lone visual poem in *The Self-Dismembered Man*, "La Petite Auto," which adds a brief pictorial element to an otherwise more traditional lyric poem, looks more like an anomaly

than an integral part of the book as a whole, as it does in *Calligrammes*, which not only takes its title from Apollinaire's neologism to describe his visual works but also features more than thirty pages of such works. In short, Revell makes Apollinaire's poetry more palpable to contemporary U. S. readers by removing potentially obscure place names and by removing the visual elements that do not adhere to the norms of mainstream contemporary poetics.

This is the tricky story of surrealism in the U. S., as correspondences with foreign predecessors are accentuated while differences with those predecessors are simultaneously scrubbed away, a case of taking what interests you and leaving the remainder. Of course, not all U. S. poets who make use of aesthetic techniques descended from Apollinaire do so in such an aggressively domesticating manner as Revell. Ashbery's work is one example. Another more progressive importation of Apollinaire's technique of combining disparate discursive registers can be seen in the work of Jack Spicer (1925-1965), who contemporary U. S. poet Andrew Joron dubbed "one of the finest exemplars of American neo-surrealism" (3). On the surface, Spicer's use of this discursive technique is similar to Ashbery's, but the variety of the content is much less personal, more an amalgamation of domestic and cultural references. Consider, for example, the second poem in the cycle "The Book of the Death of Arthur" in Spicer's *The Holy Grail* (1962):

Marilyn Monroe being attacked by a bottle of sleeping pills

Like a bottle of angry hornets

Lance me, she said

Lance her, I did

I don't work there anymore.

The answer-question always the same. I cannot remember when

I was not a king. The sword in the rock is like a children's

story told by my mother.

He took her life. And when she floated in on the barge or joined
the nunnery or appeared dead in all the newspapers it was

his shame not mine

I was king. (355)

Whereas Apollinaire sampled and combined bits of overheard speech and Ashbery collaged disparate memories and bits of overhead speech, Spicer remixes an array cultural referents and discursive registers around a central topic. In the space of eight lines (if we count the indented lines as continuations of a single line), the mix of high and low cultural references from various places and time periods is dizzying: lines 1-2 refer to the death of contemporary pop icon Marilyn Monroe, lines 3-5 combine the bawdy drinking song “I Used to Work in Chicago” (first officially published in 1945) with a pun on Sir Lancelot’s name, line 6 refers to the Grail legend as filtered through children’s literature, and line 7 makes reference to Tennyson’s “The Lady of Shalott” (1833), the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and returns to the opening theme of Marilyn Monroe. In combination, these various references function both ironically—in a manner reminiscent of the Bay Area Funk art scene that Spicer was loosely associated with—but also as serious social commentary if we consider the rumored effect that President Kennedy’s involvement with Monroe, as a modern Arthur, is said to have had on Monroe’s fragile mental state and eventual spiraling out of control.

If Spicer is, as Joron suggests, “one of the finest exemplars of American neo-surrealism,” then his work shows that surrealism in the U. S. is a poetics of assemblage and pastiche, featuring an amalgamation of sources from different times and places that signify on multiple levels. In this respect, surrealism in the U. S. is hardly confined to national

borders, as Spicer's frame of reference dates back to medieval England, far removed both geographically and temporally from the U. S. as a nation-state. The avant-garde, for Spicer like Apollinaire before him, is not a rupture from the past, but a way to make new use of a living past. Like Apollinaire, Spicer was a deeply regionalist poet, often refusing to allow his work to be published and circulated outside the San Francisco Bay Area and frequently joking that the state of California should secede from the union and form its own republic. And like Apollinaire, Spicer sees no apparent contradictions in borrowing heavily from foreign literary traditions in the cultivation of this deeply regionalist aesthetic.

André Breton and the Battle for the Term

I have relayed this somewhat prolonged account of Apollinaire's conception of surrealism because his definition of the term is generally eclipsed by Breton's—with good reason, perhaps, as Breton spent forty years sharpening his definition while Apollinaire's can only be pieced together from a handful of sources—despite the fact that Apollinaire's poetics may, generally speaking, have more in common with twentieth-century U. S. poetics than Breton's. Although I would argue that Apollinaire's conception of surrealism—loosely defined as it is—may actually be closer than Breton's to James Clifford's expansion of the term *surrealism* “to circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, unexpected juxtapositions—that works to provoke the manifestation of extraordinary realities” (118) that I cited at the outset of this chapter, I do not mean to imply that Apollinaire's definition should necessarily supplant Breton's. Although he coined the term, the word is still allowed to have an afterlife beyond Apollinaire's control. To insist on the superiority of Apollinaire's version of surrealism is to simply replace one central figure in a genius-theory model of literary history with another. This is the trap that Katharine Conley

falls into in her otherwise fascinating critical biography of Breton's cohort Robert Desnos (1900-45), *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (2003), in which Conley argues that Desnos—not Breton—should be viewed as the movement's driving force: "It is my contention here that Desnos was the person who shaped the very definition of surrealism, who inspired Bretonian surrealism, and through whom, consequently, the movement should be read" (3). At the same time, Conley's book is important because it illustrates that surrealism was bigger than Breton, that there were other central figures whose interpretation of the movement are of equal value in examining the present. For this reason, I mean to suggest that it may be more fruitful to look at surrealism—to borrow DuPlessis and Quartermain's term again—as a *nexus*, for doing so "no longer demand[s] conformity of the literary materials or producers, nor a temporal and philosophical consistency of application, but rather a continued interest in the grounds for debate" (22).

Since its inception as literary term, *surrealism* has been just such a borderland. Breton himself, whose name and work are generally thought of as synonymous with the term,¹¹ had to wrestle the term from its use by Apollinaire and Yvan Goll (1891-1950). Despite the fact that a handful of his poems were translated by William Carlos Williams, Goll's work has had minimal impact on U. S. poetries, so I will not devote too much time here to discussion of his work, but his case is worth mentioning because it illustrates that the surrealist movement spearheaded by Breton had to engage in fierce debate in order for their interpretation of *surrealism* to accrue more cultural capital than Goll's. In October 1924, Goll published a one-shot review *Surrealisme* that included work by some of the most acclaimed avant-garde writers and artists in France, including Apollinaire, Pierre Albert-Birot (1876-1967), Robert Delaunay (1885-1941), and Pierre Reverdy (1889-1960). The magazine also included a "Manifeste du Surréalisme" by Goll in which he espouses a definition of *surréalisme* very

similar to Apollinaire's, even citing Apollinaire as the source of his conception of the term. Goll's use of the term *surrealism*, however, caused a stir with Breton and his cohorts, even prompting Breton to note in his first manifesto: "Those who might dispute our right to employ the term SURREALISM in the very special sense that we understand it are being extremely dishonest, for there can be no doubt that this word had no currency before we came along" (25-26). Breton and company went so far as to storm a recital of "surrealist dance" that Goll had organized, as if they could claim ownership of the word through brute force. Goll's wife, Claire Goll, discusses the incident in her essay "Goll et Breton," claiming that Breton received a black eye during the incident and consequently always resented her husband for the fact.

If Breton's spat with Goll was relatively short-lived, his attempt to distance himself from Apollinaire was much more complex, particularly since Breton had written admirably of Apollinaire early in his career and notes in his *Manifeste du Surrealisme*, published in late October 1924, that his decision to adopt the term is partially in homage to Apollinaire. In almost the same breath, however, Breton attempts to distance himself from Apollinaire's use of the term. The passage in question comes from Breton's discussion of the composition of *Les Champs Magnétiques* (1919), the collaborative work of automatic writing with fellow surrealist Philippe Soupault (1897-1990) that Breton dubbed "the first purely Surrealist work" (35):

In homage to Guillaume Apollinaire, who had just died and who, on several occasions, seemed to us to have followed a discipline of this kind, without however having sacrificed to it any mediocre literary means, Soupault and I baptized the new mode of pure expression which we had at our disposal and which we wished to pass on to our friends, by the name of SURREALISM. I

believe that there is no point today in dwelling any further on this word and that the meaning we gave it initially has generally prevailed over its Apollinairian sense. (24)

The especially important element of this passage is that Breton's sense of surrealism is figured as having "prevailed over its Apollinairian sense." Although the aggressiveness of the language is partially due to the text's status as an aesthetic manifesto, it is worth noting that Breton characterizes the relation between his sense of surrealism and Apollinaire's in competitive terms as a situation in which one interpretation must ultimately "prevail."

Breton continues his assault on Apollinaire's aesthetic position by noting that he could have just as easily adopted the term "supernaturalism," specifically as deployed by Gérard de Nerval and Thomas Carlyle, claiming "that Nerval possessed to a tee the spirit with which we claim a kinship, Apollinaire having possessed, on the contrary, naught but *the letter*, still imperfect, of Surrealism, having shown himself powerless to give a valid theoretical idea of it" (25; emphasis in original). Curiously, Apollinaire himself had expressed a similar kinship with Nerval in a 15 May 1914 article in *Les Soirées de Paris* entitled "Surnaturalisme." This text appears to be a reaction against the label *fantaisisme*, which had been applied to his work by critics because of its fantastical elements: "The aspects that seem the most fantastic are often the most true. It is a superior naturalism, more sensitive, more vital, and more varied than the former variety—a surnaturalism, entirely in accord with the surnaturalist achievements of the other arts" (qtd. in Bohn 201). In the three years between *surnaturalisme* and *surréalisme*, very little about Apollinaire's aesthetic changed other than the terms he uses to describe it. In a letter to Paul Dermée dated March 1917, Apollinaire gives the following reason for settling on *surréalisme* over *surnaturalisme*: "Surréalisme n'existe pas encore dans les dictionnaires, et il sera plus commode à manier que surnaturalisme déjà utilisé par MM. les

Philosophes” [Surrealism does not yet exist in the dictionaries, and it will be more convenient to handle than supernaturalism, which is already used by the Philosophers.] (*Œuvres* 886). The most salient aspect of this explanation is not Apollinaire’s attempt to distance himself from “The Philosophers,” but rather the fact that surrealism is a neologism, that in being the first to employ the term Apollinaire becomes the sole arbiter of the aesthetic that he believed bound together everything that was modern about modern art. The shift in terminology also distances Apollinaire from charges of *fantaisisme*, eliding the associations with the paranormal that had come to be critically associated with the term *surnaturalisme*, and further distancing Apollinaire from Nerval.

For someone like Breton who took extreme pains to distance himself from his literary predecessors, it is particularly curious that he would leapfrog Apollinaire in favor of the more distant Nerval, but that temporal distance may have been just what he was after, as it constructs a longer historical trajectory for the movement and makes his literary discovery appear all the more poignant. Breton’s discussion of Apollinaire becomes even more conflicted when one considers the fact that Breton’s manifesto actually owes a relatively large debt to Apollinaire. Early in the manifesto, for example, Breton speaks of the imprisonment of the imagination within the narrow bounds of conventional thought: “The imagination which knows no bounds is henceforth allowed to be exercised only in strict accordance with the laws of an arbitrary utility” (4). We have seen above that—despite Breton’s claims to the contrary—Apollinaire actually was capable of articulating a relatively thorough theory behind surrealism and that this theory rested largely on the reformative capabilities of the imagination and the freedom contained therein. Breton’s ideas in the manifesto sound, at times, like he is parroting Apollinaire, down to the very language he uses to express those ideas. He claims, for example, “We really live by our fantasies when we *give*

free rein to them” (18; emphasis in original). Apollinaire uses identical language in describing the aesthetic of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*: “I have chosen *to give free rein to fantasy*, my own way of interpreting nature” (154; emphasis added).

The biggest difference between Apollinaire’s and Breton’s concepts of surrealism is Breton’s systematic application of the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, whose writings were scarcely available in French during Apollinaire’s lifetime. For Breton, Apollinaire’s “imagination” becomes synonymous with Freud’s “unconscious,” and the end goal of surrealism is “the future resolution of...dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*” (14; emphasis in original). Apollinaire’s failure to formulate a universal conception of surrealism is more a failure to do so on Breton’s terms, for Breton owes a far greater debt to Apollinaire than he is willing to admit. Breton’s admission that he chose to name the movement in homage to Apollinaire despite the fact that Apollinaire does not live up to that homage is a misnomer designed to distance Breton from his predecessor in the same way that he distances himself from those you had not yet “hear[d] the Surrealist voice” (27). Apollinaire and Breton may have had more in common than Breton is willing to admit, but his insistence on distancing himself from those who did not totally adhere to his program has caused literary historians to view the two more like distant cousins than close allies. Let us turn now to the U. S. to see how the rigidity of Breton’s conception of surrealism influenced U. S. perceptions of the orthodox-dissident debate.

Anthologizing Surrealism

As André Lefevere notes in “Anthologizing Africa” (1992), a comparative study of English-language anthologies of African poetry, anthologies have a tremendous power to

shape and be shaped by the perceptions of foreign literary canons in the receiving context, particularly as they are apt to be used as university textbooks, the likely situation of many readers' first encounter with the foreign literary tradition in question. The various inclusions and exclusions in anthologies are shaped by issues of poetics, extraliterary concerns, or some combination of the two. Editorial choices are also heavily determined by the current or projected market in the receiving culture:

Publishers invest in anthologies, and publishers decide the number of pages they want to invest in. The "limitations of size" or "space" ritually lamented in almost all introductions to all anthologies are not a natural given. Rather, they reflect the anticipated demands of the market place. (124)

Although the term was coined in 1917 and Breton's first manifesto appeared in 1924, there have been only two major anthologies of surrealist poetry in the U. S.: *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* (1974) by Michael Benedikt and *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (2001) by Mary Ann Caws. Each of these anthologies includes a core of poets that conforms to and reinforces Breton's conception of the movement, while simultaneously complicating that conception in different ways.

From the beginning of his introduction, Benedikt presents his anthology as an intervention into contemporary U. S. poetics, lamenting the fact that it has taken fifty years since its inception as a movement for a major anthology of surrealist poetry to be released in the U. S. The reason for this lapse, Benedikt claims, is "the curiously insular nature of twentieth-century literary practice" (vii). He presents a provincial image of American poetry as being slow to adapt to the advancement of the European avant-garde, of being at least a generation behind France, largely due to a xenophobic and isolationist sense of literary history:

Perhaps as a result of our natural orientation toward the idea of English literary primacy, we too often tend to forget that the celebrated and crucial “discoveries” of Laforgue by Eliot, Gautier by Pound, and Rimbaud by Hart Crane—not to mention the less particularized by no less influential discoveries of the French Symbolists by Stevens, Aiken and MacLeish—came between a half- and a quarter-century after the French writers ended their work and were regarded as established, even “classic,” writers elsewhere. (vii-viii)

By the time surrealism was getting its start in France, then, poets in the U. S. were just beginning to respond to the work of the previous generation of French poets. When this work finally reached U. S. shores, these “tardy revelations” lacked the punch that their French counterparts had in their own historical context, producing instead “the Symbolist-oriented, classicist, and esthetically conservative literary criticism that dominated American writing from the early 1920’s through the 1950’s” (viii).

The guiding force of Benedikt’s editorial choices is clearly an issue of poetics, particularly illustrating the relevance of surrealist aesthetics to contemporary U. S. poetry. He gives, for example, a long and diverse list of poets from the mid-1950s and early 1960s whose work exhibited signs of surrealist influence, breaking those poets into three groups. The first two groupings mimic aesthetic divisions constructed by Donald Allen fourteen years earlier in his landmark anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960), which by 1974 was seen as a “classic” in its own right that had gone a long way toward codifying a tradition of innovative American postwar poetry. These groupings included “major members of the San Francisco or ‘Beat’ poets” (viii), particularly Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Kenneth Rexroth, and “the members of the original group of ‘New York

School' poets, especially [...] the work of John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and the late Frank O'Hara, all of whom had spent some time in Paris" (viii). The only member of that list not part of Allen's anthology is Rexroth, as the bulk of his work appeared prior to the years covered by *The New American Poetry*, although the influence of Rexroth's work on younger San Francisco poets is mentioned in Allen's introduction. The third group in Benedikt's *The Poetry of Surrealism* is a more motley group:

a range of by-and-large independent writers who was already accomplished widely recognized, distinguished work in a less experimental mode during the previous decade: W. S. Merwin, Louis Simpson, James Wright, Donald Hall, Robert Bly and David Ignatow (who had also experimented with Surrealism in the 1930's). (viii)

Benedikt's construction of this last group is particularly important in illustrating the pervasiveness of surrealist aesthetics in modern U. S. poetry, as it suggests that the influence of surrealism is felt far beyond the "experimental" wing of U. S. poetics. Indeed, Benedikt notes, "Among poets of my generation, the list of sympathetic or influenced writers would be much longer, if not too extended to tabulate" (viii). By 1974, it seems, surrealism has been absorbed into American poetry to the degree that its pervasiveness can no longer be tabulated.

At the time of the anthology's publication, Benedikt was the poetry editor of *The Paris Review*, a professor at Hampshire College, and according to the book's jacket copy "a distinguished poet and critic" himself. Benedikt's position at *The Paris Review*, one of the era's more prominent and powerful literary journals, in particular gave cultural weight to his editing of the anthology. The book itself was published by trade publisher Little, Brown and Company, suggesting that it was intended less for an academic audience than the wider,

high-middlebrow reader of such journals as *The Paris Review*. The jacket copy supports this reading by highlighting Benedikt's vision of the anthology as an intervention into U. S. poetics. Not only does the jacket copy note that it is the "first representative collection of Surrealist poetry in English," but it also underscores the suggestion that the fourteen poets represented in the book are "dominant figures" in their respective literary traditions, "may of whom have not been widely translated" in English. The jacket copy takes a belletristic approach to the relevance of surrealism to contemporary U. S. culture in claiming: "Because Surrealist conceptions of love, freedom, nature, and the occult anticipated in numerous ways current trends, this anthology is a valuable source for students of contemporary culture in general." In the effort of furthering the connections between surrealism and contemporary U. S. poetics, the jacket copy also notes that many of the poems were "translated by such prominent contemporary American poets as Louis Simpson, W. S. Merwin, Robert Bly, John Ashbery, Charles Simic, and Mark Strand, as well as Michael Benedikt himself."¹² Benedikt also draws parallels in his introduction between surrealism and Coleridge, Wordsworth, and Yeats, again aligning the movement with major innovative forces in the recent history of English-language poetics. The impulse always seems oriented toward making the foreign appear more familiar. To this end, the book is not published bilingually, and the translations themselves are presented as stand-ins for the originals, as "[p]oetry in their own right, [...] exceptionally fresh, vivid, witty, and imbued with the kinds of textural quality and sensual nuance found in the originals."

Two French poets actually refused to allow their work to be printed in *The Poetry of Surrealism*. René Char (1907-1988) and Raymond Queneau (1903-1976), both of whom were only briefly and tangentially connected with Breton and his cohorts. In the case of Queneau, the split was particularly ugly, and he would go on to write *Odile* (1937), a playful send-up of

the surrealist roman à clef featuring a band of intellectuals presided over by a exaggeratedly dictatorial character named Anglares who is clearly a foil for Breton. According to Benedikt, Queneau “specifically requested to be omitted from Surrealist ‘annexation’ here” (ix). Queneau’s use of the term *annexation* is particularly apt, as it illustrates the relevance of the geographic metaphors that I have been developing in this study. Annexation, of course, refers the legal incorporation of one territory into an adjacent or noncontiguous geopolitical entity. Usually, it is implied that the territory and population being annexed is the smaller, more peripheral, and weaker of the merging entities, barring physical size. It can also imply a measure of coercion, expansionism, or unilateralism on the part of the stronger of the two. Queneau’s refusal to be included in the anthology is not only an explicit rejection of the canonizing power of anthologies, but also an interrogation of the dominance of surrealism in the history of twentieth-century French poetry and a refusal to have the work from the later period of his career labeled “surrealist” because of his brief association with the moment early in his career.

Benedikt, on the other hand, is interested in widening the definition of surrealism to include as many writers as he sees fit, and in the case of some of the included poets he draws on works from both before and after their period of official involvement with surrealism as a literary movement.¹³ His reasoning for this gesture is “[s]o that the reader may be better able to see for himself something of the far-reaching influence of the Surrealist spirit on its poets” (xxv). He also challenges Breton’s attempt to distance himself from his literary predecessors in his 1929 manifesto by including works by Guillaume Apollinaire and Pierre Reverdy:

To us, the relationship of Apollinaire and Reverdy to Surrealism’s poetry seems so essential that, without in any way implying membership in the

movement, we have decided to represent their poetry here. It seems to us that translations of their poetry have still not been so voluminous as to render their presence uneconomical in terms of space. (xxiii)

This is the only instance in Benedikt's introduction of the lamenting lack of space that Lefevere noted was so common for editors of anthologies. In this case, however, Benedikt turns the lamentation into a celebration of his ability to include the work of Reverdy and Apollinaire despite lack of space. For Benedikt, then, surrealism is still intimately tied to Apollinaire's conception of the term. In his discussion of surrealist aesthetics, for example, he mentions the disparate tones and mixture of discursive registers of Apollinaire as being a cardinal feature of the movement. If surrealism is, as the book repeatedly seems to be suggesting, a major influence on contemporary U. S. poetry, then Apollinaire plays a central role in that influence.

This is not the only subtle challenge to Breton's authority by Benedikt. Several times throughout the introduction, for example, Benedikt accentuates what he considers to be the central paradox of Breton's thought: his repeated insistence that surrealism is not concerned with such matters as literary aesthetics while simultaneously calling for an emphasis on the "marvelous" and on "convulsive beauty." "True," Benedikt notes, "this beauty is a new beauty [...] but the stated concern is for beauty, nevertheless, and is perhaps all the more strong a concern for the insistence that such beauty be new" (xvii). Despite these criticisms, Benedikt also clearly reveres Breton, even going so far as to say that "Breton was probably as close to a genuine literary saint as our century can offer" at the conclusion of his introduction (xxviii). If Benedikt's criticism of Breton left any doubt that his anthology is primarily a canonizing gesture, his reference to sainthood certainly quiets that doubt. In the end, we are left with an anthology that subtly questions Breton's authority by marginally

expanding the bounds of surrealist poetry, yet ultimately defers to that authority and presents a small roster of poets who would go on to be considered the core of surrealism for many years.

This canon is both reinforced and challenged by the critic and translator Mary Ann Caws (b. 1933) in her various anthologies of the movement. Throughout her career, Caws has been one the most—if not *the* most—influential mediators for contemporary American perceptions of surrealism, and her distinguished academic career lends her interpretation of the movement immense cultural weight. Her various academic positions, for example, include terms as the president of the Association for the Study of Dada and Surrealism (1971-75), the Modern Language Association of America (1983), and the American Comparative Literature Association (1989-91). Since her first book, *Surrealism and the Literary Imagination: A Study of Breton and Bachelard* (1966), a revision of her 1962 University of Kansas dissertation, Caws has devoted her career to the promotion of the movement. She has gone on, for example, in the past decade to edit *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (2001) and *Surrealism* (2004), two of the largest and most comprehensive anthologies of surrealist art and literature currently available in English. In the early part of her career, her work was relatively Breton-centric, but—as we will see shortly—her more recent work has been geared toward expanding the canon of surrealist literature to locate surrealism as a style that can appear in artists and writers who were not part of Breton’s movement and did not identify themselves as surrealist, including a fair number of female and postcolonial artists and writers.

Caws has written two books on Breton (in 1966 and 1973), and his work takes a place of central importance in her *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Tzara, Eluard, Desnos* (1970). Of the nearly twenty book-length translations of the work of single

authors that Caws has published throughout her career, fifteen of those have been by Surrealist or proto-Surrealist authors, and four of those fifteen are by Breton, including *Poems of André Breton* (1982), the longest selection of Breton's poetry currently available in English translation. She has also contributed translations to the other major collection of Breton's work in English, the University of California Press' *André Breton: Selections* (2003), edited by Mark Polizzotti, in addition to writing an introduction to Polizzotti's translation of Breton's collection of essays *The Lost Steps* (1997). All in all, Caws has had some hand in nearly half of all English translations of Breton's work currently in print.¹⁴ Caws' emphasis on Breton's work is not entirely surprising, as Breton is unquestionably one of the most influential figures in twentieth-century French poetry. In choosing Breton as an object of translation and critical attention, Caws makes a safe and marketable decision, as his literary reputation is fairly secure in his native France and beyond. After all, bookstores in France sell magnetic bookmarks with Breton's picture on them near the cash register the way Barnes & Noble might do with a quintessentially American poet like Walt Whitman or William Carlos Williams.

This canonical interpretation is reflected in her *The Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (2004), in which she devotes fourteen pages to Breton's work. Only three other poets are given more space in the anthology than Breton. The early-century work of Guillaume Apollinaire and Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) is given nineteen and fifteen pages respectively, and the only contemporary of Breton's given equal weight is Tristan Tzara (1896-1963), who is represented by seventeen pages from Caws' translation of *Approximate Man & Other Writings* (1973), which also happens to be the longest selection of Tzara's work currently in English. No poet from the latter half of the century receives nearly as much attention than those four, presenting an image of twentieth-century French poetry weighted

heavily toward the aesthetic innovations of the modernist era and diffusing outward in the postwar era. Overall, Caws' anthology reflects the canonical interpretation of twentieth-century French poetry in both France and the United States, and the book—especially since it is published by Yale University Press—seems geared toward an academic audience and intended to be used primarily as a pedagogical tool in undergraduate courses in French literature. As such, her selections are not significantly different from those in Paul Auster's *The Random House Book of Twentieth Century French Poetry* (1984), the volume that Caws' anthology seems to be succeeding. The most startling addition introduced in her anthology is the title of the temporal division she gives to the immediate postwar era, "1946-1966: The Death of André Breton, the Beginning of *L'Éphémère*," effectively carving the century's poetic production into Breton and post-Breton eras.

Three years earlier, however, Caws published another anthology, *Surrealist Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (2001), which presents a much more expansive selection of poets. Caws positions *Surrealist Painters and Poets* as a sequel to Robert Motherwell's tremendously influential *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* (1951), even noting in her preface that Motherwell was originally supposed to write the introduction to *Surrealist Painters and Poets* when he passed away. In lieu of a preface by Motherwell, Caws includes an interview she conducted with him in 1990 in which he talks about his involvement with surrealism in the 1940s. Despite their obvious connection, there are subtle differences between the two anthologies' structure and timbre. Whereas Motherwell's arrangement of works in *The Dada Painters and Poets* mimics the lively organization of Dadaist periodicals, with its discordant mix of manifestoes, essays, photographs, and factual accounts of Dadaist happenings, Caws' anthology is much more orderly in its organization, with the text broken down into three main sections—"Memoirs of Surrealism," "Texts," and "Other Works"—and the entries for

each section arranged alphabetically. This difference in organization can somewhat be explained by the two volumes' respective venues of publication. Motherwell's anthology was originally published by Wittenborn, Schultz, the art publisher whose most notable publications were the Documents of Modern Art series, which Motherwell also edited and which included works by Hugo Ball, Max Ernst, Wassily Kandinsky, among others. As an artist himself, Motherwell had close ties to the surrealist movement and an intimate understanding of avant-garde editorial strategies, serving on the editorial board of the magazine *VVV*, the house organ for European surrealists during their years of exile in New York during World War II. Caws' anthology, on the other hand, was published by MIT Press and presents itself as more scholarly in tone and orientation.¹⁵

No longer bound to the representation of a national canon as she was in *The Yale Anthology of Twentieth-Century French Poetry*, Caws presents over seventy-five writers from more than a dozen countries over the course of 530 pages. To put things in perspective, Benedikt's 375 page *The Poetry of Surrealism* contained generous selections from only fourteen poets, all of whom were Francophone writers and most of whom were members of Breton's immediate circle. Benedikt's anthology contains no women, and Aimé Césaire was the only included non-white poet and the only not born in continental Europe. Although some might object to the fact that no writers from Greece or Japan—two countries with strong associations with surrealism—are included, Caws' anthology is vastly more inclusive than Benedikt's, containing material by artists and writers from Belgium, Chile, Cuba, the Czech Republic, Egypt, England, France, Germany, Guyana, Italy, Martinique, Mauritius, Mexico, Spain, Switzerland, Senegal, the United States, and Uruguay.

More than half of the writers and artists included in the anthology, however, are either French-born or spent the majority of their time in Paris. Although the coverage of

writing from the French colonies is fairly adequate, coverage outside of the Francophone world is much sparser, with most countries—except the United States—represented by only one or two writers.¹⁶ The anthology, however, does include a particularly impressive collection of writing from the French colonies, illustrating the sympathy that Breton and his cohorts had for the colonially oppressed and the adaptability of surrealist aesthetics to local conditions and highlighting Caws' interest in the emergence of postcolonial theory. Many of these texts were specifically translated for the first time by Caws herself for publication in this volume, such as the concise, yet revealing essay “The Domain of the Marvelous” by Suzanne Césaire (1916-1966), whose literary reputation is generally eclipsed by that of her husband Aimé Césaire, which originally appeared in the first issue of Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler's *View* in 1941. In this essay, S. Césaire speaks of the relevance of surrealist aesthetics to the emancipatory politics of Martinique: “Now it is a question of seizing and admiring a new art which leaves humankind in its true condition, fragile and dependent, and which nevertheless, in the very spectacle of things ignored or silenced, opens unsuspected possibilities to the artist” (117). In his book *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster locates the surrealist interest in what Foster calls *the uncanny*, which encompasses many of the aesthetic and ideological features of Bretonian surrealism that I discussed earlier in this chapter, in “a concern with events in which repressed material returns in ways that disrupt unitary identity, aesthetic norms, and social order” (xvii). In Foster's argument, the surrealists “not only are drawn to the return of the repressed but also seek to redirect this return to critical ends” (xvii). “The Domain of the Marvelous” transposes this surrealist interest in the Freudian concept of repression to the context of leftwing politics in the colonial environment of Martinique. In doing so, S. Césaire highlights the vast international web of surrealist thought,

as the ideas of a German psychologist are filtered through the work of French writers and intellectuals and applied to the local conditions of a small island in the Caribbean.

Caws' uncovering of S. Césaire, whose work is often eclipsed by that of her more well-known husband, also betrays the influence of feminist literary theory on her choices for inclusion.¹⁷ This revisionist history of surrealism can also be seen in such inclusions as Mina Loy's "Auto-Facial-Construction," a faux-scientific treatise on fighting signs of aging in one's face. In this text, Loy (1882-1966), a writer also not normally grouped with the surrealist movement, interrogates contemporary standards of beauty and aging by mocking the tone and diction of science-based beauty enhancement tips that were widely popular (and still are) in women's magazines of the day. Loy writes, for example, "That subtle element of the ludicrous inherent in facial transformation by time is the signpost of discouragement pointing along the path of the evolution of personality" (266). Loy's dense text, which utilizes both the diction and syntax of scientific discourse, also undermines that discourse's claim to represent scientific truth by being fairly difficult—if not downright impossible—to paraphrase. The send-up of contemporary standards of beauty certainly resonates with surrealism's social criticisms, but it also represents both a thematic and formal expansion of those criticisms, as Loy's reversal of a certain form of rhetoric in the effort of interrogating the ideological imperative behind that rhetoric is relatively unique within the history of surrealist works.

Rather than lamenting the lack of space, as Lefevere notes anthologists almost always do, Caws ends her preface by explicitly acknowledging her project as a conscious canon-expanding gesture:

My view about Surrealism seen from here, in the new millennium, is that the division set up by Breton between European Surrealists and those of other

countries—such as the United States, to take a case not really at random—has no longer any reason to hold. I have therefore selected from both sides of the Atlantic, the writing and art that I find most benefitting that honorary term: Surrealist. (xxx)

In short, Caws' *Surrealist Painters and Poets* is geared toward realizing a similar definition of surrealism as the one I cited by James Clifford at the outset of this chapter, a definition that has come to dominate contemporary U. S. perceptions of surrealism, using the term *surrealism* “in an obviously expanded sense to circumscribe an aesthetic that values fragments, curious collections, [and] unexpected juxtapositions” (118). We can see this definition at play, as well, in Caws' *Surrealism* (2004), a retrospective on surrealist art that Caws edited for Phaidon Press. In turning toward the twenty-first century, for example, she selects such work as the Brazilian-born Vik Muniz's (b. 1961) gingerbread façade *CandyBAM* (2002), which was made from enlarged photographs of gingerbread cake and which enveloped the Brooklyn Academy of Music during its restoration in 2002-03. According to Caws, Muniz's piece creates “a sense of heightened anticipation and childlike wonder while preserving and transforming the memory of the real building underneath, and appealing to the possibility of Breton's claim for Surrealism, that what we imagine tends to become the real” (41-42).

Critical Responses to Surrealism in the U. S.

Critical responses to surrealism in the U. S. tend to support this division between “orthodox” and “dissident” surrealism, with dissident surrealism generally being viewed as the favored strand. In the usual history that is given, orthodox surrealism in the U. S. retreated after WWII as European expatriates returned home and small magazines such as *VVV* and *View* that had served as vehicles for the movement during the war ceased

publication. In discussing the postwar era in *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (1995), for example, Dickran Tashjian notes that “the Surrealists were effaced from the American cultural terrain even while significant traces lingered in the wake of their departure” (qtd. in Joron 3). Tashjian relates the difficulties surrealism had in assuming an American identity to a “cultural ambivalence” that he claims is “deeply ingrained in American culture, dating back to the colonial experience, when cultural as well as political independence was sought” (9). In Tashjian’s view, the “few artists and writers seeking to develop an American avant-garde came to realize that they could not simply imitate the European avant-garde no matter how much they admired its formal innovations” (9). In other words, Tashjian centers the debate along national-competitive lines, and aesthetic freedom—the refusal to play according to the rules of a literary movement, even an avant-garde one like surrealism—is figured as a quintessentially American trait, one that is explicitly connected to the spirit of the American Revolution. In this vein, Tashjian focuses the second half of his book on the artists Joseph Cornell, Arshile Gorky, and Jackson Pollock, whose importance he claims stems from “an uncanny ability to acquiesce so Surrealism and make it their own in an act of cultural and aesthetic transformation” (9).

Tashjian’s stance is not exactly new. After all, William Carlos Williams expressed a similar—albeit slightly more heated—sentiment fifty years earlier in his 1946 review of André Breton’s *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares*—a review that was curiously published in the surrealist house organ *View*, which had also published Breton’s volume—in which Williams claims that Breton’s work runs “contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the United States” (146). “Complete freedom of enterprise,” Williams claims, “is unknown [in France]. That is why they exported The Statue of Liberty to New York harbor and kept only an insignificant replica for the Seine” (146). To be fair, Tashjian displays a much more

nuanced understanding of the situation than Williams, but he also displays a certain naivety in assuming that cultural products can cross national boundaries unscathed. I would argue, on the other hand, that this can never be the case. We should view such products of intercultural exchange in the same light that we view translations, with the same sort of inevitable losses and gains. National literatures develop at different rates, respond to different conditions, and carry different baggage. When a cultural product shifts from one signifying chain to another, we cannot reasonably expect it to do so unchanged. Like many critics, however, Tashjian turns to Bretonian surrealism as a sort of ur-Surrealism. This, of course, is with good reason. After all, we have to start someplace. But even Tashjian is quick to note that Breton himself changed his ideological stance several times in his career: “Historical circumstances quickly overtook the prospect of a coherent Surrealism. Breton’s quest for the marvelous, announced in 1924, within a year also became a political odyssey on the left, requiring timeless improvisation against the pressure of events” (xvii). For this reason, Tashjian feels compelled “to take Breton as [a] beacon rather than any fixed definition in charting the relationship of *his* movement to American culture and society. I have set my compass by his concerns” (xvii; emphasis added).

The problem that Tashjian runs into along the way is that one cannot reasonably expect national literatures to develop at the same pace and according to the same terms. He is willing to admit that Bretonian surrealism undergoes ideological shifts according to historical conditions in France, but expresses surprise at the fact that surrealist aesthetics did not translate smoothly into the U. S. literary field:

Surrealism was hardly transferred in pristine form to an American avant-garde [...]. A major part of [American writers and artists’] response involved their participation in the communication of Surrealism according to their own

vested interests. The cultural diffusion of Surrealism was a process of mutual and often uncoordinated interaction among French and American participants, each with their own motives and goals. This process was never neat and orderly, any more than it occurred exclusively within the narrow confines of the art world (xix).

This is interesting territory, ripe for the sort of cultural analysis that attracts DuPlessis and Quartermain in their discussion of “cultural poetics” that I cited in this book’s introduction. The furthest Tashjian goes in this direction, however, is in his chapter on Arshile Gorky in which he discusses Gorky’s split with surrealism over issues of ethnicity. In this chapter, Tashjian claims that Gorky interrogates the paradoxical combination of Breton’s view of surrealism as a cosmopolitan movement that transcended national boundaries and his unwavering Franco-centrism. Gorky, on the other hand, whose life and work Tashjian argues is intricately bound with his Armenian heritage, soon tired of the rigidity of Breton’s thought, which he considered to be restrictive despite to its claims of liberation.

This application of surrealism as a form of cultural criticism had been particularly popular and fruitful in the U. S. context. As Andrew Joron notes in his discussion of the contemporary African-American poet Will Alexander (b. 1948) in *Neo-Surrealism: Or, the Sun at Night*, surrealism—because of its emphasis on the bringing together of opposites—became a useful tool for U. S. poets to deal with themes of racial and ethnic otherness. Gorky fits squarely into this tradition. Although he focuses on how and why Gorky turned to surrealism to explore issues surrounding his Armenian heritage, Tashjian is ultimately more interested in what Gorky’s dissent from Breton means to the unity and validity of surrealism as an avant-garde community: “In running its course, then, Surrealism unpredictably careened out of Breton’s control, beyond national boundaries and beyond the

orbit of the avant-garde itself” (xix). According to Tashjian, this results in nothing less than a crisis of the avant-garde, necessitating a “new model of the avant-garde” that is “predicated upon conflict instead of progress” (xix), a situation that compromises avant-garde notions of community and the goal of enacting positive cultural change. But the conflict in this case is internal, confined to surrealism as a literary movement itself and specifically according to the limits established by Breton in the context of French history and literature. If one views surrealism as a nexus, however, the shifting terms of the debate over time and across national and linguistic boundaries can be read in a more positive light, as the progress of latter figures can be read on its own terms and not necessarily viewed as being in conflict with the original beacon.

Despite the fact that the 2010 edition clocks in at fifty-one pages, the most expansive discussion of surrealism in the context of late-twentieth century U. S. poetry is Andrew Joron’s *Neo-Surrealism; Or, The Sun at Night: Transformations of Surrealism in American Poetry, 1966-1999*. An earlier version of Joron’s slim volume was initially written for *The World in Time and Space: Towards a History of Innovative American Poetry* (2002), a collection designed to capture the variety of aesthetic stances in contemporary poetry at the turn of the millennium, which was edited by Edward Foster and Joseph Donahue and published by Foster’s Talisman House, an imprint that displays strong affinities with surrealism. Because of its expansiveness, Joron’s essay also tends to lack analysis and contextualization. Dozens of poets are treated in the text, often with only a paragraph or two devoted to each writer’s work. Joron never hides the fact that his essay is primarily a promotion or celebration of surrealist tendencies in American poetry, which likely explains the tendency toward cataloging over analysis, as if his goal were to illustrate the breadth and diversity of contemporary U. S. poetry in the surrealist vein. This breadth and diversity, however, is

perhaps Joron's most significant contribution to the body of secondary literature on surrealism. Joron gives equal weight to African American poets like Will Alexander, Jayne Cortez, Ted Joans, Bob Kaufman, and Sotère Torregian; European immigrants like Adam Cornford, Edouard Roditi, Charles Simic, and Nanos Valaroitis; the Latin American poet Ivan Argüelles; and the Asian American poet John Yau. Joron does not go so far as to explicitly make this argument, but one can infer from his choice of representative poets that he considers surrealist aesthetics to be a major player in the increasing interest in identity politics driven poetics since the late 1960s.

In this direction, Joron suggests that the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire and his relation to the surrealist-inspired Négritude, a cultural movement by black Francophone writers that arose in response to racial oppression and French colonization, exerts a stronger influence on American poetry than the orthodox surrealism of Breton: "In the cultural context of the United States, not surprisingly, the surrealism of Aimé Césaire—with demotic, demonic sources—can seem more relevant and convincing than that of the Old-World patrician André Breton" (18). Joron's language here, particularly his use of the term "demonic," comes close to the same sort of reductive primitivism that dogged the response of Breton and his cohorts to third-world poetics. In his discussion of the contemporary African-American poet Will Alexander, however, whose work Joron posits as stemming from Césaire, Joron gives a stronger glimpse at how he figures surrealist aesthetics as playing an interventionist role in U. S. racial politics. In reference to *Asia & Haiti* (2000), a collection of two long poems written in response to the Chinese invasion and occupation of Tibet and the victims of Duvalier's dictatorship in Haiti respectively, Joron claims Alexander's use of exoticisms, which he sees as stemming from Césaire's emphasis on the flora and fauna of Martinique, "is simultaneously defined and indefinite, setting a vivid dialectic of freedom and

determinism in motion within the poem's linguistic order" (39). In Joron's view, "there is a political corollary to be drawn" from this: "these interactions tend to resist the encirclement of the imagination by authoritarian discourse" (40).

Along the same line, Joron reads the inclusion of such aesthetic features as the linguistic skepticism that characterized late-twentieth century literary movements like language poetry as the cardinal feature that distinguishes surrealist-inspired writing in the U. S. from its original French counterpart, making an explicit connection between the language school and poets like Alexander, surrealist-oriented poets who prioritize the "word" over the "image" (the latter of which Joron reads as a more orthodox surrealist gesture) and claiming that those poets constitute "a linguistic turn in neo-surrealist practice" (41). At the same time, Joron's analysis is tinged with a hint of mysticism that is more reminiscent of Breton than postmodern movements like language poetry. He writes, for example, "The poet's ability to liberate language in this way is a magic weapon, and part of the spell he is casting against oppression in Asia and Haiti" (40). This mystical sort of diction would likely have never been deployed by poets of the language movement. In reference to Breton's claim in *L'Amour fou* (1937) to have predicted meeting his second wife a decade earlier in his poem "Tournesol," for example, Barrett Watten, one of language poetry's foremost practitioners, claims, "At this point the mysticism is getting unbearable" (47). Watten rightfully criticizes the sort of reverse fortune telling of which Breton was so fond, but he would likely also equally object to Joron's description of language as a "magic weapon" with the mystical ability to cast a spell against oppression. In short, Joron advocates a hybrid of two poetic styles whose aesthetics may not be entirely congruous.

Joron's position here is remarkably consistent with Alexander's own. In "My Interior Vita" (2011), an autobiographical essay in which Alexander traces his career as a writer as

stemming from his teenage interest in both jazz and surrealism, Alexander rails against poetry wielded as “a didactic device,” championing instead a view of poetry as “a magical instrument with the powers to overcome the mortality of the temporal” (69). For Alexander, the surrealist interest in the subconscious has its historical root in the ancient Egyptian belief that the visible and invisible domains were intimately connected. This concept, he claims, was corrupted by Western, rational, “left brain” thought: “within the Roman or American criteria I see the active involvement of what is called the left brain and its natural gravitation towards separating life by means of active fragmentation” (65). If Alexander’s work, as Joron suggests, constitutes a “linguistic turn in neo-surrealist practice,” that thrust takes on a very different twist than the postmodern movements like language poetry to which Joron compares it, as the language poets were very much concerned with the active fragmentation Alexander claims to be against. Both Alexander and the language poets *are* concerned with language as an agent for social change, but their approach to this issue could hardly be more different. Whereas the language poets were interested in part in critiquing dominant power structures by testing and attacking the transparency of language, Alexander’s interest in language is geared toward expanding the reader’s horizons by piecing together disparate specialized vocabularies culled from Alexander’s eclectic reading habits. On this aesthetic technique, Alexander rests the same emancipatory burden that Breton placed on the bringing together of opposing states of the conscious and subconscious mind: “Humans conduct themselves through language, and, when the latter transmutes, the human transmutes” (66). Ultimately, Alexander’s interest in language is a functional one, aimed at language’s ability to transmit knowledge—the very aspect of language that the language poets hoped to call into question—and the freedom that can be gained from piecing together such knowledge. For Alexander, this constitutes a political stance that has its roots in African and African-

American literary and artistic traditions, and he boldly claims, “[T]he rational world has never been able to annul my alacrity for what the mechanically-sighted call the invisible” (68). It is no surprise, then, that Alexander’s list of surrealist writers that he considers to be precursors to his own work leans away from Breton’s official roster (although Breton himself is included) and toward Afro-Caribbean poets (Aimé Césaire), American and African-American poets (Philip Lamantia and Bob Kaufman respectively), and Antonin Artaud, who was excommunicated by Breton and whose late-period work was more extreme in its exploration of madness than anything attempted by Breton and his cohorts.

Joron and Alexander are not the only contemporary poets who view surrealism as an intervention into American racial politics. Clayton Eshleman, whose work is the subject of chapter four of this study, makes repeated gestures in this direction throughout his career as a poet, translator, and editor. In “At the Locks of the Void: Cotranslating Aimé Césaire” (2000), for example, Eshleman explicitly figures his translation strategy as an intervention into contemporary racial discourse:

In 1977, I received a California Arts Council “Artists in the Community” grant which involved my teaching poetry for a school year in the predominantly African-American Manual Arts High School in south-central Los Angeles. I got the idea of translating Césaire’s “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” while teaching at Manual Arts and presenting the translation to my students at the end of the year. (132)¹⁸

In his cogent analysis of Eshleman’s translation practice, Lawrence Venuti notes that “Eshleman offered no explanation of what he hoped to achieve with his ‘idea’” (*Invisibility* 234). Venuti suggests, however, that Eshleman’s goal may become more clear if one turns to the introduction to his translation of “Notebook of a Return to the Native Land” (1983), in

which Eshleman describes the poem as “a parthenogenesis in which Césaire must conceive and give birth to himself while exorcising his introjected and collective white image of the black” (21). As I explain in more detail in chapter four, this sense of parthenogenesis is viewed by Eshleman as a fundamental element of surrealism and becomes a central thematic in his own work, in which the act of translation itself is figured as an opportunity for such rebirth. For my purposes here, however, it is worth noting that Venuti suggests that “Eshleman expected a translation to provoke a similar reformation in his African-American students—despite the difficulties they would face reading an experimental text [like Césaire’s]” (234). This reformation is consistent, Venuti argues, with Eshleman’s interjection of contemporary African-American slang, such as “I say right on!” for “Je dis hurrah” (“I say hurrah”), for in doing so Eshleman draws an implicit connection between the rhetoric of the Black Power movement and Césaire’s *Négritude*.

In short, surrealism in America—both in translation and in surrealist-inspired writing by homegrown U. S. poets—is often a response to specific domestic cultural agenda, whose concerns are generally extremely localized and germane to the preoccupations of the particular poet serving as a conduit. This is what makes telling the history of surrealism in the U. S. such a difficult task, as it is not necessarily a linear history in which late-twentieth century practitioners have a direct relationship to early-twentieth century practitioners. In fact, later writers often proceed as if they were among the first on U. S. soil to discover the movement. And when they do acknowledge U. S. precursors, this acknowledgment is—as one could say of Joron—often carried out in the service of constructing an image of an intercultural community of homegrown surrealists that may not exist in reality.

Joron locates the dissident-orthodox argument as originating from the French context, with dissident figures like Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) breaking from Breton to

cultivate an intensely personal form of surrealism. This binary, Joron claims, creates a division between the work of the three American poets to be officially recognized by Breton as surrealists. On the orthodox side, you have Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, who founded the Chicago Surrealist group. On the dissident side, you have Philip Lamantia:

the two faces of French surrealism—one looking exoterically outward to political and cultural revolution, the other looking esoterically inward to spiritual revolution—seem to be reflected in complementarity of the Rosemonts’ and Lamantia’s respective approaches to American surrealism.

(7)

The Rosemonts, in Joron’s view, practice an orthodox surrealism influenced by their work as labor activists. He dismisses “the shortcomings of some of their verse” and focuses on their extracurricular activities, which he considers to be their most significant contribution to American letters:

They were among the first to translate and disseminate many of the works of “classic” French surrealism; they have maintained contacts with other surrealist groups around the world [...]; and they have delved deeply into the popular culture of the United States to discover the “accomplices of surrealism.” (6)

These “accomplices,” Joron claims, include such works as fellow Chicago Surrealist Group member Paul Garon’s *Blues and the Poetic Spirit* (1975), which draws an analogy between the blues and surrealist conceptions of the unconscious. Lamantia, on the other hand, is seen as “too self-absorbed for such work, too attentive to his inner transformations” (6). Joron dubs Lamantia’s work “surrealism in service of the Revelation” (9), punning on the phrase *Le Surréalisme au service de la révolution* (Surrealism in the service of the revolution) after the

periodical that served as the house organ for Breton and his cohorts during the years of their heaviest involvement with the PCF (1930-33). He places Lamantia in a lineage of poets like Artaud who broke with orthodox surrealism and focused their literary efforts in an “ongoing quest for ecstatic, often drug-mediated, mystical experience in non-Western cultures and in the West’s own pre-capitalist culture” (8).

In displaying a marked preference for the work of Lamantia,¹⁹ Joron echoes the general tendency among U. S. poets to gravitate toward less overtly political brands of surrealism, although he still reads such works as able to enact subtle political critique. He also establishes such dissident surrealism as a norm in the field of U. S. literature: “As orthodox surrealism receded, [...] it began to glow: it now became a part of the ‘background radiation’ of American culture” (3). This “background radiation,” in Joron’s view, includes the work of John Ashbery (b. 1927), Frank O’Hara (1926-1966), the Beats, and Jack Spicer (1925-1965), whose *After Lorca* (1957) Joron calls “one of the finest exemplars of American neo-surrealism” (3). Ashbery, O’Hara, and the Beats have all—to varying degrees—been discussed in terms of surrealism, but Spicer’s work rarely enters the discussion. If one looks close enough, however, the connections are certainly there, and the complexity of those connections—and their contrast from Bretonian surrealism—can be read as emblematic of the U. S. response to the movement. For starters, Spicer’s engagement with the early-twentieth century French avant-garde was fairly consistent since the early part of his career. The word “Dada” appears as a nonsense syllable throughout the second section of his “Imaginary Elegies” (1950), a clever nod to Tristan Tzara’s insistence that “Dada” is a nonsense word that signifies nothing and the sound of the ending to T. S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.”²⁰ He wrote two poems entitled “A Poem for Dada Day at The Place,” the first dated April 1, 1955, and the second April 1, 1958.²¹ In 1956, he wrote the faux-manifesto

“The Unvert Manifesto and Other Papers Found in the Rare Book Room of the Boston Public Library in the Handwriting of Oliver Charming,” which makes frequent references to Dada and to “Mertz,” a clever bastardization of Kurt Schwitters’ *Merz*. And the second section of *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* (1960) is entitled “A Fake Novel About the Life of Arthur Rimbaud,” which takes several liberties with Rimbaud’s biography. Rimbaud, of course, was considered by Breton to be an important precursor to surrealism, and Spicer’s “fake novel” about Rimbaud also contains allusions to Guillaume Apollinaire, the poet and art critic who is generally considered to have coined the term *surréalisme*.

Explicit references to surrealism, however, are few and far between in Spicer’s work, although one can extract from those references the sense that Spicer was attempting to construct a very specific tradition and interpretation of surrealism in which to place his own work. He begins the first of his infamous Vancouver lectures, “Dictation and ‘A Textbook of Poetry’” (13 June 1965), for example, by relaying an embellished version of the story by which William Butler Yeats came to write *A Vision* (1925). In Spicer’s version of the story, Yeats and his wife Georgie were on a train in California in 1918 when Georgie “suddenly began to have trances, and spooks came to her” (*Lectures* 4).²² However, anyone familiar with *A Vision*, or the particulars of Yeats’ biography, will be able to immediately spot the places where Spicer’s version of the tale diverges from Yeats’. In *A Vision*, Yeats claims that the automatic writing experiments with his wife began on October 24, 1917, four days after their marriage (8), while a letter to Lady Gregory more accurately dates the experiments as having begun on October 27th (qtd. in Foster 2: 105). Regardless of the exact date, the experiments clearly began in 1917 when Yeats was fifty-two and not in 1918 at the age of forty-five, as Spicer claims. Of course, Spicer is speaking from memory and modifies his comments with phrases such as “I guess” and “something like that,” so he cannot be held entirely

accountable for these errors, but the other liberties that Spicer takes with the story show that he is recreating Yeats' experience to suit his own needs.

Spicer claims, for example, that Yeats was on a train "between San Berdoo and Los Angeles" (*Lectures* 4), yet Yeats' biographer notes that the first experiments actually took place during the couple's honeymoon at Ashdown Forest Hotel in Sussex (Foster 2: 105). Yeats did, however, date the first time the spirits changed from "the written to the spoken word" as early 1919 when the Yeatses were on an overnight train "somewhere in California" during Yeats' lecture tour of America (*A Vision* 9).²³ It is possible that Spicer is accidentally mixing these two instances, but his claim that George "started automatic writing" implies that he is referring to the initial automatic writing experience, as does his claim that "Georgie was doing all of this to divert him" (*Lectures* 4).²⁴ Regardless of his mixing of the dates, Spicer undoubtedly knew from *A Vision* that the Ashdown incident and the California train incident were two very different events. After all, Spicer does mention that this is "something which is in all English department lectures now" (*Lectures* 5), and his knowledge of Lady Gregory's patronage and the Yeatses' involvement with the Society for Psychical Research all point to a deep knowledge of Yeats' biography.

It seems clear that Spicer is rewriting literary history here, but to what end? The answer might be found in looking at the regionalist subtext of an earlier nod to Yeats in Spicer's work and at the fact that Spicer positions Yeats as being an originator of the surrealist technique of automatic writing. He begins "Imaginary Elegies" (1950-55), a poem that Spicer considered to be one of his early creative breakthroughs, with a quote from *A Vision*: "All the philosophy a man needs is in Berkeley" (*Collected Poetry* 26). Yeats is, of course, talking about George Berkeley, the eighteenth-century Anglo-Irish philosopher and author of *An Essay toward a New Theory of Vision* (1709) and *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of*

Human Knowledge (1710), both of which were extremely influential in formulating Yeats' final conception of *A Vision*. In addition to the philosophical correspondence, Berkeley also corresponds with Yeats on a nationalistic level, as Berkeley was Ireland's greatest philosopher and Yeats, who was politically involved and deeply nationalistic, strove to make himself Ireland's greatest poet. In other words, Yeats may have had ulterior motives in adopting Berkeley's philosophy in *A Vision*, as he becomes a sort of one-man Irish Renaissance in doing so. Picking up on Yeats' nationalism, Spicer shifts the meaning of the word "Berkeley" to the city of Berkeley, California, where Spicer claimed he was "born" in 1946, the year in which he met the poets Robin Blaser and Robert Duncan at the University of California.²⁵ Spicer himself was deeply regionalistic, publishing his work exclusively with small, Bay Area magazines and presses, often demanding that it not be distributed outside the San Francisco Bay Area. He even commented in an interview that he would like to see "a Pacific British Commonwealth formed from the Tehachapi mountains near Bakersfield and all the way up to northern Canada and perhaps even Alaska" (*Lectures* 243). By claiming that the train headed toward Los Angeles—where Spicer was born, the same year that the first edition of *A Vision* was published—was the site of first modern example of poetic dictation, Spicer makes it a local event and part of the regional tradition he was constructing for his work. The casual tone of Spicer's comments seems to support such a reading. He jokes, for example, "[Yeats] probably was in a nasty mood after having gone across the country on the Southern Pacific, which I imagine in those days was even worse than it is now" (*Lectures* 5). A kinship of sorts is born out of the experience of having ridden the same railway system, and it is almost as though the "nasty mood" created by that experience is what allows the spirits to make contact.

Spicer's lecture was given on the 100th anniversary of Yeats' birth, and was only one of the many lectures and symposiums throughout the world taking in place in honor of the event. I do not mean to imply that Spicer's lecture was intended to be in direct commemoration of the Yeats centennial. It was, after all, the first in a series of three lectures that were to be given over the next five days at the house of Warren Tallman, a professor at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver who had also organized the 1963 Vancouver Poetry Festival, which included talks and readings by Robert Creeley, Charles Olson, Allen Ginsberg, Robert Duncan and others. The lectures were primarily intended to be vehicles for the articulation of Spicer's poetics, and their attendance largely consisted of students and young poets. Spicer is aware of this fact and adopts a didactic tone, playing the role of the older poet instructing younger poets in their craft, a role that he also enjoyed playing in the bars in the North Beach section of San Francisco where he often held court. At the same time, there was a definite spiritual "correspondence" with Yeats, to adopt the Swedenborgian term that both Yeats and Spicer make liberal use of, at play in the first lecture that was more akin to Yeats' poetic practice than perhaps all the academic symposiums combined. In the introduction to his transcription of the lecture, Peter Gizzi notes the lecture's "séance-like charm" (*Lectures* 1). Gizzi's term "charm" can be taken in multiple senses of the word: Spicer's characteristic charm is certainly brought to the surface in the lecture, but the lecture also evokes a more hypnotic, trance-inducing feeling, becoming, as Spicer says in *After Lorca*, "how we dead men write to one another" (*Collected Poetry* 134).

The subject of the lecture is Spicer's concept of composition by "dictation," of the poem coming through the poet via some force outside the poet's psyche, a technique Spicer explicitly positions in opposition to the confessional brand of poetry that was popular in

academic circles of the day. Spicer also explicitly positions Yeats as a forbearer to this concept of dictation in the outset of the lecture: “Yeats is probably the first modern that took the idea of dictation seriously. And he might be a good person to start out from” (*Lectures 4*). In relating the composition of Yeats’ *A Vision* to the technique of automatic writing and presenting himself as an inheritor of that technique, Spicer constructs an Anglo-American tradition that originates concurrently to and independent from André Breton’s claim that the surrealist concept of automatic writing was born in 1919 when he and Philippe Soupault began work on *Les Champs magnétiques*. In keeping with this vision of literary history, Spicer distinguishes his practice from surrealism, presenting an image of the movement as being primarily concerned with the arbitrary pairings of disparate things, a practice that he mockingly critiques:

I’ll just write this thing and I’ll take a line from someplace or another, or use a dada or surrealist technique (in a different way than I’m going to use the word “surrealism” tonight, but the French surrealist way of placing things together, taking the arbitrary and all of that) and that won’t be what I want to say, and that’ll be great. (*Lectures 7*)

The brand of surrealism that Spicer is referring to is an early phase in the movement, popularized by Breton and some of his immediate cohorts, which places a strong emphasis on the startling juxtaposition of disparate images. This technique was inspired by a combination of facets of the writing of Isadore Ducasse and the theory of the poetic image espoused by Pierre Reverdy in the March 1918 issue of *Nord-Sud*, a magazine edited by Reverdy himself. Breton quotes Reverdy’s theory at length in his first “Manifesto of Surrealism”:

The image is a pure creation of the mind.

It cannot be born from a comparison but from a juxtaposition of two more or less distant realities.

The more the relationship between the two juxtaposed realities is distant and true, the stronger the image will be—the greater its emotional power and poetic reality. (qtd. in Breton 20; emphasis in original)

Breton considered Reverdy's "juxtaposed realities" to be the aesthetic equivalent of his desire to unite the opposing states of sleeping and waking consciousness, and he was drawn to works containing metaphors that exemplified such distance, such as the following passage from the sixth canto of Ducasse's *Les Chants de Maldoror* (1869), a passage made infamous by Breton's enthusiasm for it: "*Il est beau comme [...] la rencontre fortuite sur une table de dissection d'une machine à coudre et d'un parapluie*" [He is as handsome as the chance encounter of sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissecting table] (233). In Breton's poetry, this aesthetic manifests in such poems as "Free Union" (1931), an amusing take on the Renaissance blason, a poem in which the poet praises a female figure by singling out the various parts of her body and constructing appropriate metaphors for each part. In Breton's hands, however, we find such startling comparisons as a tongue being compared to a "stabbed wafer" (*Selections* 89).

This technique can also be seen more subtly in such lines as the opening of Keith Hollaman's translation of Benjamin Péret's "Human Flesh":

A charming woman who was crying
dressed in black and gray
threw me through the window of the sky (24)

Here, the woman's charm is disrupted by the fact that she is crying and "dressed in black and gray," two things that one would likely not normally associate with the term "charming." We

also would not expect someone who appears to be in a severe state of morning to suddenly get up and throw someone through a window, unless, of course, the person being thrown through the window is the cause of the woman's mourning. Even then, it is a surprising gesture, and Peret never reveals the details of the relation between the woman and the narrator of the poem. More importantly, however, is the question of what exactly is a "window of the sky"? This is the kind of image that the brand of surrealism that Spicer objects to is most known for, combining two objects through the use of the possessive. It is also the kind of writing that has become synonymous with the term "surrealism" in the U. S.

The popularization and eventual absorption of such aesthetic gestures into mainstream U. S. poetics leads contemporary poet-critic Ron Silliman to coin the term "soft surrealism" on his popular weblog, suggesting that surrealism in the U. S. has gone "soft" in being stripped of its association with avant-garde ideology. Silliman has used the term several times since beginning his weblog in 2002, but he gives perhaps his most concise definition of the term in a 23 Oct 2007 entry on the Serbian-American poet Charles Simic. At the time, Simic had just won the Academy of American Poets' prestigious Wallace Stevens Award and was elected to serve as the U. S. Poet Laureate:

A true neophobe, the last thing Simic wants to represent is the new—soft surrealism itself is about packaging such disquieting phenomena in ways that are always already understood. It is, in this sense, the antithesis not just of the original surrealist movement, but even of more recent surrealist practitioners, from [Robert] Bly & [James] Wright to Joseph Ceravolo or David Shapiro.

A footnote to Silliman's comments above reads:

If the surrealism of Robert Bly & James Wright was a conscious rebellion against the Boston Brahmin scene around [Robert] Lowell, the soft

surrealists—who emerged after [James] Tate’s sublime first volume, *The Lost Pilot*—represented a kind of rapprochement. The three who matter are Tate, Simic & Bill Knott, tho [sic] one can detect its influence to this day in the work of, say, Dean Young.

In these passages, Silliman clearly favors a dissident poetics, positioning earlier American practitioners of surrealism, like Robert Bly and James Wright, in opposition to the erudite, confessional poetics of Robert Lowell and his circle that many critics have read as being the dominant mode of mainstream U. S. poetics in the 1950s. Surrealist-inspired poets who came of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, are viewed by Silliman as lacking the oppositional fervor of Bly and Wright, as the style of Bly and Wright had by that time become somewhat of a norm itself. In short, poets like Tate, Simic, and Knott are not—in Silliman’s view—rebellious against anything, both aesthetically and ideologically.

If we look at a poem by James Tate written not long before he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for his *Selected Poems* (1991), the poem “Under Mounting Pressure” from his 1990 collection *Distance from Loved Ones*,²⁶ we can see a number of similarities to Peret’s “Human Flesh”:

She was a floating beautyfarm.

I had planned to escort her to the demolition derby.

[...]

I started reeling in this wildcat beautyfarm,

it was a big one. Her ledger of love was a blur,

her helmet was full of holes. “O Marcel,” she said to me,

“O Marcel, there’s a doorbell in your head. Don’t touch it!” (15)

First, there is the objectifying image of the female character as a “floating beautyfarm.” The word “beautyfarm” itself is a neologism, which presumably means that beauty is something that can be farmed or cultivated, but the fact that the female character is also floating makes her seem like she exists on an otherworldly plane. The poem then quickly shifts from the ethereal qualities of the “floating beautyfarm” to the grimy world of the demolition derby. There are subtle gestures toward a critique of class stratification, as a demolition derby is not exactly the sort of event that one would normally think requires an “escort,” nor does it seem like the sort of place where one might bump into a “floating beautyfarm,” whatever that may be. Tate presumably is a fan of the term “beautyfarm,” as he uses it three times in the poem. The second appearance is actually a repetition of the sentence “She was a wildcat beautyfarm” two lines after its initial appearance. The third is in the sentence “I started reeling in this wildcat beautyfarm, / it was big one.” Here, Tate gives us some fisherman’s lingo, effectively placing the setting in the same class space as the demolition derby. The term “beautyfarm” is somewhat freshened, however, by its pairing with the adjective “wildcat,” which not only is a word generally not used as an adjective but it also deepens the mystique of the term “beautyfarm” through the odd, indeterminate pairing. The woman, once so ethereal, who seemed ready to float away and thus required an escort to the earthly demolition derby, is now given animal-like qualities and figured—like a prize fish—as willing to resist being caught at all costs. Finally, the poem ends with an odd juxtaposition of images, with the female character’s helmet “full of holes” while the narrator’s head is anything but empty, as it contains a doorbell that appears to be a dangerous object since the narrator is told not to touch it.

Tate’s poem has a strong narrative feel to it, although that narrative does not exactly add up to a scene that a reader could necessarily summarize. In that gesture, there is a certain

tension between readerly expectations of closure and the feeling of being swiftly moved along from point A to B to C to D without really knowing how you ended up at point D, nor what relation point D has with point A. It is definitely an amusing ride that many readers will enjoy, but it does not offer anything new—at least aesthetically—that a reader cannot get from going back to a work like Peret’s “Human Flesh,” which is what prompts Silliman to label “soft surrealists” like Tate as “neophobes.” This act of labeling, of course, presumes that formal innovation is a cardinal attribute of worthwhile poetry, a position in line with Silliman’s own political and aesthetic views. From Silliman’s vantage point, a poem like “Under Mounting Pressure” lacks political import because it packages disquieting themes “in ways that are always already understood.” For these themes to be effective, Silliman contests that they must be packaged in a way that challenges conventional reader-writer relations. Silliman expands on this idea in a brief essay exploring the boundaries between flash fiction and prose poetry in the journal *Double Room* (2003):

[S]oft surrealism permits disruptions at the level of plot & character, but never at the level of poet-reader relations, where the power relations of writing remain unchallenged. In sharp contrast, the post-avant world, which Bill Knott recently called the School of Noisiness, offers a far messier, more participatory, pluralistic vision of life as a process of constantly becoming.

Silliman may go wrong here in the assumption that disruptions at the level of plot and character do not necessarily also disrupt the power relations of poet-reader relations, making them part of a “participatory, pluralistic vision of life as a process of constantly becoming” as well. As a useful corrective, Matthew Zapruder—in a panel of young surrealist-influenced poets arranged by *Gulf Coast* editor Hannah Gamble in 2009—criticizes Silliman’s position:

Basing the “hardness” or “softness” of surrealism on whether or not it challenges “poet-reader relations” and the “power relations of writing,” is not only ahistorical but beside the point. [...] [Y]ou can say “poet-reader relations” and the “power relations of writing” are the most important things to think about in every act of writing [...] but it wasn’t what Breton or James Tate or anyone else under discussion was thinking about. To filter surrealism through that idea is just plain foolishness, and not helpful, unless you are trying retroactively to raise the values of your own particular literary movement to an unwarranted position of transcendence.²⁷

Silliman’s is a classic avant-garde position, and it is also very much the position of the group of poets whose work Silliman’s is most often grouped with: the language poets. Tate, on the other hand, has a very different view on originality and the merits of formal experimentation. In an interview conducted between 1975 and 1978 and published in *New Orleans Review* in 1980, Tate notes, “Poetry is recycled. Mine has surely been a composite of all that excited me in the poetry I have read. [...] I haven’t imitated, though I have learned from everyone” (56). In other words, Tate considers his poetics to be a composite of his reading practice. Literary tradition is always very much alive in his work. His position on the literature of the past is not that different from Spicer’s attitude toward constructing a poetics out of material from a usable past, a poet Silliman admired.²⁸ For Tate, dissenting material is always relayed in the poem’s content and has more to do with the poet’s personal stance toward the world—both inside and outside the poem—than issues of literary form. In the same interview, for example, when asked about his opinion on political poetry, Tate replies:

I do think poets must be committed to being certain kinds of “outlaws.”

They can’t “fit in,” as it were. Supposedly, if you are aware of a social

structure you can never again be a natural, interacting part of it. [...] I definitely mean for most of my poems to ridicule our performance in life: it is shoddy and not what it should be. But this will not make me righteous now: now I see failure as what unites us. I am political in that I speak for failure, for anger and frustration. (53)

If we turn these comments against a poem like “Under Mounting Pressure,” we can see the poem in a light that may surprise such detractors as Silliman. Even the poem’s title takes on a different meaning when we acknowledge the fact that Tate considers speaking for failure, anger, and frustration—for what are those three feelings if not forms of mounting pressure—to be a political act. The characters speak to one another in a deadpan sort of way, using plain, colloquial language, yet they seem fundamentally unable to communicate with one another. Every time the female character refers to the narrator, for example, she begins by addressing him, “O Marcel,” with the poetic “O” hearkening back to such genres as the ode or apostrophe. Yet everything that comes after the exuberant “O” is always either a mundane question or a simple, declarative sentence: “O Marcel, / do you know the way out of this pool?” or “O Marcel, there’s a doorbell in your head” (15). The female character—she is never named in the poem—appears detached from her surroundings. Not only does she not understand “the way out of this pool,” but she also fails to notice that the narrator’s name is in fact not Marcel: “She recognized me as some Marcel-type of guy— / this was incomprehensible to me, but preparatory / to something perhaps worthwhile.” The narrator does not seem particularly alarmed that the woman does not know his name. He calls it “incomprehensible,” but also “preparatory / to something perhaps worthwhile.” The rhetoric that he uses looks, on first appearance, very logical and orderly, but the terms hardly add up to anything meaningful. There is a well-placed line break after “preparatory” that

allows the vague “to something perhaps worthwhile” to have strong deflating effect. Not only do we not know what the “something” that her forgetfulness is preparatory for, we also have no idea if that something is really “worthwhile” after all. The narrator’s reaction to this revelation is odd, as it forces a smile that is both “quizzical” and “concupiscent” (certainly a surrealist-like pairing of adjectives), yet that smile is only expressed internally, as it “exhaust[s] itself in [his] head.”

Despite their attempts to make contact—the narrator at one point stretches his hand out to the female character—they are unable to do so. Both characters seem to exist on separate planes, each slightly askance from the other. When the narrator first meets the female character, for example, he notes, “A gale from her shoulder left me in dishabille.” One might suggest that this means that he was floored by her beauty, but he also immediately notes, “I was in dishabille anyway as I was just back / from the kaleidoscopic society.” The term “kaleidoscopic society,” of course, is strange and unclear, but it suggests that the narrator’s perceptions are not as ours, that he is seeing multiples, refracted colors and shapes. Was the gale, then, from the woman’s shoulder that left the narrator in a state of dishabille real or the byproduct of altered perceptions stemming from time spent in the “kaleidoscopic society?” Is the woman herself real? The narrator does, after all, describe her “ledger of love” as “a blur.” Is the “ledger” a blur because of all the names notched in it or because he is still seeing things according to the kaleidoscope effect? It is impossible to know the answer to those questions, but one thing for sure: that the poem continuously teeters between the real and the imagined. Even the limited setting that we are given suggests that we are in liminal space, as the narrator tells us he is standing “there on the wharf of the final landing.”

Some of the elements of “Under Mounting Pressure” that I have been discussing are the very things that Silliman objects to about Tate’s poetics: the aggressive piling up of disparate images, for example, in a poem whose narrative framework is otherwise straightforward. As I mentioned earlier, Silliman claims that “soft surrealism permits disruptions at the level of plot & character, but never at the level of poet-reader relations, where the power relations of writing remain unchallenged” (*Double Room*). But does Tate really leave the power relations of writing unchallenged? In “Describing the Surreal” (1981), Joseph Halpern illustrates how Breton’s use of description facilitates the sort of participatory reading strategies that Silliman champions for challenging poet-reader relations, and it is possible to infer from this claim that Tate’s work functions similarly. If we remember, early in Breton’s first “Manifesto of Surrealism,” he rails against the dominance of realist prose, pointing specifically to a lengthy description of a room from Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*. Breton especially objects to the author’s controlling hand, hidden under the guise of supposed realism and objectivism, manipulating the reader’s emotional response to the story through calculated use of descriptive language, as the items being described carry a symbolic correspondence to the characters’ mental states. Halpern, on the other hand, points to the very different function of description in Breton’s *Poisson soluble* (*Soluble Fish*, 1924).²⁹ The specific passage that Halpern turns to is:

Le dindon, qui répondait au nom de Troisétoiles, en manière de plaisanterie, ne savait plus où donner la tête. Chacun sait que la tête des dindons est un prisme à sept ou huit faces tout comme le chapeau haut de forme est un prisme à sept ou huit reflets.

The turkey who answered to the name of Threestars, as a joke, didn’t know which way his head was screwed on. Everyone knows that the head of a

turkey is a prism with seven or eight faces, just as a top hat is a prism with seven or eight reflections. (93)

According to Halpern, it is “difficult to differentiate the formal status of [these lines], in terms of mode of production, syntax or style, from that of many such lines in realist discourse” (90). In Halpern’s view, the only difference is in the “obvious contradiction in content” and the fact that the passage effectively negates common sense (90). Halpern reads this gesture as an attempt to turn a cardinal technique of realist prose against itself, critiquing the very technique Breton is mockingly adopting: “The use of ‘chacun sait’ [everyone knows] and the word ‘prisme’ [prism], charged with scientific connotations, as well as the heartening appearance of logic in the numbers cited, signals a pastiche of realist description” (30). The effect of this rhetorical move, Halpern claims, is that

Breton shakes the reader loose from his faith in cultural givens. What the caricature brings forth is the paternalistic, patronizing and usually reassuring (here falsely reassuring) voice of the realist descriptor [...] and the reciprocally passive, childlike condition of the reader who both receives knowledge and shares partnership in a world as fully his as the speaker’s. In Breton’s text the reader to all appearances still plays the inferior role (not knowing what everyone else knows), he is still a rival to the speaker for the control of knowledge, and yet on another level a partner in the decoding of an irony that undermines knowledge. (90-91)

The partnership that Halpern describes here invites an active, participatory form of reading, in effect challenging—to return to Silliman’s terms—poet-reader relations and the power relations of writing.

I would argue that the fundamental inability of the two characters in “Under Mounting Pressure” to connect, despite their repeated attempts to do so, coupled with the poem’s subtle interrogation of the rhetorical use of declarative statements functions similarly to Breton’s challenge to realist prose. Tate himself says something very similar in a 1982 interview with Richard Jackson in which he is asked to respond to Halpern’s claim that surrealistic tendencies are “a runaway cross-referenced encyclopedic indexing whose first step is to undermine the validity of classification” (qtd. in *Route* 159).³⁰ His answer:

I tend to do that—use idiomatic expressions, lazy given pieces of language that we don’t examine carefully enough. I try to set the expressions in motion against whole new meanings so that you can’t classify them as simple statements. It’s a way of enriching language, of attaching whole alien worlds to a context. [...] Setting that language in motion unsettles the reader in a deep way. The reader thinks that the poem is making a statement and then all of a sudden the poem insists that the reader think about words, not about content. All of a sudden the poem is not going to deliver a neatly packaged message; the reader is going to have to do some work. It’s up to the reader to gather the little shards of meaning from the friction set off by words being imposed on one another in a way that doesn’t seem natural. (159)

But what about Silliman’s claim that Tate represents the status quo? Well, Tate’s work—despite the fact that his first book, *The Lost Pilot*, won the Yale Younger Poets award in 1967 and that he would go on to win both the Pulitzer Prize (1992) and the National Book Award (1994)—was not always viewed as mainstream. In fact, his work was venomously attacked in such mainstream poetry venues as *The Hudson Review*, where reviewer and Amherst College professor William H. Pritchard routinely slammed each new volume by

Tate in his omnibus reviews. In his review of Tate's third volume *Hints to Pilgrims* (1971), for example, he calls Tate's work "a huge sly elegant piece of trifling on the assumption I guess that the original surrealists didn't do a full enough job of it" (123). Pritchard's criticism here is not all that different from Silliman's claim that there is nothing new in Tate's work. In fact, the relative sameness of Tate's poems is routinely noted in Pritchard's reviews. In his discussion of the "sporty surrealist moments" in Tate's second volume *The Oblivion Ha-Ha* (1970), for example, Pritchard notes that "Tate can do this sort of thing all night" (569), and Pritchard finds himself "interested therefore in poems which experimented with playing it a bit straighter" (569). One could take Pritchard's comments here one of two ways: first, that Tate's "sporty surrealist moments" have become a norm to the degree that "playing it a bit straighter" actually becomes more experimental than what Tate is already doing, or that Pritchard wishes that Tate's work conformed more to his expectations of how poems should behave, that they should in a sense act more "straight." The likely answer is a bit of both. By his review of Tate's eighth volume, *Constant Defender* (1983), however, it is clear that Pritchard views Tate's style as a norm, so much that he notes its similarity to Simic's: "One of the poems from Charles Simic's [*Weather Forecast for Utopia & Vicinity* (1984)] is dedicated to 'Jim Tate,' and [...] we are located not far from Tate country [...]. But Mr. Simic is more spare, more laconic, and not as funny as Tate" (335). By this time, as well, Pritchard has warmed to Tate's writing:

The very first book of poems I reviewed in the chronicle seventeen years ago was also James Tate's first book, *The Lost Pilot*, and I remember referring to him as "sporty." It is fair to say that, in the seven volumes he has published since, Mr. Tate has indulged in much sportiness, indeed provoking me on occasion to shake a finger at his surrealistic indulgences. No more, however.

If I am not quite a card-carrying Tate fan, I have accepted him for what he is, an amusing rogue with words, and incorrigible jokester and molester of all linguistic straight arrows. (334)

It seems fair to say, then, that by 1984 Tate's work had garnered mainstream success to the degree that he was seen as influencing other well-known poets like Simic. But if we look back at the history of Tate's reception, we see that Tate was once viewed as a literary outsider, a "rogue" to borrow Pritchard's term. In other words, Silliman's claim that Tate is a poet whose work lacks an inkling of dissent may hold true for when it was made in 2007, but it is also an anachronistic comment at best, as Tate was not always the revered poet he is today. The gradual warming of Pritchard to Tate's "sporty surrealist moments" can be said to mirror the gradual warming of U. S. culture as a whole to surrealism in general, culminating in such different cultural critics as Jon Spayde and Susan Sontag accepting that warming as a given. As we will see in the next chapter, however, which focuses on William Carlos Williams as one of the first U. S. translators of surrealist literature, this warmth was not always the case.

CHAPTER 3

WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS: TRANSLATION IN THE AMERICAN GRAIN

In a letter to Louis Zukofsky from December 1928, William Carlos Williams (1883-1963) claims to have had no “thought of having [his translation of Philippe Soupault’s surrealist novel *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*] published—unless it should just happen” until Matthew Josephson, an editor at Macaulay, the press that published the original 1929 edition of Williams’ translation, discovered that he was working on it and offered him a contract (*Williams and Zukofsky* 23).³¹ Williams complained of the amount of work involved in the translation in this letter and in a number of other letters to Zukofsky from this period,³² a complaint that leads Paul Mariani, Williams’ biographer, to claim that Williams’ professional distractions during this period did not “give him the time he needed to let the French idioms soften up inside him and become as fluid and idiomatic as he would have liked. The result was a slightly wooden version of Soupault’s novel” (287). In calling Williams’ translation “wooden,” Mariani delivers one of the harshest insults that is generally leveled on a translation in the United States. As Lawrence Venuti has noted, adjectives like “wooden” are symptomatic of the Anglo-American desire to view translations as substitutes for the original texts. Any translation that deviates from the current standard dialect or otherwise shatters the illusion of transparency by calling attention to itself as a translation, Venuti argues, tends to be labeled by reviewers with a pejorative like “wooden” (*Invisibility* 2-5).

Such labels are generally given to literal translations that do not force the foreign syntax to adhere to norms in the receiving culture. And Williams’ translation of *Les Dernières*

Nuits de Paris is—for the most part—a relatively literal translation, with a large number of passages closely following the French syntax in places where alternate renderings would certainly be more idiomatic. This strategy, of course, is almost antithetical to the generally accepted view of Williams’ poetics, a view that Williams’ own aesthetic pronouncements helped usher in. Throughout much of his career, Williams rather vocally advocated the cultivation of what he came to call the “American idiom,” a language that he considered to be different “from the language used among cultured Englishmen, being completely free from all influences which can be summed up as having to do with ‘the Establishment’” (*Interviews* 160). This statement was made in 1960, and the term “Establishment” comes from the vocabulary of the younger generation of poets just coming to prominence at that time, a conscious attempt on Williams’ part to position himself as both member and progenitor of the contemporary avant-garde.³³ Not only does Williams advocate composition in American English as a revolutionary gesture against poetic tradition but he also views himself as the father of this gesture. Over time, the term “American idiom” has become a sort of rallying cry in Williams criticism, a term that both encapsulates Williams’ achievement in recording modern American sensibility and affirms his position as the creator of a uniquely American literary tradition, so it is not at all surprising that Mariani critiques Williams’ translation for failing to adhere to the current standard dialect. Mariani’s dismissal of Williams’ translation of *Last Nights of Paris* actually fits squarely into the prevailing critical attitude toward Williams’ work, which is likely the reason why his translation of Soupault has been ignored by critics for more than eighty years.

Williams’ own shifting views on translation seem to have also contributed to the bias. Later in his career, for example, Williams himself valued translations that adhered to the current standard dialect, praising, for example, Ezra Pound’s “translations from [Sextus]

Propertius into the AmeriCAN idium” (sic) in a letter to Pound dated 26 November 1960 (*Pound/Williams* 318), a curious comment when one considers the fact that Pound’s *Homage to Sextus Propertius* is littered with archaisms and poeticisms. It is difficult—by any stretch of the imagination—to say that Pound’s Propertius conforms to the current standard dialect, but that is precisely what Williams suggests in his letter. Williams’ comment says less about Pound’s translation than it does about just how far Williams’ ideas on translation had shifted since 1929 and just how loosely he was willing to delineate the boundaries of the term “American idiom” in order to construct a history of innovative translation into that idiom. For these reasons, I would like to argue that Williams’ translation of *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* is not the unfortunate result of a busy doctor not having enough time to perfect his work, as Mariani claims, but rather an important point in the history of American letters where a foreign literary values are clearly and consciously adapted to serve both ideological and aesthetic ends. Williams’ literal translation shows that the “American idiom” is—much like the country itself—constantly expanding and reimagining itself as it accommodates foreign influx.

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Before I get too far into Williams’ work, however, it seems necessary to provide some context on the state of U.S.-Franco literary relations in the 1920s. In *The World Republic of Letters* (2003), Pascale Casanova uses the case of Gertrude Stein (1874-1946)—particularly the example of a feminist critic who focuses on the fact that Stein was a woman and a lesbian—to illustrate the tendency of literary critics to emphasize the singularity of individual authors and privilege specific aspects of an author’s biography in their analysis. Casanova does not discount the importance of considering Stein’s gender and sexual orientation in understanding the nature of her aesthetic ambitions and subversive impulses, but she also

claims that this critical tradition obscures the larger—and more important—structural pattern of literary domination Stein’s work is battling against:

the United States in the 1920s was a literarily dominated country that looked to Paris in order to try to accumulate resources it lacked. Any analysis that fails to take into account the world literary structure of the period and of the place occupied in this structure by Paris and the United States, respectively, will be incapable of explaining Stein’s permanent concern to develop a modern American national literature (through the creation of an avant-garde) and her interest in both American history and the literary representation of the American people. (42)

Drawing on such sources as Immanuel Wallerstein’s “world-systems” theory and Pierre Bourdieu’s work on the constitution of the literary “field,”³⁴ Casanova presents a global, competition-based model of literary history. At the center of this model lies the area richest in literary capital, which Casanova claims has—since the mid-sixteenth century—been Paris.³⁵ The center, in Casanova’s view, has the tremendous power to dictate literary norms and otherwise govern the system as a whole. Writers from the literary provinces, or those places with the smallest concentrations of literary capital, must appeal to center for acceptance, conforming to the dominant norms in the center at any given period. This, Casanova claims, is a matter of literary survival or legitimacy, two terms that she uses interchangeably. This struggle is usually conceived by its participants along national boundaries, despite the fact that literary space does not always conform to geopolitical space. The center, in turn, bestows acceptance on writers from the periphery via such modes of transmission as translation, criticism, and international literary prizes. The way Casanova would have it, then, the primary preoccupation of an expatriate writer like Stein is the

cultivation of a modern national literature on par with that of the Parisian avant-garde. Casanova references the works of Stein whose titles and subject matter—*The Making of Americans* (1925), *The Geographical History of America* (1936), *Paris France* (1940)—readily support this view. The paradox, of course, in Stein's position is that it begs the following question: what's American about American literature if it borrows so heavily from France?

Casanova's formulation has been justly criticized, even engendering a collection of essays conceived as a response to her book: *Debating World Literature* (2004). In his introduction to that volume, editor Christopher Prendergast uses the examples of Wordsworth and Shakespeare to illustrate literary paradigms that resist the national-competition model, claiming that “[i]t might make more sense to speak here of literary ‘negotiations’, itself of course a diplomatico-commercial term, with the implication of at least a modicum of cooperative rather than competitive transaction” (13-14). In *What is World Literature?* (2003), David Damrosch notes that “a number of contemporary Brazilian scholars are moving beyond the paradigm of ‘Paris, cultural capital of Latin America’ to emphasize a two-way process, one that is grounded as much in Brazil's dynamic heterogeneity as in French cultural authority” (27). Ultimately, Damrosch claims, the work of these scholars illustrates that Casanova's book is “[a]n unsatisfactory account of world literature in general, [...] which might be better titled *La République parisienne des lettres?*” (27). On the other hand, Damrosch does concede that “Casanova's book is actually a good account of the operation of world literature within the modern French context” (27). The work of Stein's compatriot Williams, however, suggests that Casanova—to a certain degree at least—may be on the right page in her characterization of U.S.-Franco literary relations in the early part of the twentieth century.

The compartmentalization of literary studies along national lines, Casanova claims, obscures the fundamental fact that Stein is an American, as if it were obvious and need not be pointed out. Stein's work is, after all, most likely to be discussed by an American critic, writing for a specifically American audience. When considering Stein's nationality in the context of international literary space, however, her turn toward the Paris avant-garde suggests that at this stage in the history of American letters innovative writers like Stein felt the need to look toward Paris as the center of the literary universe in order to import the resources they felt their native traditions lacked. The same could be said for the work of Williams, a contemporary of Stein's who was equally obsessed with American history, the literary representation of the American people, and—especially—cultivating a modern national literature. Williams is, of course, one of the most canonized figures in twentieth-century American poetry, whose literary reputation is perhaps only eclipsed by those of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. But unlike Pound and Eliot, both of whom are generally viewed as exuding a polyglot European sensibility, Williams is generally figured as a quintessentially American poet, a champion of the "American idiom" and the inheritor of a national poetics that extends at least as far back as Walt Whitman. And unlike many of the most celebrated figures in early-twentieth century American literature—Pound, Eliot, Stein, Djuna Barnes, H. D., F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Henry James—Williams did not leave the United States to settle in Europe, opting instead to practice medicine in his hometown of Rutherford, New Jersey. As Gertrude Stein famously wrote in *Paris France* (1940), "Paris was where the twentieth century was" (11). Those writers who moved overseas in the early part of the twentieth century were well aware of the fact that the United States was—at best—a secondary player in the field of international literature at that time, and their move to Paris can be read as turn toward the center. Rutherford, on the other hand, may as well have been

the literary provinces, and Williams' existence in that liminal space made him acutely aware of his distance from the center. Through examining Williams' statements on translation and comparing his translation of Philippe Soupault's surrealist novel *Last Nights of Paris* (1929) to his own *A Novelette* (1932), which Williams was writing at the same time as completing the Soupault translation, I aim to illustrate the key role that translation plays in Williams' struggle for a legitimate place among the international avant-garde, as Williams engages in a complex process of simultaneously absorbing and rejecting French literary modernism.

That Williams' verse has been accused of borrowing heavily from French modernist traditions should not be news to those familiar with the history of Williams criticism. Usually, this discussion hovers around the similarities between the work Williams produced during the 1920s and that of the French poet Arthur Rimbaud (1854-91), particularly in their use of the prose poem as an exploratory form for the construction of a poetic subjectivity that has its basis in "free play." Williams' old friend Ezra Pound was first to voice the accusation in an often quoted letter to Williams dated 12 September 1920: "Voui, c(h)a j(h)ai deja (f)vu c(h)a c(h)a c'est de R(h)imb(h)aud [yes, that, I've already seen that; that's by Rimbaud]" (*Pound/Williams* 44). Pound's letter refers to *Kora in Hell*, Williams' book of prose improvisations that had recently been published by The Four Seasons Company in Boston, and his argument is that both the form and opacity of the work recalls that of Rimbaud. A few months later Marianne Moore, another friend of Williams, linked *Kora in Hell* to French traditions in a review published in *Contact* 4 (January-March 1921), a journal edited by Williams and Robert McAlmon. In this review, Moore speaks positively of Williams' "concise, energetic disgust, a kind of intellectual hauteur which one usually associates with the French" (56). Williams' *Contact* cohort McAlmon also compared the book to Rimbaud's work in a review in the 18 April 1921 edition of *Poetry*. His friends and cohorts, however,

were not the only early commentators to pick up on the connection. In his influential study *The Influence of French Symbolism on Modern American Poetry* (1929), for example, the French critic René Taupin claims that *Kora in Hell* is written “very much in the manner of the *Illuminations* of Rimbaud” (240).

Marjorie Perloff fervently revived the discussion in “‘Lines Converging and Crossing’: The ‘French’ Decade of William Carlos Williams,” a chapter from her book *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (1981), making a compelling argument for the influence of modern French poetics on Williams’ work of the 1920s. Perloff’s is a sophisticated analysis, but like the earlier commentaries, her emphasis is almost exclusively on the aesthetic benefits of importing French literary values, seemingly ignoring how this importation complicated the arguments about nationhood that writers like Stein and Williams—both of whom receive chapters in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*—were making in their work. *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* was a major statement in the canonicity battles that came to dominate the study of twentieth-century American poetry during the 1980s, positing an “other tradition” directly opposed to the mainstream symbolist mode of Eliot and his followers. What differentiated this “other tradition” from the dominant tradition, Perloff claims, is its emphasis on indeterminacy, the fact that meaning in these works can never be definitively fixed. Perloff traces this aesthetic back to Rimbaud, particularly the Rimbaud of *Les Illuminations* (1886). By turning Williams and Eliot into poles of antagonism—a move that, as I will show below, is suggested by Williams himself—Perloff obscures the fact that both poets were, in their own ways, engaged in the same essential project: borrowing heavily from the areas with the most literary capital.

It is difficult to trace how and when Williams first encountered the work of Rimbaud, but Perloff notes that portions of Rimbaud’s *Illuminations* appeared in English

translation for the first time in the August 1920 issue of *The Dial*, an issue that Williams undoubtedly saw because it also contained six of his own poems, two years after Williams reportedly finished *Kora in Hell*, so it is plausible that Williams was not acutely aware of Rimbaud's work until after he had written the book that many critics claim bears Rimbaud's stamp.³⁶ Pound himself later admitted the likelihood that Williams' work developed independently of any significant knowledge of Rimbaud: "If he did some Rimbaud forty years late it was nevertheless composition, and I don't think he knew it was Rimbaud until after he finished his operation" (*Literary Essays* 393).³⁷

It is no secret that the poets of French surrealism were indebted to Rimbaud as well, and much has also been written on Williams' relationship to that movement. The *William Carlos Williams Review*, for example, published an excellent issue devoted to the topic in 1996.³⁸ The way the story usually goes, the connection between Williams and surrealism either hinges on statements that Williams makes in "How to Write" (1936), a short essay in which he advocates a compositional method startlingly akin to the surrealist technique of automatic writing, or Williams' tenuous relationship in the 1940s to the surrealist periodicals *View* and *VVV*.³⁹ Few critics have written on Williams as a translator, and even fewer have written on Williams' translations of surrealist literature, despite the fact that Williams produced a fair number throughout his career. Of these, most critics focus on Williams' translations of the Greek poet Nicolas Calas in the early 1940s, positioning their brief literary relationship as an exceptional moment in Williams' ambivalent response to surrealism.⁴⁰ I have drawn this somewhat belabored history of commentary on Williams' connections to French modernist traditions in order to show how surprising it is that—amid all this buzz—nobody has really said anything about what is not only Williams' longest translation but also perhaps his most illuminating connection to French modernism: his version of Philippe

Soupault's surrealist novel *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (*Last Nights of Paris*, 1929). The reason for this exclusion is not only the prevailing view among literary critics to view translations as a form of second-order composition, thus relegating them to a lesser status than Williams' "original" compositions, but also because Williams' attitude toward translation at this time was at odds with his theory of the "American idiom" that he would develop later in his career and that would go on to dominate the critical reception of his work.

Translation and the "American Idiom"

Williams published very few statements on translation in his lifetime and even less on his own translations. More often than not, these statements are anecdotal and do little to illuminate his translation theory and practice. His complete account of translating *Last Nights of Paris* given in *I Wanted to Write a Poem: The Autobiography of the Works of a Poet* (1958), for example, reads as follows:

I had met Soupault in Paris. He was very a very amusing person, really amusing, all wound up in Dadaism. I didn't understand what Dadaism was but I liked Soupault. The French edition of his book came out in 1928. I got a copy of it and admired it. It was about a very wonderful little French whore, very intellectual, exotic, strange—one couldn't capture her mood in any way at all—contradictory, amusing. I worked with my mother on the translation. We worked and worked, intently. (47-48)⁴¹

At first glance, Williams' choice of source text appears to have been little more than a passing whim. After all, the most prominent adjective he uses to describe the novel—he uses it three times in the above passage—is "amusing." In *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), Williams uses the same adjective in a brief anecdote on meeting Soupault in

1924 to describe the “simple and amusing dishes” at the Restaurant l’Avenue where they dined (213). For a poet who only published one book-length translation during his career, finding that book to be amusing hardly seems like adequate motivation to engage in the enterprise of translation. It is worth noting, however, that these statements were made nearly thirty years after Williams’ translation of *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, and they can be read as an attempt to account for that translation in light of the increasingly hostile attitude toward foreign literature that characterized the latter part of Williams’ career.⁴²

In the letter to Louis Zukofsky cited above, Williams provides a compelling clue to his choice of source text, claiming that he originally took up the idea of translating *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* in order to keep his ailing mother amused. Williams’ parents were both immigrants. His father was an advertising executive from England who adamantly refused to become a U. S. citizen; his mother was a Puerto Rican woman who had studied art in Paris. Williams used the translation sessions with his mother to reconnect with his Hispanic heritage and listen to romanticized stories of her time in Paris. In *William Carlos Williams and the Maternal Muse* (1987), Kerry Driscoll argues:

[B]y virtue of its language and setting, [*Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*] served as a bridge between mother and son; as the immediate focus of their attention, it offered a readymade topic of conversation, a false center around which valued personal information could be unself-consciously exchanged. (37)

Driscoll’s analysis of the situation is fairly accurate, especially when one considers the tremendous influence that Williams’ mother had on his career and that, as I discuss in more detail later, these information-exchanging sessions led to Williams’ interest in documentary-style transcriptions of conversation, an interest that crept into Williams’ own work of this

period, particularly *A Novelette* (1932), and also gave him the idea of writing a book that documents his mother's anecdotes and way of speaking.

Williams was always very open about the centrality of his mother's influence on his work. In his discussion in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* of the artistic growth that accompanied his second book of poems, *The Tempers* (1913), for example, Williams notes:

I was conscious of my mother's influence all through this time of writing, her ordeal as a woman and as a foreigner in this country. I've always held her as a mythical figure, remote from me, detached, looking down on an area in which I happened to live, a fantastic world where she was moving as a more or less pathetic figure. Remote, not only because of her Puerto Rican background, but also because of her bewilderment at life in a small town in New Jersey after her years in Paris where she had been an art student. Her interest in art became my interest in art. I was personifying her, her detachment from the world of Rutherford. She seemed an heroic figure, a poetic ideal. I didn't especially admire her; I was attached to her. I had not yet established any sort of independent spirit. (16)

The statements in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* were made in 1958, nearly a decade after Williams' mother's death in 1949 and more than forty years after the composition of *The Tempers*, yet certain aspects of Williams' choice of words ("I've *always* held her as mythical figure"; emphasis added) suggest that her influence continues into the present date. Indeed, his mother appears as a figure in his work several times throughout his career: she becomes a character in a number of his prominent poems, he praises her as a symbol of the imagination in the prologue to *Kora in Hell* (1920), he slips aspects of her biography into *The Descent of Winter* (1928) and *A Novelette* (1932), there are numerous allusions to her in his multi-part

epic *Paterson* (1946-58), and her stories and aphorisms become the subject of the book-length memoir *Yes, Mrs. Williams: A Personal Record of My Mother* (1959), a work which Williams noted in a 1939 letter to Louis Untermeyer that he hoped would become “one my major works—if not *the* major one” (qtd. in Driscoll 141; emphasis in original).

At the same time, Driscoll’s emphasis in the setting of Soupault’s novel as the primary motivator of Williams’ choice of source text overlooks the importance that choice played in the development of his aesthetic theories and concept of a national literature and idiom. For Driscoll, the act of translation is figured as a red herring for the complex evolution of the Williams family unit, but Williams could have easily chosen any number of other texts set in Paris. In discussing the similar motivation behind the translation of a group of traditional Spanish poems and the short story “The Man Who Resembled a Horse” by the Guatemalan writer Rafael Arevalo Martínez that he completed with his father in 1915-16, for example, Driscoll claims:

Williams chose this particular form of “entertainment” over other shared activities [...] because it supplied him with a formal linguistic construct intimately connected with earlier phases of his mother’s and father’s lives. In addition to rendering the past accessible, the foreign texts became a vehicle for the retrieval and salvage of familial information which would have otherwise have been irrevocably lost after their deaths. In this respect, the translations are a poignant, if somewhat circuitous, attempt by the poet to establish contact with his parents before it was too late. (37-8)

Driscoll’s analysis of the Williams family unit is interesting and convincing, but it also relegates the act of translation to a relatively minor role, an inconsequential means to an end. I contend, however, that Williams’ translation activity cannot be so conveniently separated

from his evolving conception of family, especially when one considers that the translations he completed with his mother and those that he completed with his father correspond chronologically with recognizable shifts in Williams' aesthetic development.

Williams gave his longest and most illuminating statement on translation in the chapter "Translations" from *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), in which the only language he mentions translating from is Spanish. He begins the chapter by describing his personal connection to the Spanish language, a language both of his parents spoke, but claims an even stronger connection in the sense that Spanish appeals to him "temperamentally, as a relief from the classic mood of both French and Italian" (349). The binary that Williams attempts to establish between Spanish, on one hand, and "the classic mood" of French and Italian, on the other, is likely the reason why he makes no mention of his translations from French, the number of which equals—if not surpasses—the number of translations he produced in his lifetime from Spanish. Williams' privileging of Spanish literary traditions over the classicism of French and Italian suggests that he not only favors national literatures that reflect his own ethnic background but also that he considers the "classic mood" of French and Italian to be too deeply inscribed in the fabric of international literary space to serve as a blueprint for the creation of a modern American literature.

Spanish, in Williams' view, is not a "literary language," but rather occupies "an independent place very sympathetic to the New World" (349). In claiming that Spanish is not a "literary language," Williams certainly does not mean that Spanish lacks a literary tradition, but rather that Spanish literature has been able to develop relatively free from the influence of dominant literary trends in Europe. In a 1939 *Kenyon Review* article on the modern Spanish poet Federico García Lorca, Williams claims that there are "two great traditional schools of Spanish poetry, one leaning heavily upon world literature and another

stemming exclusively from Iberian sources” (219). Unsurprisingly, Williams displays a marked preference for the latter school, which he extends from *El Poema del Cid* (c. 1140), the oldest preserved epic poem in the Castilian language, to Lorca’s *Lament for Ignacio Sánchez Mejías* (1935), celebrating his observation that “Spanish literature gives a first and striking proof of its ability to make poetry out of the here and now” (220). On the surface, Williams’ emphasis on the contemporary relevance of an archaic text like *El Poema del Cid* seems to be more aligned with Old World classicism than New World organicism and innovation. In his view, however, drawing a line from *El Poema del Cid* to Lorca uncovers an alternative canon hidden under the celebrated works of French, Italian, and English literary history. The binary Williams constructs between Spanish literature and French and Italian literature may also be reminiscent of Iberian-Northern European stereotypes of earlier times, despite the fact all three are Mediterranean languages that have their common root in Latin.

The “ability to make poetry out of the here and now” is, of course, the same quality that Williams claims repeatedly throughout his career distinguishes the best contemporary American poetry. Williams presents an image of Lorca as the prototypical Spanish poet whose literary value lies in his use of the vernacular and cultivation of an indigenous folk tradition, an image in perfect harmony with the one Williams also tried to project of his own career. As Jonathan Mayhew points out in *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (2009), however, this image focuses on just one facet Lorca’s creative output, which is far more sophisticated and varied than Williams is willing to admit.

Williams is clearly invested in establishing the isolationist mode of Spanish literature as a precursor to his conception of the “American idiom.” Later in the chapter on translation from his autobiography, for example, Williams claims that Spanish has “a noteworthy body of verse for us to work upon” (349), although he admits that this body of work is not “as

rich as English in the multiplicity of its achievements” (349). For Williams, however, this lack of richness is not a liability. In fact, he views it as part of the immense potential of Spanish as a source language. Because of its status as a minority literature, translations from the Spanish have the ability to enrich American literature by opening it to the current of an alternative tradition. This, Williams claims:

gives us an opportunity...to make new appraisals, especially in attempting translations, which should permit us to use our language with unlimited freshness. In such attempts we will not have to follow precedent but can branch off into a new diction, adapting new forms, even discovering new forms in our attempts to find accurate equivalents for the felicities of the past. (349)

In other words, translation from Spanish allows an innovative and enterprising translator to expand the American idiom, enriching it with “new diction” and “new forms” from a fellow minority literature. If translated in a rather literal manner, the unfamiliar “forms” of Spanish literature carry over into the set of tools available to the American poet. Despite this seeming emphasis on literalism, Williams is much more concerned with using “our language with unlimited freshness” than finding “accurate equivalents for the felicities of the past,” a stance that would seem like aggressive looting if it were not for Williams’ view that Spanish literature is underrepresented in English translation.

Debby Rosenthal, writing of Williams’ translations from the Spanish, points to what she considers to be the essential paradox of Williams’ turn to translation:

One of Williams’ greatest concerns as a poet was to forge a new language to vocalize his ideas, to “make it new,” and properly evoke his conception of

locality. Paradoxically, Williams looks to the process of translation as a model for translating his own ideas into words. (30)

Rosenthal's comments display a relatively narrow understanding of Williams' attitude toward foreign literature at this early stage of his career. By dwelling only on the apparent paradox that a poet as concerned with locality as Williams would turn to translation as a model, Rosenthal ignores the most progressive element of that paradox: that openness to foreign influx is of central importance to vanguard American literature because the U. S. itself is figured as a "melting pot." Like many others, Rosenthal unquestioningly accepts the vision of Williams as the poet whose most important contribution to literary history was his cultivation of the "American idiom," and her analysis of Williams' translation strategy supports this view at every turn. The problem with Rosenthal's approach, however, is that her goal prevents her from giving a fair and accurate account of Williams' translation process. There is no doubt that the "American idiom" was of primary importance to Williams; his letters, essays, and poetry all support that. But—at least in the early stages of Williams' formulation of the concept—this "American idiom" is not a fortress or an island, impervious to foreign influences. In Williams' view, its porousness is its very strength, as the language is able to absorb and adapt to rising immigrant populations while allowing these populations to retain their individuality.

In Rosenthal's view, Williams' early, more literal translations are seen as amateurish works. Not until later in his career when Williams' translations began to utilize the "American idiom," she claims, does he forge a truly modern translation practice. Rosenthal's argument focuses on two different translations of the same two poems that Williams published twenty-three years apart from one another, and she praises the version that most handily conforms to the commonly perceived image of Williams at the expense of dismissing

the other version. The poems are both anonymous Spanish ballads taken from the second volume of the four-volume anthology *Poesías Selectas Castellanas*, edited by D. Manuel Josef Quintana (1817), which was given to Williams as a gift by Ezra Pound because Pound knew that Spanish was spoken in Williams' home.⁴³ Williams' initial translations, published as the last two sections of the four part "Translations from the Spanish, 'El Romancero'" from *The Tempers* (1913), are, as Rosenthal points out, layered with archaisms, whereas his second versions, published as sections three and five of the five part "Translations from the Spanish" from *Adam & Eve & The City* (1936), are much more fluid and idiomatic.

Rosenthal's analysis of the variations between the two versions displays an extreme focus on accuracy and fidelity: "I believe that choosing contemporary language helped Williams remain truer to the original in meaning, though not in rhyme" (32). Ultimately, Rosenthal argues that "the more concrete and controlled style that Williams develops by 1936 makes him a better translator and a more modern poet than he was earlier" (33). Most of the passages that Rosenthal compares in detail are, in her opinion, rendered more clearly in the 1936 versions, whereas the obfuscation in the 1913 versions is generally the result of poetic inversions ("Deep is my assurance") and archaic language ("The day draweth nearer, / And morrow ends our meeting"). In praising the "concrete" style of the 1936 version, Rosenthal makes it clear that what she values most in a translation are directness and clarity, values that also conform both to contemporary literary standards and Williams' own aesthetic ideals.

The second passage above, for example, reads in the 1936 version: "The dawn is upon us / And day begins to grow" (427). The language is still poetic, not at all like everyday speech, but gone are such archaisms as "draweth" and "morrow" that deviate from the current standard dialect. One of the more telling aspects of Rosenthal's analysis is that the 1936 translations make Williams "a more modern poet." In other words, Rosenthal approaches

the translations as if they were original poems in English and proclaims the translation that displays Williams' mastery of the modern idiom to be the most accurate, completely disregarding the temporal distance of the source texts.

I do not wish to appear as though I am condemning Williams' 1936 versions for bending the source texts to suit contemporary literary norms. The 1936 versions can be viewed as innovative translations because of the fact that Williams was still somewhat of a marginal figure in 1936, operating within the equally marginal field of Modernist poetry. In other words, Williams' act of translating a marginal literature into the language of a marginal aesthetic can be read as an avant-garde gesture aimed at expanding the horizons and possibilities of American literature. In this respect, Rosenthal's praise of the 1936 translation is not without merit. At the same time, however, praise for the 1936 versions should not necessarily make them superior to the 1913 versions, for, by 1913 standards, the earlier translations were equally as progressive.

Consider, for example, the similarities between Williams' attitude toward translation in 1913 with that of his friend and cohort Ezra Pound (1885-1972) in his 1912 translation of *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti*. In the introduction to this volume, Pound articulated a theory of translation as a form of "accompaniment," which he defined by claiming that "the modern audience must in some measure be made aware of the mental content of the older audience, and of what these others drew from certain fashions of thought and speech" (*Pound's Cavalcanti* 12). For Pound, this meant the cultivation of an archaizing strategy intended to force the reader to recognize the temporal and linguistic divide between the original text and the translation. Pound's was an innovative translation practice because it ran counter to dominant methods of literary translation at the time, which valued fluency and assimilation. A similar argument could be made for Williams' archaizing strategy in the 1913

versions. No record exists in Williams and Pound's correspondence of their having discussed Pound's Cavalcanti translations or Pound's theories on translation at this time, but it is known that Pound returned to the United States in June of 1910 to work on the translations at the house where his parents were staying in Swarthmore, Pennsylvania, and he continued working on the translations in August of the same year when he moved to an apartment at 164 Waverly Place in Greenwich Village. Pound dated the preface to *Sonnets and Ballate of Guido Cavalcanti* as 15 November 1910, suggesting that he had completed the bulk of the manuscript and preface by that date. In his biography of Williams, Paul Mariani notes that Pound and Williams met numerous times during Pound's brief stay in the United States that summer and fall (93-94). Because Pound was consumed with working on his Cavalcanti translations at that same time, one can reasonably assume the topic came up during their conversations, suggesting not only that Pound's gift of *Poesías Selectas Castellanas* had a significant impact on Williams' choice of source text but also that their discussions of Cavalcanti may have affected his translation strategy as well.

The book in which Williams' earlier translations from the Spanish appear, *The Tempers*, is generally seen—both by critics and by Williams himself—as a conflicted work of apprenticeship. As Williams' first commercially published book, *The Tempers* stands in an uneasy transition between the imitative verse of his first book, the privately printed *Poems* (1909), and his third book, *Al Que Quiere!* (1917), which is widely viewed as Williams' first unique contribution toward cultivating a modernist idiom. Williams' own statements on his earlier work greatly helped solidify this view. In *I Wanted to Write a Poem* (1958), for example, Williams critiques the diction employed in *Poems* while refusing to recant the meaning and sentiment behind the expressions: “I meant it very definitely but it was no language I spoke or even thought” (14). The implication, of course, is that the poems in Williams' first book

are not composed in the “American idiom.” Viewed in this light, *The Tempers* is a retrograde work, littered as it is with archaisms, poeticisms, poetic inversions, relatively regular rhyme schemes, and capitalized first lines, a formality that Williams would later claim to be pretentious. In critiquing the diction in *The Tempers*, Williams is able to distance himself from the book’s obvious debt to poetic tradition while still valuing the local specificity of the book’s content, a way of having his cake and eating it too. In this sense, Williams’ 1913 translations from the Spanish fit perfectly into the fabric of *The Tempers*. Their archaizing strategy sits well with the book’s aesthetic conservatism, while the fact that the poems are translations from a minority literature speaks to Williams’ blossoming interest in forging an alternative tradition. The differences between William’s 1913 and 1936 translations from the Spanish suggest that Williams’ ideas about translation evolved according to a similar trajectory as his poetics. By the time Williams published his 1936 translations, he was on the other end of the most experimental decade of his career and his notion of the “American idiom” was becoming increasingly nationalist in scope. By privileging the translation strategy that effectively erases the temporal and linguistic divide between Williams’ source text and target audience, Rosenthal endorses this act of domestication, and her endorsement points to the general lack of understanding and concern for the ethical implications of translation that have dogged Williams criticism. On the other hand, it is possible to read Williams’ theory of the “American idiom” as a response to the foreignizing effects of his own earlier translations. As U. S. poetics had been sufficiently enriched by the importation of foreign aesthetics and traditions and U. S. literature had worked to establish itself as a major player—if not *the* major player—in the field of world literature, it becomes necessary to protect and isolate American literature in order for it to retain its autonomy.

Last Nights of Paris

Williams' 1929 translation of Philippe Soupault's surrealist novel *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* chronologically appears between Williams' two versions of "Translations from the Spanish" and near the end of 1920s, a decade in which he was more willing to capitalize on the advances of modern French literature than the statements on translation in his autobiography might admit. As noted earlier, Williams makes little mention of his opinion of Soupault's literary talents in both of his published statements on Soupault, claiming only that he "admired" the book, although the reason he gives for this admiration rests entirely on the character Georgette, on the fact that "one couldn't capture her mood in any way at all." The male characters in *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* seem equally incapable of capturing Georgette's mood:

Car Georgette, pour tous, était le mystère. La vie qu'elle menait était si nettement tranchée qu'elle pouvait faire illusion. Georgette du jour, Georgette de la nuit. (109)

For Georgette was a mystery to them all. The life that she lived was so sharply divided that it created illusion. Georgette of the day, Georgette of the night. (130-31)⁴⁴

Georgette is a prostitute who lives a relatively normal life by day, using the money she makes working the streets to support herself and her artist brother. The stark contrast between the two Georgettes fascinates the narrator, drawing him into the web of shady characters that surround "Georgette of the night."

The narrator is not the only character magnetically drawn into Georgette's web. The others include a sailor who is wanted by the police for murdering his girlfriend, although we are never told whether or not his desire for Georgette was a motivating factor in the murder. And when the narrator pays for Georgette's services, he finds himself vaguely dissatisfied, as

he seems no closer to understanding—and perhaps possessing—her than he did before. He is especially surprised when he shows up one day at the house that she shares with her brother and she seems to not recognize him, marveling at her ability to disassociate between “Georgette of the day” and “Georgette of the night.” Soupault’s characterization of Georgette is less of an “illusion” than it is an idealization and an objectification of female sexuality on the fringes of society. Insofar as Georgette’s occupation is seen as pushing the limits of sexual propriety to its extreme, she is viewed by the narrator as the ultimate object of erotic desire, an object that always seems just beyond his grasp. In this aspect, Soupault’s novel resembles works by his surrealist cohorts, especially Louis Aragon’s *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and André Breton’s *Nadja* (1928). *Nadja*, in many ways, is the prototypical surrealist work in this mode, following a narrator (Breton himself) as he falls in love with a mysterious woman named Nadja because of her so-called “madness.” This theme reflects the movement’s emphasis on living one’s life outside the bounds of conventional mores and on the belief that “madness” exposes the limits of normative perceptions of reality. In an interview with André Parinaud much later in his career (1952), Breton would characterize this mindset as follows:

Our taste for adventure in every sphere had never died—I’m speaking of adventures in language as well as in the street or in dreams. Works such as *Paris Peasant* or *Nadja* give a good idea of this mental climate, in which our penchant for wandering was taken to its furthest limits. An uninterrupted quest was given free rein: its purpose was to behold and disclose what lay hidden under appearances. Unexpected encounters, which explicitly or not always tend to assume female traits, marked the culmination of this quest.

(*Conversations* 106)

This feminization of the chance encounter, Susan Rubin Suleiman suggests in *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (1990), “is not surprising, given the enormous prestige accorded to heterosexual love (and specifically to *amour fou*, passionate ‘love at first sight’) in the mythology of Surrealism” (101). Needless to say, this attitude has not been especially popular with Breton’s feminist critics. Suleiman sums up the response best: “Breton’s biographers applaud this role; some of his critics deplore it” (109). Simone de Beauvoir was perhaps the first to criticize Breton’s characterization of Nadja for its refusal to allow her an identity other than that of an object: “Truth, Beauty, Poetry—she is All: once more all under the form of the Other, All except herself” (268).

The transient narrator of Soupault’s novel is especially drawn to the fact that Georgette would turn to prostitution to support her brother’s artistic endeavors. Like the narrator of *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, the protagonists of surrealist novels are generally unemployed, live in hotels, and spend most of their time in bars and cafés. André Breton, the movement’s founder, held gainful employment in disdain, often excommunicating members who strove to profit from their art or writing.⁴⁵ That a woman would prostitute herself to support her brother’s art is a misogynistic fantasy indicative of the movement’s general attitude toward both gender relations and their own lack of income. There seems to be no awareness of the double standard in it being acceptable for a woman to sell her sexuality but unacceptable for a man to receive remuneration for his literary or artistic endeavors.

Soupault’s novel can be read as a surrealist interrogation of the pulp noir genre, with Georgette acting as the femme fatal and the unnamed narrator as more of a bemused *flâneur* than a hard-boiled detective or criminal. The narrator has no hand in—or anything at stake in—the novel’s criminal activity. At no point in the novel does he appear to be in danger,

nor is he particularly interested in upholding justice. Rather, he seems to derive a sense of pleasure from his observation that the complexities of the modern city allow one the possibility of freely committing the most heinous of crimes, remarking after hearing the confession of a murderer:

I knew well that Paris is a city dark and full of mysteries, that the men who haunt it are often creatures in hiding, tracked or lost, but I had not believed it really possible thus to escape the power of all those laws which constantly threaten innocents like me...I called to mind long solitary walks during which it would have been possible for me to commit the most irregular acts without drawing attention. (98)

Les Dernières Nuits de Paris belongs to a long tradition of novels celebrating the mysteries and glories of Paris, casting the city itself as an allegorical stand-in for the world at large, a leitmotif that extends as far back as the late-eighteenth century. This tradition, however, has its roots in the realist novel, and *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* is anything but realist. The characters themselves feel like vaguely sketched facets of this idealized Paris. This fact would have been readily apparent to the contemporary U. S. reader, if not through the reader's own knowledge of French prose traditions, then from editor Matthew Josephson's introduction to Williams' translation:

The mention of "derelicts, prostitutes, thieves," would hint at some naturalistic cross-section of degraded humanity. But this is far from the case. It is a question rather of a *pattern of mystery*; it is a business chiefly of the imaginative and the probable. From the beginning, the remarkable atmosphere is wrought through an invitation to the reader to follow the

author, and move upon the great mystery of common and diurnal things in the street. (7-8; emphasis in original)⁴⁶

The narrator's ruminations on the events of the story display the surrealist preoccupation with "objective chance," or the belief that coincidences for which there are no logical explanation are evidence of the illogical nature of everyday reality. In orthodox surrealist thought, chance is connected to the belief that the only way to access a truer and higher form of reality is by tapping into the subconscious mind through acts of automatism or other random occurrences. At one point, the narrator even remarks, "Once more chance had destroyed oblivion, and given reality to what I would willingly think of as dreams" (72). Here, Soupault mimics Breton's famous definition of surrealism given in his first "Manifesto of Surrealism" (1924), in which Breton calls for "the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*" (14; emphasis in original). The narrator goes so far as to proclaim Paris the capital of chance, metonymically linking the city to the concept itself. In this, again, Soupault's novel has much in common with the prose works of his surrealist cohorts, and like Aragon and Breton, Soupault's Paris is gendered, metaphorically linked to the nighttime wanderings of the prostitute Georgette, whom Soupault presents as the supreme and most mysterious example of chance in the novel. The male characters seem content by equating her mysteriousness—and the city's—with her femininity: "Georgette is a woman. That is all I can say," Volpe, the kingpin of the novel's band of petty criminals, states, to which the narrator replies, "So that's the way they explain the mystery. With that statement they think to explain it all. I smiled skeptically and yet I myself could not help but be content with that explanation" (121). In other words, feminine sexuality—characterized both by Georgette and her profession—are analogous to the darker evils lurking beneath the city's surface.

If one is willing to consider contemporary reviews as a valid indicator of a work's public reception, it is evident that both the gender themes and intertexts with French literature that I am reading in Soupault's novel were available to the audience of Williams' translation. Only one review, however, an anonymous review from *The Bookman*, acknowledges the fact that the book is a translation, although this review offers no commentary on the translation or attempt to contextualize it in relation to Williams' own writing. The *Bookman* reviewer categorizes Soupault's novel as "an excellent example of the post-dada fashion in French fiction" (xxx), presuming familiarity with the contemporary French avant-garde and displaying knowledge of the basic tenets of surrealism in claiming that "M. Soupault has written charmingly on his themes of chance and strangeness" (xxx). This review also calls the book a "mystery story," but notes that "it is not the solution of the crime [...] that holds the interest; the real mystery is the character of the little prostitute, Georgette" (xxx). Ultimately, the reviewer notes that "*Last Nights of Paris* is the story of the mystery of a great city," presenting an exoticized view of Paris' seedy underbelly that "glides through the mind like a dream, [...] leaving behind a pleasant after-taste of having adventured in 'Paris and her supple and silent nights—Paris and her folds, Paris and her faces'" (xxx). In other words, Williams' translation allows American readers to experience the Paris underworld without leaving the comfort of their living rooms, and this underworld is gendered feminine.

Other reviewers recognize the same themes in the book but give a much harsher view of its appeal to a contemporary audience. In *The Living Age*, a reviewer who goes by the initials 'E. H. G.,' writes:

One can scarcely recommend *Last Nights of Paris* to the general reading public. Our extroverted civilization has a deep-seated hatred for such

subjective, essentially morbid fancies. They represent the antithesis to the equally morbid attitude of the hard, go-getting man, who, nevertheless, is an accepted part of our present-day life. To him and those like him, this subjective attitude is both an insult and a threat. It is only among those who seek to know before they judge and who accept beauty wherever they find it that this book of Philippe Soupault will find its friends. (viii)

This reviewer plays on national stereotypes, presenting the “subjective” world of *Last Nights of Paris* as inherently antithetical thought process to that of the “hard, go-getting [American] man.” Soupault’s novel is viewed as a potential “threat,” and the only reader who can appreciate the book, this reviewer claims, is an elite reader with aesthete (and perhaps effete) tastes. An anonymous reviewer for the *New York Times* also notes that “a sort of Spenglerian pessimistic philosophy impregnates the theme [...] and when the book is finished the reader will have an uncomfortable sensation of ‘decline’ in European civilization.” Although Soupault and his Surrealist cohorts did not claim allegiance to the ideas of Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), this reviewer reads the novel’s moral ambiguity as evidence of the decline of Western civilization. It was, in fact, quite common at this time for the popular U. S. press to read contemporary European thought through a Spenglerian lens. An anonymous *Time* magazine review from 1928 of the English translation of volume two of Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, for example, claims that after the publication of the Spengler’s first volume in 1918, “Cultivated European discourse quickly became Spengler-saturated. Spenglerism spurted from the pens of countless disciples. It was imperative to read Spengler, to sympathize or revolt. It still remains so.” The Spenglerian attitude in Soupault’s novel, the *New York Times* reviewer suggests, is at odds with perennial American optimism. At the same time, the reviewer also notes that “if [a reader] does not choose to worry about the philosophical

innuendos of the book he does not need to; he can become engrossed in the action and atmosphere,” which is “capably handled.” In other words, *Last Nights of Paris* can be divorced from surrealist ideology and read as standard pulp-fare, albeit pulp-fare that revels in revealing the mysteries of the subconscious mind.⁴⁷

The overt moralizing of the *The Living Age* and *New York Times* reviewers is symptomatic of the sort of gut-reaction response that characterizes popular reading strategies. When confronted with material such as Soupault’s, this reaction arouses censure in the reviewers, and they are quick to point out that American literature would never concern itself with such amoral material. Interestingly, one could argue that Williams supports this assertion by presenting a domesticated version of the surrealist attitude toward women in his own *A Novelette*. The objectification is certainly there—several passages, for example, focus on detailed descriptions of a woman’s body, including a description of her feet that borders on fetishism (282)—but instead of the wayward prostitute in *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, Williams’ attention is tuned to the body of his wife. In other words, objectifying one’s wife is perfectly acceptable, even encouraged, in ways that lusting after a prostitute is not. And, like Breton’s *Nadja*, the wife in *A Novelette* becomes synonymous with beauty to the degree that her singularity seems to be erased: “So she—building of all excellence is, in her single body, beautiful; enforcing the mind by imperfections to a height. Born again, Venus from the confused sea. Summing all the virtues. Single. Excellence. Female” (282). And later: “as a wife you carry to me the freshness of all women” (283). Simone de Beauvoir’s criticism of *Nadja* seems equally relevant here. If Breton and his cohorts, as Suleiman suggests, accorded enormous prestige to heterosexual love, Williams shifts that prestige to the institution of marriage, and marriage in turn is intimately tied to the act of composition: “You, I, we, cannot you see how in the singleness of these few days

marriage and writing have been fused so that the seriousness of my life and common objects about me have made up an actuality of which I am assembling the parts?" (294)

This "assembling the parts" is the assembly of conversation. As Webster Schott, the editor of *Imaginations* (1970), the collection of Williams' experimental prose works from the 1920s in which most contemporary readers first encounter *A Novelette*, notes in his introduction, "The only two characters of consequence are Williams and his wife, developed exclusively through conversation. The plot, if it's a plot, is their relationship" (269). In this emphasis on conversation, as well, Williams has his root in *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*. In a letter to Ezra Pound dated 11 August 1928, Williams explicitly praises *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* for its superior handling of conversation, providing a key insight into what may have been his biggest motivation for translating the book:

The first few pages of Soupault, by the way, are delightful reading. Easy, deceptive, accurate to the rules of conversation (which I am afraid Hem[ingway] doesn't at all understand since it's rarely as expressive as he makes it and almost always twice as succinct) just batting the air effectively and swimming in it—like an airplane. I like the Soupault better than anything of his that I have encountered. Perhaps it will grow foolishly fantastick later in the book—, as much of the little modern french stuff that I have seen does. (*Pound/Williams* 92)

Again, he uses the word "delightful," a very similar term to "amusing," but we can also begin to see an argument for the importance of Soupault's novel. Williams positions *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* as bettering American novelist Ernest Hemingway at the very skill that critics often champion Hemingway for excelling at: namely, naturalness and linguistic precision, especially where dialogue is concerned. A 22 December 1929 letter to Louis Zukofsky

written not long after Williams finished his translation of Soupault goes deeper into his attitude toward Hemingway, although he does so via comparison to Williams' *Contact* cohort Robert McAlmon:

McAlmon is a better writer than Hemingway. I believe that though it would be hard to prove. But the gist of it rests in this, that Hem is a clever manipulator of phrases and dramatic effects whereas McAlmon is fixed as the North Star on a quality in words that he believes to be "true." (*Williams and Zukofsky* 53)

Both of Williams' statements against Hemingway rest on the view that Hemingway's work is deliberate and staged. Williams finds a greater naturalness in McAlmon's language, and he finds a similar naturalness in the succinct nature of Soupault's dialogue and its lack of emotional charge. In the letter to Pound, however, he admits to only having read the "first few pages" of Soupault's novel. It is impossible to gauge just how far Williams had read at the time of the letter, but in looking at the novel one thing is certain: the dialogue in the first chapter of *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* is both more frequent and more mundane than in later chapters. The first chapter describes the narrator's initial encounter with the prostitute Georgette and their long stroll through the streets of Paris at night. Along the way, the characters exchange remarks about the weather, ask one another for cigarettes, often giving one-word answers to questions. There is a startling disconnect between the narrator's fascination with Georgette and the inanity of their interactions. For Williams, it seems, this is more true to life than the more dramatic use of dialogue in Hemingway's work, such as stories like "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), in which every line of dialogue is charged with dramatic tension.

In praising Soupault's linguistic precision, Williams places him squarely in the modernist tradition that both he and Pound championed, particularly as formulated in Pound's manifesto "A Retrospect" (1918): "To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" (*Literary Essays* 3). What Williams sees of value in Soupault is a mirror for his own aesthetic concerns. To be sure, Williams and Pound traded several jabs at Hemingway's expense in their correspondence throughout the years, as well as jabs at a vast number of the most lauded American poets and writers of the day, but Williams' comment here is particularly noteworthy because it is a rare case where he champions a foreign literary innovation over an American one, even if he does temper that praise by predicting that Soupault's novel will turn "foolishly fantastick" as it progresses.

Williams also explicitly references the aesthetic advancements of Soupault in *A Novelette*. Although he says very little about *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, he does metonymically link the book to the surrealist movement, which he goes on to discuss in greater detail:

And they have added a new brick front to the old brick house, coming out to the sidewalk for a store. Writing should be like that, like the world, a criticism of ideas; a thought implied in the trees, the storm grown vocal: One thing supplanting all things—the flu, summing all virtues. A lardy head—new brick joined to the old—the corner of the street in a wind that's driven them all indoors.

Take the surrealists, take Soupault's *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*, take—
You think I take no interest in you? It is not so. I avoid your eye merely to avoid distraction. (279-80)

One of the most notable aspects of the above passage is its relative disjointedness. To be sure, a syllogistic connection can be made between the sentences, but only upon recognition

that the sentences progress by association, which gives the text the illusion of being the record a hyperactive imagination. The first sentence begins by describing a relatively common practice in American cities and small towns, renovation by addition, and one can reasonably assume that this scene is something that Williams himself observed en route to visit a patient, as the previous paragraph references a phone call from a patient who is experiencing labor pains. In the second sentence, however, the scene shifts to an aesthetic metaphor, a claim that truly new writing—much like new architecture—should usurp and destroy earlier traditions.⁴⁸ The remainder of the paragraph continues the theme of usurpation, both formally (with rapid list-like succession) and explicitly (“One thing supplanting all things”). If one is willing to follow the associative logic of the passage, then, it would seem that when Williams says “Take the surrealists, take Soupault’s *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*” in the next paragraph, he is positing surrealism—particularly Soupault’s novel—as an example of what writing “should be like.”

The thought gets cut off there, however, and the scene shifts to a domestic setting where the narrator—who is verily likely Williams himself—reassures his partner of her importance to him. This undramatic, interjected dialogue resonates with the accuracy to the rules of conversation that Williams spoke of in his letter to Pound. These interjections happen throughout *A Novelette*, as snippets of conversation continually interrupt and punctuate Williams’ meditations, sometimes spurring them forward and other times spinning them in a completely different direction. The juxtaposition of thoughts and associations with live dialogue, rendered in a manner meant to appear as if both were recorded on the spot, was intended to be more “like the world,” with each new thing supplanting the thing that came before it. Williams’ goal appears to be to make the text function like speech, not merely *seem* that way. In this respect, the text takes on objective, documentarian qualities. In

doing so, it resembles the Apollinarian brand of surrealism that I spoke about in the previous chapter. The repetition of the verb “take” (in the phrases “Take the surrealists, take Soupault’s *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris*” and “You think I take no interest in you?”) suggests that the passage may also be an exercise in word association, a collage of distinct moments with the appearance of simultaneity hinging on a common verb. Even if the sequence of events really did happen as Williams describes, the dash serves as a flashing arrow to let the reader know the text is shifting from written thought to written speech.

Later in the book, Williams explicitly discusses his method of recording conversation. Fittingly, this happens in the form of a conversation itself:

You are copying.

Always.

But that’s not original nor is it design.

Purely.

Purely what?

Conversation of which there is none in novels and the news.

Oh, yes, there is.

Oh, no, there is not. It is something else. To be conversation, it must have only the effect of itself, not on him to whom it has a special meaning but as a dog or a store window. (287)

Here, Williams attempts to bridge the gap between speaking and non-speaking consciousness, apparently transcribing conversations as if he were taking dictation. The opening chapter of Soupault’s *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* functions similarly, with the narrator’s meditations on Georgette punctuated and interrupted by their banal conversation. Either Williams’ conception of the literary value of conversation is informed by Soupault, or

Williams was drawn to translate *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* because Soupault's novel readily conforms to Williams' preconceived notions of how conversation should be rendered in literature. In his view, a snippet of conversation in which a wife interrupts her husband while he writes in order to complain of a sore toe is far more realistic than any contrived, expressionistic conversation in literature, especially if the text is intended to be a documentary look at consciousness and the conversation interrupts—and is eventually absorbed into—the text itself.

The Evolution of Williams' Attitude toward French Literature

Williams' attitude toward French literature varied throughout his career, from his early willingness to absorb French influences to the caustic statements that characterized his later years. In an editorial statement from the first issue of *Contact*, the literary journal that Williams edited with Robert McAlmon between 1920 and 1923, Williams and McAlmon advocate a poetics of "contact" based on the confrontation between imported aesthetics and local conditions, making explicit reference to Dada as the avant-garde movement *du jour* in Paris: "We should be able to profit by this French orchid [Dadaism] but only on the condition that we have the local terms" (66). At this early stage in his career, Williams calls for the wholesale importation of foreign literary devices. In this view, a poet does not need to formally or aesthetically innovate, as long as he or she is able to successfully merge avant-garde European literary techniques with local content and syntax.

Dada-influenced poetics, however, did not necessarily produce the same effect on American soil as it did in such places as the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, as Peter Middleton notes in *Distant Reading: Performance, Readership, and Consumption in Contemporary Poetry* (2005). Middleton, for example, juxtaposes Williams' reading of *Kora in Hell* in front of the

Polytopics Club in Rutherford, New Jersey to Dada recitals at the Cabaret Voltaire. The Polytopics Club was, like many bourgeois reading clubs of the time, a relatively formal gathering where the men “wore tuxedos to their fortnightly meetings at which they often had an outside speaker as well as discussion, reading aloud, music, and singing” (Middleton 78). When Williams read from *Kora in Hell* in March 1921, he was met with laughter. As Middleton playfully notes, “Even a profession and a dinner jacket were not enough to make modernism palatable for oral performance” (77). In comparison to the open hostility of bourgeois crowds in Zurich, the laughter of the Polytopics Club seems rather tame, for the Dada events at the Cabaret Voltaire often resulted in violence and chaos. But, as Middleton also points out, there is a stronger connection between Williams’ reading of *Kora in Hell* at the Polytopics Club and the Dada soirees at the Cabaret Voltaire than mere provocation on the part of the Dadaists and desire for acceptance on the part of Williams: both groups were formed in the same year, 1916, and both involved programs that mixed aesthetically radical modernist texts with more traditionally recognizable ‘art.’ As mentioned above, the meetings of the Polytopics Club involved discussion, music, and singing, but the meetings mixed these happenings with other, more radical events such as plays where Williams wore shaving cream on his face alongside his wife, who wore mud on hers (78). In turn, the Dada performances at the Cabaret Voltaire mixed sound poetry by Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara with “readings of Rimbaud and Apollinaire, Russian poetry, and music that was recognizably music” (Middleton 78). Of course, Rimbaud and Apollinaire are not exactly traditional, but, in both the Cabaret Voltaire and the Polytopics Club, the radically new is paired alongside its aesthetic forebearers, giving the audience a sense of tradition and historical continuity.

The attitude toward French literature expressed in *Contact* dominated Williams’ thinking during the 1920s and early 1930s, culminating in the publication of *A Novelette* in

1932, which Williams claims in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* “show[s] the influence of Dadaism. I didn’t originate Dadaism but I had it in my soul to write it. [...] Paris had influenced me; there is a French feeling in this work” (48-49). He even uses a term borrowed from surrealism, “automatic writing,” to describe the compositional technique of *A Novelette*, claiming, “I sat and faced the paper and wrote” (49).⁴⁹ In a gesture that reveals much about Williams’ view on the relative positions of French and American literature, he presents his French-inspired work as being too advanced for American audiences: “An American reader would be lost entirely” (49). Williams claims, however, that this lack of American readership does not bother him, as he writes primarily for “personal satisfaction” (49), which is perhaps a hardened response adapted after the jeers at the Polytopics Club.

A similar attitude toward French literature also characterizes his “*Midas: A Proposal for a Magazine*” (1941), which was written for *Midas*, the surrealist-influenced magazine he and Nicholas Calas wanted to bring out but ultimately had to put aside, and was eventually published in the magazine *Now*. In this case, however, the indifference to public opinion has been replaced by the desire to instruct and to invoke positive change. Williams speaks of the rapid, destructive power released by war (the text explicitly references World War II and the Spanish Civil War) and the need to harness that power via the creative imagination and inversely use it to invoke positive change. An important element of the capacity to change is in the emphasis on the benefit of international cultural exchange: “We seek as far as we are American to take in the difficult ‘foreign,’ identical with us in the GOLD of it no matter how the ornament is shaped or what may be the purpose to which it seems to be put” (244). And one of the most important foreign elements that Williams thinks we should absorb is the aesthetics of surrealism, as the most recent and potent European vanguard movement, for surrealism’s emphasis on the reconciliation of opposites illustrates the common bond

between the arts and the sciences and how the imaginative thrust of both can positively affect humanity. Only through understanding such commonalities, Williams claims:

will such a concept as surrealism find a common ground, no matter how antagonistic it may seem to be, with the advance of thought and effort in America where it has no such original basis as existed in France yesterday. That is only when a profound enough basis is discovered here in our own lives—on which we can meet others. (244)

The desire to make the foreign “identical with us” sounds very similar to the guiding ideology of Williams’ editorial statements in *Contact*, but there is a stronger sense of both urgency and humanism in Williams’ proposal for *Midas*. Here, there is a desire to “meet others” both aesthetically and socially. Not only can the U.S. get up to par with—and perhaps surpass—the aesthetic advancements of Europe by borrowing and transforming those advancements but such international communication between the arts and sciences can also bridge differences, fighting the destructive impulses of war and bringing about peace.

Not surprisingly, this period also coincides with an increased interest in translation on the part of Williams. In the spring of 1940, for example, he translated a number of poems by Yvan Goll, and in the fall of that same year, he translated some of Calas’ poems. At this same time, he was working on his second book-length translation with his mother, Don Francisco de Quevedo’s dense seventeenth-century novella *El Perro y la Calentura*. Not long after, however, his attitude toward foreign literature became increasingly xenophobic. In his review of André Breton’s *Young Cherry Trees Secured Against Hares*, for example, which was curiously published in 1946 by Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler’s surrealist-influenced *Vien*, whose imprint had published the book that Williams was reviewing, Williams attacks

Breton for his calculation and for “display[ing] all the conventional virtues of French poetry” (146). Williams dresses his criticism of Breton in nationalist terms, claiming that his work runs “contrary to the spirit of the Constitution of the United States” (146). “Complete freedom of enterprise,” Williams claims, “is unknown [in France]. That is why they exported The Statue of Liberty to New York harbor and kept only an insignificant replica for the Seine” (146). Gone is the rhetoric of benefiting from “French orchids,” replaced with the claim that Breton’s work “is completely without invention in the American sense” (147). In the matter of twenty-five years, we have shifted from the U.S. needing to import cultural forms from France in order to make itself relevant and distinguish its literature from British literary tradition to France being condemned as a bastion of literary tradition and the U.S. positioned as the major innovative force in international literature. Ultimately, Williams concludes with the bold, all-caps statement: “WE CAN EXPECT NOTHING NEW FROM FRANCE IN THE WORLD ANYMORE” (147). To a certain degree, this can be read as the relatively common gesture of a mature artist divorcing himself from the influences that characterized his formative years, but when one couples this gesture with Williams’ increasingly fervent call for translations into the “American idiom,” it becomes something different altogether.

It is perhaps not surprising that during this era Williams’ interest in translation shifts from being conceptualized as a tool that can enrich American letters to an aggressive emphasis on promoting translations that conform to his standards of the “American idiom,” from a foreignizing to a domesticating translation strategy. The emphasis on the U. S. as a nation of immigrants who enrich the national idiom through the introduction of diversity is replaced with a view of the people of the United States as a distinct race, a seeming throwback to pre-twentieth century models of conceptualizing national populations. In “The

American Idiom" (1961), for example, he speaks of the "new and unheralded language" as "the pride of an emerging race" (*Interviews* 101-02).

We can see this domesticating turn in a 1962 review of Robert Lowell's *Imitations* published in *The Harvard Advocate* in which Williams praises Lowell's renderings of Baudelaire for "getting the precise accent of the words to stand up without a foreign un-American implication" (273). There is no longer anything French about these orchids. In "Language Writing; or, Literary History and the Strange Case of the Two Dr. Williamses," Hank Lazer argues that Williams' oeuvre can be broken into two opposing poles: his early, experimental years and his later, more conventional years. These two poles, Lazer claims, in turn influenced distinct—and often antagonistic—strands of American poetry that emerged after Williams' death. Just as Lazer claims that Williams' oeuvre can be separated into opposing poles, the same can be said for Williams' shifting attitude toward French literature. This is no coincidence. Williams' unabashed borrowings from the early-twentieth century French avant-garde in the early part of his career led his work during that period to become increasingly experimental, while the xenophobic attitude that characterized the latter, more commercially successful years of his career signaled a more conservative, retrograde poetics. To some degree, this was to be expected all along. After borrowing heavily from the Parisian avant-garde in order to create a modern national literature, Williams turned to an isolationist mode to protect the singularity of the American tradition he helped usher in.

I began this chapter by discussing the work of Gertrude Stein, which would have been nothing more than a convenient way to introduce Pascale Casanova's competition-based model of literary history if Williams had not been such a fervent supporter of Stein, often speaking of her work in the same terms he used to describe his own. Williams begins his essay "The Work of Gertrude Stein," published in *A Novelette and Other Prose* (1932), by

suggesting that originality in literature—a value Williams claims is held dearly by American critics—is a sham, as the germ of “whatever is new in literature [...] will be found somewhere in the writings of other times” (346). According to Williams, “only the modern emphasis gives the work a present distinction” (346). This “present distinction,” Williams claims, is everywhere to be found in Stein’s writing. Throughout his discussion of Stein’s work, Williams stages writing as a competition, both against foreign literature and against the literature of the past. He asks, for example, “How in a democracy, such as the United States, can writing which has to compete with excellence elsewhere and in other times remain in the field and be at once objective (true to fact), intellectually searching, subtle and instinct with powerful additions to our lives?” (351). Contemporary American writers, Williams claims, must struggle just to “remain in the field.” His answer to that struggle is that writing should be “democratic, local (in the sense of being attached with integrity to actual experience)” (351). And Stein’s work, in his view, has resolutely attached itself with integrity to the American experience: “Stein’s pages have become like the United States viewed from an airplane—the same senseless repetitions, the endless multiplications of toneless words, with these she had to work” (352). Ultimately, then, Stein’s turn to the Paris avant-garde does not divorce her from American reality, which she must confront if she is to evolve as an artist:

No use for Stein to fly to Paris and forget it. The thing, the United States, the unmitigated stupidity, the drab tediousness of the democracy, the overwhelming number of the offensively ignorant, the dull nerve—is there in the artist’s mind and cannot be escaped by taking a ship. She must resolve it if she can, if she is to be. (352)

Williams could have just as easily been talking about himself.

CHAPTER 4

CLAYTON ESHLEMAN: TRANSLATION AS SPIRITUAL REBIRTH

In *Juniper Fuse: Upper Paleolithic Imagination & The Construction of the Underworld* (2003), U.S. poet-translator Clayton Eshleman's book on prehistoric cave art, Eshleman (b. 1935) speaks of the caves as wombs, as places where the cave artists experienced spiritual rebirth in the act of "translating" (Eshleman's term) their thoughts into images. For Eshleman, the cave paintings signify a fundamental rupture in the history of consciousness, the birth of the primal imagination during which humans first realized they were different from animals and developed the ability to graphically articulate that difference. The implication of this act of spiritual rebirth, Eshleman claims, is "that the birth from one's mother is not a complete or the real birth, and that the real or second birth involves something more than continuing to exist" (xxi). In this chapter, I argue that literary translation serves a similar function for Eshleman, allowing him to be figuratively "born again" in contact with foreign works. Consider, for example, the following passage from an interview with Ethriam Cash Brammer in which Eshleman discusses working on translations of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) with a teenage Mexican girl in the summer of 1959:

So what was I really up to? I was involved with a kind of mystique that was not directly tied to that poem in translation, a mystique of trying to figure out how I could insert my way into something that was not myself, that was—I can't say that wasn't necessarily Indiana or Indianapolis—but I was trying to cross over to something that was buried within me and that represented an alternative to what I appeared to be. (54-55)

In the interview, Eshleman notes that his hitchhiking trip to Mexico was inspired by Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957), the reading of which reinforced Eshleman's belief that the world was much larger and more diverse than the environs of his Indianapolis upbringing. Like the Cro-Magnon cave artists' descent into the caves, Eshleman views his trip to Mexico—which marks his initial attempt at translation—as a way to reinvent himself as something more interesting than a middle-class, white, Protestant Midwesterner. Mimicking Arthur Rimbaud's famous dictum "Je est une autre," Eshleman claims that "Mexico, that summer, represented the possibility of becoming other than myself. And myself was nothing, nothing!" (55). Eshleman saw himself as part of an invisible majority, and his challenge to this invisibility was in devoting himself to the re-creation in translation of a subject position wholly antithetical to his own. Speaking in an interview with Keith Tuma on what sparked his interest in translating the Peruvian poet César Vallejo (1892-1938) and the French poet Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), for example, Eshleman says, "[T]heir lives attract me, given their radical difference from my own background" (306). Eshleman's family life was—by almost any standard—a repressive atmosphere: his father was a deacon and an efficiency expert at a local slaughterhouse; his mother, a strict housewife who forbade her son from playing with children who were not Protestant and white, whose parents smoked or drank, or whose mothers wore pants. Vallejo, on the other hand, came from a mestizo family in a remote part of northern Peru, was briefly imprisoned in 1920 for politically instigating a skirmish in Santiago de Chuco, and spent the rest of his days in Europe in abject poverty. Similarly, Artaud spent the last ten years of his life in various mental institutions, and it is no coincidence that Eshleman's translations of Artaud focus on his work from this period. One would be hard-pressed to find two characters with backgrounds further from Eshleman's own.

Eshleman viewed the Mexican girl who helped with these early translations as an instrument to help him achieve this sense of otherness. Her only value to him seems to have been either as an object of sexual desire or an interpreter, and Eshleman decidedly assigned her the latter role: “I would invite her into my room, ask her to sit next to me on the bed, and rather than trying to seduce her, I would say, ‘Help me with Neruda’” (54). Like the way the characters in Kerouac’s novel treat Mexican women, Eshleman’s statement carries a sense of entitlement, the unspoken assumption that the girl would have willingly submitted to his seduction, an inflated sense of self-importance that is symptomatic of the sensibility that Eshleman was attempting to overcome via translation. In his elaborate fantasy, Eshleman chooses the noble route by not seducing the girl and devoting himself to the selfless task of translation, presenting this task as a male-male collaboration that has little to do with the girl who helped him learn the Spanish language: “Mexico was the place of my self-discovery. Without Mexico that summer, there would be no Eshleman/Vallejo” (55). For Eshleman, translation is a journey of self-discovery in which the self is found in contact with the foreign, ultimately allowing Eshleman to assume the hybrid identity of “Eshleman/Vallejo.” Before I turn to Eshleman’s work, however, it seems necessary provide an outline of how that work fits into the narrative of surrealism and world literature.

Historical Context

In the previous chapter, I noted Pascale Casanova’s claim in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004) that writers from parts of the world endowed with the least literary capital must be consecrated by the area with the strongest concentration of literary resources—which, in Casanova’s view, is Paris—in order to become a major player in the field of world literature. This act of consecration, Casanova claims, can come in a variety of different forms:

translation, criticism, publication by Paris publishing houses, prefaces written by prominent French writers, and the bestowing of international literary awards, of which the most symbolic is the Nobel Prize. According to Casanova, this situation is at its most acute in areas that are colonies—or former colonies—of areas with strong concentrations of literary capital. She uses the case of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant from the West Indian island of Martinique, a department of France, as one of her examples. As co-authors of the 1989 manifesto *Éloge de la créolite* (In Praise of Creoleness), Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant advocated the literary use of creole as a method of opposing both French literary norms and bourgeois Martinican attitudes toward popular language. Casanova notes, however, that after receiving international literary recognition—culminating with Chamoiseau’s Goncourt Prize in 1992 for his novel *Texaco*, which was also named a *New York Times* Notable Book of the Year—their attitude toward the vernacular became less radical, as all three began to compose primarily in French and abandon West Indian publishers for more prestigious Paris publishing houses.

I also noted in the previous chapter that Casanova’s claims have received substantial criticism for their Gallocentrism and their reductive view of literary history, citing, for example, Brazilian critics who argue that the development of national literatures in South and Latin America display a much more complex process of borrowing from both European literary modernism and native literary traditions than Casanova is willing to admit. This would seem to be the case, as well, for another Martinican writer, the poet Aimé Césaire, who receives little mention in *The World Republic of Letters* and who is often viewed as having been “discovered” by André Breton, the leader of the French surrealist movement, despite the fact that Césaire had already published one of his more important works, *Cahier d’un*

retour au pays natal (Notebook of a Return to the Native Land), in the Paris periodical *Volontés* in August 1939, two years before Breton stumbled across Césaire's work.

In his "A Great Black Poet" (1943), the introduction to the first English translation of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Breton tells of how he stumbled upon Césaire and René Ménéil's literary journal *Tropiques* in April 1941 while on a layover in Fort-de-France on the way to wartime exile in North America. Speaking of the journal's aesthetic and political outlook, Breton claims that *Tropiques* said "what had to be said [...] in a manner not only as elegant but as elevated as anyone could say it" (x). As surprised as Breton claims that he was upon discovering *Tropiques*, he also writes, "I will not pretend that I did not at once take some pride in the fact that what he expressed was in no way unfamiliar" (x). In other words, both the aesthetic stance of *Tropiques* and its attitude toward the colonial situation mirrored Breton's own.

To a certain degree, this claim is not entirely unfounded, as public opposition to colonialism by Breton and his cohorts dates at least as far back as 1931, when the group published the pamphlet *Ne Visitez pas l'exposition coloniale* (Do Not Visit the Colonial Exposition), which called for a boycott of the *L'Exposition Coloniale Internationale* (International Colonial Exposition) that opened in Paris on 6 May 1931. In the effort to display the diversity and immense resources of the French colonies, the French government organized the exposition, inviting people from the colonies to Paris to display native arts and crafts and perform in grandly scaled reproductions of various native architectural styles. The exposition also included a human zoo that attempted to replicate life in nomadic Senegalese villages. The emphasis of the exhibition was on highlighting the indigenous cultures of the colonies and downplaying French efforts to spread their own language and culture abroad,

thereby advancing the notion that France was associating with the colonized societies rather than assimilating them.

Ne Visitez pas l'exposition coloniale, on the other hand, which was written at the height of the efforts of the surrealist group to officially align themselves with the PCF, proclaims the colonial peoples to be natural allies of the proletariat, decrying the exhibition as an elaborate stage to advance the purposes of the bourgeoisie. In the pamphlet, for example, the group claims that the exposition

clearly expresses the complicity of the entire bourgeoisie in the birth of a new and particularly intolerable concept: "La Grande France." It is a question of giving to the citizens of metropolitan France the feeling of being proprietors which is needed so they can hear the distant sounds of gunfire without flinching. It is a question of annexing a view of minarets and pagodas to the fine scenery of the French countryside. (qtd. in Lewis 95).

The surrealists' position was nearly identical to that of the Comintern and the PCF who organized a counter-exhibition called *La Verite sur les Colonies* (The Truth on the Colonies) that sought to chronicle the abuses of the colonialist project. What Breton found in the haberdashery in Fort-de-France, then, was a confirmation of his own position, and he readily absorbed and adopted Césaire as his own important discovery, despite the fact that *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* had already been published by "a small Parisian journal in which the poem must have passed unnoticed in 1939" (xiii). It takes discovery by Breton, who figures himself as the ultimate arbiter of aesthetic matters, for Césaire's work to be legitimized and labeled "the greatest lyrical monument of our times" (xiii).

The woman in the haberdashery where Breton discovered the journal was Ménéil's sister, and she arranged meetings between Breton and the two editors. Breton's depiction of

these meetings swings wildly between acute awareness of Césaire and Ménéil's racial otherness and praise for their literary advancements. As if it were some sort of surprise, he speaks of the presence of "genuine culture in its least ostentatious form" in Ménéil and notes that Césaire is "of a black so pure and even more noticeable at first because he was smiling" (xi). Emphasis on Césaire's blackness permeates Breton's analysis to the point where it becomes a defining feature of both Césaire and his work: "the first revivifying new breath capable of restoring confidence [in art] comes from a black. And it is a black who handles the French language in a manner that no white man is capable of today. And it is a black who guides us today into the unexplored" (xii). Here, a figure from the center reaches toward a figure in the periphery in order to "restore confidence" in French literature and push it forward. This attitude of absorption complicates Breton's stance toward colonialism, as does the fact that Breton essentially negates Césaire's blackness in the same breath as overstating it: "And it is a black who is not only a black but *all* of man, who conveys all of man's questionings, all of his anguish, all of his hopes and all of his ecstasies" (xii). This universalizing of racial otherness is similar to the movement's attitude toward women that I discussed in the previous chapter. Césaire's racial otherness, in Breton's view, is the very thing that allows him to speak for everyone. Breton claims that literary posterity tends to consecrate those who have "split open the armature that stifles us" (xiii), placing Césaire squarely among those worthy of such canonization. In this, again, Breton again sees shades of himself: "I truly valued a feeling of total communion with one of them, of knowing him above all as a man of will and not distinguishing his will from my own" (xiii). And in referring to Césaire as "one of them," he once again frames his discussion in terms of race.

Breton's attitude toward the conditions of Martinique similarly fluctuates from describing an idealized tropical oasis whose women are more beautiful than any other place

on the planet to a deeper “wretchedness of a colonized people, their shameless exploitation by a handful of parasites in defiance of the very laws of their mother country and without any qualms about dishonoring it” (xvi). From a contemporary perspective, it would be easy to criticize Breton’s views for their subtle hints of racism, arguing that his views—perhaps unconsciously—reinforce the very “shameless exploitation” he claims to be against. To do so, however, would be slightly anachronistic, as Breton’s concern for racial equality was fairly radical by 1943 standards, particularly in his call for a potential racial uprising:

One awaits with equal impatience the day when, outside these colonies, the great mass of colored people will no longer be insultingly segregated and restricted to inferior jobs or worse. If this expectation is not met by the international settlements that will come into play at the end of the present war, one might be forced to endorse, once and for all with all that it implies, the opinion that the emancipation of colored people can only be brought about by themselves. (xvii)

Césaire’s reception in the United States complicates Casanova’s argument even more. For one thing, it suggests that during the post-WWII era the U. S. became at least as important—if not more important—of a player in the field of international literature than France. Consider, for example, *The New York Times* review of Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith’s 1983 translation of *Amié Césaire: The Collected Poetry*—written by Serge Gavronsky, chair of the French department at Barnard College—which trumpets Eshleman and Smith’s translation as the consecration of Césaire as a major literary force:

Aime Césaire has found his voice in English. Thanks to the meticulous translations by Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith [...] readers can now

judge for themselves the talents of one of the most powerful French poets of this century, who has been neglected for too long.

Gavronsky speaks as if Césaire's work had been waiting in exile for the right translator to come along. And Eshleman, by this time, was a fairly influential translator, as his 1979 version of the Peruvian poet Cesar Vallejo's *Complete Posthumous Poetry*—done in collaboration with José Rubia Barcia—was awarded the National Book Award and helped put Vallejo on the map in the U. S. Throughout *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova is willing to admit that other major cities—particularly London—posed significant challenges to Paris' throne at the center of international literature, yet she is unwilling to consider a map that includes overlapping fields with no stable or apparent center. Translations like Eshleman and Smith's *Amié Césaire: The Collected Poetry*—distinct from the French reception of Césaire, yet no less important to establishing his international reputation—suggest that the latter is very possibly the case. And such translations also suggest that since the time of poet-translators like William Carlos Williams, who turned to translating the French avant-garde in order to accumulate the literary resources he felt his native tradition lacked, the United States' stature in the field of international literature had shifted from a position of relative marginality to a position of power due to its newfound ability to influence the international reputation of writers from colonial—or otherwise disadvantaged—literary environments. Eshleman as a translator, however, illustrates just how complicated this new position could be. As I will show in this chapter, Eshleman is simultaneously conscious of his potentially colonizing influence as a translator, yet—much like Williams, although for very different reasons—turns to translation as a way to import literary resources. Eshleman's position is one of both personal and political crisis, as he both struggles with the ethical questions that translators of colonial texts must face and attempts to write himself into a

“primal” literary tradition that extends from prehistoric cave paintings to the writers whose work he translated and, eventually, Eshleman himself.

Producing a Non-Cosmeticized Translation:

Eshleman on “The Translator’s Ego”

During an era in which American poets produced fewer translations than their modernist predecessors, Eshleman has translated more than twenty books from a handful of different languages, establishing himself as one of the country’s most prolific poet-translators. These translations have been published by influential independent publishing houses and prestigious university presses alike and have garnered Eshleman a number of major awards, including a National Book Award and translation grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. In many ways, one could argue that Eshleman’s influence as a translator outweighs his cultural capital as a poet. Surprisingly, however, Eshleman’s translation practice has not been given serious consideration in criticism of his work. Although it is common to mention Eshleman’s activity as a translator whenever his name comes up, little attention has been paid to exactly how this enterprise interacts with and influences his poetics. For most of Eshleman’s literary activities beyond his own poetry, the critical discussion is generally brief and laudatory. His work as both a translator and an editor are viewed as extracurricular activities, supplementary to the real business of writing poetry and evidence of his selfless devotion to literature.

In *Minding the Underworld: Clayton Eshleman & Late Postmodernism* (1991), the only book-length work thus far solely dedicated to Eshleman’s work, Paul Christensen reads Eshleman’s embracing of “otherness” via translation—particularly third world, colonial otherness—in Freudian terms, as a return of values repressed by late-twentieth century American imperialism, although he does not give an in-depth reading of how this critique is carried out in Eshleman’s work as a translator.⁵⁰ Christensen’s view is a hopeful one in which

translation is employed to introduce American audiences to poets and writers who occupy positions at the margins of international literary space. But I would like to argue that there is another side to the story, equally supportable by Eshleman's statements and practice, that stands in stark contrast to Christensen's view: Eshleman's attempt to escape his Protestant, Midwestern roots by embracing cultural forms that he perceives as wholly antithetical to those roots. From this vantage point, Eshleman's work is not critical of American imperialism, as Christensen claims it to be, but participant in the cultural wing of that imperialism, as he absorbs foreign works for the benefit of his own evolving psychological drama and poetics.

This chapter construes the term "translation" with a certain amount of latitude, considering Eshleman's formal and thematic borrowings from the writers whose work he translates as extensions of the translations themselves. This latitude is not arbitrary, however, as the connection between Eshleman's translation practice and his poetics is suggested by Eshleman himself:

All the poets I have spent long periods of translation time with [...] have drawn me because I felt that their poetry knew something my poetry wanted to know. Besides attempting to make accurate, readable versions, I was involved in a secondary plot, or sub-text, wanting to shovel some of their psychic coal into my own furnaces. ("The Translator's Ego" 230)

Eshleman's comments come from "The Translator's Ego" (1986), an essay in which he warns against translation's colonizing ability. In Eshleman's view, translation is not only a form of vocational training but also a way to bring foreign influences into Anglophone poetic traditions, expanding the aesthetic and thematic possibilities of poetry in English. As an act of poetic apprenticeship, Eshleman views translation as supplementary—and thus secondary—to the act of writing one's own poetry. I do not mean to imply that translation is not a serious enterprise for Eshleman, an important part of his lifelong devotion to poetry, but he also views the act of translation as a tributary feeding the real work. In "Writing and

Translating” (2006), Susan Bassnett notes that for many writers who are also translators, the popular distinction that privileges original composition over translation simply does not exist, and translation becomes one of many creative endeavors that collectively define the author’s oeuvre (174). Eshleman’s practice, on the other hand, suggests a desire to preserve that hierarchy. Eshleman translates because models for the kind of poetry he wishes to write do not exist in English, to build an alternate tradition in which to place his own work.

“The Translator’s Ego” takes its title from Eliot Weinberger’s introduction to Eshleman’s *The Name Encanyoned River: Selected Poems 1960-1985* (1986). In a brief aside—the entire paragraph is actually encapsulated by parenthesis—on Eshleman’s translation practice, Weinberger claims that “the dissolution of the translator’s ego is essential if the foreign poet is to enter the language—a bad translation is the insistent voice of the translator” (12). Here, Weinberger presents an idealized image of translation in which the translator literally disappears and the foreign poet speaks directly in the target language. The unspoken desire behind this position is that the linguistic and cultural barriers that prevent any text from smoothly carrying over into another language are eradicated and the poet is allowed to speak as if the target language were his or her own native tongue. Weinberger’s vision of fidelity, of course, is an impossible one, as translation is always a radical process of de- and recontextualization in which one signifying chain is replaced with another. By the very nature of their belonging to distinct linguistic codes, the source text can never and will never speak directly in the target language. Nonetheless, Weinberger construes translation as a process that has its basis in the extinction of the translator’s ego, as though a truly perfect translation could be made if the translator were able to operate with minimal or no interference, the way one might turn the dial on a radio to reduce static and get a clearer signal. This view minimizes the role of the translator as a mediator, reinforcing the authority of the source text and downplaying the fact that translation is always a negotiation between at least two different cultures.

Weinberger, himself, is a noted anthologist and translator, particularly known for being the primary English-language translator of Octavio Paz, the Nobel Prize winning Mexican poet, and his edition of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' *Selected Non-Fictions* (2000) was awarded the National Book Critics Circle award for criticism. His stature as an important translator suggests that Weinberger's stance on translation reflects the dominant translation method of the time. And, as it turns out, Eshleman's own views are remarkably close to Weinberger's, as he claims that his first encounter with what he thinks Weinberger means by "the translator's ego" was in reading poet-translator Ben Belitt's version of Spanish poet Federico García Lorca's *Poet in New York* (1955). Eshleman raises a particular objection to Belitt's translation of the last line of Lorca's poem "La Aurora" ("como recién salidas de un naufragio de sangre"), which Belitt translates as "as though lately escaped from a bloody disaster" (227). Eshleman prefers what he considers to be a more literal rendering, claiming that "Lorca's 'shipwreck of blood' [is] a powerful direct image that needs no translational revision" (227). Despite the fact that Belitt was born in New York and spent the majority of his life as a professor at Bennington College, Eshleman reads Belitt's "bloody" as British slang, claiming that "Belitt is colonizing the foreign terrain of [Lorca] instead of accommodating himself to the ways in which [it differs] from his own poetic intentions" (227). There is, of course, little about Belitt's line that suggests he is using "bloody" in the slang sense. It is much more likely that he is trying to avoid the common "noun of noun" construction that permeates U. S. translations of surrealist-inspired literature from Latinate languages by turning "sangre" (blood) into an adjective, as the rhetorical technique of combining disparate nouns in this fashion is a trademark of surrealism. Because of structural differences between English and Latinate languages such "noun of noun" phrases sound much less idiomatic in English, and one could argue that Belitt is trying to account for this effect in his translation. Belitt introduces a more consequential shift—at least in terms of the poem's meaning—by translating "naufragio" (shipwreck) as the more general "disaster," although this fails to raise Eshleman's ire.⁵¹

Like Weinberger, Eshleman thematizes the best translations as those in which the translator is able to completely extinguish his or her ego, giving the source text a sense of authority to which one must remain faithful at all costs. Lorca's "powerful" and "direct" images need no "translational revision." Any deviation from a strict word-for-word literalism, it seems, has drastic implications and should be looked upon with suspicion. Eshleman goes on to describe this situation in colonial terms:

By adding to, subtracting from and reinterpreting the original, the translator implies that he knows better than the original text knows, that in effect his mind is superior to its mind. The "native text" becomes raw material for the colonizer-translator to educate and re-form in a way that instructs the reader to believe that the foreign poet is aping our literary conventions. (227-28)

For a translator who generally refuses to discuss his practice in theoretical terms, Eshleman displays a relatively sophisticated understanding of the ethical issues at stake when translating work from so-called Third World countries.⁵² In Eshleman's view, the way for a translator to avoid becoming a colonizer is to produce a "non-cosmeticized" translation that attempts to recreate a native speaker's experience with the source text (230). The problem with this view is that a "non-cosmeticized" translation is, like Weinberger's egoless translation, an impossibility. There is simply no way to reproduce a native speaker's encounter with a source text. Too many cultural and semantic referents are lost. These referents, of course, can be hinted at through a variety of possible translation strategies or through footnotes and other editorial apparatuses, but never reproduced in exactitude.

In terms of his own practice, Eshleman's "non-cosmeticized" translation means a long—often more than a decade—immersion in the source text, consulting multiple dictionaries for even the simplest of words, working closely with source-language scholars, and studying source-language criticism in order to gain an understanding of how the work is received in its own culture. The result is a well-researched translation that occasionally deviates from the current standard dialect, incorporating archaisms, neologisms, and

colloquialisms whenever they appear in the original. The poets that Eshleman has spent the most time with—César Vallejo and Aimé Césaire—have been translated multiple times by Eshleman, suggesting that in his view the process of translation is never complete. This, too, can be connected to his ethical concerns: the imperative to “get it right.” Generally speaking, however, what Eshleman means by “non-cosmeticized” translation is the suppression of the translator’s interpretive and creative desire to cosmetically enhance the translation, presenting as literal of a translation as possible, although Eshleman is cognizant of the fact that this is a utopic vision: “For the fact is, there is no such thing as a literal translation of a poem—denotative choices come up in every line. There is a constant process of *interpretation* going on, regardless of how faithful one attempts to be to the original” (229; emphasis added). Ultimately, Eshleman is willing to admit that—despite a translator’s best intentions—translation is largely an interpretive act.

This dilemma is made all the more apparent in those places in which Eshleman attempts to be most faithful to the texture of the original, particularly in his creation of neologisms to correspond with those in the source text. Consider, for example, Eshleman’s use of “fecapital” for “tesórea” in the first section of César Vallejo’s *Trilce* (1922), a move in which alternate meanings are released that subtly alter the poem’s political thrust. From his reading of Giovanni Meo Zilio’s “Neologismos en la poesía de César Vallejo” (1967), Eshleman concludes that “tesórea” is comprised of elements of “tesoro” (treasure) and “estercórea” (excrement), a reasonable assumption considering the frequent turns toward the scatological in *Trilce*. Eshleman’s “fecapital,” in turn, combines elements of “fecal” and “capital.” On many levels, this is an extremely resourceful solution to the vexing problem of translating a difficult neologism. On closer inspection, though, the ideological thrust of the term is altered in subtle, yet significant ways. Not only are the scatological elements of the word pushed to the front of Eshleman’s neologism, but the word also has harsher consonant sounds that can be seen as accentuating the scatological nature of the term. More importantly, however, the subtle hint of the root “oro” (gold) in “tesoro” is lost, replaced by

“capital” and its allusion to Marxist terminology. This shift releases a new meaning in English that is not immediately apparent in the Spanish, as it positions *Trilce* as prefiguring the interest in Marxism that Vallejo would subsequently take up during his years of exile in Paris. Eshleman has produced—perhaps unconsciously—a prophetic translation that locates Vallejo’s Marxist sympathies as stemming from the experiences in Peruvian jail that are recorded in *Trilce*. This shift illustrates the fact that new meanings are always inevitably released in translation, that a translator can never reproduce in exactitude the experience of a native speaker’s encounter with a source text.

Eshleman’s *Caterpillar* (1967-1973):

A Collective Vision of Translation

To a certain degree, Eshleman’s attitude toward translation is a product of his generation, particularly influenced by Black Mountain poetics and the cadre of so-called “deep image” poets that Eshleman regularly published in his magazine *Caterpillar*.⁵³ From Black Mountain, Eshleman inherits the concept of the poet’s vocation as a period of extended apprenticeship, which Eshleman subsequently applied to his translation practice. He derives this idea from Charles Olson, citing a letter that Olson wrote to the young poet Ed Dorn in 1955—revised and published in *A Bibliography on America for Ed Dorn* (1964), a small pamphlet that Eshleman read in the late 1960s—as its source. Eshleman quotes Olson’s letter in the introduction to *Juniper Fuse*:

Best thing to do is *to dig one*
thing or place or man until you yourself know more abt
 that than is possible for any other man. It doesn’t matter
 whether it’s Barbed Wire or Pemmican or Paterson or Iowa.
 But *exhaust* it. Saturate it. Beat it.

And then U KNOW

everything else very fast: one saturation job (it might

take 14 years). And you're in, forever. (xii)

For Olson, this “saturation job” was his study of Melville. For Eshleman, it was a combination of translating Vallejo and studying prehistoric cave art, two activities that he would view as increasingly linked as his career progressed.

The culmination of Eshleman’s thirty-year obsession with prehistoric cave art in southwestern France, *Juniper Fuse* is comprised of equal parts poetry, speculative prose, and—in Eshleman’s words—“archaeology proper” (xv). Eshleman goes so far as to suggest that the work in *Juniper Fuse* is a form of translation: “in the spirit that I served the cave images as observer, [I] ask them to serve my imagination, so as to *translate* them not back into their own original unknown-to-us context, but forward into my own idiom” (xv; emphasis added). Eshleman’s “service” to the cave images is predicated on an unspoken deal that the caves would return the favor, sparking his own creative imagination. The core of *Juniper Fuse*, then, and the impetus behind its composition, is an elaborate attempt to establish a prehistoric antecedent for Eshleman’s poetics, explicitly connecting his own poetry to the cave imagery, which he comes to view as the birth of human consciousness and creative expression.

In the book’s introduction, Eshleman is quite open about the fact that his interest in cave art is primarily a creative one:

I want to incorporate [cave] imagery into poetry as a primary antecedent dimension, in effect opening a trap door in poetry’s floor onto these unbounded but evocative gestures. As a poet’s book, *Juniper Fuse* is an attempt to reclaim the caves [...] for poets as geo-mythical sites in which early intimations of what we call “muse” may have been experienced. (xii)

Eshleman views the caves as an “unbounded” tabula rasa on which to project his idiosyncratic interpretations of the origin and meaning of the cave paintings. This method is guided by the belletristic conception of the “muse,” and Eshleman’s interpretations of the

paintings are often bound up with the same themes that dominate his own poems: tropes borrowed from Freudian psychology, shamanism, and sexual frustration.

These interpretations, however, are presented under the rubric of “translating” the “interior world” of prehistoric man (xv), and Eshleman positions the various kinds of discourse in *Juniper Fuse* as an “inseparable mix” aimed toward a new axiom of fidelity, recasting the imagination of prehistoric man in the idiom of contemporary poetry (xv). In Eshleman’s view, pairing fieldwork and research with his poetic imagination is a deeper penetration into the nature of prehistoric cave art than can be achieved by “solely employing rational documentation” (xv). Eshleman’s claim that poetry has the uncanny ability to access knowledge unavailable to rational thought is, of course, a relatively common rhetorical move for a neo-Romantic poet who generally mistrusts traditional criticism. Through discursive heterogeneity, Eshleman hopes to show the full range of cave art’s creative complexity in much the same manner as his archaisms and neologisms were intended to make reading Vallejo in English an equally challenging experience as reading Vallejo in Spanish. Although Eshleman is aware that recasting the imagination of prehistoric man in the medium of contemporary poetry is an interpretive act, he seems relatively unconcerned with its ethical implications: “I sought to be open to what I thought about and fantasized while in the caves or while meditating on their image environments—to create my own truth as to what they mean, respecting imagination as one of a plurality of conflicting powers” (xv). This, of course, places Eshleman in a very dangerous position, as he deigns to speak for the creators of a sign system that—by its extreme distance from any modern sign system—defies comprehensive understanding. On the other hand, Eshleman is careful to point out that traditional archaeological writing on the cave paintings is also an act of interpretation, perhaps an even more dangerous one, as it strives for objective invisibility. At least he, Eshleman claims, is upfront about the intrusion of his own subjectivity.

This speaks to the central paradox of Eshleman’s approach to prehistoric cave art—a paradox that also haunts his views on the translator’s ego—the desire to push the individual

psyche aside long enough for the object of translation to come across unharmed while simultaneously turning to that object as a source of creative inspiration. Eshleman claims that, unlike Olson, his desire was not to know more “than is possible to any other man” about the caves, but rather to “make use of a pluralistic approach that may result in a ‘fuller’ reading of Upper Paleolithic imagination than archeological or literary approaches alone might yield. [...] I don’t want to engage the caves in an ahistorical void or to strip-mine them for ‘poetic’ materials” (xii). But, as his earlier expressed desire to “incorporate [cave] imagery into poetry as a primary antecedent dimension” suggests (xii), his actions do indeed veer toward strip-mining. What this somewhat lengthy digression on Eshleman’s reading of prehistoric cave art illustrates, then, is that Eshleman views all acts of interpretation—translation, adaptation, criticism—as second-rate compositions, supplementary to—but ultimately inferior to—composition proper.

A similar attitude can be seen in the translation practice of Eshleman’s peers, which is perhaps most clearly revealed in the “Test of Translation” feature that appeared in *Caterpillar* at irregular intervals. The pieces were not written by Eshleman himself, but he published them, suggesting that his own views were—at the very least—sympathetic with those expressed by the various contributors. In this feature, a contemporary poet examines multiple translations of the same poem—the examples span both the classical and modern eras—pointing out the pros and cons of each version. Although each “Test of Translation” was written by a different contributor, a collective vision of translation emerges from the series as a whole: an essentialist view of the source literature combined with the desire to produce a translation that can read as an original work in its own right.

In general, the “Test of Translation” contributors fail to recognize that the essential features they read in each source text are often only one of many possible readings of those texts and that those readings are generally motivated by the contributors’ own aesthetic interests. In “Test of Translation VI: Rilke’s Third Duino Elegy,” for example, George Quasha, who is perhaps best known in the poetry world for co-editing the anthology

America, A Prophecy: A New Reading of American Poetry from Pre-Columbian Times to the Present (1973) with Jerome Rothenberg, criticizes previous translations of Rilke's elegies for presenting an image of Rilke as "a sensitive poet of introspection with more interesting 'ideas' and psychological insights than poetic gifts" (200).⁵⁴ Quasha, on the other hand, claims, "Whatever [Rilke's] ideas, the whole point about reading the late work—or translating it—is to know directly what is revealed in his unexampled extension of an apocalyptic mode" (200). Quasha's claim gives translation the ideological imperative to inform both the translator and the target audience, but only under the vague condition that the translation reveals the fruit of Rilke's "unexampled extension of an apocalyptic mode." According to Quasha, Rilke's "poetic stance" is much more important than his "ideas," and Quasha defines this stance in terms that sound very familiar with those that were popular among certain branches of American poetry at that time, particularly Black Mountain and other groups whose poetics were influenced by William Carlos Williams and Objectivism, presenting Rilke as a "poet with his ear turned inward toward his brain, tensely listening for the voice of where he is" (200). Quasha defines Rilke's compositional process in terms of "breath," a concept that took on a particular weight in American poetics after Charles Olson—in his seminal essay "Projective Verse" (1950)—proclaimed it to be the primary compositional unit in American poetry.

"The translators job," Quasha claims:

far more than with rhetorical or literary kinds of poetry (where form tends to be a traditionally definitive artifact), is to reenter the original process by way of resources in his own language: a genesis technically analogous to the original, guided by empathy and precise knowledge of it (200).

Rilke, in this view, is seen as the consummate poet of a brand of free verse that emphasizes the situatedness of the poet's own body, and the translator's job is to analogically represent that state. For Quasha, the process is akin to creating a new poem, and this poem looks suspiciously like one that Charles Olson or Robert Duncan might have produced,

particularly in its radical spacing as opposed to Rilke's more orderly, left-justified verse. Quasha is open about the fact that he has taken formal "cues from Pound, Williams, and Duncan" (204), including a particularly pronounced use of Duncan's suspended punctuation. Quasha's translation, then, presents Rilke—the most widely translated foreign modernist poet—as a mirror for contemporary American poetic concerns. Quasha is fully conscious of this fact, but—much like Eshleman's ambivalent attitude toward the cave paintings—its ethical implications seem to not concern him: "I call my version a 'transposition' to indicate that, if I have emphasized one side of Rilke, as some tell me, to the exclusion of others, I'd like it to be taken somewhat on its own compositional terms" (204).

This attitude permeates nearly all of the pieces in the "Test of Translation" series. In "Test of Translation IX: Nerval's HORUS," for example, Gerrit Lansing establishes a dichotomy between translations produced by scholars and translations produced by poets, predictably praising only the versions of Nerval produced by Robert Duncan and Robin Blaser, two poets whose work circulated in the same circles as Lansing's own. Lansing especially praises Blaser's decision to cut the length of Nerval's lines in half, which he claims results in a similar "concentration of energy [...] obtained by quite other means" (87). In Blaser's Nerval, on the other hand, Lansing anachronistically finds "a savage contemporary language" (87). In other words, those elements of Nerval's work that Lansing finds most valuable are the elements that resonate aesthetically with Lansing's own poetics and with the poetics of his immediate cohorts. George Economou establishes a similar dichotomy between translations by scholars and translations by poets in "Test of Translation X: Guillem Comte de Peitau's Ab La Dolchor Del Temps Novel," even more forcefully advocating the notion of translation as original composition. Economou characterizes the translation of his friend Paul Blackburn, which bears aesthetic resemblance to Blackburn's own modernist poetics, as a matter of destiny, as if Peitau's work were waiting for the right translator to canonize it via a strategy that renders the work in modernist terms:

Blackburn's translation is a genuine poem because he was written it as one of his own, which does nothing to the original but enhance and authenticate it in English version since Blackburn, temperamentally and artistically, has been the right man at the right time for the job. (158)

Perhaps none of the contributions to the "Test of Translation" series are more revealing of the general attitude of the *Caterpillar* group than Tim Reynold's "Test of Translation VII: A poem by Sappho," in which Reynolds praises Catullus' version over the American versions of Mary Barnard, Robert Lowell, Willis Barnstone, and Guy Davenport:

It's apparent that [Catullus is] in touch with what used to be called the Genius of his Language in a way that none of the American translators are, his own language. I mean because he's not translating but writing a poem, because the Greek is a mirror not a problem, he's putting himself at the center of the process, not the text. (92)

Like Quasha and the others, Reynolds values translations that can be viewed as original compositions, but he takes this idea a step further by suggesting that the ideal translation places the translator's literary interests at "the center of the process." Reynolds even goes so far as to say that the translator discovers his or her own identity along the way: "Translation is not losing, abnegating your identity[...], it's finding, recognizing, defining it" (93).

Becoming Porous to the Character of the Original:

Translation as "Assimilative Space"

In Eshleman's own practice, the quest for personal discovery and spiritual rebirth is consistently linked to his theories of translation and apprenticeship. Eshleman claims that all of the poets with whom he spent a long period of translation time knew something that his poetry wanted to know, suggesting that his primary motivation in choosing a source text is the reinforcement of his own aesthetic development: "I let my sense of my relationship to Vallejo and his poetry enter my own poetry, so that the translating activity, in the context of

apprenticeship, was envisioned and critiqued as an aspect of my own evolving poetics” (“Translator’s Ego” 230). This, Eshleman curiously claims, is necessary to keep the translation free from subjective intrusions. While the translations themselves are supposedly kept “pure,” once complete, they become fodder for his own poetry, and translation is seen as the build-up or precursor to original poetic composition. Eshleman dubs the space between the work one has translated and one’s own creative output “assimilative space,” which he defines as “becoming porous to the *character* of the original” (230). In Eshleman’s poetry, this act of absorption often manifests in the aping of foreign literary forms and rhetorical devices, while translation itself is often presented as a physical battle between master (or source text) and apprentice (or translator).

An obvious example of Eshleman’s explicit borrowing from a poem that he translated is “The Excavation of Artaud” (1984), which parrots the formal and rhetorical strategies of César Vallejo’s “El libro de la naturaleza.” Eshleman’s translation of “El libro de la naturaleza,” titled “The Book of Nature,” begins as follows:

Professor of sobbing—I said to a tree—
 staff of quicksilver, rumorous
 linden, at the bank of the Marne, a good student
 is reading in your deck of cards, in your dead foliage,
 between the evident water and the false sun,
 his three of hearts, his queen of diamonds. (*Complete Poetry* 487)

The poem’s rhetorical strategy is easily identifiable. Each of the first three stanzas begins with an apostrophe, which continues for roughly three lines and is followed by an equally long address. The content of the first three stanzas is fairly consistent, with each subsequent stanza advancing the poem’s main theme by addition. In the final stanza, each of the guiding metaphors of the previous three stanzas are addressed line by line in a manner that is vaguely reminiscent of a sestina’s envoi. Likewise, Eshleman’s own “The Excavation of Artaud” begins as follows:

Shaman of obsession—I sat at his tomb—
 excavated in electricity, opened between
 anus and sex. In the Australian outback of the soul,
 3 dead men are fingering your anesthetized root support
 shining like a chain of sputtering lights, for the key to creation,
 between the bone they've drawn out and your bone they so desire. (*Selected
 Poems* 216)

Although there are distinct features of each poem (Vallejo's syntax, for example, is generally denser than Eshleman's), the basic rhetorical structure is identical. Tonally, however, the poems are very different, with Vallejo's displaying an air of irony or condescension toward the object of address, while Eshleman's attitude toward Antonin Artaud (another poet whom Eshleman spent many years translating) borders on idolatry.

Content-wise, "The Excavation of Artaud" is representative of Eshleman's work at this stage in his career, not only displaying characteristic leaps of association and attention to the functions of the lower body but also placing Artaud in an all-male, hypersexual landscape. This masculine world parallels the way that Eshleman thematizes the relationship between translator and source text. The earliest, and perhaps most illuminating, example of this trope in Eshleman's work is "The Book of Yorunomado" (1964), which takes its name from a coffee shop in Kyoto where Eshleman spent afternoons in the early 1960s translating Vallejo. In the poem, the name "Yorunomado" becomes that of a mystical samurai-like warrior whom Eshleman must confront in translation. This confrontation is staged like a street brawl:

We locked. I sank my teeth into
 his throat, clenched, his fangs

tore into my balls, locked
 in spasms of deadening pain we turned, I
 crazed for his breath, to translate
 my cry into his gold, howling, he
 ripped for food (24)

As in Eshleman's poem about Artaud, the violence is focused on the lower body, as Yorunomado (presumably a stand-in for Vallejo) sinks his animal-like "fangs" into Eshleman's testicles, "ripp[ing] for food" like a vampire who gains sustenance from sperm not blood. Eshleman's narrator derives a sense of sexual pleasure from the battle, as his "spasms of deadening pain" suggest a possible orgasm. The severely enjambed lines—often ending at or right before verbs—swiftly but erratically move the reader through the frenzied action of the battle. The most curious aspect of the passage, however, is Eshleman's use of the verb "translate," as it is Eshleman's "cry" that is translated into Yorunomado's "gold." This inversion suggests that—much like George Economou's interpretation of Paul Blackburn's translation practice—Eshleman views his translations as autonomous works and views himself as destined to canonize Vallejo by making his work known in the United States.

The poem ends with the narrator performing the ancient Japanese rite of *seppuku*, a ritual form of suicide by disembowelment usually reserved for samurais to die with honor rather than fall in the hands of their enemies or as punishment for serious offenses that bring dishonor to their character. The narrator sees the "[e]yes of father" and "tubes of mother" streaming from his gut as his past life escapes him, and the hybrid identity of "Eshleman/Vallejo" is "unlocked" from the "complex cavework of [his] own tomb" (25). Eshleman has noted several times throughout his career that he considers "The Book of Yorunomado" to be his first mature poem, a breakthrough work after which he ceased to write as a novice.⁵⁵ Through his translational encounter with Vallejo, Eshleman is literally born anew, and the poem ends with the narrator "unfurled" (27). The lack of punctuation in

the poem's last line suggests the open field of possibilities that Eshleman sees at this new stage of his career, presenting an image of a world in which men can give birth to other men through the violent and sexually-charged act of translation.

While not discounting the fact that translation was a lifelong vocation for Eshleman, a "saturation job" to borrow Olson's term, this symbolic rebirth also allows Eshleman a medium to escape his Indiana roots. Eshleman began this quest on his hitchhiking trip to Mexico, and as he notes in *Juniper Fuse*, it has been the impulse behind all his creative work since he began writing in 1958:

The main thing that kept me going was a blind belief that if I worked through the sexism, self-hate, bodilessness, soullessness, and suffocated human relationships that encrusted my background, I could tear down the "House of Eshleman" and lay out a new foundation in its place. (45)

Eshleman claims to have discovered this impulse during his experience in Reichian psychotherapy, which leads him to view poetry as an essential part of the therapeutic process. At the end of his poem "The Bridge at the Mayan Pass," written shortly after this experience, Eshleman symbolically casts off the weight of his Midwest heritage in a frantic, all-capitalized rant:

THE WEIGHT THE DREADED

WEIGHT I

NOW TAKE OFF INDIANA

I RELEASE INDIANA (*Selected Poems* 67)

"The Bridge at the Mayan Pass" originally appeared in *Indiana* (1969), a book in which Eshleman chronicles his complicated relationship to his birthplace. In the poem, as in many of Eshleman's poems and essays, "Indiana" becomes shorthand for the general conservatism and bigotry of 1950s white America. Eshleman is particularly harsh on his father, likening him to the puppet Charlie McCarthy, and producing a long list of the various reasons why he hates him, including his indifference to the poverty in South America and his refusal to give

a Christmas tip to an African-American paperboy, ultimately summing up his feelings toward his father with the following line: "I hate you because you are simply a cruddy uninteresting piece of this history" (65). Eshleman, in turn, seeks a surrogate father in Vallejo, one whose bohemian lifestyle was about as far from the comforts of Eshleman's Indianapolis upbringing as possible. But this new father figure must also be subdued and mastered in order for Eshleman to prove the originality of his vision and rise as a mature poet.

CHAPTER 5

“I SEE YOU BETTER THAN YOU DO / BECAUSE I’M FOREIGN”:

ALICE NOTLEY’S *DÉSAMÈRE*

The poets of the New York School made collaboration a part of their poetics to an extent that had not yet been seen in American poetry, expanding our notion of what could be considered a collaboration in the process. In his editorial comments at the back of the infamous special collaborations issue of *Locus Solus* (1961), Kenneth Koch (1925-2002) presents what is perhaps the best window onto the myriad activities the New York School poets included under the banner “collaboration”:

Most of the works here included were written with the two or more poets actually together while they wrote, though some were composed by poets working with already existing texts [...] and others by poets working with already existing languages ([Thomas] Chatterton’s “Rowley” poems and Frank O’Hara’s “Choses passagères”). (196-97)

Chatterton’s “Rowley” poems are a relatively well-known literary hoax in which the young Chatterton (1752-70) passed off a series of his own works as having been written by a mythical fifteenth-century priest named Thomas Rowley. It is now widely believed that the archaic diction in the poems was largely culled from John Kersey’s *Dictionarium Anglo-Britannicum* (1708). Frank O’Hara’s “Choses passagères” (1955) is a similar project, written in French and consisting largely of idiomatic phrases taken from the 1951 edition of *Cassell’s French-English English-French Dictionary*.⁵⁶ The bond between Chatterton and O’Hara’s texts is that both use dictionaries as keys to foreign or archaic idioms. If we can use Koch’s inclusion of such texts as an indicator, it becomes clear that the poets of the New York

School had a relatively loose definition of the term “collaboration” that included collaborating with dead writers, preexisting texts, and archaic and foreign languages. In these cases, the act of collaboration involves the construction of an alter ego that is based in a particular lexicon, archaic or foreign, and the cultivation of a network of intertextual connections associated with that lexicon. This innovative approach to collaboration has dramatic implications on the presentation of poetic subjectivity, for it suggests that the subjectivities constructed in such collaborations can be read themselves as allegories for the very links they enact between the early modern and the modern or the foreign and familiar.

This chapter examines Alice Notley’s book-length sequence *Désamère* (1995) as one of the longest and most revealing collaborations written in that vein by a writer associated with the New York School. *Désamère* is not—like Chatterton and O’Hara’s texts—a dictionary-work, but it does involve contact with a preexisting idiom, namely the voice and rhetorical strategies of the French surrealist Robert Desnos (1900-45). I argue that Notley’s choice of Desnos as a collaboration partner stems from the following three reasons: that he was French and a surrealist, that he suffered and died as the result of his internment in a Nazi concentration camp, and that he was a male poet (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, that his work is often seen as aggressively masculine). *Désamère* begins as a conversation between Desnos, who died the same year that Notley was born, a fact that does not go unnoticed in the book, and the female character Amère, who is both a stand-in for the author (Notley admits as much in the book’s preface) and metonymically linked to the United States of America: “My name’s Amère / See how it’s short for America?” (73).⁵⁷ Throughout the course of the book, the two fuse into a single figure named Désamère, who can be read as a symbol of the cross-cultural and transhistorical bond created in that fusion (Desnos plus America equals Désamère), a bond Notley ultimately presents as a solution to the social problems confronted in the book: U. S. cultural and political imperialism, the horrors of war, impending environmental disaster, and the marginality of women in U. S. culture.

The New York School of Surrealism

In the book's preface, Notley notes that *Désamère* was written in response to her move from New York to Paris in the early 1990s, not long after her husband Ted Berrigan's death in 1983, which gave her the perspective of looking at the social problems of the United States as an outsider. Notley, as we will see in more detail below, turns to Desnos as an oracle to help her make sense of the complicated, global present. She claims that she "owe[s] an apology to the French for coopting their Robert Desnos and making him speak as a dead man to my own American purposes" (4). Particularly because the book itself—as we will see later in the chapter—is extremely sensitive to the effects of U. S. foreign policy, Notley's comments bare an awareness of the appropriative dimension of her project and its danger of slipping into neocolonialist territory. Hence, she feels the need to apologize to the French for "coopting their Robert Desnos," as if he belonged to France itself. Notley's project is pulled back from the brink of neocolonialism, however, by the fact that her use of the term "co-opt" also carries hints of the term "co-op," the willingness and ability to work with others that marks the sense of collaboration outlined by Koch in *Locus Solus*. Her use of Desnos suggests that her relationship to surrealism and the French avant-garde is not competitive or derivative, as some critics have figured the relationship between the New York School and surrealism, but cooperative. The implication of this collaborative project is that U. S. poetry stands to benefit from contact with foreign poetics—particularly the French surrealism of Desnos—in much the same way that the U. S. itself stands to benefit from productive conversation with other nations. The questionable aspect of her project, on the other hand, is that Desnos himself is not alive to sign off as a willing participant, so one could argue that Notley is—perhaps unwillingly—participating in the very sort of imperialism that she claims the book to rally against, a charge that critics such as Serge Guilbault have levied against the New York School painters and their relation to the Paris art world. Nonetheless, there is a certain moral imperative to Notley's stance, and that moral

imperative is inextricably tied the conception of the book as a conversation between Notley and Desnos and their eventual fusion. This amounts to nothing less than an evolution in the poetics of the New York School, as Notley presents a much more advanced and aggressive understanding of the New York School's debt to surrealism than her peers and forbears. Before jumping into a discussion of *Désamère*, then, it seems necessary to sketch a history of the kinship lines between surrealism and the New York School poets and to contextualize Notley's place in that tradition.

To a certain degree, the seeds of Notley's adaptation of Desnos can be seen in the collaboration issue of *Locus Solus*, in which Koch presents an array of foreign poetries as poetic precursors, but Koch's editorial comments in the issue—and elsewhere—suggest a more derivative relationship to the French avant-garde than Notley. Although Koch presents an eclectic mix of foreign poets in the issue, other than those poets associated with the New York School, the largest amount of space in the issue is devoted to the surrealists, including works by André Breton, René Char, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, Yves Tanguy, and others, for a total of nineteen pages, all of which were specifically translated by Kenneth Koch and John Ashbery for publication in the issue. It is clear from his editorial comments that Koch's interest in surrealism goes beyond a shared affinity for such parlor games as the “exquisite corpse” and into a shared devotion to testing and exceeding the limitations of the singular poetic subjectivity:

The strangeness of the collaborating situation, many have felt, might lead them to the unknown, or at the least to some dazzling insights at which they could never have arrived consciously or alone. The surrealists were the first avowed practitioners of literary collaboration for this specific purpose. (193)

Koch's interest in French poetry and his interest in expanding the boundaries of lyric subjectivity are tied to his participation in the binarism that dogged poetic discourse during that era: avant-garde vs. academic, raw vs. cooked, Pound and Williams vs. Eliot. Whatever terms one uses to characterize the debate, the argument is essentially the same: that there are

two distinct strands of American poetry, one of which is a bastion of English literary tradition, while the other wishes to erode that tradition in the effort of pushing the genre forward and inventing new forms for contemporary concerns. In a well-known poem from this era, “Fresh Air” (1962), Koch criticizes the popular poets of the day for their mythologizing of the self, an aesthetic gesture that he perceived to be retrograde. He claims, for example, that stumbling across work “Written by the men with their eyes on the myth / And the Missus and the midterms, in the *Hudson Review*” has the ability to ruin an otherwise pleasant spring day (125). The poets he views as fresh enough not to ruin a pleasant spring day are resolutely French: “Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire, Eluard, Reverdy, French poets are still of our time” (123).

The “raw vs. cooked” debate, of course, has its root in the work of the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who used the terms as a shorthand to differentiate between that which is found in nature and that which is a product of human culture. The application of these terms to mid-century U. S. poetry is hardly news today. The metaphor is generally deployed by proponents of the “raw” side of the equation, and the implication is that “raw” poetry is superior because it does not pander to mass consumption. Koch’s comments are worth noting here because he presents the binary in international terms: the “raw” poets derive their sources from France, while the “cooked” ones derive theirs from England. In an interview with Daniel Kane published in *What Is Poetry: Conversations with the American Avant-Garde* (2003), Koch speaks of his aesthetic practice as motivated by a desire to “break away from ‘poetry’ poetry. This was something I thought was French” (94-95). What Koch means by “poetry” poetry is, he claims, characterized by “Eliot, and depression, and despair, and inky-dinky meter” (95). Juxtaposed to this tradition, Koch places a more playful method of composition, which he cites as stemming from the French poet Max Jacob (1876-1944): “From Jacob I learned how to be comic and lyrical at the same time. That was quite a discovery” (95). The only poets from the United States beyond the members of his immediate circle that Koch speaks positively of are Walt Whitman (1819-

92), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), and William Carlos Williams (1883-1963). If what Nathaniel Mackey says is true when he writes, “As a writer, one has to find one’s tradition, create one’s tradition, and in doing that create lines of affinity and kinship that can cut across national boundaries, ethnic boundaries, and so forth” (190), then Koch’s personal pantheon leans heavily toward French and American modernism. Koch’s comments present an image of American poetry—at least around the time he began writing—as lagging behind France aesthetically. Other than a handful of literary mavericks—Koch and his friends included—American poetry is a resolutely minor player in the field of world literature, and in order for American poets to move forward, they must import cultural forms from France, the locus of the international avant-garde.

Anthologists and literary historians tell a very similar story, although this story is sometimes tinged with hints of national competition that sound reminiscent of William Carlos Williams’ attitude that I spoke of in chapter three, suggesting that his shadow was still cast over American perceptions of the U. S. role in world literature even after his death. In the introduction to his anthology *The Poets of the New York School* (1969), for example, editor and curator John Bernard Myers draws a Koch-like distinction between academic and avant-garde poetries. He writes:

In the early Fifties I found it difficult to enjoy much poetry then being published as “new.” By comparison with the verses of older poets such as e.e. cummings, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, the stream of “acceptable” stuff was swollen by competent “craftsmen,” unengaging, invertebrate. (7)

Compared to the giants of American literary modernism, the popular poets of the 1950s were—in Myers’ view—pallid and effete, lacking real backbone. Juxtaposed to this tradition of competent “craftsmen,” Myers presents the poets in his anthology, who he claims were influenced more by contemporary U. S. painting than contemporary U. S. poetry.⁵⁸ Along the way, Myers explicitly positions the American scene in opposition to the French avant-

garde: “New York at the time had become suddenly the art center of the world. For years Paris had been steadily declining in its power to produce fresh, significant painting” (8). According to Myers, New York’s ascent was due to the belated influence of André Breton, who spread the surrealist influence in his time of exile in New York during World War II, claiming that Breton was “a man who had had no influence whatever on the American literary scene while he lived in America but who, by a complex carom shot, was now to make himself felt to a later literary generation though transmission by the plastic arts” (9).⁵⁹

Myers makes an even more pronounced version of this argument in an *Evergreen Review* article entitled “The Impact of Surrealism on the New York School” (1960). Here, Myers speaks with nationalistic fervor, claiming that “France is at present a stronghold of all that is conservative, cruel and philistine” (75-6). From this perspective, then, “it is not surprising that the seeds which Breton planted in New York during the years in which he resided here have come to flower in a soil *not* French” (75; emphasis in original). “The life giving energy,” Myers claims:

the essence of all that which is avant-garde apparently needs a more ebullient society, a society more anarchic than that which obtains in France, or indeed throughout Europe. For whatever the causes (and they are many and tragic), the avant-garde spirit seems largely to continue in New York. (76)

Part of Myers’ distinction seems to be class-based, as the “upper-class prejudices” of the older, more established European vanguard is juxtaposed to “the rough and ready Americans who lived in lofts and did not kiss ladies’ hands” (76). This results, in Myers’ formulation at least, in a pragmatic strand of avant-garde activity, “the art of painting strong, expressive pictures which were valid in themselves” (77). In Myers’ case, the class division functions as a thinly veiled nationalism, with the earlier, European painters portrayed as effete and upper-class while contemporary U. S. painters are positively portrayed as working-class heroes.

“Europe no longer understands the messages of Breton” (85), Myers claims, and the poets of the New York School are presented as second-generation homegrown surrealists, regardless of whether or not the poets would have presented themselves as such. In his book *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (1998), the poet David Lehman (b. 1948), a former student of Koch’s at Columbia, makes a similar argument. Lehman positions his book, published by Doubleday and geared toward a popular audience,⁶⁰ as a sequel of sorts to Roger Shattuck’s *The Banquet Years: The Origins of the Avant Garde in France, 1885 to World War I* (1968), which chronicles the symbiotic relationship between the arts in Paris at the dawn of the twentieth century by focusing on the work of the painter Henri Rousseau (1844-1910), composer Erik Satie (1866-1925), and the writers Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) and Guillaume Apollinaire (1880-1918), who Lehman notes was “the champion of Cubism and the man who gave Surrealism its name” (2). “Substitute Frank O’Hara for Apollinaire and Abstract Expressionism for Cubism,” Lehman claims:

and you get an eerie fit. The poets of the New York School were as heterodox, as belligerent toward the literary establishment and as loyal to each other, as their Parisian predecessors had been. [...] It is as though they translated the avant-garde idiom of “perpetual collaboration” from the argot of turn-of-the-century Paris to the roughhewn vernacular of the American metropolis at midcentury. (2)⁶¹

Lehman’s choice of the verb “translate” is a telling one, for it suggests both that the New York School poets bear a derivative relationship to their Parisian predecessors and that the “avant-garde idiom” of those predecessors had been transformed in the process. Lehman, with his emphasis on the New York School’s “roughhewn vernacular,” also retains some of Myers’ characterization of the New York poets as distinctly working-class.

Not every poet associated with the New York School, of course, was quick to adopt the “New York School” moniker or sanction the view of literary history that placed themselves as the direct descendants of French surrealism. In a 1968 statement from the

National Book Awards symposium, for example, John Ashbery expresses his displeasure with the “New York School” label because its pigeon-hole effect: “If you start out writing haikus, man, then it’s haikus from here on in [...]. One thing I am certain of as regards to poetry is that I feel it should be anything it wants to be” (113). Ashbery claims that—if it has a program at all—the New York School program “is the absence of any program,” which “amounts to not planning the poem in advance but letting it take its own way” (115). This, Ashbery claims, “is descended from Surrealism” (115): “I do not think of myself as a surrealist, but I feel akin to it in the same way the poet Henri Michaux does—he once said that he wasn’t a Surrealist, but that Surrealism for him was *la grande permission*—the big permission” (115-16).⁶² In “The Heritage of Dada and Surrealism” (1967), a review of the Museum of Modern Art exhibit *Dada, Surrealism and Their Heritage*, Ashbery echoes this sentiment, taking the idea a step further in claiming:

Surrealism had been the chief influence on [Michaux] as a writer because it gave him the permission (*la grande permission* was his phrase) to do as he pleased. In this sense we are all indebted to Surrealism; the significant art of our time could not have been produced without it. (*Reported 6-7*)

Ashbery spends much of the review railing against the “narrow interpretation of [surrealism’s] theologians” (6) and advocating a broader interpretation of the movement that views surrealism’s primary achievement as total aesthetic freedom. In this latter sense, Ashbery claims, surrealism is “still what’s happening” (8). This ambivalent attitude toward surrealism remained constant throughout Ashbery’s career. In an interview conducted by Lehman in October 1984, for example, when asked whether he felt his work had been influenced by the surrealists, Ashbery replies, “Not the actual Surrealists, but hybrid ones like [Pierre] Reverdy and Max Jacob” (qtd. in Lehman 97). Ashbery’s reply is emblematic of the tendency of U. S. poets to privilege the aesthetic advancements of surrealism over such ideological elements as the liberation of consciousness, and his use of the term “hybrid”

points to a similar tendency to categorize foreign writers whose work loosely fits such aesthetic criteria—Michaux, Reverdy, Jacob—under the banner of surrealism.⁶³

Notley's peers, on the other hand, the poets of the so-called "second generation" New York School, were much more forthcoming on the influence of surrealism on their work. In poet and noted translator of French poetry Ron Padgett's book *Ted: A Personal Memoir of Ted Berrigan* (1993), Padgett's recollection of his lifelong friendship with Berrigan, Padgett speaks openly about the surrealist-inspired collaborations and parlor games on which he and Berrigan embarked. The female poets of the group, however, exhibited more distance from surrealism, possibly because they came of age in an era after cultural critics like Simone de Beauvoir had interrogated the movement's cultivation of an idealized image of "Woman" as an object of desire and mystery. In her "Idiosyncratic Poetry Pyramid: A Guide to Daily Poetry Choices" (2003), a playful piece that uses the food pyramid as a model to guide a reader's daily choice of reading material, Bernadette Mayer (b. 1945) places surrealism at the top in the "Fats, Oils, and Sweets" section with the recommendation to "use sparingly" (139). This is a surprising placement, as Mayer has experimented with surrealist-inspired compositional techniques throughout her career. It is difficult to take the document too seriously, however, as the project has a very tongue-in-cheek feel. In addition, there are certain inconsistencies in the piece. "Plagiarism," for example, is placed both in the "Fats, Oils, and Sweets" section at the top of the pyramid and in the "Bread, Cereal, Rice, Pasta Group" at the base. It is also possible to read surrealism's inclusion in the "Fats, Oils, and Sweets" group as a positive attribute, for that group contains many of the food items that we know are bad for us but love to consume anyway.

One does not have to look far to find affinities with surrealism in Mayer's work. On the back of her *Utopia* (1984), for example, is a blurb by André Breton, presumably written by Mayer herself, which reads, "I do believe Mayer is one of the few humans living (as I am not) who has read my 'Ode to Charles Fourier.'" She also places Breton's *Ode to Charles Fourier*, most likely the 1970 edition translated by Kenneth White and published by Cape

Goliard, in her selected bibliography of utopian works (129). In addition, Mayer's preface to *Utopia* ends with a description of a recent dream, which leaves Mayer feeling "anxious to get out of bed and do something" (7), suggesting an affinity with Breton's vision of dreaming as key to social change. The most glaring example of Mayer's debt to surrealism, however, is *The 3:15 Experiment* (2001), a foray into automatic writing in which Mayer, Lee Ann Brown, Danika Dinsmore, and Jen Hofer awoke at 3:15 A.M. each morning during the month of August in the years between 1993-2000 and wrote the first thing that came to mind. In her introduction to the book, fittingly written at 3:15, Hofer describes the project in terms that would have felt at home in Breton's "Manifesto of Surrealism":

The project is not about the imposition of the waking (critical) (refined) mind on the 3:15 (raw) (critical) mind. Cannot be. It is about scratching a small transparent spot into the opaque surface of sleep, of dream, of our daily existence in that other nightly world, to see what is there. Merely what is there, merely to see. (xii-xiii)

Unlike Breton, who made specific claims that automatic writing had the potential to liberate the human subject by exploding the division between conscious and unconscious states, the authors of *The 3:15 Experiment* make no explicit claims about the political implications of their text. Hofer does, however, state that the goal of the project is "to see," so one could read such implications into *The 3:15 Experiment*, even if Hofer attempts to undercut such a reading with the word "merely." Like the surrealists, and Koch in his editorial comments in *Locus Solus*, the authors of *The 3:15 Experiment* are interested in collective activity's ability to interrogate the dominance and transparency of the individual poetic subjectivity. Albert Flynn DeSilver, the book's editor, notes the work's emphasis on "time, consciousness (altered), collaboration, community, and ritual" in his introduction (ix). And fellow collaborator Danika Dinsmore similarly notes that the writers were concerned with "the ideas of ritual, of collective consciousness, of altered states, and of record" (x). She goes on to describe the personal attraction of these ideas: "what attracts me to ritual is the rhythm of

the drip. half-conscious interior / exterior. is the partnership between self and other. the timelessness of dream-state” (xi). Partnership and community seem to have been the shared goals of these collaborators.

Désamère

Alice Notley’s *Désamère* is unique amid the New York School canon in the sense that it explicitly returns to the source of the New York School conception of collaboration, presenting the longest sustained interaction between a New York School poet and French surrealism. Curiously, there is little in Notley’s oeuvre that suggests an interest in Desnos or surrealism prior to *Désamère*. Even if one looks at Notley’s introduction to *Désamère* and other ancillary material from this time period, she makes no mention of the word “surrealism,” although she does nod toward surrealist tropes such as writing while under a self-induced trance, a compositional method that Desnos infamously employed. In the introduction to *Désamère*, however, Notley offers some insight into her choice of Desnos as a collaboration partner:

I found thinking of his life very moving, and I’d always liked his funny, luxurious poetry. His voice in my poem is oracular by reason of his known aptitude for dreaming, his life experience (including his death as a result of Nazi internment), and also his insouciance. Insouciance is a freeing quality that can open poetry to truth. (6)

Notley’s comment that she had always liked Desnos’ “funny, luxurious poetry” sounds very similar to Koch’s that he learned from Max Jacob “how to be comic and lyrical at the same time,” but Notley takes *la grande permission* that Koch and the poets of his generation derived from surrealism and ascribed qualities of “truth” to it.

Notley gives little indication what aspect of Desnos’ life she finds moving. His aptitude for dreaming? His life experience? His insouciance? The answer is most likely an

amalgamation of all three, but the strongest link seems to be the suffering Desnos endured in Nazi concentration camps. This suffering, in Notley's eyes, seems to be where Desnos' "truth" comes from, as it imbues Desnos with prophetic insight into contemporary American history: "It's Desnos' voice," she claims in the preface, "that explains recent American history to the 'heroine,' Amère, embedding in it her personal suffering" (4). The embedding of contemporary American history in the "personal suffering" of the narrator Amère is where Notley's appropriation of Desnos becomes sticky, for Notley equates Amère's suffering with her own: "She is myself, a fact that's not interesting except insofar as anyone realizes that one is a product of one's times. This realization is quite horrible in horrible times" (4). In other words, Notley draws a loose parallel between her own personal experiences and those of Desnos, an extremist comparison beyond tendentiousness. Despite this tendentiousness, Notley's adaptation of Desnos allows her to construct a transindividual model of poetic subjectivity that functions as an allegory for a given historical period. Because it is derived from Desnos, who occupies a position far removed from that of Notley, this model has the potential to cut across the boundaries of nation and gender, as Desnos' death as the result of his internment in a Nazi concentration camp makes him the ultimate symbol for suffering that results from the conditions of a culture gone awry.

Desnos is a valuable precursor for Notley both because he is a foreigner and because of his mediumistic ability to speak from a trance. This position allows Desnos to speak as an objective and unmediated observer of not only Notley herself but also recent American history. In a 2007 interview with the poet CA Conrad, Notley briefly mentions Desnos' experiments with trance writing, one of the few places in which she makes explicit reference to surrealism:

Desnos, who famously would fall asleep and dream for the Surrealists, is the oracular voice of the poem, telling the history of the century between World War II and the poem's present, out of the knowledge he possesses being a dead person, a poet, and a victim of a concentration camp.

If surrealism is, as André Breton claims in his “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924), primarily concerned with the clarity that can be achieved through the collision of distant realities, Notley figures this collision along historical and geopolitical lines. Desnos is able to speak to the present state of U. S. affairs because he is a foreigner from an earlier historical epoch who died as a result of that epoch’s most fundamental crisis. At the end of his first speech in *Désamère*, his character tells Amère:

I see you better than you do
 Because I’m foreign and because I died
 In nineteen forty-five,
 The last time things seemed clear. (70)

Here, Notley presents a different model of cross-cultural influence than Koch and her New York School predecessors, a model that is less concerned with what foreign writers can teach us about craft than what foreigners can teach us about us.

Notley’s turn to an oracular voice has its root in *Close to me & Closer ... (The Language of Heaven)*, the book Notley wrote immediately prior to *Désamère* and included in the same volume, which also features an authoritative dead male character speaking from beyond the grave.⁶⁴ In this case, the character is Notley’s father, who is there to instruct Notley on what life is like after death. The conversation in *Désamère* is broader in the sense that it investigates intercultural communication, but the connection between Notley’s father and Desnos goes beyond the fact that both are dead men from whom Notley can benefit, particularly since Notley and Desnos share working-class backgrounds and strong connections to the places in which they were born. Notley’s father was a car parts salesman, whose regional and class-based manner of speaking she tried to capture in *Close to me & Closer ... (The Language of Heaven)*: “I let the voice dictate to me exactly what to write with very little interference from ‘my’ rationalizing self” (3), Notley claims in the book’s preface, echoing such voice based experiments as Desnos’ supposedly unconscious channeling of Marcel Duchamp’s alterego Rose Sélavy in the 1920s.⁶⁵ In pushing her “rationalizing self” aside and allowing the voice

of her father to “dictate” the poem’s content, Notley presents a model of poetic subjectivity that goes beyond the notion of the lyric persona as a foil for the author and into an allegory for the act of conversation. It is not surprising, then, that the book uses ellipsis to chop the dialogue into phrasal units in a similar fashion as Notley’s now infamous use of quotation marks in her previous volume *The Descent of Alette* (1992).

This use of conversation has its root in surrealism, not only in the surrealist emphasis on mediumship but also in the logic of dreams, which Notley characterizes as a form of conversation with “godlike” possibilities in “What Can Be Learned from Dreams?,” a 1991 essay published in her and Douglas Oliver’s magazine *Scarlet*. In this essay, she notes that dreams are populated with “the real dead & living” who are there “to remind out that you miss them, or that you hurt, that you’re anxious, that you feel inadequate.” Notley presents *Close to me & Closer ... (The Language of Heaven)* and *Désamère* as just this type of conversation. “Dream,” according to Notley, “knows many things about me, about life even, that I don’t.” If one is able to interpret dreams—and Notley acknowledges the difficulty of doing so—one is presented with a more complete understanding of the world and the forces of good and evil that control it than one can achieve from science. She criticizes, for example, the Big Bang theory for its inability to instruct: “How can anyone be interested in a theory of origin which does not contain a seed of an explanation of the millennia-long subjugation of women & men, a hint of what has lead to the grotesqueness of war & the cruelty of slavery?” It would be easy to dismiss such statements for their mythical or mystical bearings, but Notley’s interest in finding the “seed of an explanation” for a history of power struggles also leads her to experiment with a poetics that goes beyond the representation of individual subjectivity to examine the act of communication between individuals and between disparate cultures and historical epochs.

Toward the end of the essay, Notley relays the story of a dream she had in which a rosebush near her brother’s grave was transformed into “a heavy plaster monument with a woman’s form & long hair sculpted on its surface.” In Notley’s interpretation, this

transformation came to symbolize the “shallow rhetoric” surrounding the Persian Gulf War, particularly the notion that by winning the Gulf War, the United States was able to bury the demons of defeat that had plagued the country since Vietnam: “In the symbolism of the dream the Iraqi War is a slab of plaster laid down in place of a natural thing, a rosebush, which we had made grow over time.” One could argue that it is a stretch to associate the plaster slab with the Gulf War’s supplanting Vietnam in contemporary political discourse, but the accuracy of Notley’s interpretation is not the issue here. Rather, I would like to focus on the relationship between that interpretation and the content of *Désamère*—both share themes of the aftershocks of war, the pervasive rhetoric surrounding wars, and the destruction of the natural world—and the ultimate implication of dreams that she calls for in the conclusion of the essay. Here, she claims that understanding dreams gives the possibility of harmonious conversation between nations and the potential to prevent future conflict: “Suppose a world leader were in touch with his dreams? Would he finally have the delicacy of understanding necessary to conduct a conversation, a real conversation, with foreigners, with others? without leaping into Action?” Because dreams function dialogically in Notley’s view, they have the potential to provide solutions to contemporary geopolitical conflict. Although the surrealist emphasis on dreams was primarily geared toward bridging the gap between conscious and unconscious states, one could read this binary metaphorically as the attempt to mediate between opposing sides of an argument. In this sense, dreams always already functioned dialogically within the rubric of surrealism. In other words, it may be a stretch—but not too far of a stretch—to suggest Notley’s claim that dreams have the ability to mediate between opposing sides in a geopolitical conflict is in the surrealist vein. And no member of the original surrealist movement was better known for his ability to serve in this mediumistic role than Robert Desnos.

Notley’s turn to Desnos also reinforces the notion that I spoke of in chapter two that U. S. poets are generally drawn to dissident surrealist figures, especially since Desnos was excommunicated by Breton in 1929 for pursuing a career in journalism. Not only is

Desnos an outcast from orthodox surrealism, but he is also literally a foreigner to Notley, one whose land and language Notley was just beginning to navigate when she began work of *Désamère*, a foreigner whose literary and artistic traditions had long been considered rivals to those of the New York School poets and painters. And, of course, Desnos—like Notley’s brother—died as the result of his involvement in a brutal international conflict. In his placement in a Nazi interment camp, Desnos was singled out because of his otherness, and Notley’s book is an attempt to reach out to the foreign with the hope of alleviating future suffering of such magnitude.

In *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (2003), Katharine Conley claims Desnos was a surrealist in everything he did, from his early experiments in automatism to his radio work in the 1930s and the impromptu lectures on surrealism and surrealist jokes he delivered as a political prisoner in Nazi concentration camps. She relates stories of how Desnos was able to use his imagination—by pretending, for example, to read palms and predict long lifelines in the hands of his fellow prisoners—to raise their hopes and spirits. “By popularizing surrealism in the media and by carrying it into Nazi deportation camps,” Conley claims, “[Desnos] contributed to the lasting effect surrealism has had on the twentieth-century imaginary” (1). For these reasons, Conley argues that Desnos—not Breton—should be viewed as the movement’s driving force: “It is my contention here that Desnos was the person who shaped the very definition of surrealism, who inspired Bretonian surrealism, and through whom, consequently, the movement should be read” (3). Although she acknowledges that the most fruitful recent work on surrealism as a movement has been in describing its group dynamic, Conley essentially creates a binary between Bretonian and Desnosian surrealism, proclaiming Desnosian surrealism to be the “true” surrealism though which we should judge those associated with the movement. If Conley’s argument has a fault, that fault lies in the fact that she replaces one central figure in a genius-theory model of literary history with another. Despite this shortcoming, there is something valuable in her acknowledgement that Desnos and Breton practiced a different kind of

surrealism, for the two are generally lumped together in literary histories, and her clarification of Desnosian surrealism as being primarily concerned with finding the marvelous in everyday life.

The notion that everything Desnos did in life was carried out as a surrealist would have appealed to Notley who has stated on several occasions that everything she has done in her adult life has been done in the service of being a poet. And his emphasis on uncovering the marvelous in everyday life would have also appealed to her as well, for until the period of her career beginning with *The Descent of Alette*, her work was—like many of her New York School peers—oriented toward the quotidian, toward finding a unique way to capture the mysteries of everyday life that had hitherto been excluded from the subject matter of poems. This can be particularly seen in her work from the 1970s, in such poems as “January” (1979), a poem that revels—among other things—in the peculiar syntax of children who are just beginning to learn how to use language as a communicative tool. The poem begins, for example, with a conversation between Notley and one of her young sons: “Mommy what’s this fork doing? / What? / It’s being Donald Duck” (*Selected* 44).

Notley discusses this predilection toward previously excluded subject matter in “The Poetics of Disobedience,” a lecture given at King’s College in 1998, positioning that predilection in relation to her antagonistic position toward her male predecessors:

I’ve spoken in other places of the problems, too, of subjects that hadn’t been broached much in poetry and of how it seemed one had to disobey the past and the practices of literary males in order to talk about what was going on most literarily around one, the pregnant body, and babies for example. There were no babies in poetry then.

Notley might have been better off saying that there were no babies in the experimental wings of American poetry, as she excludes such poets as Sylvia Plath (1932-63), Anne Sexton (1928-74), and the early Adrienne Rich (b. 1929). Her position here, however, is a revision of the position she outlined in an earlier lecture *Doctor Williams’ Heiresses* (1980), delivered at 80

Langton Street and published as a chapbook later that year by Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press. In *Doctor Williams' Heiresses*, Notley discusses the complex process of becoming a female foil to Williams as a male. The lecture has a pedagogical tone to it, and it is clear that Notley's relationship to Williams is based on what she can learn from him as a poet. Several times throughout the lecture she notes that she considers Williams to be the greatest poet of the twentieth century and that he taught her how to write as herself:

The thing about William Carlos Williams is [...] he sets himself up to be this character of the American male in this way. [...] So if you're a woman you can relate to him in this way, where you'll be the woman, the typical American woman character. He made himself be this character, so you can make yourself be this other character, the polar opposite of him, & it enables you to have access to his secrets & to his diction & to his ways of thinking.

Again, we can see here that Notley is constructing the poetic subject as an allegory for gendered, national stereotypes. Williams "sets himself up to be this character of the American male," while Notley positions herself in response as "the typical American woman character." This, of course, is not an orthodox surrealist gesture, but it does have its root in the surrealist predilection for binaries and sense of gender essentialism that I spoke of in my discussion of Soupault's *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* in chapter three. Instead of disobeying her male predecessors, as she suggested in "The Poetics of Disobedience," Notley advocates borrowing heavily from the work of those predecessors and applying that borrowed knowledge to localized, female concerns. In this way, Notley is able to adapt Williams in much the same way that Williams adapted Soupault. Notley juxtaposes this practice to the feminist practice of uncovering forgotten female poets and writers, thereby separating herself from the contemporaneous trajectory of feminist criticism:

[Y]ou could use [Williams] to sound entirely new if you were a woman. [...] I thought we didn't need to read women—I mean find the hidden in the woodwork ones—so much as find the poems among whatever sex that made

you feel free to say whatever you liked. Williams makes you feel that you can say anything, including your own anything.

As she had in her claim that there were no babies in poetry until she began writing about motherhood, Notley seems to prefer to view herself here as an outsider and a pioneer. There is a lot at stake for her in this move, as she risks alienating herself from her female contemporaries and reifying gender categories, but the move is made in the spirit of *la grande permission* that Ashbery inherited from surrealism, total aesthetic freedom and the absence of dogma.

Notley takes a similar approach in her collaboration with Desnos as she outlined with Williams above. Instead of digging up “hidden in the woodwork” French female poets to aid her project, Notley goes straight to Desnos, one of the most visible and influential French poets of the twentieth century. In doing so, Notley’s collaborative project strives toward a poetics based in the extinction of the individual ego and essentialist views of nationhood, although curiously not necessarily gender essentialism, a vision in which there is “nothing in America / In a country with a name or leader” (82). This post-nationalist insight comes from Desnos, whose character exclaims, “I am dead, and I am happy / I’m not French now” (87). Desnos’ insight is presented as stemming from his experiences in a Nazi interment camp, during which time he claims, “I was free / Whole countries of freedom inside me” (77). The idea that a person in a Nazi interment camp could be “free” is shocking at first, but Desnos’ freedom in *Désamère* comes from his ability to break down the barriers between the self and non-self, to effectively contain whole countries within the self. Notley’s use of Desnos as the person who delivers these lines suggests an alternate interpretation of *la grande permission* that the New York School poets inherited from surrealism: the freedom to construct multiple poetic subjectivities in the same work, with each of these subjectivities serving a particular allegorical function. In short, Notley’s Desnos lives according to the famous Arthur Rimbaud dictum that the surrealists held so dear: *Je est une autre* (“I is an other”). Notley’s vision of Desnos’ insouciance in the face of such horrific circumstances

prompts Amère to dream of a world “[i]n which there’s no Frenchness, no Americanness” (88). That is, a world in which the distinctions between Frenchness and Americanness do not matter as much as they do in ours, a world in which there is no difference between “Human or beetle or rock” (88).

The central question that arises here is whether this gesture is a universalizing or a globalizing move. When asked—in an interview with the poet John Olson (1999)—to elaborate on her claim in the preface to *Désamère* that moving to France allowed her to view the problems of the United States as an outsider, Notley rails against the globalizing force of American culture:

I’ve observed, from France, the rise of the multinationals and of further computer technology, also of scientific hegemony (incipient genetic tyranny, Monsanto seeds, my own fear that French food will cease to taste good). It’s happening here too but I see it better from here as emanating from its American context and spreading throughout the world. [...] I see the continuing negative effect of American political policy and economic and cultural imperialism on the rest of the world. Nothing much good is happening. (171)

Notley’s emphasis is on the effects that U. S. actions (e.g., “genetic tyranny”) have on other nations (e.g., that French food will cease to taste good). In other words, Notley is concerned with preserving what is foreign about the foreign while simultaneously striving for a sense of sameness or communion with the foreign. Fundamentally, Notley’s use of Desnos rests on the allegorical function that his presence plays in this investigation, and this allegory is carried out both formally and thematically in the book. The first section of *Désamère*, for example, is literally structured as a conversation between Desnos (or Notley’s version of Desnos) and Amère, an allegorical stand-in for both Notley and the United States. Notley is

in conversation with Desnos both in the sense that she is reacting to him as the representative of a literary tradition from whom her work can learn and more generally as a foreigner through whose eyes she can gain a more focused view of the social and ecological effects of globalization and U. S. foreign policy. The book literally begins with the confusion and dissolution of identity, as the three principle characters of the opening section—Amère, her brother, and Desnos—are initially referred to in the third-person and the text zooms in from the heavens in a modified omniscient point of view: “Overhead at night, above the planet / Identity gone to sleep...Look what I’ve done / End of a century, world so human” (69). It is not clear who the “I” is here, but one could read the “I” as a sort of godlike deity because of the setting and the fact that the narrator feels a sense of responsibility for the problems of the world. This foreshadows Notley’s solution to the potential major environmental catastrophe brought on by human disregard for the natural world (“world so human / It may become a desert”). The tone of the piece, however, is not entirely apocalyptic, as it projects a semblance of hope from the arid, desolate landscape: “What nondescript hardy little bushes!” (69). The perseverance of the “hardy little bushes” suggests that there is a future for humanity and the natural world after the impending global environmental disaster.

According to Notley’s projection of Desnos, the key to revising or reversing this future disaster is through dreaming: “[Y]ou can’t leave your pasts,” he tells Amère and her brother, “I’ll try to dream you out of them” (69). Desnos’ dreams of the future carry both a warning and a solution:

Desnos says, “The future’s this desert

I’m dreaming

The future, there’s nothing in it but spirit

There are no animals
 And then no people, it's so beautiful
 White and empty like dissolved bones of a carcass' (72)

The lack of punctuation, however, allows Desnos' syntax to be interpreted in multiple directions. The first three lines, for example, can be read as, "The future's this desert. I'm dreaming the future. There's nothing in it but spirit," or, "The future's this desert I'm dreaming. The future, there's nothing in it but spirit." The first option begins more concretely, as if the future is *this* desert, the desert in which the characters currently find themselves. Only later does the concept of dreaming arise, perhaps as a way to imagine a less arid future or a way to envision beauty amid the desert landscape ("it's so beautiful / White and empty like dissolved bones of a carcass"). In the second interpretation, however, the concept of dreaming is foregrounded, as if the desert itself were always a figment of the dream world. In the first option, the dream presents a solution to the environmental catastrophe that the book confronts, the recognition of the common "spirit" shared by the human and animal world. In the second option, the dream functions more like a crystal ball or an oracle, presenting an image of an apocalyptic future.

Ultimately, the scope of the problems confronted in *Désamère* is very different from that of the problems confronted by Desnos in his lifetime, prompting the French poet to admit, "I can't make this dream stable / Your times are too nervous" (71). Desnos seems puzzled—or perhaps troubled—at being summoned by Notley to solve the dizzying problems of the present:

Why am I here in this grief, as if
 My nationality, French or human,
 Has dominion over me after death? (87)

Even in such moments of doubt, Desnos provides Amère with a solution in the assumption that the boundaries of the nation-state and the normative divisions between the human and non-human should not hold dominion over the self. The curious elision of “French” and “human” under the rubric of “nationality” suggests that the problems of contemporary geopolitical conflict both stem from and transcend modern concepts of the nation-state. This is where the book turns toward the ecocritical, as Notley explicitly links the destruction of the planet with the destructive power of modern warfare. At one point in the text, for example, Notley’s Desnos criticizes the catastrophic effect of U. S. military action on the Vietnamese ecosystem:

The effect of war
 On all wildlife is unimaginable, I dream
 How Americans kill the elephants
 Who provide the Viet Cong transport. (75)

This criticism rests in part on the reductive juxtaposition of the highly technological means of U. S. warfare—the work makes nods, for example, toward Agent Orange—with the much simpler—and thus more in tune with nature—way of life of the Viet Cong, who rely on elephants as a means of transportation. Despite—or perhaps because of—these reductive associations, Notley locates the source of conflict between humans and the natural world in U. S. foreign policy. At the same time, the complacency of the American people in Notley’s view is as much to blame as their leaders:

‘In the judging of Nixon,’ Desnos says,
 ‘Perhaps everyone’s judged, to the extent that
 Everyone tolerates him:
 Trees disappear, animals die, don’t they?
 The same laxness results in global warming,
 In a world where it’s difficult not to be guilty.’ (77)

In the book's central section, Désamère must seek her own answers to these contemporary problems during a biblically-inspired period of isolation and temptation in a desert, which Desnos claims she must "enclose in [her] largesse" (72). During this period, Désamère gradually comes to represent a construction of poetic subjectivity in which historical catastrophe and the ecological are equal strands. While walking around, for example, she observes that the creatures in the desert lose their names and identities and begin to blend with herself: "Everything one thing. Almost one color. Inside me is no different" (101). Soon after, Désamère begins to question her connection to the human race and the baggage that comes along with it, suggesting a strong urge for communion with the natural world: "Why am I person? Still don't see the point. Small creature's closer to god, less distracted, destructive" (103).

Désamère's temptation comes in the form of a friendly, seemingly well-meaning high school guidance counselor who speaks to her in the soothing tones of a psychologist. He tries to get her to accept things the way that they are and to acknowledge the importance of her individuality: "World comes before universe,' he says. 'Own species before others'"(95). She is suspicious of him, however, and regards such statements as a "power play" (97). After prolonged isolation in the desert, Désamère loses memory of her own name and own face. She is able to remember that she had a brother in uniform, but is unable to remember whether or not there was even a war. When the counselor returns, Désamère snaps out of this transcendent state: "Don't you want to know who you are?" he asks (104), to which Désamère replies, "I'm not who I am. In your terms" (105). The period of isolation has changed Désamère's conception of her own subjectivity, and she now views herself as a participant in a more universal subjectivity. When the counselor tells Désamère that she cannot live alone forever in the desert, she responds, "That's true [...] But why does the world have to be unhappy? Covered with meaningless games? A show of power, no matter what you do" (107). The counselor responds, "It's what there is [...]. Can't change it" (107). But Désamère ultimately concludes, "Can change self though" (107). The turn to the

personal here, then, is a political act, as in the act of changing the self she sees the genesis of a potential solution to global conflict.

Désamère returns from the desert in section three of the book with the ability to shift forms ["I'm now a seahorse / I see myself delicately armored and scaled" (137)] and with the intent to instruct. Although it would be difficult to determine whether or not Notley had seen his films by this point in her life, the seahorse image suggests an affinity with the scientific documentaries of Jean Painlevé, a figure who was marginally associated with surrealism, particularly his 1934 film *L'Hippocampe* (The Seahorse).⁶⁶ The seahorse held a special place of fascination for the surrealists because of the fact that the male of the species are the ones responsible for gestation and giving birth. Painlevé, however, was not content to merely marvel at such "oddities" as the seahorse. Rather, he felt that the medium of film could be used to interrogate the way humans look at the natural world through an anthropomorphic lens: "Everything is subject to the most absurd anthropomorphism," he wrote, "completely made for humans and in the image of humanity, explaining it only in relation to humanity, otherwise 'it's a waste of time'" (Bellows 136). Observing the seahorse, in Painlevé's view, tells us as much about its sexual practices as our attitudes toward our own sexual practice. In this sense, each film becomes a dissertation on seeing, and Painlevé is never secretive about the imposition of his own ordering subjectivity in the film, be it through the use of expressive music or leading intertitles. While not entirely discounting documentary film's ability to instruct or explain, Painlevé maintained a level of skepticism toward the medium's illusion of objectivity. In other words, Painlevé both participated in the scientific process and questioned the human desire to use scientific knowledge "to predict, from a safe distance, phenomena in a variety of fields and to produce more numerous and fruitful hypotheses that we hope will finally explain Nature once and for all...But compared to Nature, Man's imagination provokes weak revelations" (Bellows 119).

Notley, on the other hand, like most U. S. poets who take inspiration from surrealism, places extreme emphasis on the transformative powers of the imagination. Her attitude toward the shape-shifting is not all that different from the attitude she assigned Desnos' in section one: that the trick is to become something larger than the self. That message, however, is subtly wrapped in political rhetoric that resonates with Notley's concern for the U. S. role in the Vietnam and Gulf Wars, the admonition that one's enemy may be closer than one imagines: "The lizard says my parents lover children friends are me— / my enemy's part of me" (129). It is not surprising that Désamère's message here is similar to Desnos' in section one, as Notley notes in the previously cited interview with CAConrad that the poems in the third section of *Désamère* were "written somewhat in the style of Desnos." She does not elaborate on this issue, nor does she note whether she is using translations of Desnos' work or the original French versions as source material, the latter of which is a distinct possibility, as she began work on *Désamère* soon after moving from New York to Paris. She also occasionally quotes snippets in French from Desnos' anti-war poem "Le Veilleur du Pont-au-Change" ("The Watchman of The Pont-Au-Change") throughout the first section. The first, and most revealing, passage Notley quotes is "*Il est mort dans la rue déserte*" ("He is dead in the empty street") (73). The "he" in the poem is an anonymous German soldier, and "*la rue déserte*" resonates symbolically and phonetically with the desert in *Désamère*. The strongest connection to Desnos' work, however, is such rhetorical gestures as the rapid transformations of objects and the juxtaposition of opposing color schemes. Compare, for example, the following passages from Notley's "Door to the Desert" and Desnos' novella *Deuil pour Deuil* (*Mourning for Mourning*, 1924). Here is Notley:

The skull becomes a hand, writing with pen and paper

The hand then becomes a red skull with a hole on its pate
 through which something winged squeezes
 It's only a tiny black insect, it has white wings as wide
 as the sky
 The earth's a snake with a bright red tongue, the snake's
 everywhere though its tongue flickers nearby (Notley 121)

And here is Desnos:

While waiting, the fair-haired virgin dips her blond tresses in my coffee; it is midday; the statutory litre of wine which has been deposited next to the ribbed glass in front of me turns into a dove. The coffee turns into tea, the fair-haired virgin grows a little pale; from now on she will sing sweeter than the nightingale. The bell rings: in his ribbed velvet garb the forensic expert comes in. He takes a seat. He liberates the dove imprisoned in the bottle, he turns over the glass which becomes an egg timer, kisses the fair-haired virgin on the lips. He accuses me of murder. (Desnos 24)⁶⁷

There are obvious differences in form between the two: Desnos' is in prose, while Notley's is in verse with a rare—for her—end-rhyme between “sky” and “nearby,” which accentuates the human connection to the natural world by sonically emphasizing the proximity of the sky. The rhetorical strategies in each text, however, are similar, particularly the emphasis on metamorphosis. In each passage, objects quickly turn into other objects and sometimes back again. Colors and textures are recycled or juxtaposed against vastly different colors and textures. These are normative features of surrealist writing, of course, and the overall result is the creation of an unstable universe in which the power of the imagination to enact radical transformation reigns supreme.

This is where the New York School expansion of collaboration to include collaboration with dead writers or foreign idioms starts to break down, for it is here that such works as Notley's begin to hardly seem like a collaboration at all. The Desnos in

Désamère is not Desnos himself, but Notley's projection of him. The instability of the subject in *Désamère* masks a powerfully controlling subject: Notley herself. In the end, even an innovative project like *Désamère*—or Chatterton's "Rowley" poems or Frank O'Hara's "Choses passagères"—relies on a single author to put the pieces together. If there is a fault to Notley's project—and perhaps the surrealist project as a whole—it is the fact that the quest for a poetics capable of representing multiple subjectivities ultimately rests on the Romantic notion of the poet as the center of the universe. When Notley proclaims near the end of the book, "I now define the human as divine" (118), it is hard not to think that Notley also means, "I now define the poet as divine." At the same time, Notley presents a practical model of how literary works that are the products of different eras, cultures, and linguistic codes can generate a productive conversation with potentially radical effects on both our individual lives and the geopolitical landscape. Ultimately, Notley's appropriation in the service of ideological critique is a more progressive model of U. S. relations to foreign literary works than the appropriation for the sake of psychological or aesthetic gain put forth by predecessors like Eshleman and Williams.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The events of twenty-first century thus far have demonstrated that Alice Notley's criticisms of U. S. political and cultural unilateralism in *Désamère* were eerily prescient. On the heel of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, American poets took up a renewed interest in both surrealism and translation, largely because of the emphasis both place on conjuring otherness. There is a certain utopic aspect in this renewed interest, as poetry in translation begins to be figured by younger American poets as direct communication with the foreign culture and surrealism is seen as a way to subjectively refashion the future. Literary journals devoted to publishing works in translation, such as *Circumference: Poetry in Translation* and *Words without Borders*, made a special effort to devote entire issues to the translation of works from the Middle East, and the middle part of the 2000s saw a dramatic increase in the publication of anthologies of foreign-language poetry. These efforts were not lost on the poetry community at-large. In *Poets & Writers* magazine, for example, the poet Travis Nichols (b. 1979) calls this expanding interest in poetry in translation "a new golden age" of U. S. "poetic diplomacy," arguing that "translations of contemporary poetry can provide alternative ways of understanding other cultures." Although Nichols sees translation as an important component to understanding the U. S. position in both the fields of world literature and global politics, he also claims to "have no illusions that world peace hinges on a well-turned phrase."

The poet Jordan Davis (b. 1970) makes similar note of the recent explosion of interest in the marketability of poetry in translation in “Exchange Rate,” an omnibus review of several anthologies of foreign-language poetry published in *Boston Review* (2009). Whereas Nichols viewed translation as ushering in a greater awareness of foreign cultures, however, Davis focuses his discussion on the importing of aesthetic features that American poets can borrow from foreign poetries. In particular, Davis claims that American poets can use foreign poetry to avoid slipping into a confessional, first person lyric, an extremely unpopular mode of writing in the channels in which Davis’ poetry circulates:

in order to stop talking about themselves, to be inspired, to say something recognizable in an unfamiliar way, poets make believe, generalize, extrapolate from an overspecific detail, and otherwise appropriate what is not theirs. Translation and signaling foreign influence are some of the more prestigious means to effect this escape from the self and its unchallengeable rules, even if they lead to alien rules, equally unchallengeable.⁶⁸

The central difference between Nichols’ and Davis’ attitude toward foreign literature is that—unlike Nichols—Davis shows little interest in gaining an understanding of the foreign culture and literary tradition. As I noted in my discussion of anthologizing surrealism in chapter two, the usual rhetoric editors and reviewers use when talking about anthologies is to lament the lack of space and the inevitable exclusions that accompany such spatial restrictions. In his discussion of Wayne Miller and Kevin Prufer’s *New European Poets* (2008), however, a book also praised by Nichols, Davis posits the lack coverage as a positive trait, suggesting that Miller and Prufer have done their homework in bringing over only the most useful poets for U. S. purposes: “At so few pages per national literature—as many as a few dozen, as few as four—there is no time for the poems to devolve into national stereotypes.”

Both Davis and Nichols are young, relatively unknown poets, but both also control relatively powerful channels within the field of contemporary poetry, suggesting that their views on foreign literature may carry more weight—or be more indicative of the general attitude of U. S. poets—than their relative marginality might lead on. Davis, for example, is currently the poetry editor of *The Nation* and has been a longtime contributor to the website Constant Critic, which is devoted exclusively to publishing reviews of contemporary poetry. Nichols, on the other hand, works as an editor for the Poetry Foundation, managing the online content of the foundation’s website, and serves as a poetry columnist for the alternative news outlet *Huffington Post*. The biggest similarity between Nichols’ and Davis’ attitude toward foreign literature is that both value translation primarily for the benefits that can be reaped on American soil with little interest in the relationship the translation has with the foreign text and culture, even if they ascribe different meaning to that value. The problem with both approaches is that they fail to take into full consideration the dense web of intertextuality that is the province of every translation. In “Translation, Intertextuality, Interpretation” (2009), Lawrence Venuti notes that most translators today strive for what he calls “lexicographical equivalence,” which he defines as “a semantic correspondence to the foreign text based on dictionary definitions” (162). The fault of this approach, Venuti claims, is that it “risks the naive assumption of an instrumental model of translation, in which a translated text is seen as the reproduction or transfer of an invariant contained in or caused by the foreign text, whether its form, its meaning, or its effect” (162). As I noted in the introduction, however, translation is always a radical process of de- and recontextualization marked by both loss and gain. In other words, the instrumental model of translation that Venuti describes is a myth that obscures the fact that translation is largely an interpretive act, “an inscription that communicates only one particular interpretation of the foreign text,

never that text itself and never some form, meaning, or effect believed to be invariant and somehow inherent in it” (162). Both Nichols and Davis consider the translations they discuss to reproduce just such an invariant, reflecting the foreign texts intact: Nichols for what they can tell us about foreign cultures, Davis for what American poets can steal from their form.

The lesson of Magritte’s *La reproduction interdite* seems important again here, the idea that mirrors do not always reflect things as clearly as we might like them to. Nichols’ argument would have been well-suited if he had adapted André Lefevere’s methods for analyzing anthologies that I noted in the discussion of anthologizing surrealism in chapter one, examining how the editors’ various inclusions and inevitable exclusions ascribe an interpretation to the foreign literary traditions rather than reproducing them intact. After all, the editors of the anthologies that Nichols discusses are—like all anthologists—interpreting the cultures being represented, basing their inclusions and exclusions on political or aesthetic factors. Nichols cites, for example, an interview with Kevin Prufer and Wayne Miller, coeditors of *New European Poets*, in which Prufer and Miller claim to have focused their attention on the “writers at work right now [that] seem most likely to inject something vital and new into our own poetic conversation here in the United States.” Prufer and Miller’s statement reveals an editorial agenda that had a guiding hand in shaping the anthology, the injection of something new and vital into American poetry. Their statement also would have felt at home in Davis’ essay, for both emphasize the enrichment of American poetry via the importation of foreign sources.

Davis locates the appeal of *New American Poets* in John Locke’s idea (from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*) that “it is only possible to understand what you can relate to some experience you have already had.” In other words, he grounds the familiar in the

foreign and finds solace in such observations as the fact that Nguyen Do and U. S. poet Paul Hoover translated all of the poems in *Black Dog, Black Night* (2008), their anthology of contemporary Vietnamese poetry, themselves. That “consistency,” Davis claims, “is part of what makes it so good to read,” without questioning whether or not such consistency may have eradicated differences between the represented poets. Davis goes so far as to claim that the cardinal reference point in *Black Dog, Black Night* is not a text from Vietnamese literature—or even from Asian literature—but rather Hoover’s own 2005 collection *Poems in Spanish* in which “Hoover use[s] the music and directness of Spanish poetry in translation to make poems in English that sound at once otherworldly and completely, poignantly American.”

Of the poets discussed in this book, Davis’ desire to use foreign literature to sound more “American” (Davis never defines what exactly it means to sound American) most resembles William Carlos Williams’ use of translation to supplement the development of the American Idiom. At the same time, it echoes Clayton Eshleman’s concept of “assimilative space,” of literature in translation being “psychic coal” for the translator’s own creative endeavors. It is not surprising, then, that Davis’ first venture into translation, the two-line “The Shameful Feelings of a Bad Man” by the Turkish modernist Orhan Veli Kanik (1914-1950) from Murat Nemet-Nejat’s *EDA: An Anthology of Contemporary Turkish Poetry* (2004), a language Davis neither reads nor speaks, led to the self-published chapbook *My Orhan Veli* (2007) in which he reworks preexisting translations to make Veli sound like a twenty-first century American poet. His poem “Jordan Davis,” for example, has an even closer relationship to Veli’s “Orhan Veli” than Eshleman’s “The Excavation of Artaud” had to Vallejo’s “El libro de la naturaleza.” The opening lines of Talat Sait Halman’s 1971 translation of “Orhan Veli,” for example, read, “I am Orhan Veli, / Creator of the famous

line / ‘It’s a pity Süleyman Efendi had to die’” (92). The opening lines of Davis’ poem read “I’m Jordan Davis / The one who wrote / ‘I miss your pussy.’”⁶⁹ Davis’ version presents a voice that is more colloquial (the contraction “I’m”), less haughty (“The one who wrote” in place of “Creator of the famous”), and more crass (“I miss your pussy”). Even the title *My Orhan Veli* suggests that Davis is taking ownership of Veli’s texts.

The renewed interest in foreign poetry in the twenty-first century includes the uncovering of previously marginalized (at least in the U. S.) strands of surrealist writing, such as Nikos Stabakis’ *Surrealism in Greece: An Anthology* (2008), which includes generous selections from eighteen different poets spread over the space of more than three hundred pages. Stabakis includes thirty-one pages by Odysseus Elytis, winner of the 1979 Nobel Prize, in a section marked “The Founders,” lending the collection an air of authority. The last decade also saw the founding of Boston’s Black Widow Press, an independent publisher devoted new translations of surrealist work—most of which is from France—and republishing formerly out-of-print works by such figures as Breton and Tzara. To date, their catalogue of new and forthcoming titles includes more than twenty works by surrealist authors. Translations of proto-surrealist poets were also produced with new vigor. Several new translations of Arthur Rimbaud, for example, were published in the last decade, including two separate editions by U. S. poet Donald Revell (of both *The Illuminations* and *A Season in Hell*) and a version of *Illuminations* by John Ashbery published by Norton in which Ashbery’s name is displayed as prominently on the cover as Rimbaud’s. Ashbery also published a translation of Pierre Reverdy’s prose tale *Haunted House* (2007), a book that André Breton once listed as one of the ten books he would take with him to a desert island. Ashbery’s version of *Haunted House* was published by Black Square Editions, a small imprint

run by the poet John Yau, which also published Ron Padgett's translation of Reverdy's *Prose Poems* the same year.

Two of the more obvious questions one might ask when faced with this renewed interest in translations of surrealist and proto-surrealist works are the same questions that I asked in the introduction to this study: why surrealism? And why now? The answer in this case might be found in another book published by Black Square Editions, this one not a translation: Andrew Joron's *Fathom* (2004). Joron opens the volume with a ten-page essay (a rarity for a book of poems), "The Emergency," in which he locates the resurgent interest in surrealism in the tumultuous environment surrounding the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 and the subsequent U. S. response. The earlier part of the decade had seen elder American poets criticize younger poets for lacking a firm political stance in their work. In a joint interview with Bob Perelman published in 2000, for example, Lyn Hejinian (b. 1941) claims:

I think poets in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties now do not have a comparable historical moment [to that of the Vietnam War]. The problem isn't as localized as it seemed at our moment; now it's everywhere and overwhelming—to me too, not just to younger people. Also I think younger people are unable to sustain utopian visions—they don't consider them tenable. (Lorberer 39)

Hejinian's statements are questionable for a number of reasons, most notably because she lumps together all "poets in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties" in opposition to a romanticized vision of the Bay Area in the 1970s "as a site of political and social upheaval" (39) brought about through the merging of "the hippie ethos and the ethos of burgeoning leftwing organizations" (39). However, I would like to focus on what Hejinian calls "our

moment.” Her characterization of our moment, of course, is defined by the sort of U. S. cultural and political imperialism that Notley criticized in *Désamère*, and her statement that contemporary problems are “everywhere and overwhelming” sound very much like when Notley’s vision of Desnos said, “I can’t make this dream stable / Your times are too nervous” (71).

Certainly, the scale of contemporary global politics may seem impenetrable to lone poets, even well-organized communities of poets. Where would one even start if one wanted to construct a poetics of dissent? As we saw in chapter five, however, Notley turns to the surrealism of Desnos as a way to confront the complexities that Hejinian describes, and *Désamère* could definitely qualify as the sort of politicized response Hejinian seems to be looking for. But Hejinian and Notley are roughly the same age, and Notley also returns to the Vietnam War as her historical reference point. By the time Joron was writing “The Emergency” in late 2001, however, the world looked like a very different place, and Joron begins the essay by evoking Adorno’s infamous declaration that to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric: “What good is poetry at a time like this?” (15). For Joron, the answer arises from the German Marxist-Utopianist philosopher Ernst Bloch’s (1885-1977) notion of the “novum,” or the unstable situations through which the imagination has the potential to transform the material world. Joron’s position, however, rests on the belletristic notion that poetry somehow expresses the inexpressible, that it exists on a plane outside the realm of language as a communicative tool. “Where language fails,” he claims, “poetry begins” (15). And according to Joron, “[This] kind of topological fold or failure (called a ‘catastrophe’ in mathematics) precedes the emergence—constitutes the emergency—of the New. If poetry ‘makes language new,’ then it must be defined as the *translation* of emergency” (15; emphasis added).

For the sake of seeing where Joron's logic leads us, I would like ignore his neo-Romantic suggestion that poetry is an extra-communicative tool and focus on Joron's use of the term *translate*.⁷⁰ Here, Joron invokes the popular metaphor of translation as carrying over, using that metaphor to claim that "poetry represents (translates) the motion of social change" (15). In this sense, poetry is seen as an agent of social transformation, but his specific use of the verb "translates" and his placement of that verb in parenthesis also highlights the agency that act of translation itself—in terms of the literal issues of transferring language—plays in that transformation.⁷¹ Joron's own literary career bears witness to the sort of transformation that can be ushered in via contact with foreign cultures and texts. After Joron received a B.A. in the philosophy of science from the University of California at Berkeley, he spent the next decade writing science fiction poems, activity that culminated in the unimaginatively titled *Science Fiction*, which appeared in 1992 to little fanfare. Somewhere between the publication of *Science Fiction* and the publication of his second book *The Removes* in 1999, however, Joron's work underwent a transformation that I would argue was the result of his translating Bloch's *Literary Essays* (1998) for Stanford University Press. At the time, Joron was working as a freelance bibliographer and indexer with little to no experience in literary translation, and the job of translating Bloch's work basically fell into his lap based on the publisher's knowledge that Joron had grown up in Germany and spoke fluent German. In an email to me, Joron writes, "The fact that [Stanford University Press] offered this translation project to me was purely providential, a striking instance of surrealist 'objective chance.'" From Bloch, Joron adopts the connection between the imagination and utopia. In Bloch's view, the world—and humanity in it—are unfinished. The task of humanity is the completion of the world, and thus the completion of itself. The imagination, Bloch claims, has the potential to overcome the gap between the

things we daydream and reality as it is. Our desires, dreams, and longings, are given form by the imagination. They are how “hope”—a term that holds a particular utopian function in Bloch’s view—is cast by the imagination. As human subjects, we can make conscious choices as to which wishes we seek to fulfill. This is what Bloch calls the “waking dream,” a phrase that would have felt at home in the surrealist vernacular. Choosing those wishes is, in effect, a critique of present reality and an expression of utopian aspiration.

Joron was forty-five years old in 2000 when Hejinian criticized younger poets, so he may not have been the kind of poet she had in mind, but he was fourteen years younger than Hejinian and had published relatively little work by that time for a poet of his age. At the same time, Joron’s work shows that some contemporary poets do consider utopian visions tenable and that his vision is tied to a conception of translation as ushering in a sense of understanding between disparate cultures. Although he claims that his translation of Bloch was an act of providence, Joron’s next venture into literary translation was a text of his own choosing, selected because it reinforced Blochian notions of the power and will of the imagination: his 2011 translation of Paul Scheerbart’s (1863-1951) *The Perpetual Motion Machine: The Story of an Invention*, a nonfiction work in which Scheerbart restlessly documents his two and a half year long attempt to invent a perpetual motion machine. For Joron, Scheerbart is an ideal utopic figure, not only for his scientific curiosity in envisioning the perpetual motion machine, but perhaps more importantly for his fanatical devotion to realizing his dream of inventing the machine. This devotion, in Joron’s view, becomes an exemplary model for the literary artist in the twenty-first century.

Joron’s motivation for translating Scheerbart is similar to that of many of the poet-translators whose work is discussed in this study: to locate a foreign mirror for their own aesthetic or ideological preoccupations. In Joron’s case, this might not be such a bad thing.

A marginal poet translates a marginal author, and that text in turn is published by a small press. Relatively few English translations of German literature are produced each year, and one may question Joron's motives for translating Scheerbart, but other translations have certainly been motivated by more dubious factors. Near the end of the introduction, I noted that this particular study was inspired by my own interest in contemporary American poetry, by the belief that one way of knowing what U. S. were up to was by looking at what they were translating. The activity of the last decade suggests a surging interest in surrealism and poetry in translation, ushered in by the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the deeper geopolitical divide that brought about such tumultuous events. Some poets, like Nichols and Joron, see this as a utopic aspiration for communion with the foreign. Others, like Davis, continue to see it as a form of aesthetic unilateralism, as one-way street pointed toward what we can continue to take from other cultures. If this study has an implied audience, it is future poets and translators and the readers of their translations, with the hope that all will form a more sophisticated understanding of the complex intertextuality of the enterprise of translation. If that sounds like a utopic aspiration in its own right, so be it.

NOTES

¹ This is not the only Magritte (1898-1967) painting of this era to explicitly reference Poe. *The Domain of Arnheim* (1938) takes its title from the Poe story of the same name. *La reproduction interdite* is currently held by Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam. The *Domain of Arnheim* currently resides in a private collection.

² Discussions of “language poetry” suffer the same crisis of nomenclature as discussions of surrealism. Arnold aptly notes in the opening paragraph of his study:

It has been variously labeled ‘Language poetry’, ‘Language writing’, ‘L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E writing’ (after the magazine that ran from 1978 to 1981) and ‘Language-centered writing’. It has been variously defined as non-referential or of diminished reference, as textual poetry or a critique of expressivism, as a reaction against the ‘workshop’ poetry enshrined in creative writing departments across the United States. It has been variously described as non-academic, theory conscious, avant-garde, post-modern and oppositional. It has been placed according to its geographical positions, on east or west coasts of the United States; its venues in small magazines, independent presses and performative spaces; and its descent from historical precursors, be they the Objectivists, the composers-by-field of the Black Mountain school, the Russian Constructivists or American modernism *à la* William Carlos Williams and Gertrude Stein. Indeed, one of the few statements that can be made about it with little qualification is that ‘it’ has

fostered and endured a crisis in representation more or less since it first became visible in the 1970s. (1)

Hank Lazer makes a similar observation in the introduction to *Opposing Poetries* (1996), noting that the term “Language poetry” gradually “comes to refer to a broader range of experimental poetics—including varieties of ethnopoetics, oral and performance poetics, and feminist poetics—many of which have at most a tangential relationship to the group or poets actually associated with *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine in the late 1970s and early 1980s” (2). Arnold and Lazer’s litanies illustrate just how difficult—and perhaps ultimately beside the point—it is to demarcate a literary movement. For reasons similar to my reasons for referring to surrealism with a lowercase *s*, I will also refer to language poetry sans quotation marks and with a lowercase *l*, as I use the term to describe a general mode of writing that encompasses all of the attributes and potential contradictions that Arnold brings up in his list.

³ See “The Sociology of Reading: What’s Poetry Got to Do with It?,” which is currently under editorial consideration at *Jacket2*.

⁴ It is worth noting that Moretti’s theories have not been met without criticism. One of the most useful criticisms—at least for my purposes here—was voiced during the question and answer session of a panel at the 2009 MLA Annual Convention, in which David Damrosch suggested that one of Moretti’s shortcomings is that he takes the worldwide dominance of the novel as a given, positing European literary modernism as a global standard.

⁵ A short, but by no means complete, list of such critics includes Maria Damon, Michael Davidson, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Stephen Fredman, Alan Golding, Peter

Middleton, Adalaide Morris, Cary Nelson, Maggie Nelson, Libbie Rifkin, and Barrett Watten.

For an interesting work that combines cultural and transnational studies, see *Queering Cold War Poetry: Ethics of Vulnerability in Cuba and the United States* (2009) by Eric Keenaghan.

⁶ See, for example, Francine Prose's "Voting Democracy off the Island: Reality TV and the Republican Ethos" in the March 2004 edition of *Harper's*.

⁷ *Rain Taxi* regularly reviews translations of surrealist literature and features articles on surrealist authors. The magazine also publishes a chapbook series that published, among other things, a reprint of Paul Auster's *A Little Anthology of Surrealist Poems* (2002) and works by Clayton Eshleman, Alice Notley, and James Tate. Like Zaprunder, Lorberer is a former student of Tate's.

⁸ He is a central figure, for example, in L. C. Breunig's *The Cubist Poets in Paris: An Anthology* (1995), in which forty-three pages are dedicated to his work.

⁹ In the preface to *Les Mamelles de Tirésias*, Apollinaire claims that the play was actually written in 1903, fourteen years before it was performed, although that is unlikely for a number of reasons: the subject of the play was repopulation, an extremely popular topic in post-war France; Apollinaire made several comments earlier in his career that he had never written a play; and it is possible that he feared charges of plagiarism, as there are elements of *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* bear resemblance to Cocteau's scenario for *Parade*, which made its debut a few weeks prior. Accusations of plagiarism, after all, would have seemed the worst possible literary fate to Apollinaire, who throughout his career insisted on the supremacy of the imagination over all other critical and artistic faculties.

¹⁰ The connection to cubism can also be seen in the Serge Férat's costumes, as depicted in the few surviving photographs of the play's only performance during

Apollinaire's lifetime, which clearly draw on the primitivist aspects of cubism. See, for example, Pia 149.

¹¹ After all, Breton's *Entretiens* (1952) is titled *Conversations: The Autobiography of Surrealism* in its 1993 U. S. translation by Mark Polizzotti, the added subtitle blatantly suggesting that to interview Breton is to learn the history of surrealism itself.

¹² More than half the poems in the anthology were translated by Benedikt himself. Interestingly, the list of translators also included the poets David Antin and Keith and Rosmarie Waldrop, but their work seems to have been deemed too marginal at the time to receive notice in the jacket copy. Keith Waldrop would go on to win the National Book Award in 2009.

¹³ The fourteen poets in *The Poetry of Surrealism: An Anthology* are Guillaume Apollinaire, Pierre Reverdy, Tristan Tzara, Philippe Soupault, André Breton, Louis Aragon, Paul Eluard, Jean (Hans) Arp, Benjamin Péret, Robert Desnos, Antonin Artaud, René Daumal, Jacques Prévert, and Aimé Césaire, arranged chronologically by birth. All fourteen were Francophone writers, and only the Martinican Césaire was not born on continental Europe, although his work was actively promoted by Breton in the 1940s.

¹⁴ Polizzotti and Caws combined have translated all but a few of the works currently available by Breton in English. Polizzotti's translation output, however, is primarily limited to Breton, making Caws' work as a translator, critic, and anthologist much more widespread than Polizzotti's.

¹⁵ The editorial board of *VVV* also included Breton, Duchamp, Ernst, and the American David Hare, and the magazine was experimental in both form and content, with its contents including fold-out pages, different sized pages and types of paper, and bold use

of typography and color. The second issue, for example, included an original work by Duchamp as its back cover, *Twin-Touch-Test* (1943), a cutout revealing an image of female mannequin surrounded by a piece of actual chicken wire. Interestingly enough, *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology* was reprinted in 1988 by Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, suggesting that by 1988 Motherwell's editorial strategy—and the work included in the anthology itself—had received a certain degree of institutional acceptance, although the book's republication probably speaks more to its status as a historical document than changing standards governing the editing of academic anthologies.

¹⁶ The U. S. is represented by Kay Boyle, Joseph Cornell, David Hare, Man Ray, Harold Rosenberg, Dorothea Tanning, and William Carlos Williams, and Caws herself. Elsa Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, Mina Loy, and Kurt Seligmann—who were foreign-born, but spent much of their lives in the United States—are also included.

¹⁷ We can also see this at play in *Surrealism and Women* (1991), which Caws edited with Rudolf Kuenzli and Gwen Raaberg, a collection of essays either about—and sometimes by—women artists and writers associated with the surrealist movement, or interrogating male surrealists' representations of women. Caws' own introductory essay, "Seeing the Surrealist Woman: We Are a Problem" (11-16), falls into the latter category.

¹⁸ This is not the only time in "At the Locks of the Void" that Eshleman figures translating Césaire as an intervention into American racial politics. He also discusses being inspired to retranslate the poem "Lynch I" during the 1995 O. J. Simpson trial, noting that the poem "link[s] social terror with the violence of sudden natural growth, and its sacrifice of a male hero for the sake of sowing the seeds of renewal" (132). Eshleman's purpose here is a little muddled, as he glosses over the obvious deep cultural ramifications of lynching in U. S.

racial politics and problems with referring to Simpson as a sacrificial male hero in favor of his pet theme of renewal. Instead, he quickly shifts to making a tenuous connection between the poem and the theme of erotic asphyxiation in the 1976 Japanese film *In the Realm of the Senses*. As I explore in more detail in chapter four, such tenuous connections between surrealist tropes and sexual practices are a common theme in Eshleman's work.

¹⁹ Joron and Lamantia were close friends late in Lamantia's life, and Joron dedicates his *The Cry at Zero: Selected Prose* (2007) to Lamantia's memory.

²⁰ The Spicer passage in question reads:

This is the sun-tormented castle which
 Reflects the sun. Da dada da.
 The castle sings.
 Da. I don't remember what I lost. Dada.
 The song. Da. The hippogriffs were singing.
 Da dada. The boy. His horns
 Were wet with song. Dada.
 I don't remember. Da. Forgotten.
 Da. Dada. Hell. Old butterface
 Who always eats her lovers. (28-29)

The repetition of "Da dada da" can be seen as echoing the repetition of "Datta, dayadhvam, damyata" (which Eliot translates as "Give, sympathise, control") in the final section of Eliot's "The Waste Land," particularly when one considers the fact that the repetition in Spicer's poem frequently appears in similar places in the line as in Eliot's poem. In the few

public comments he made on Eliot's work, however, Spicer displays ambivalence toward Eliot and his stature in modern American poetry.

²¹ The correspondence between the fictional holiday "Dada Day" and "April Fool's Day" seems to be a gesture aimed at uniting the anarchic spirit of the practical joke with the spirit of Dadaism. The first of the "Dada Day" poems ends with a sly reference to Marcel Duchamp's infamous *Fountain*, a urinal signed "R. Mutt" and exhibited at the 1917 Society of Independent Artists exhibition in New York: "You only have the right to piss in the fountain / If you are beautiful (47). This reference—and the earlier reference in the poem to Duchamp's *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919) in which Duchamp drew a moustache and a beard on a postcard reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and inscribed the letters of the title at the bottom, creating a lewd pun in French ("Elle a chaud au cul," which roughly translates as "She has a hot ass" or "Her ass is on fire")—not only suggests that Spicer had intimate knowledge of Dadaist activity, but also provides an aesthetic judgment of that activity: the suggestion that pissing in the fountain can be seen as being "beautiful."

²² Spicer's complete comments on Yeats' train ride read as follows:

He was on a train back in, I guess it was 1918. The train was, oddly enough, going through San Bernardino to Los Angeles when his wife Georgie suddenly began to have trances, and spooks came to her. He'd married at the age of forty-five, something like that, a rather rich woman who everyone thought he married just because she was a rich woman and Lady Gregory was getting old and wasn't about to will him money. Georgie was in the tradition of the Psychic Research Society and all of that, and so naturally they would come in the form that the Psychic Research Society would think

spooks would come in. And she started automatic writing as they were going through the orange groves between San Berdoo and Los Angeles.

And Yeats didn't know what to make of it for a while, but it was a slow train and he started getting interested, and these spooks were talking to him. He still, I'm sure, thought Georgie was doing all of this to divert him. He probably was in a nasty mood after having gone across the country on the Southern Pacific, which I imagine in those days was even worse than it is now. But he finally decided he would ask a question or two of the spooks while Georgie was in her trance. And he asked a rather good question. He asked, "What are you here for?" And the spooks replied, "We're here to give metaphors for your poetry." (*Lectures* 4-5)

²³ Yeats' lecture tour of America actually took place in 1920 (Foster 2: 163).

²⁴ Foster notes the psychosomatic illness that plagued Yeats during the couple's honeymoon, hence Spicer's claim that George began the automatic writing experiments to "divert" him (2: 103-05).

²⁵ Spicer was fond of embellishing his own past, claiming at various times that he was part Native American and that his father was a labor activist and a member of the Wobblies.

²⁶ Although Tate's *Selected Poems* was published a year after *Distance from Loved Ones*, none of the poems from that book appear in *Selected Poems*. Both books, however, were published by Wesleyan University Press.

²⁷ The panel included Heather Christle, Matthew Rohrer, Zachary Schomburg, and Matthew Zapruder. Christle and Zapruder were both students of Tate's at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, and Rohrer's primary publisher is Wave Books (where Zapruder

works as an editor), which also published a collection of Tate's short fiction, *Dreams of a Robot Dancing Bee* (2001). Tate's name is raised several times during the discussion as a major influence on all four.

²⁸ See Silliman's lecture "Spicer's Language" in Bob Perelman's *Writing/Talks* (1985).

²⁹ It is worth noting that Breton's manifesto was originally published as a preface to *Soluble Fish*, as a way to introduce the poetics of the book.

³⁰ Jackson does not mention Halpern's name or the title of his essay in the interview, simply referring to it as "a recent issue of *Yale French Studies*" (158), but the passage in question appears on page 96 of Halpern's article.

³¹ Josephson had a keen interest in the prose works of modern French poets, having published his own translation of Guillaume Apollinaire's novella *The Poet Assassinated* in 1923 under the imprint of his press Broom Publishing.

³² See *The Correspondence of William Carlos Williams & Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Barry Ahearn: 29, 31.

³³ In the same year, Grove Press, a leading publisher of innovative literature, published Donald Allen's landmark anthology *The New American Poetry*, a collection of work by younger American poets. In his preface, Allen claims that these poets have one thing in common: "a total rejection of all those qualities of academic verse" (xi). This language, of course, sounds very close to Williams', and Allen goes on to position these younger poets as the progeny of Williams:

Following the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, [the new American poetry] has built on their achievements and gone on to evolve new conceptions of the poem. These poets have already

created their own tradition, their own press, and their public. They are our avant-garde, the true continuers of the modern movement in American poetry. (xi)

Allen claims that the “academic verse” these poets were rebelling against stemmed from T. S. Eliot and his followers. This polarizing gesture established the critical framework that Perloff and other critics still use today to evaluate the period, obscuring the battle for literary relevance that Pound, Williams, and Eliot were jointly engaged in against Europe and presenting a vision of American poetry with its own center and periphery, sealed-off from external influences.

³⁴ Despite her obvious debt to world-systems theory, Casanova does not cite Wallerstein in her account. She does, however, make reference to Fernand Braudel’s concept of “unequal structures.” Casanova’s predilection toward a historian from Annales School is perhaps symptomatic of the general Gallocentrism of her account.

³⁵ According to Casanova, the genesis of Paris’ ascendancy is the 1549 publication of Joachim du Bellay’s *La deffence et illustration de la langue françoise* (The Defense and Illustration of the French Language). Her claim is made by virtue of the fact that du Bellay’s proto-nationalist document asserting the vitality of the French language against the dominion of Latin coincides with the formation of the nation-state. Casanova dismisses an obvious precursor to du Bellay’s text, Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Vernacular Eloquence, 1303-04), on the condition that Dante’s championing of vernacular language in literature does not have the backing of a unified Italian kingdom.

³⁶ Williams was fairly proficient in French, so it is plausible that he could have read Rimbaud in the original.

³⁷ As Perloff also points out, the earthly realism of *Kora in Hell* has very little in common with the visionary transcendence of *Illuminations*, no matter how obfuscated both may be. At the same time, however, Perloff claims that *Illuminations* serves as a pretext for Williams' subsequent book of poems, *Spring and All* (1923), especially in the emphasis that both texts place on destruction-creation myths. Similarity, however, does not necessarily connote influence. In "William Carlos Williams Writing Against *The Waste Land*" (1989), for example, Philip Bufithis makes the equally—if not more—plausible argument that the destruction-creation myth in *Spring and All* is primarily a symptom of Williams' complicated reaction to the publication of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1922.

³⁸ *William Carlos Williams Review* 22.1 (1996).

³⁹ The connections between "How to Write" and surrealism extend beyond compositional technique. "How to Write" was initially published in the first annual *New Directions in Poetry and Prose* (1936), the appearance of which was intended to coincide with the first major retrospective of surrealist art in the United States, *Fantastic Art, Dada, Surrealism* (1936), at the then new Museum of Modern Art in New York.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Dickran Tashjian's "Translating Surrealism: Williams' 'Midas Touch'" and Christopher MacGowan's "'Sparkles of Understanding': Williams and Nicolas Calas." José María Rodríguez García also discusses Williams' translation of Octavio Paz's "Hymn among the Ruins" in "Ruination and Translation in William Carlos Williams," calling Paz's poem an exceptionally rich example in the tradition of "ethnographic surrealism" (232), but García treats Williams' translation as if it were an original composition, considering it "one of the salient compositions in Williams's series of poems dealing with the

epistemology of ruination—his sustained meditation upon the dialectics of loss and recovery” (226).

⁴¹ In all fairness, Williams’ account of the composition of many of his own books in *I Wanted to Write a Poem* are equally as short and anecdotal as his description of translating *Last Nights of Paris*.

⁴² In the discussion of meeting Soupault in *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*, for example, Williams paints a picture of Soupault as being obsessed with American culture, obscuring Williams’ own romanticization of—and debt to—French culture: “We talked of America, of which all Frenchmen are secretly jealous, especially of our money” (213). Macaulay editor Matthew Josephson expresses a similar sentiment in his “A Note on Philippe Soupault,” which precedes the 1929 edition of Williams’ translation, claiming that Soupault “loves sports, American movies, American fashions, Negro jazz, international trains, seaports, revolutions, the city of London” (9). Williams and Josephson’s statements run counter to the commonly held notion among American literati at the time that Paris was the undisputed fashion capital of the world. See, for example, Gertrude Stein’s *Paris France* (1940): “It was in Paris that the fashions were made [...] Foreigners were not romantic to them, they were just facts” (11, 17).

⁴³ In *The Spanish American Roots of William Carlos Williams* (1994), Julio Marzán suggests that Pound’s gift “amounted to a symbolic insult” (125), as Pound himself had no interest in—or use for—Spanish literature.

⁴⁴ All quotations from Soupault’s novel are from the 1997 Gallimard edition. All quotations from Williams’ translation are—except where indicated—from the 1992 edition published by Exact Change.

⁴⁵ Breton publicly excommunicated Soupault and Robert Desnos in his “Second Manifesto of Surrealism” (1929) for pursuing careers in journalism. In a clear double-standard, the fact that Breton made a living selling artwork was exempt from this disdain.

⁴⁶ Josephson assumes that the audience for Williams’ translation will be familiar with the works of the recent French avant-garde. He claims, for example, that “so many of us still remember with wonder” the literary periodical *Littérature*, which Soupault edited—with André Breton and Louis Aragon—from 1919 to 1923 (9).

⁴⁷ It is worth noting that in a “Paris Letter” published a year earlier (1928), Paul Souday—writing for *The New York Times*—speaks favorably of Soupault’s French original, contextualizing it among a tradition of Paris-centered writing that extends from Eugene Sue to Francis Carco. The novel, this letter claims, establishes Soupault as “an esthetic and excellent writer” (14).

⁴⁸ This sentiment permeates Williams’ prose of this period. See, for example, the destruction-creation myth with which he opens *Spring and All* (1923) (*Imaginations* 90-91) and *The Great American Novel* (1923): “Every word we get must be broken off from the European mass” (*Imaginations* 175).

⁴⁹ As noted earlier, Williams also describes a compositional technique akin to automatic writing in his 1936 essay “How to Write,” which was written to coincide with the first major retrospective of surrealist artwork in the U. S.

⁵⁰ The two poets with whom Eshleman has spent the most translation time—César Vallejo and Aimé Césaire—are both products of colonial environments.

⁵¹ I do not mean to imply that Belitt's translations are beyond criticism. In *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (2009), for example, Jonathan Mayhew catalogues a list of Belitt's "infractions." These so-called infractions include:

verbosity, ennoblement, awkward syntax and punctuation, outright obfuscation, the erasure of poetic devices like metonymy and syntactic parallelism, wildly inappropriate shifts of register and tone, inexplicable lexical choices, and the dilution of metaphors and sensory images. (64)

Mayhew claims that Belitt's "use of Lorca for his own poetic project ultimately seems narcissistic" (68), although he fails to provide any evidence from Belitt's own poetry to show exactly how his use of Lorca benefits Belitt's own poetic project. Mayhew's use of terms like "dilution" suggests that he perceives an essential quality inherent in Lorca's work that the translation is obligated to remain faithful to. In his review of *Apocryphal Lorca*, Lawrence Venuti provides a useful corrective to Mayhew's approach, arguing that Mayhew's preferences rest in "a canonical interpretation of Lorca [...] that can only be found in the academy" (27). Belitt's translations are condemned less for their lexical inaccuracies than for their failure to perform according to the expectations of an academic specialist in twentieth-century Spanish poetry.

⁵² In the "Translators' Notes" to *Aimé Césaire, The Collected Poetry* (1983), which Eshleman translated with Annette Smith, Eshleman and Smith display a relative lack of interest and background in translation theory:

It is not our intention to be theoretical. Anyone interested in the general linguistic implications of translating should refer to the many excellent books on the subject, such as W. Arrowsmith and R. Shattuck, eds., *The Craft and*

Context of Translation (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1964) or W. Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

Eshleman and Smith give no indication whether their translation strategy is inspired by Benjamin's essay or any of the essays in *The Craft and Context of Translation*. Their prefatory comments eschew theoretical discussion of translation in favor of a general outline of how they handled specific translation problems such as neologisms and Césaire's frequent references to the flora and fauna of Martinique.

⁵³ *Caterpillar* was a literary journal edited by Eshleman. Twenty issues were published between 1967 and 1973.

As Jed Rasula notes, the term "deep image" is a slippery one that can either refer to poets like Jerome Rothenberg and Robert Kelly, who coined the term only to abandon it soon after, and poets like Robert Bly and James Wright, who popularized the term. For more on the origins and evolution of the term, see Rasula's "Deep Image." Although Eshleman is not mentioned in Rasula's essay, his work would fall in with the Rothenberg-Kelly camp, two poets whose work frequently appeared in *Caterpillar*.

⁵⁴ The particular translations that Quasha has in mind are those by C. F. MacIntyre (1961) and J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (1939).

⁵⁵ In "Companion Spider," for example, he writes:

In the winter of 1964, I began to work on the first poem of my own that fully engaged and tested me. I called it, after Blake's short prophetic books, "The Book of Yorunomado," in honor of the coffee house, my Vallejo workshop. The poem had a double focus: a coming to terms with my first

wife's abortion the year before, and an attempt to imagine my Jacob/angel struggle with Vallejo's labyrinthine texts. I tried to pair what was never born, as an infant, with what I was unable to bring forth of myself into the American English via Vallejo. [...] The spectre of Vallejo, now dressed as an overlord, commanded me from his regal porch to commit harakiri, as a dishonored samurai. So I did, slicing into my Indiana guts. An eerie ecstasy ran through me as I envisioned the destruction of my given life, as if I was ripping my mother and father out of me. (118-19)

⁵⁶ For a nuanced reading and translation of "Choses passagères," see "Passing Things" in Andrew Epstein's *Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry* (2006).

⁵⁷ In a nod to the wordplay of Desnos' *Rose Sélavy* poems, the name "Amère" points in several other directions as well. It includes, for example, the French word "mère" (mother), "mer" (sea), "amer/amere" (bitter), and makes a subtle allusion toward "amour" (love). In her unpublished dissertation, "Spectacular Margins: Women Poets Refigure the Epic" (1999), Heather H. Thomas also notes the similarity between "Amère" and "myrrh," one of the gifts of the Magi, and notes similar allusions to Mary, mother, and myrrh by H.D. in her "recovery of the maternal symbol as a regenerative goddess" (111). This is an interesting—and perhaps illuminating—connection, but it is difficult to tell whether Notley would have been conscious of such elements in H.D.'s work. The sonic allusions to "myrrh" and the biblical associations that go along with it, however, may have some merit, especially since the central section of *Désamère* explicitly alludes to Christ's period of temptation in the wilderness.

⁵⁸ The poets in Myers' anthology are—in alphabetical order—John Ashbery, Joseph Ceravolo, Kenward Elmslie, Barbara Guest, Kenneth Koch, Frank Lima, Frank O'Hara, James Schuyler, and Tony Towle. Each poet is given roughly the same number of pages.

⁵⁹ Martica Sawin presents a more nuanced version of this argument in her *Surrealism in Exile and The Beginning of the New York School* (1995), although Sawin's list of European expatriates who exerted a formative influence on the New York painters is longer than Myers'.

⁶⁰ Lehman's book comes at a time when the New York School poets were beginning to be seen by big publishing houses as a marketable commodity. All four poets discussed in *The Last Avant-Garde*—John Ashbery (b. 1927), Kenneth Koch, Frank O'Hara (1926-66), and James Schuyler (1923-91)—had been the recipient of major literary awards, including the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the Bollingen Prize. Alfred A. Knopf had recently published Brad Gooch's biography of O'Hara, *City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara* (1993), and the poetry of Kenneth Koch was also regularly published by Knopf, while Ashbery and Schuyler were published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

⁶¹ This historical trajectory is commonly presented in early work on the New York School. See, for example, the first scholarly monograph on Frank O'Hara, Marjorie Perloff's *Frank O'Hara: Poet Among Painters* (1977). Even Perloff's title self-consciously echoes that of Francis Steegmuller's Apollinaire biography, *Apollinaire: Poet Among the Painters* (1963).

⁶² Ashbery's capitalization of the terms "Surrealism" and "Surrealist" is irregular throughout the essay, and there does not seem to be a discernable difference in meaning between its capitalized and un-capitalized forms.

⁶³ In *Apocryphal Lorca: Translation, Parody, Kitsch* (2009), Jonathan Mayhew criticizes U. S. poets and critics for lumping Spanish-language poets whose work displays surrealist affinities under the heading “Spanish surrealism” (18-20), regardless of whether or not said poets were officially involved with surrealism as a movement. The fact that such tendencies exists in the U. S. response to both French and Spanish literary traditions suggests that U. S. poets generally operate under a less rigorous and historically grounded definition of the term “surrealism.”

⁶⁴ Both books were published around the same time that Notley also published *The Scarlet Cabinet: A Compendium of Books* (1992), a collection of individual “books” written by Notley and her then husband Douglas Oliver (1937-2000). The grouping of individual books by different authors in a single volume suggests that, at this stage in her career, Notley views the book as a part of a dialogue, a collaborator in the creation of a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.

⁶⁵ For a thorough reading of Desnos’ Rrose Sélavy poems, see Katharine Conley’s *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (2004).

⁶⁶ Painlevé, for example, partially funded Yvan Goll’s one-shot literary magazine *Surréalisme* (1924), which was dedicated to Painlevé and which included such important writings by Painlevé as “Neo-Zoological Drama” and “An Example of Surrealism: The Cinema,” the latter of which extols the virtues of cinema as a medium for capturing modern reality. Painlevé also assisted with the filming of the ant scene in Luis Buñuel’s infamous surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Despite these associations, Painlevé never considered himself a member of the surrealist movement, and he held an intense personal disdain for André Breton.

⁶⁷ Despite the fact that it is in prose, *Mourning for Mourning* is the closest of Desnos' works to *Dèsamère* in terms of content. The book begins in a desolate wasteland, amid the ruins of an obscure city. Upon initial approach, the city appears uninhabited, strange, and baroque, a setting that can be read as quintessentially surrealist, as it that resonates with such similar deconstructions of urban civilization as Louis Aragon's *Le Paysan de Paris* (*Paris Peasant*, 1926) and Philippe Soupault's *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (*Last Nights of Paris*, 1928). Although Desnos' baroque city is soon filled with mysterious characters and bizarre turns of events, one thing remains constant: that the surreal landscape is perhaps most revealing of the narrator's own subjectivity: "Amongst these stones I can find no vestige of that for which I am searching," the unnamed narrator says, "The imperturbable and ever-changing mirror reveals to me only myself" (9).

⁶⁸ If Davis' attitude toward foreign poetry sounds a lot like Kenneth Koch's distinction between "raw" and "cooked" poetry that I discussed in the previous chapter, the similarity is no coincidence. Davis was a student of Koch's at Columbia University, was Koch's personal assistant for several years, and is currently the literary executor of Koch's estate.

⁶⁹ It is worth exposing here my own personal connection to both Davis and Nichols. "Jordan Davis" was initially published in issue number three of the literary magazine *baffling combustions* (2003), which I co-edited with Nichols. Our intention in publishing the poem was to raise awareness of the Veli intertext. The line "I miss your pussy," incidentally, is the first line in an untitled poem from Davis' first book *Million Poems Journal* (2003), a line that I actually criticized in my review of the book for signaling a return to the machismo that

characterized the male members of the second-generation New York School poets whose work is often read as a precursor to Davis’.

⁷⁰ I use the term *neo-Romantic* deliberately here, as Joron himself placed his work in a neo-Romantic tradition that includes both the surrealists and Hart Crane in his essay “Language as Ghost Condensate” (2007).

⁷¹ This use of a term for its potential double meaning is common stylistic trait in Joron’s work. Consider, for example, the dual meanings of the term *emergency* in the paragraph above to mean both the state of emerging and an urgent need for assistance or relief.

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