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Brooks B. Lampe

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Surrealist Poetics in Contemporary American Poetry

Brooks B. Lampe, Ph.D.

Director: Ernest Suarez, Ph.D.

The surrealist movement, begun in the 1920s and developed and articulated most visibly and forcefully by André Breton, has unequivocally changed American poetry, yet the nature and history of its impact until recently has not been thoroughly and consistently recounted. The panoramic range of its influence has been implicitly understood but difficult to identify partly because of the ambivalence with which it has been received by American writers and audiences. Surrealism’s call to a “systematic derangement of all the senses” has rarely existed comfortably alongside other modern poetic approaches. Nevertheless, some poets have successfully negotiated this tension and extended surrealism to the context of postmodern American culture.

A critical history of surrealism’s influence on American poetry is quickly gaining momentum through the work of scholars, including Andrew Joron, Michael Skau, Charles Borkuis, David Arnold and Garrett Caples. This dissertation joins these scholars by investigating how selected American poets and poetic schools received, transformed, and transmitted surrealism in the second half of the twentieth century, especially during the mid-‘50s through the early ‘80s, when the movement’s influence in the States was rapid and most definitive.

First, I summarize the impact of the surrealist movement on American poets through World War II, including Charles Henri Ford, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and Philip Lamantia, and briefly examine Julian Levy’s anthology, Surrealism (1936). Next, I investigate how surrealism was transmitted to the Beats and elucidate surrealist elements in the work of
Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman. Then I analyze the deep image poets (especially Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly, Robert Bly, and James Wright) and how their attempt to combine surrealism with imagism and Jungian depth psychology framed the discourse about surrealism during the ‘60s and ‘70s. The implications of this assimilation are explored further in a study of George Hitchcock and Kayak magazine. Finally, I consider the complicated relationship between the language poets and surrealism, and how the complementarity of the two movements is worked out in the writing of Clark Coolidge.
This dissertation by Brooks B. Lampe fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in English Language and Literature approved by Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., as Director, and by Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D., and Glen Johnson, Ph.D., as Readers.

_______________________________
Ernest Suarez, Ph.D., Director

_______________________________
Rosemary Winslow, Ph.D., Reader

_______________________________
Glen Johnson, Ph.D., Reader
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CHAPTER 1
POETIC SURREALISM IN THE UNITED STATES:
INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

The surrealist movement began in the 1920s and was developed and articulated most visibly and forcefully by André Breton. It expanded throughout Europe and the Americas over the course of the twentieth century, inspiring and transforming practically all artistic mediums. In the United States its impact has been ubiquitous, redefining for many how art itself is conceived and practiced. The movement has unequivocally changed American poetry, yet the nature and history of its impact has not been thoroughly and cogently recounted. This dissertation investigates how selected poets and poetic schools received, transformed, and transmitted the ideas of surrealism. I focus special attention on the mid-‘50s through the early ‘80s as the period when surrealism’s influence on poetry in the States was rapid and most definitive.

Surrealism’s expansion across the Atlantic was somewhat limited until after World War II. To that point, its tenants had been adopted in the States by only a few writers, such as Charles Henri Ford and Philip Lamantia. During the war, Breton and the Surrealist expatriates led a flurry of activity in New York. Andrew Joron notes that the efforts of these individuals would become the “‘background radiation’” for a renaissance of surrealism in the States during the ‘60s. During this decade many poets came into contact with surrealism through travel and the increased availability of translated works. This exposure, combined with “the mystical, apocalyptic, and psychedelic tendencies of 1960s counterculture...mingled with political currents, adding momentum to the surrealist surge in America” (380). By the end of the ‘70s,
George Hitchcock, editor of the surrealist magazine *Kayak*, could claim that there was such a thing as an “American Surrealism” that retained “all the well-known devices of the Surrealists—but utilize[d] them with American material, American consciousness, and elements of our American experience” (“Interview” 154).

This introductory chapter summarizes the history of surrealism in American poetry and identifies the tensions at play in its evolution. The next chapter investigates the channels through which surrealism was transmitted to the Beat poets and examines how these influences shaped the poetry of Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman. Chapter 3 considers the deep image poets and how their attempt to combine surrealism with Pound and Jungian depth psychology shaped the discourse about surrealism in the States during the ‘60s and ‘70s. The nuances of this discourse are further elucidated in a study of George Hitchcock and *Kayak* magazine in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 considers the complicated relationship that has formed between the language poets and surrealism, and how the complementarity of the two movements is worked out in the writing of Clark Coolidge.

The academic study of “American Surrealism” has been impeded in part because of surrealism’s ambivalent reception by popular and scholarly audiences. The concept of the “surreal” has come to be viewed, simultaneously and paradoxically, as normative and transgressive, as endemic and irrelevant. In casual contexts the term describes merely the uncanny or peculiar—misnomers that are cripplinglly vague and neutral. In the hypermodern context of the twenty-first century, its idiomatic meaning is essentially a banal truism. In critical and academic discourse, the subject has been disparaged, such as when Charles I. Glicksberg
wrote 1949 that “[i]f the unconscious is the abode of infantile repressions, then Surrealism culminates in the art of infantilism” (303), or, especially in more recent decades, has been treated as a stylistic category lumped in with playfulness, irony, and absurdity.¹ These misrepresentations stem from a variety of factors, including the avant-garde nature of the movement, the diverging and sometimes contradictory branches of its influence, and, to some extent, the aesthetic mediocrity with which it has come to be associated.

Despite the often vexed and inconsistent discourse concerning surrealism, many American poets have undeniably been inspired by the movement’s approach to writing. Especially since the ‘60s, poets have been interested in reestablishing a connection to the unconscious and have imitated many surrealist techniques, often with considerable success. Yet frequently these writers treated surrealism as one of many modernist traditions, ostensibly a set of tools for expanding and varying poetic creation, rather than a point of view directly challenging the cultural and literary status quo. Surrealism’s call to a “systematic derangement of all the senses” could not comfortably exist alongside the desire to explain and resolve the disjointedness of modern experience. Absent a unifying principle, especially in the context of the rapid and complicated expansion of American poetry during the mid-century, a syncretistic approach to surrealism took shape. Critics and other poets detected the diluting effects of this syncretism and criticized some of the most visible versions of it as “soft” or “sloppy.” Even though the works of the Surrealists were only partially and recently available, readers knew enough to contest certain aspects of the movement’s assimilation. For these reasons, discussions

¹ See, for instance, Donna Stonecipher’s article on James Tate, “Poet Tate’s American surrealism keeps attracting new readers.”
of surrealism in American poetry have been engulfed in a cloud of frustratingly ambiguous connotations and mystification.

Nevertheless an appreciative critical history of American surrealism is quickly gaining momentum through the work of scholars, including Andrew Joron, Michael Skau, Charles Borkuis, David Arnold and Garrett Caples. Joron’s seminal essay, “Neo-Surrealism; or, the Sun at Night,” brings to light the work of over twenty American poets in the second half of the twentieth century who belong to a surrealist tradition broadly conceived. Most of these figures—Pete Winslow, Philip Lamantia, Bob Kaufman, Jayne Cortez, George Hitchcock, Nanos Valaoritis, Ivan Argüelles, Adam Cornford, Will Alexander, Franklin and Penelope Rosemont, Garrett Caples—have been virtually unknown by the mainstream. In the last few years, however, several of them have begun to be discovered and made available to a wider audience. Lamantia, for instance, who stands as the single most important surrealist poet in the States before mid-twentieth century, had little exposure until last year, when a volume of his collected work, edited by Garrett Caples, Joron, and Nancy Joyce Peters, was published by the University of California (2013). Their introduction, spanning over fifty pages, is by far the most detailed and definitive account of Lamantia’s life and work yet assembled, and it makes the scope and development of Lamantia’s career readily apparent. Along similar lines, the poetry of Michael Benedikt, another figure essential to the history of American surrealism, has just been assembled and republished after several decades of being out of print.\footnote{See \textit{Time is a Toy: The Selected Poems of Michael Benedikt}, edited by John Gallaher and Laura Boss.} Renewed interest in surrealism is also indicated by the founding in 2007 of \textit{The Journal of Surrealism in the Americas} and the reopening in 2013 of
the University of Iowa journal *Dada/Surrealism* overseen by Mary Ann Caws.

What’s more, a number of young poets are poised to revisit and incorporate the surrealist tradition from a new vantage. In 2009, Hannah Gamble organized an exchange between several young poets—Zachary Schomburg, Matthew Zapruder, Heather Christle and Matthew Rohrer—because, she writes, “it seemed...a new generation of surrealist- and absurdist-influenced poetry had emerged in the U.S., written by poets ranging from their mid-twenties to mid-forties and rooted in small presses like Wave Books, Black Ocean, and Octopus Books.” Recognizing and claiming historical distance from the criticism of surrealism that typified the second half of the twentieth century, these poets open-mindedly approach the surrealist tradition as a form of response to contemporary experience. Zapruder for instance states that, for contemporary poets who inhabit a world where “[t]he pressure of the real in everyday life is absolutely overwhelming,” surrealism proposes “acts of imagination against the pressures of the real.” The current success of these writers and small presses testifies to the gains to be made through a continued dialog with surrealism’s ideas.

Of the recent scholarship on American surrealism, Joron’s work stands out as significant, offering a framework through which poetic surrealism in America can be approached in broad and inclusive terms. He maps out an area of poetry that could not be touched because it belonged neither to the canonical body of American literature nor to the pantheon of “classical” surrealism. It is the first attempt since Paul Zweig’s article, “The New Surrealism,” in 1973 to present a bird’s-eye view of surrealism in American poetry. Joron advances the conversation by his willingness to recognize a wide range of divergent figures and movements branching out
from surrealism, and to incorporate poets who demonstrate surrealist affinities, even if they did not consistently self-identify as surrealist. His catalogue includes poets from the Beat movement, the deep image movement, the Chicago Surrealist Group, and the Language poetry generation, in addition to poets working independently in more recent decades. This panoramic perspective on the nature of surrealism’s influence has been implicitly understood but difficult to identify partly because poets are hesitant to claim association with a polarizing, maligned and misunderstood movement. Under the label “neo-surrealism,” Joron arranges these writers as dynamically connected to a tradition that has been successfully remade in the context of postmodern American culture, where “otherness has been systematically denied a presence.” Against this denial, surrealism presents “a critique and a carnival of the object under capitalism” and “the materialization of a mystery whose non-sense signals the irruption of the genuinely new” (378-79). His expanded approach provides the model for this dissertation, which undertakes the task of delving deeper into selected and seminal figures through which surrealism has evolved.

**Poetic Surrealism**

Underpinning the tensions and misperceptions about surrealism’s influence is a basic obstacle that has slowed recognition and interaction with American surrealism: the difficulty of surrealism itself. Because the Surrealists insisted on figurative rather than formal explanations, consensus on its definition has always been weak. This poses obvious problems for a study of influences and transformations, especially when transference is not clearly demarcated from poet to poet or one school to the next, but rather through momentary points of contact and indirect
channels. In spite of its elusive nature, certain definitions and characteristics have always been upheld as central to the movement, and one can make some progress through the untidy record by being attentive to the connection between textual patterns and the theoretical principles that govern these features. My purpose is not to scrutinize the plausibility of these presuppositions, but to delineate the essential facets of surrealist thought so that the influence of its ideas, however one may judge them, can be traced.

Surrealism took its central goal, to “change life,” from Arthur Rimbaud, one of its most important predecessors. Rimbaud inspired the Surrealists with his conjuring of unreal landscapes and his concept of the disordering or “deranging” of the senses. Breton admired how Rimbaud’s dreamlike poetry seemed to dissolve the real and imaginative worlds into each other, unifying apparently opposing realities. Rimbaudian derangement represented an instrument for creating this convergence of opposites, transforming one’s conception of reality. For the Surrealists, situated in the cultural experience of post-World War I Europe, the modern individual was essentially disconnected from himself or herself, alienated by the social, political, economic and psychological conditions that governed daily existence in a civilization built on rationalism and capitalism. In contrast to its more destructive and iconoclastic sister movement, Dada, David Hopkins notes, “Surrealism had more or less a restorative mission, attempting to create a new mythology and put modern man and woman back to touch with the forces of the unconscious” (n.p.). Surrealism’s radical proposal was that language was the mechanism for reconnecting with these forces. By disrupting or suspending rational thought, the unconscious could be given voice; conversely, language unintelligible and disorienting to the logical part of the mind could
reawaken the unconscious imagination from the slumber it had been put in by modern life and Enlightenment rationalism. The surrealist project thus consisted of experimenting with various methods for suppressing rational control in writing and revivifying what it viewed to be the “abject insignificance and stagnation” that typified conventional and literary French language (Balakian, *Surrealism* 113).

From this framework, two basic principles developed: *automatic writing* and the *intensification of contradiction*. Gerald Mead argues that Breton was convinced “the conscious mind participates in language only incidentally,” and thus that language, which was devoid of *a priori* content, was equally capable of communicating conscious and “subconscious” subject matter. The practical problem, as Breton understood it, was “restoring to language its natural association to the subconscious, by freeing it from the constraints or influences outside of itself, by allowing language to function *automatically*” (27, Mead’s emphasis). Breton’s confidence in the link between language and the unconscious is partly due to his experience in the psychiatric hospital where he witnessed the Freudian technique of free association practiced on shell shocked war veterans (Hopkins 68). Breton’s other inspiration, according to his account in “The First Manifesto of Surrealism,” was his experience of having a phrase come to his mind “one evening, …without any apparent relationship to the events in which… I was then involved” (21). The sentence, “‘[t]here is a man cut in two by the window,’” was “so clearly articulated that it was impossible to change a word” (21). Mead spells out the implication of the linguistic nature of this explanation of automatism: automatic thought for Breton is not the representation or imitation of mental content or images, but rather issues directly from the unconscious as
language (28). This necessitates that the writer be in a “receptive” and “passive” frame of mind, as Breton indicates in his instructions for automatic writing:

After you have settled yourself in a place as favorable as possible to the concentration of your mind upon itself, have writing materials brought to you. Put yourself in as passive, or receptive, a state of mind as you can. Forget about your genius, your talents, and the talents of everyone else. Keep reminding yourself that literature is one of the saddest roads that leads to everything. Write quickly, without any preconceived subject, fast enough so that you will not remember what you’re writing and be tempted to reread what you have written. The first sentence will come spontaneously, so compelling is the truth that with every passing second there is a sentence unknown to our consciousness which is only crying out to be heard. … Go on as long as you like. Put your trust in the inexhaustible nature of the murmur. (29-30)

The peculiarly artificial details of these instructions reinforce the key aspects of automatic writing: it is spontaneous, rapid, and unselfconscious. While it was rare for Surrealists to follow this exact formula, they translated the precept into numerous process-centered experiments, involving, for example, hypnosis, sleep deprivation, dreaming, chance operations and collaborative writing. These passive and non-intentional forms of writing were at the heart of the movement because they create or attempt to approximate, as Breton puts it in his definition of surrealism, “thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, exempt from any aesthetic or moral concern” (26).

Writing composed accordingly, the Surrealists believed, would routinely violate reason’s basic axiom, the law of non-contradiction. Louis Aragon’s declaration that “the marvelous is the eruption of contradiction within the real” points to the fundamental role of contradiction and incompatibility in surrealist writing (22). The Surrealists proposed this “eruption” through inciting acute semantic resistance between words or phrases. Breton credits Pierre Reverdy with
originating this principle in his statement on the poetic image:

“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 and poetic reality…” (qtd. in Breton 20)

Reverdy’s description provided the basis for the surreal image, which might be described as the correlation of non-compatible terms without qualification or resolution. The reader’s instinctual and automatic attempt to resolve the relationship proposed in the contradictory pairing causes psychic dissonance, a “derangement” of thought and sensation.

Inez Hedges, in “Surrealist Metaphor: Frame Theory and Componential Analysis,” argues that surreal images break the contractual relationship between author and reader. Surreal images violate the “quality” maxim, where “[m]etaphor should be in a relation of noncontradiction to the relational world presented by the surrounding discourse” (282). Surreal word combinations ignore “selection restrictions” on semantic frames of reference, as when, for instance, a non-substantial noun is matched to a verb requiring a substantial subject. This occurs, for example, when a verb “normally matched to a human is matched to a nonhuman subject” (290-92). Formulations of this type violate semantic codes that would normally limit phrases to groups of words referring to consistent or relatable frames of reference.

Mead, in his monograph, *The Surreal Image: A Stylistic Study*, describes the surreal image as a paradoxical relationship that “provides contact but preserves distance” (29). Unlike symbolic language, which “represent[s] something outside itself,” the surrealist image employs reference *literally*:
The surrealist image is seen as an encounter totally in situ; it is not elliptic, a process Breton condemns…, but complete in itself, automatic. The surrealist image, therefore, is not metaphoric, in the sense of a relationship of equality existing somewhere at a distance, outside the units actually in contact…. The relationship realized by the surrealist image is not, in this sense, an equation…. (29)

The surreal image thus proposes a linguistic event that is both paradoxical and self-sufficient. Meaning in this situation becomes a precarious concept: the suggestiveness of the image is highly ambiguous and obscure, even though its denotative significance is precise.

The jarring effect of contradiction in the surreal image is understood as an experience of “convulsive beauty” and as a direct channel to the “marvelous.” Breton’s most succinct statement on these concepts is often considered to be found at the end of Nadja where he describes a train struggling to pull out of a station, while its wheels strain restlessly on the tracks (Bohn 48). The marvelous was, Willard Bohn claims, “a unique kind of beauty” that the Surrealists “were first to recognize” (48). Rick Poynor describes it as “a kind of jolt or shock, an excitingly disorientating sensation, as though a crack had suddenly opened in the world’s carapace of normality and everything was slipping away.” The intense dissonance of the surreal image is the movement’s quintessential staging of convulsive beauty, the mind’s wheels straining on the track.

For the Surrealists, these two principles—automatism and contradiction—turn the notion of literary value on its head. “Poetry,” Anna Balakian writes, “was no longer to be an expression of ideas or emotions but the creation of a series of images, which did not necessarily owe their existence to an a priori subject” (114). Surrealism proposed, Ernesto Suarez-Toste observes, “a major breach” between those who “considered themselves mere vehicles, and their automatic
pieces different from literary texts,” and other modernists who viewed the poet as “a gifted creator and craftsman” (“Spontaneous” 166). Over and against the “literary,” Breton holds the “nobler” purpose of surrealist writing, wherein what seems to be “an extreme degree of immediate absurdity” is actually the writer “giv[ing] way to everything admissible, everything legitimate in the world” (24).

This study proceeds from the position that automatism and contradiction form the basis for surrealism’s conventions, and that poets’ surrealist affinities can be measured in these terms. Certain difficulties arise in regards to this criterion. While surreal images, for instance, can be demonstrated textually, automatism, as a compositional process, seems contingent on authorial intentionality (or the lack thereof, as it were). This obstacle is addressed in two ways. The first and most direct approach is to examine the conditions and specifications under which the poets conceptualized their creative processes; to this end, special attention is paid to the poets’ own statements on their methods. Second, textual evidence of an indirect nature can be traced by looking for signs indicative of automatic writing. For instance, automatic writing typically has a lower degree of narrative and topical cohesion, as the writer during composition is preoccupied with only the most immediate frame of linguistic reference. Hedges explains that automatic texts “are less cohesive than conventional works because they omit many devices of topicalization” such as plot and character, and rely on other devices for “minimal continuity,” such as pronominal redundancy, localized topical cohesion, and segmentation, such as paragraph breaks (288-89). In addition, deictic markers (“here,” “there,” etc.) are used arbitrarily, even as conventional use of coordination and subordination in sentence structure “creates the illusion of
organization” (289). These kinds of features are characteristic of automatic works and provide supporting evidence for assessing the degree of surrealism present.

Of course, to members of the movement, the mark of a Surrealist was commitment to an idea, not a set of textual features. While this attitude implied a dubious division between author and text, it at least conveyed the importance of the writer’s ontological trajectory. Without, to borrow Joron’s words, an “agonistic embrace” of “the beautiful convulsion of irresolvable paradox” (379), surrealist devices are drained of their effectiveness and become empty tricks. The history of surrealism in American poetry, in a sense, turns out to be a prolonged experiment in testing the extent to which this “embrace” could be redirected, changed or qualified.

**American Surrealism 1920-45**

An uneasy tension has existed between surrealism and American poetry from the beginning of surrealism’s migration across the Atlantic. Dickran Tashjian traces the artistic and literary history of the movement in the United States from 1920 through World War II in *Boatload of Madmen*. His primarily art-focused account depicts New York City as the cultural hub where surrealism’s first wave of exposure was worked out in the interaction between the competing interests of artists, museum curators, entrepreneurs and the American public. Direct exposure to surrealist art was relatively unavailable in the States until curator Julien Levy’s exhibitions of the 1930s, but interest in the European avant-garde remained “nascent” with a public that “still preferred a representational visual art that illustrated genteel sentiments” (6-7). The 1930s saw an alignment of the avant-garde with politics, radicals who “had long urged their
counterparts in the arts to join in common cause social, political, and economic matters” (7). At the same time, some Surrealists, such as Man Ray and Salvador Dali, were conscripted by the fashion and advertising industries to appropriate surrealism for commercial interests. The popularity of surrealism “reached full pitch” during World War II, when the artists and writers in Breton’s circle came to New York as French expatriates. These figures were “highly visible” but “insular” and “sectarian,” and few Americans satisfied Breton’s “rigorous ‘membership’ standards” (5). Breton is traditionally described as either “crippled and frustrated” or “arrogantly unbowed” during his time in New York. Yet, Tashjian finds that, contrary to legend, Breton was productive during his stay in New York, with war conditions inclining artists toward more “cooperative improvisation” that “dislodged the Surrealists sufficiently from their imagined cultural superiority to put everyone on an equal footing, even if only for a moment” (8).

Nevertheless, the unmistakably European flavor of surrealism disinclined New York audiences from fully embracing the movement.

Alongside these events, a literary interest on surrealism emerged through magazines that published surrealist works and carved out their own interpretations and responses to the movement. Eugène Jolas, an American expatriate in Paris who followed the movement from its inception, began the magazine *transition* in 1927. His sensibilities overlapped significantly with the Surrealists, but he stubbornly worked for a unification of all avant-garde movements, which he imagined ushering in a new literary era--something the Surrealists had little interest in. Early on, Jolas printed the Surrealists with regularity, but he soon found the movement lacked aesthetic principle and believed “that the unconscious might provide raw material for poetry but should
not be taken as an inherent form of poetry” (Tashjian 158). He worked hard to create a viable alternative, eventually settling on a Jungian-surrealist synthesis that provided a social basis for art while preserving political neutrality (33).

Jolas’s magazine inspired Charles Henri Ford, an enthusiastic young poet from Mississippi, to adopt surrealism as the outlook for his new magazine, *Blues*, which he started in 1929 while still in high school. While Ford sought “a synthesis of regionalism and avant-garde innovation,” he, like Jolas, “came down squarely on the side of writing poetry,” arguing that automatism needed to be refined through craftsmanship and “‘a thorough discipline of the emotions’” (Tashjian 155, 158). After spending the 30s in Paris with members of Breton’s movement, Ford returned to the States and started *View*, which would be the most significant introduction of surrealism to American readers through World War II. Ford’s relationship with the expatriates in New York provided the magazine with many opportunities to feature Surrealists, including an important interview with Breton in 1941 in which he proclaimed the continued relevance of surrealism for a world currently being scoured by the destruction of war (191). Still, Ford’s rejection of surrealism’s anti-literary stance steered the magazine deliberately toward a more eclectic and artistic focus that eventually created a “‘rivalry’ with Breton ‘for the New York scene’” (196). When Breton initiated his own magazine, *VVV*, in 1942 and asked Ford to run it, Ford declined because he knew Breton would pressure him into excluding non-surrealists. *VVV’s* four issues over the next two years became largely a forum for European surrealists. An opportunity was missed, Tashjian concludes, for “a French-American parity with increased collaborations” (211). Thus, while “these editors sought cultural goals that were
sometimes derived from, sometimes at odds with, sometimes tangential to, Breton’s surrealism,”
their magazines became platforms for their own “cultural agendas” (7-8).

Due to these activities, however, surrealism was sufficiently visible between the wars to
warrant serious consideration from some of the most important American poets, particularly
William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound. Their instinct, like Jolas’s and Ford’s, was to
assimilate surrealist principles into a broad modernist poetic. Daniel Albright explains that
Pound, who was at first “diametrically opposed” and largely indifferent to surrealism, was
“obsessed” with the movement from 1936-38 (161). Albright argues that during that time Pound
was fascinated by surrealism’s hyper-materialistic point of view and saw it “not as an artifact of
the twentieth century, but as an esthetic modality available at all times and places” (163). Pound,
peering at this aesthetic through the perspective of his ideogrammic method, concluded that
surrealism’s purpose was “to cause hilarity through destruction” and the “dismemberment of
logical sequence” (170, 172). Albright sees Pound’s encounter with surrealism impacting his
writing of the Cantos, but Pound’s non-automatic version of surrealism was developed in relative
isolation and thus had little impact on the evolution of surrealism for later poets.

Williams’s flirtation with surrealism was more promising. He had encountered the seeds
of the movement in the Dada exhibitions he attended in the New York in 1915 (Tashjian,
Williams 58). Duchamp’s “readymades” inspired him through their focus on objects in their
literal and material presence. The dictum he later formulated, “no ideas but in things,” is parallel
to surrealism’s emphasis on encountering material reality (Tashjian, Williams 59), and Kora in
Hell was written in a spontaneous, “‘quasi-hallucinatory state’” that anticipates Breton’s and

form an accompaniment to the radio jazz and other various, half preaching, half sacrilegious sounds of a Saturday night in June with the windows open and the mind stretched out attempting to regain some sort of quiet and be cool on a stuffed couch. (Williams 9)

Tashjian draws an insightful comparison between Williams’s description of Ford and Breton’s explanation of automatic writing. Whereas Breton’s encounter with automatic language is a “gratuitous” phrase arriving “in a vacuum,” Ford’s poetry, for Williams, makes one “receptive” to the “‘sounds’ of American life” (*Boatload* 162). Notably, the sounds coming through Williams’s figurative “window” are both local in flavor and representative of American popular culture. In contrast to Breton’s automatism, Williams’s vision of a derangement of the senses is “simply an immersion in American culture in its poetic radiation” (162). This is an intriguing proposal for an American modification of surrealism, but this is as far as Williams could go. As his interactions with Surrealists developed, he grew adverse to the mechanical passivity automatism demanded. In his article, “Spontaneous, Not Automatic: William Carlos Williams versus Surrealist Poetics,” Suarez-Toste argues that on the question of literary value—the point of “major breach” between surrealism and modernist poetics—Williams was unequivocally a modernist (166). Williams would take the position that without an extensive sifting and purging of the “‘drivel’” and “‘crap,’” the poetic value of spontaneous writing was lost (qtd. in Suarez-Toste 165). Later, he would reiterate his anti-automatic stance, complaining that the Surrealists
are “‘degenerate, insane and worst of all tiresome,’” and “‘so fixed on the first stage of placing words on the page… that they forget there is a second phase’” (168).

The proclivities of Jolas, Ford, Pound and Williams point to what Tashjian identifies as an “American pattern of ambivalence toward Surrealism [that] continued unabated through the Second World War” (Boatload 8). This ambivalence, and the tensions it centered on, would shape how surrealism was understood and transformed in American poetry. A glimpse into the nature of these tensions is indicated by Levy’s representation of the movement in his 1936 anthology, Surrealism. In 1978, Franklin Rosemont would remark that Levy’s book “was the standard US reference work on [Surrealism] for years,” but “was intended as a popularisation [sic]” and misrepresented the movement (57). A careful reading of Levy’s introduction reveals how.

First and most distinctly, Levy de-radicalizes the movement. He defines it as essentially psychological rather than political in nature, a “point of view” the goal of which is “[t]o re-establish man as psychology instead of anatomy.” This positions the movement as a philosophical corrective—an opposition to positivism and naturalism—rather than as a form of linguistic and social revolt (7). He also gives surrealism universal and democratic orientation. Surrealism, he explains, is accessible to all by virtue of poetic sensibility:

Surrealism should not be difficult to understand. It is not a specialized monopoly of a few mysterious initiates. It deals with what Salvador Dali terms “the great vital constants.” Its fundamental doctrine is that poetry originates in, and appeals to, the subconscious. Every one shares it, unless temporarily impeded by the mechanism of repression, or by an imagined economic handicap (I have never been to college) or by prejudice (poetry and art are effeminate) or by utter laziness (explain it to me, I haven’t the energy to think and feel for myself). (5, original emphasis)
This statement supposes that a uniform model of consciousness and artistic sense can by applied across history and culture. He infers this from the movement, although it is not a particular emphasis for the Surrealists, who were more likely to frame their work in terms of scientific progress: it was investigation of consciousness, the “constants” of which were open to question. Levy also pushes surrealism much closer toward the literary than Breton, who tried to hedge against the dissolution of surrealism into an aesthetic modality. Levy overleaps his anti-literary antipathy, claiming not only that surrealism is compatible with a conventional view of poetic sensibility, but also that it finds its basis in aesthetic experience. Indeed, for Levy, the applications of surrealism are primarily artistic: “Painting, Literature, ...ARCHITECTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY, and CINEMA” (3, original emphasis). These categories, along with a few others, form the organizational schema for his anthology.

Extending the implications of this democratic psychology, Levy emphasizes surrealism’s connection to intuition and the mythopoeic while significantly reducing the role of automatism and chance. The “subconscious,” he writes, is the “bed” of “intuitive action,” and he quotes from Dali’s speech at the Museum of Modern Art: “‘For Surrealism the only requisite is a receptive and intuitive human being’” (7). The role of derangement is reduced, and the principle of contradiction is buried beneath the surface of affect: “The surrealists often propose to shock and surprise,” Levy explains, “so that you may be deprived of all preconceived standards and open to new impressions” (8). This ostensibly equates surrealism’s convulsive beauty to shock treatment, a preparatory step for “contemplation”:

Age and habit have too often overcome the original intensity of living.
Unfortunately, unless people are startled they frequently fail to devote their attention to anything as subtle as a work of art, which must be understood through contemplation. (8)

A reader relying on this explanation of the movement is doomed to frustratingly approach surrealist works as intentionally befuddling, yet somehow comprehensible through intuition and common human nature.

In sum, Levy’s anthology sublimates surrealism’s contrarian stance into a more palatable, politically correct modernism. He pushes the emphasis away from revolt and anti-art toward a psychological humanism that exalts aesthetic expression. Notably, as the primary museum curator of surrealist art in the States, Levy would have had reason to cultivate an audience of receptive museumgoers. In as far as his task was to translate the essential ideas of the movement to a readership skeptical of European sophistication, the book captures, however obliquely, something of its affirmation of imagination and its dynamic capacity for defamiliarization. Nevertheless, it gives a skewed view by leaving out clear explanations of the essential mechanisms of surrealist production. It highlights a group of artists united by their interest in a new psychological approach to art rather than as an uncompromising movement engaged in revolutionary anti-art. If Levy were accurately anticipating the expectations of his audience, it would seem Americans could only accept a surrealism that was aesthetically approachable and spoke to the common man.

Levy’s version of surrealism is in all likelihood similar to the one Lamantia encountered as a teenager. Lamantia was the only American poet to be officially inducted into the movement while the Surrealists were in New York and is the only poet from this era to successfully conjoin
a commitment to surrealism with sustained poetic creation. Caples, Joron and Peters’s extensive introduction to Lamantia’s new *Collected Poems* provides the details of his captivating journey into the world of poetry and surrealism. Having stumbled upon the movement through an exhibit of Dali’s work in San Francisco, he subsequently researched the topic at the public library and not long after began submitting poems to Ford’s *View* and Breton’s *VVV* in New York. Breton, seizing the opportunity to promote his movement in the form of young American talent, encouraged and endorsed him, and soon Ford took him on as an editor for *View*. Only sixteen at the time, Lamantia was exhilarated but ultimately overwhelmed and disillusioned by the rivalry among the New York avant-garde, and he returned to the Bay area after only a few months on the East coast, “ready to renounce surrealism” (*xxxi*). There, Kenneth Rexroth became his mentor figure and involved him in the pre-Beat poetry scene. After a few years making acquaintances in this circle, he fell into relative seclusion and was preoccupied with an intense exploration of mysticism and ecstatic experience. This journey led him simultaneously to drug addiction and Catholicism. His religious beliefs, he decided, were incompatible with his previous poetic outlook, and he started viewing his pre-conversion writing as “blasphemous” (*xxxvii*).

Eventually, however, his closest friends within the Beat circle softened his religious fervor and his enthusiasm for surrealism returned. During this time he would publish some of his most accomplished poetry and participate in the Rosemonts’ magazine, *Arsenal* (*xl ix*). The final decades of his life continued his circuitous personal journey into mysticism and gnosis, which centered on the dialectic between his religious interests and poetic surrealism. His investigations led him variously to ecology, Native American ritualism, Egyptology, and symbology. Behind
his self-doubt and spiritual pendulum swings was a desire to synthesize and correlate experience with meaning in a holistic and universal vision. Caples, Joron and Peters describe Lamantia’s life as a “Hegelian spiral” that ascended to “a higher level” with every cycle through his uncertainties and passions (xlviii). Ultimately, in the last years of his life, he arrived at a Catholic-surrealist synthesis that connected surrealism’s poetics of contradiction to the mystery of the Trinity. In one of his last poems, he was able to declare, “‘God is a surrealist / in the union of opposites’” (lvi).

Lamantia’s importance has flown under the radar, and only now because of Caples’ and Jorons’ research is the significance of his lifelong dialog with surrealism becoming fully visible. For the Beats in the ‘50s and ‘60s, he represented an authentic connection to the surrealist movement, even though he was nearly the same age as many of the poets he befriended. Up to and during World War II, the demarcations of American-based surrealism were fairly defined—artists and editors had clear proximity to the movement, interacting with a visible “center” represented by Breton and the expatriates. When surrealism reemerged a decade later, it was a widespread and diffused phenomenon. Lamantia’s sensibilities, in contrast to these later movements, had been shaped by direct contact with an American surrealism, however nascent, in the centralized scene in New York. And in spite of being privy to the negative aspects of that contentious scene, he was able to continue developing his surrealist approach with increased confidence over the course of his life. His ability to do so made him the foremost luminary for American surrealist poets later in the century.
American Surrealism after 1945

In 1945, with the closing of View and VVV and the return of the expatriates to France, surrealism’s presence in America took a noticeable hiatus. It began to reappear in the late ‘50s, under changed cultural conditions. Joron sites the “‘background radiation’” from surrealism’s initial presence in America between the wars as the primary reason for its return, but there was an additional cause for the resurgence. A new generation of poets was gaining exposure to the movement through researching and translating the Surrealists, discovering the Latin surrealist poets, and traveling to Europe. Notably, most of the figures that would promulgate this second “wave” of exposure encountered surrealism through texts and works of art rather than through direct contact with the official members of the group. Surrealism was for them thus manifested primarily in literary and artistic terms, and the indirectness of this exposure gave these figures the historical and cultural distance to take a more flexible and assimilative approach, even as this lack of proximity would create new problems. As diverging poetic schools of this period mixed modernist and avant-garde traditions into their own concoctions, surrealism converged with other traditions with varying results.

The Beats were the first school during these decades to incorporate elements of surrealist thought into their work. Between their relationship to Lamantia, appreciation of French modernist poetry, travels to Paris, acquaintance with surrealist-inspired poets in Mexico, and connection to jazz music, their exposure to surrealism was layered and diverse. Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti forged the way for an embrace of the surreal image. Ferlinghetti’s appreciation for Jacques Prévert’s modernist perspective and Ginsberg’s experimentations with
improvisational noun clusters culminated in a pointed approach to the derangement of the American experience. The compositional techniques the Beats developed borrowed from automatic writing in its emphasis on the tempo of composition and spontaneous association. The contradictory forces at play in this compositional style created something closely resembling Breton’s convulsive beauty, and it was through an embrace of contradiction that the Beats imagined transformation of society was possible.

The fullest iterations of this Beat-surrealism are visible in the careers of Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman, who I examine in the next chapter. For both these poets, surrealist writing provided a means of transforming personal anxiety into cultural restoration. Corso combines surrealist juxtaposition and with Percy B. Shelley’s alchemical model of poetry. Shelley allowed Corso to see the surreal image as part of a larger Romantic tradition and as appropriate to his own cultural context. Particularly in *Gasoline* and *The Happy Birthday of Death*, Corso contains and transmutes the contradictions of society within a poetics of derangement. In “Bomb,” this derangement erupts into a hysterical and joyous embrace of modern society despite its self-destructive tendencies. For African-American Bob Kaufman, surrealist derangement was an inflection of his marginalized racial and cultural identity. Surrealism equipped Kaufman with the tools for cultural resistance and revolution. He is exceptional among American poets for taking seriously the surrealist impetus for aggressive activism, exemplified in his disruptive public readings and demonstrations. In addition, he synthesized surrealist juxtaposition, jazz-based improvisation and the outlook of the Beat movement into a form of cultural protest, constructing an image of the beatnik as a *poète maudit*. His satirical “Abomunist Manifesto” calls for an
alternative and oppositional approach to life that entails the rupture of the normative values through surrealist humor and pathos. For these Beat poets, renewed interest in surrealism aligned with a particular cultural moment, creating new possibilities for poetic derangement.

Following closely on the heels of the Beats, the deep image poets began their own, very different appropriation of surrealism, which forms the subject of Chapter 3. A less cohesive network of writers, this movement’s origins can be traced back to the early ‘60s in New York, where Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Bly and Robert Kelly shared mutual interest in merging surrealism with the modern imagist tradition and Jungian depth psychology. This objective meant a reconnection with the unconscious as a storehouse of ancient, universal and collective memories that constitute primal human experience. These poets’ literary interests were wide ranging, and they facilitated a renewed interest in European and Latin modernists as well as lesser-known indigenous poetic traditions. Based on their early writing, surrealism projected to play a key role in their poetics by providing the link between conscious and unconscious experience. Bly, who showed a particular affinity for Latin surrealism, developed his theory of “leaping poetry” wherein the mind energetically jumps “from the conscious to the unconscious and back again” (Leaping 1). Deep image poetry as practiced under Bly’s leadership eventually evolved into a fairly compressed lyric form that employed surrealism’s principle of contradiction to dramatize these “leaps” into the collective unconscious.

My analysis the work of deep image poets James Wright, W.S. Merwin, John Haines and Bly, however, shows that the deep image model largely suppressed surrealism’s principle of contradiction. In the mature and productive model these poets developed, the surreal image’s is
carefully isolated and subordinated to an overall structure that is narrow in interpretative possibility. The surreal becomes unproblematically transactional. Furthermore, they advocated extensive revision and literary craftsmanship. Thus, their assimilation of surrealism is rather tenuous. Yet because the deep image group associated with surrealism more conspicuously than any other mid-century movement—largely due to their role in translating and popularizing European and Latin American surrealist poetry through their small magazines and presses—their iteration of surrealism has heightened significance. More than any other network, these poets defined what others would think of as poetic surrealism for the next several decades. When their poetic model grew stale, the “new surrealism” they represented turned stale with it. In *Disappearing Ink*, Dana Gioia remarks that “[f]ew literary movements produced so many dreadful poems so quickly as seventies’ Surrealism” (253).

There were some, however, who perceived traces of a more dynamic and open possibilities under the surface of the deep image. George Hitchcock’s *Kayak* magazine, which ran from 1964-84, is an intriguing look into the work of a diverse community of young poets discussing surrealism at this time. Hitchcock positioned the magazine as both surrealist and imagist in orientation, reflecting the proposed complementarity of these traditions on which the deep image was premised. Hitchcock welcomed and gave ample space to Bly and others whose style resonated with the proclivities of the deep image writing. At the same time, Hitchcock made *Kayak* a forum for experiments in surrealist derangement and automatic writing, exemplified by the work of poets like H.R. Hays, Lou Lipsitz, Louis Z. Hammer, and Nanos Valoritis. While these poets were still inclined toward craftsmanship and imagism, they were
more comfortable with the indeterminacy and irresolvability of surrealist juxtaposition.

Hitchcock’s poetic corpus sheds light on the connection he had to both sides of this equation. Chapter 4 analyzes his poetry in order to consider where and how he engages the tension between a more traditional version of surrealism and the deep image. His forays into poetry reveal surrealist sympathies and an appreciation for the chaotic energy of automatic writing. At the same time, Hitchcock’s interaction with some of the figures surrounding the deep image movement in the ‘60s initiated a deep image phase of writing that culminated in the pastoralism of Ship of Bells (1969). In the productive decade that followed, his work oscillates between these two approaches and sometimes attempts to synthesize them.

At least conceptually, Hitchcock believed in the ability of these two poetic approaches—the deep image and surrealism—to co-exist and complement one another. To a certain extent this complementarity seemed to work. From whichever end of the spectrum the “Kayak poets” (as they would be casually refer to themselves) hailed, they agreed that the unconscious had an important function in contemporary society and that surrealism was one of the most important paths to it. In important ways, though, these camps were antithetical. A few years into the magazine’s existence, Bly chastised the Kayak community for what he deemed to be their lax compositional approach and stylistic sterility. A debate ensued among the magazine’s readers and contributors over the role of style, sincerity and derangement. Some argued that “overloading” the mind was just as valid an approach to consciousness as Bly’s desire to calm and empty it. Others insisted that the surrealistic aspects of the “Kayak poem” were no less “artificial” than Bly’s own model. Even though Hitchcock only directly commented on these
questions much later, his own poetic tendency for an ornateness and mannerism intimated a preference for the raw textures of an earlier surrealist style. His editorship of Kayak, too, leaned in this direction, as the magazine’s playful collage-like design, together with the poetry he selected and the editorial ethos he exuded, creates a sharp contrast to Bly’s quietism. For twenty years he persistently promoted through Kayak openness to the derangement of surrealist poetics.

For practical reasons, this dissertation passes over two other pockets of surrealist resurgence in the ‘60s: the Chicago Surrealist Group and the New York school. While Joron notes that the anthologies and publications of the Chicago Surrealist Group made available underappreciated and important writers from overseas, he concludes that their strict adherence to Breton’s formal dictates caused their own work to lack innovation (382). On the other hand, Franklin Rosemont’s What is Surrealism? was the first extensive anthology of Breton’s writing available in English and offered a comprehensive, if biased, history of the movement. Unfortunately, Rosemont, who considered himself the official leader of the movement in the States, replicated Breton’s attitude of exclusivity and absolutism. As a result the group’s influence was severely limited.

The New York school’s ties to surrealism have been addressed by scholars to some extent. Partly for this reason I have deferred a close study of their interaction with surrealism for another time. Their connection is somewhat different than the Beats and deep image poets, with the lines of influence running through the New York art scene. John Ashbery’s deferential attitude toward surrealism, particularly Bretonian automatism, complicates his connection to the
movement, and while Frank O’Hara and Kenneth Koch both had early experimental surrealist phases out of which they developed their trademark styles, the orientation of their mature work is nominally surrealist at best, blending American idiom with a broad post-Symbolist French poetic tradition characterized by a dexterous and witty realism. The compelling spontaneity with which they move between subjects no doubt is partly derived from the loosened compositional approach automatism demanded, but without a thorough study of the movement, it is difficult to determine the significance of these connections.

At the least, the New York school played an important role in preceding and influencing the Language poets, who represent an unlikely, more recent chapter in the history of American surrealism. With the advent of Language poetry in the ‘70s and ‘80s, Joron notes, surrealism undergoes a “linguistic turn” (402). Challenging the assumption that language is a transparent medium of communication and is politically neutral, they interpret the majority of modern discourse, literary and otherwise, as reinforcing a capitalist framework for social and material exchange. These poets developed various theories and practices to counteract what they see as a fetishistic approach to language epitomized in realist fiction, journalism and consumerist advertising. Ron Silliman, for instance, promulgates his “new sentence” as means of frustrating the reader’s expectations of narrative and hypotactic structure, bringing attention to language as a material construct.

The roots of Silliman’s technique find their closest antecedent in the work of Clark

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3 See Suarez-Toste, “‘The Tension’” 1-2.
4 Marjorie Perloff, for instance, argues that O’Hara “assimilate[s]” surrealism “into an American idiom” after his early phase culminates in poems like “Second Avenue” (74).
Coolidge, one of the Language movement’s most important predecessors and the subject of my final chapter. Coolidge did not call himself a surrealist but came to similar conclusions as the Surrealists through his independent explorations of linguistic incongruity. Coolidge was fascinated by the automatic possibilities of language and the frictional energy between words. He began by studying and experimenting with juxtaposed word pairs and soon developed a highly unusual syntax-oriented and process-based compositional technique. By the late ‘70s, he was writing book-length poems in a unique style characterized by improvisation and syntactic deviation. This style, which he called “prosoid,” was engendered when he landed upon a technique that employed source texts as the basis for improvisational riffing. This technique served as a point of inspiration for the “automatic listening” method developed by Bob Perelman and the Grand Piano poets a few years later as well as Silliman’s new sentence. Coolidge’s style can be interpreted as the extension of surrealist principles of automatism and contradiction to the syntactic axis of language. My analysis traces the development of this style and examines his shorter poems from the late ‘70s and ‘80s employing these elements.

Coolidge’s syntactic innovations provide an intermediary link between surrealism's imagistic torque and the Language poets’ sentence-level focus. This connection between surrealism and Language poetry has caused scholars to hunt for further parallels. The most important Language poets, however, anticipated the comparison and tried to head off such analogies. In fact, at times they judged surrealism harshly and positioned themselves as superseding rather than extending the surrealist tradition. Nevertheless, the basic similarity of its theoretical approach and technical execution invites comparison. Standing in an indirect
relationship to both surrealism and Language poetry, Coolidge indicates the continued relevance and potential of Breton’s theory of automatic writing. The Language movement, indebted to this aspect of Coolidge, might have enriched its literary heritage and expanded the possibilities for their work had they not been so quick to foreground the differences over the similarities between the movements.

The Language poets are the last well-established movement to interact with surrealism more or less directly, albeit in a vexed manner, but surrealism has continued to exert an influence on recent and contemporary poets. Joron names several writers from the ‘80s and ‘90s who continue along the trajectories of surrealist poetics. His list includes Ivan Arguelles and Adam Cornford, for instance, who were frequent contributors to Kayak, while Will Alexander and Language poet John Yau represent part of surrealism’s “linguistic turn” (402). Other examples could be put forward, including Simic and James Tate, also Kayak poets, who have enjoyed widespread popularity in recent decades. Finally, younger poets such as Caples, Zapruder, Schomburg and Christie may prove to be at the forefront of another wave of surrealist influence. Afforded adequate time and space, all of these writers would prove intriguing to examine more closely.

**Conclusion**

The diversity and ubiquity of surrealism’s influence in widely differing approaches in American poetry gives evidence of the flexibility and relevance of its innovations. From one vantage, the surrealist project in the States has been fractured into multiple surrealisms; from
another point of view, the movement has lost its integrity and practical value in these weakened iterations; from still another, the vitality of surrealist poetics persists in these various iterations as a coherent tradition. While it is interesting to compare and contrast these perspectives, the situation more generally indicates the precarious conditions in which surrealism’s influence must be approached. On the level of individual poets, who are often inclined to claim only a qualified relationship to the movement, the mark of surrealism is sometimes only faintly perceptible; yet, when one considers larger trends and movements, its presence seems inescapable.

This situation was brought on in no small part by the way poets have responded to the tensions between surrealism and American poetry. Consistent with tendency in the first half of the century toward restating surrealism’s ideas in literary terms, poets since mid-century have typically married surrealism to literary craftsmanship and have modified its principles to accommodate their aesthetic criteria. Simic identifies this tension when he alludes to a tradition in American poetry that embraces “cheat[ing] on your unconscious and your dreams” (14). Unlike the pure automatism of the Surrealists and the “mechanical chance operations” of John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, which demonstrates a “suspicio[n] of the imagination,” Simic writes that his “entire practice...consists in submitting to chance only to cheat on it” (15). This suggests one possible way of characterizing surrealism in American poetry: consistent with Williams’s conclusion that a revisionary “second phase” of composition is a vital addition to the automatic process, American poets have taken the liberty of exploiting automatic writing for their own purposes. On one hand, this represents an important innovation. At least in theory, an automatic substructure could subsist beneath layers of revision. The basic principle of surrealist
composition, at least for Simic, is still compelling: “I open myself to chance in order to invite the unknown” (16). If in any sense American poets have been successful in executing this “two-phase” compositional approach, one could argue that they have taken steps toward resolving the dichotomy the Surrealists constructed between literary and automatic modes of writing.

On the other hand, this modification shifts the focus toward artistic value and is set in tension with surrealism’s emphasis on the liberation of the unconscious. For the Surrealists, revision inevitably introduced a component of authorial control and subjugated the work to preconceived aesthetic criteria. This was antithetical to the surrealist enterprise, as it effectively mitigated the irrational configurations generated through the automatic process. Surrealist techniques were designed to produce and highlight incongruous and irrational content; if such content were not taken as intrinsically valuable, its inclusion would become optional. Thus, imagining a synthesis between surrealist elements and other poetic traditions has proven difficult and paradoxical. The deep image poets, for instance, attempt to tame the surreal image by nesting it in a dramatic context that subsumes its contradictory energy to the poem’s unified structure. The Language poets ironically share surrealism’s distrust of the literary but reject what they deem to be a fetishistic relation to language surrealism proposed. Perhaps underlying these varying responses is an overarching and unavoidable question: What is the place of automatism and contradiction in American poetry? In the broadest sense, this dissertation attempts to consider some of the most telling answers that poets since mid-century have developed in relation to this question.
CHAPTER 2

BOMBS AND ABOMUNISTS: THE BEAT-SURREALISM

OF GREGORY CORSO AND BOB KAUFMAN

The Beat movement is commonly considered to have begun on the night Allen Ginsberg first read “Howl” at the Six Gallery reading in San Francisco in 1955. Philip Lamantia, the most prominent American-born surrealist poet to that date, opened the reading, although he elected to read not his own work but selections from the recently deceased John Hoffman. Ginsberg and other burgeoning poetic talents overshadowed Lamantia that evening, but the symbolic significance of his participation was clear—surrealism was a forerunner of the Beat movement and heralded its arrival. As part of their cultural identity, poetic approach, and political outlook, surrealism’s influence on Beat poetry seems unmistakable. Michael Fry delineates some of the obvious parallels: both “felt strongly the repressive and monotonous character of capitalism”; both sought to return to “the uncorrupted intuition of mankind”; both were “undoubtedly… spiritual[1] movement[s]” that strove for “the creation of a new consciousness”; and both conjoined contradictory ideas, especially the spiritual and the obscene, in order to “shock” readers into new consciousness (5, 8, 20). Why did these mid-century American writers look to the Surrealists, and in what ways did they incorporate their techniques and philosophy into their own?

This chapter investigates the relationship of surrealism to the Beat movement through a study of two well known but less-studied Beat poets, Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman. I begin by surveying works of scholars as well as the correspondence and commentary of these poets,
presenting an overview of the paths by which they came into contact with surrealism. Then, taking my cue from Paul Breslin’s psychological framework for understanding the poetry of the mid-century, I consider the Romantic and alchemical vision of Corso’s early poems and Bob Kaufman’s iteration of Beat poetics as a surrealist poète maudit. In the work of these two poets, surrealist derangement serves as a medium for social transformation and enables the unconscious to be translated into public critique.

Surrealism and the Beats

The relationship between the Beats and surrealism is complex, and criticism on surrealism in Beat literature has deepened over the past several decades to reflect this. Initial treatments of the movement took its parallels to surrealism on face value, as a simple case of literary inheritance, largely because Ginsberg and others openly attributed the Surrealists as one of their main sources of inspiration. Recent scholarship has revisited the role of surrealism in Beat community, looking at less direct avenues of transfer, such as the improvisational methods of blues and jazz music and the impact of Magic Realism in Mexico. These numerous channels of influence might be consolidated into five general areas of exposure and transference: (1) contact with French Surrealist poets and their works, (2) discovery of the modernist juxtapositional techniques of Imagism and Post-Impressionism, (3) inspiration of African American music, (4) adaptation of Latin American surrealism, and (5) interaction with preceding American surrealists, such as Phillip Lamantia and Kenneth Patchen.

(1) The poets most central to the Beat movement acknowledged their indebtedness to the writings of French Surrealists. Many of the Beats discovered these figures at a young age, and
their proclivities for them remained throughout their careers. Several of the Beats traveled to Europe in the late ‘50s and early ‘60s, strengthening their interest in French modernism and surrealism by meeting some of these artists and writers. The “Beat Hotel” in Paris became a place where Beat and French poets met and exchanged ideas, which created lasting influence on the work of Ginsberg, Burroughs, Corso and others (Van Der Bent 50-51).

Ginsberg’s primary surrealist influences came through Antonin Artaud and Guillaume Apollinaire. Carl Solomon, who had met Artaud while in Paris, introduced Ginsberg to his work while the two were in Rockland State Hospital. Brian Jackson observes that Ginsberg was immediately and profoundly impacted by Artaud’s view of art as rescuing society from “over-civilization” and restoring it to its “mythic origins” by means of “surrealistic shock” (307-10). He cites Ginsberg’s encounter with Artaud as the catalyst for Ginsberg’s experimentation leading up to the composition of “Howl” (310). Additionally, Ginsberg was impacted early in his career by Apollinaire’s view of poetry, which, similar to Artaud, viewed poetry as the antidote to cultural homogeneity (Kerouac and Ginsberg Letters, 4n). During his trip to Paris in 1957, Ginsberg visited Apollinaire’s grave and wrote a poem about that event, and he often references Apollinaire in his correspondence alongside Whitman and Lorca as the most innovative poets to remain undiscovered by American audiences due to their unconventional styles (134). Later in is career Ginsberg would call his “formula” a combination of Whitman and “Apollinaire zone montage swiftness” wherein “[d]ream gives the surreal super reality” with “naturalistic” and “social realist” texture (Letters 431). Ginsberg repeatedly acknowledges his imitation of these two poets, as well as other French Surrealists throughout his correspondence. Ginsberg was quick to correct critics who dismissed the influence of these writers. When Monarch Books
published a pamphlet on the Beats in 1966, Ginsberg wrote the publishers to express disapproval for such a serious mistake: “I have pointed out, Artaud, Céline and Genet, as well as the whole Dada-Surreal-Gertrude Stein scene, were essential to Burroughs, Lamantia, myself, Kerouac, etc” (*Letters* 325).

Gregory Corso’s life was similarly steeped in surrealist literature. His stint in prison during his adolescence was spent in reading a plethora of writers that included the Surrealists and Lamantia (Foster 131, Skau 88). Years later, during his long stay in Europe, he deepened his connections through his relationships with many of the Surrealists in Paris. Corso reports meeting Breton, mentioning in a letter to Ferlinghetti that “he digs my surrealist poems” (*Accidental* 45) and elsewhere recounts dining with Jean Genet and Salvador Dali, conversing at length with Duchamp, Man Ray and Benjamin Péret, befriending Henri Michaux, and playing “a mad surrealist dada pinball game” with Tristan Tzara (*Accidental* 30, 44, 109, 111, 135). Ginsberg and Corso paid comic tribute to these figures, when upon meeting Duchamp, Corso writes, “Allen ate his shoe; I ate Man Ray’s tie” (*Accidental* 109).

Lawrence Ferlinghetti was particularly well equipped to access surrealism directly from the French. He stayed in Paris from 1948-50 to study Jacques Prévert in an academic program and during the next few years taught French classes while translating Prévert and Apollinaire. Apollinaire was immensely influential on Ferlinghetti, and Larry Smith points out many remarkable parallels between the lifestyles of the two figures (*Lawrence* 62-64). These connections to French modernism led indirectly to his role as a writer and publisher of the Beat movement, as it was Peter Martin, the publisher of his Prévert translations, who later partnered with him to start *City Lights* magazine (Smith 19-21). In his introduction to his Prévert
translations, Ferlinghetti describes Prévert as a “great ‘see-er’ if not a seer,” who acts as a “seeing-eye dog” bringing clarity to an absurd world (“Translator’s Note” iii). The title of Ferlinghetti’s poem, “A POEM IS A MIRROR WALKING DOWN A STRANGE STREET,” reflects this idea (Pictures 5), as does his longer and more popular work, *A Coney Island of the Mind*. In that poem he “sees” America

with its ghost towns and empty Ellis Islands
and its surrealist landscape of
  mindless prairies
  supermarket suburbs
  steamheated cemeteries
  cinerama holy days
  and protesting cathedrals
a kissproof world of plastic toiletseats tampax and taxis

…

and all the other fatal shorn-up fragments
of the immigrant’s dream come true
  and mislaid
  among the sunbathers (*Coney* 13)

For Ferlinghetti and Ginsberg, America in the ‘50s and ‘60s was perhaps an extenuated version of the European environment that had produced French modernism, a landscape for which surrealism was growing increasingly appropriate.

(2.) Michael Skau remarks that the most important and recognizable inheritance the Beats take from surrealism is the surreal image (8), but the inheritance of this technique by the Beats and other American poets must be understood in the context of modernist poetics and art. Jackson, in his essay “Modern Looking: Surrealist Impressions in the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg,” argues that Ginsberg arrived at surreal juxtaposition through modernist poetics and impressionist painting. In his correspondence with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg learned the technique of “sketching,” in which the poet records in literal language the most striking,
particular details of what he is seeing, combining “passive recording and active interpretation,”
emulating the techniques of impressionism (Jackson 301). Impressionist-inspired sketching
resonated with Ginsberg, whose fascination with the painter Cezanne became a catalyst for
exploring juxtapositional images. As Ginsberg explains in an interview:

Cezanne doesn’t use perceptive lines to create space but it’s a juxtaposition of one
color against another color…so, I had the idea…[of the] juxtaposition of one
word against another, a gap between the two words—like the space gap in a
canvas—there’d be a gap between the two words which the mind would fill in
with the sensation of existence. (Spontaneous 30)

Ginsberg explains that “Howl” is in part homage to Cezanne; a phrase like “winter midnight
smalltown streetlight rain” imitates impressionist juxtaposition, replacing, necessarily, the
painter’s elements of shape and color with words and phrases (30). As Jackson points out,
however, only a few of Ginsberg’s juxtapositional images reflect this method of selecting facets
from a single plane of vision; most of his phrases, such as “hydrogen jukebox” and “rubber doll
bills” create conceptual gaps suggestive of surrealism (307). Ginsberg recognizes that with these
images, the writer “reach[es] different parts of the mind, which are existing simultaneously,
choosing elements from both” that “actually compresses in one instant…a whole series of
things” (Spontaneous 30-31). His commemoration of this technique in “Howl” further
demonstrates that he finds the contradictory tension of radical juxtaposition produces an effect
on the mind that goes well beyond impressionism. The “angelheaded hipsters” of the Beat
generation are those

who dreamt and made incarnate gaps in Time & Space through images
juxtaposed, and trapped the archangel of the soul between 2 visual images
and join the elemental verbs and set the noun and dash of consciousness
together jumping with sensation of Pater Omnipotens Aeterna Deus
(Collected 138)
This striking expansion of Prévert’s theory of the image is set adjacent to Ginsberg’s preceding line, which provides the basis for generating these juxtapositions: “…and who therefore ran through the icy streets obsessed with a sudden flash of the alchemy of the use of the ellipse the catalog the meter & the vibrating plane” (138). The spiritual and experiential terms with which he writes about this technique affirm irrational and unconscious language as the basis for poetic perception. Ginsberg indicates that this kind of image is not less authentic because it defies immediate comprehension:

[A]ctually in the moment of composition I don’t necessarily know what it means, but it comes to mean something later, after a year or two. Which takes on meaning in time, like a photograph developing slowly. Because we’re not always conscious of the entire depth of our minds…. (Spontaneous 31)

In spite of the immediate experiential difference in these two types of imagery, impressionistic and surreal, Ginsberg differentiates them only in matter of degree. In his photographic analogy, images like “hydrogen jukebox” obtain meaning the same way representative images do, only the meaning “develop[s]” slowly. His analogy argues for the veracity of images emerging from an automatic, non-rational process. In this sense, surrealism for Ginsberg is an extension of “modernist looking,” a “moment of heightened perception.” In fact, Jackson argues that Ginsberg understood surreal juxtaposition as arriving “naturally as a result of acute perception” and goes on to show that Ginsberg later joined these ideas to Eastern meditative practices (299-300).

(3.) The influence of jazz and blues music on the formation of the Beats’ approach to
writing is, justifiably, a central topic for Beat scholarship. This channel of influence has been interpreted as manifesting the Beats’ affinity for the primitive and the folk (Van Elteren 67). Folk music traditions assisted in bringing surrealism to the Beats in two ways. First, these traditions inform each other and exhibit similar approaches to art and life, specifically in the way both are based on the experience of the cultural margins. Second, these musical forms rely on theories of improvisation similar to automatism and encouraged the Beats to develop compositional methods that imitate the jazz singer’s mind-body holism in order to attain more fluid and immediate access to the unconscious.

In *Blues and the Poetic Spirit*, Paul Garon examines American Black music from a surrealist framework, establishing “the psychological and dynamically poetic nature of the blues,” which he claims is made possible through a surrealist perspective of art. Surrealism “confronts the whole dynamism of the creative process in a way that goes beyond psychoanalysis, beyond sociology, beyond all academic frames of reference” and “sees a means to freedom and life which is truly *livable* in the fullest understanding of the poetic act” (7). Like surrealism, blues and jazz fuse resistance and poetic impulse, re-center “human thought around the axis of desire,” restore “analogical propensities,” and annihilate “ideological limitations normally placed on our use of language” (7). The blues, according to Garon, are a vital force stemming from the margins of society often employing subversive humor (75). He cites the “fraternal reinforcement” shared between surrealism and blues music, which is all the more striking because surrealism originally dismissed music as an effective medium for revolt (211-

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5 See especially Ronald D. Cohen’s “Singing Subversions: Folk Music and the Counterculture of the 1950s” and Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity*, pages 196-221.
The compatibility of blues music and surrealism is on full display in the work of Bob Kaufman and other African American Beats whose imagery issues directly out of the spontaneity and subversive energy of blues musicology. For other Beat writers, improvisation and spontaneity represent an ideal artistic synergy of mind and body. Kerouac and Ginsberg, in translating the musical model of jazz to poetry, looked in part to surrealism as an approximate poetic model for “jazz writing.” At times, this softened the distinctions between surrealist and jazz methods of composition. For instance, Ginsberg cites Apollinaire and Artaud as his models for measuring lines as breath-thought units, whereas he reports Kerouac as deriving the same principle independently from great jazz musicians (Aldrich, Kissam and Blecker 146).

More generally, Skau notes the similarities between Breton’s model of creation and Kerouac’s directions for writing (7). In “Essentials of Spontaneous Prose,” Kerouac directs readers to “[i]f possible write ‘without consciousness’ in semitrance… allowing subconscious to admit in own [sic] uninhibited interesting necessary and so ‘modern’ language what conscious art would censor” (2). Revision and topical cohesion is eschewed because “undisturbed flow from the mind” is the objective. Instead of thematic control, the writer should

[follow] free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought, swimming in sea of English with no discipline other than rhythms of rhetorical exhalation and expostulated statement, like a fist coming down on a table with each complete utterance, bang! (1)

The reader will “receive telepathic shock and meaning-excitement by same laws [sic] operating in his own human mind” (1). Another similarity emerges regarding tempo. Kerouac explains that rapid and constant writing is necessary to avoid the temptation to revise and self-censor. Rapid
writing results in a climatic accumulation of automatic language: “No pause to think of proper word but the infantile pileup of scatological buildup words till satisfaction is gained” (1). For Ginsberg, contradictions are the inevitable and desirable outcome of spontaneous writing: “I just type fast, hoping to catch all angles including contradiction” (qtd. in Belgrad, *Culture* 206).

In practice, the Beats synthesize automatic compositional processes with measured control. Daniel Belgrad traces the migration of surrealism through American abstract expressionist painters and poets like Charles Olson and William Carlos Williams, who were eager to embrace surrealism’s free play but were skeptical of its anti-revisionism. These artists and poets “integrate the free play of the unconscious with an empirical ‘reality principle’ in order to arrive at truth” (*Culture* 37). The resulting American “aesthetics of spontaneity” democratizes the artistic process by asserting that “authorship and by extension cultural authority” derives not from command of forms, which disadvantages the uneducated, but rather from one’s ability to access one’s own unconscious (40). As Belgrad goes on to show, bebop and jazz, as well as Beat poetics, emanate from this aesthetic (179-221).

(4.) Another channel of exposure came through the Beats’ contact during their trips to Mexico with Magic Realism. Belgrad argues that the Beats identified with Magic Realism as a counterculture position against corporate capitalism and state socialism. Similar to the States, the Mexican poetic avant-garde was influenced during the ‘40s by an influx of expatriate Surrealists and were inspired by the movement’s liberation of the unconscious and radical politics, even while they “rejected Breton’s authority to define Surrealism on the American continent.” Differentiating themselves from French surrealism, they reshaped the movement according to “the indigenous ways of thinking and being” (Belgrad, “Transnational” 30, 34). Some of the
concepts that informed these changes include explorations of Jung’s theory of archetypes, non-linear models of time, open organizational forms, drug-induced visions, Eastern religions, and elements of primitive culture. For the Magic Realists, these concepts offered more accurate representations of reality than the States’ prevailing values of liberal individualism, which Octavio Paz claimed denied “the ‘irrational’ aspects of reality” (35). By introducing these new elements to an artistic model inspired by surrealism, the Beats and the Magic Realists reinforced and extended the “trope of a fusion of opposites, or a dreamlike play of images uniting dualisms” (36). Belgrad concludes: “Instead of utilitarian notions equating progress with economic development, this vision defined social good in terms of the individual’s relation to larger unconscious or cosmic structures” (39).

(5.) Finally, the Beats saw themselves within the context of American surrealist poets of previous generations. The most important of these was Lamantia, whose direct relationship of the Surrealist movement in New York was a point of pride for the Beats in the ‘50s. Ginsberg calls Lamantia a “champ,” and while he finds his work “dependent…on atmosphere and French mood,” he regards it “as exemplary post-war American poetry with surrealist flavor” (Jañab 509-10). Ginsberg was inspired, even jealous, of Lamantia’s hallucinatory experiences, one of which inspired his line in “Howl”: “who bared their brains to heaven under the El and saw Mohammeden angels staggering on tenement roofs illuminated” (Caples, Joron and Peters xxxvi). Additionally, Lamantia became close friends with Kerouac and together they participated in jazz-poetry readings (xxxix). To a lesser degree, Patchen’s writing, which emphasized irrational structures and anarchist values, inspired the Beats with its experimental creativity. Larry Smith writes that Patchen’s “apocalyptic verse had seared the righteous wings of American
conformity and given character to the poetry of revolt.” Patchen’s *Journal of Albion Moonlight*, Smith claims, gave the Beats “a manifesto of engaged revolt… a bible of commitment where art and life are one in search for regeneration” (“Kenneth”). Surrounded by this small network of American poets exemplifying surrealist techniques, the Beats’ surrealist propensities were encouraged and reinforced.

This constellation of influences of surrealism on Beat writing creates various levels of overlap and counterpoint. Some channels, such as Magic Realism, define themselves partly against surrealism’s origins, and others, such as jazz and blues, represent separate but parallel traditions. What’s more, these influences made up a part of the larger scope of modernist poetics through which the Beats informed their craft. When Ginsberg mentions surrealism, it is usually the context of modernist poetry broadly conceived. In an interview with Yves Le Pellec, he states:

> Very definitely all of our work is built on a very firm base of connaissance of twentieth-century writing from Gertrude Stein through the French Surrealists with much of their knowledge appreciated and genuflected to and then developed further in an American context for an American tongue, slightly later in the century when there was a slightly more obvious opening of a new consciousness. (*Spontaneous* 297)

The synthetic and flexible nature of Beat writing made the coexistence of these influences possible. And while this means the distinctions between these channels are not always definite, it made it possible for surrealism to be deeply integrated into their work. Its presence is felt not primarily as a surface feature but as part of its underlying basis.
The Beats and Social Psychology

To a great extent, Beat poetry can be understood in the context of the social psychology of the middle decades of the century. Paul Breslin, in his introduction to *The Psycho-Political Muse*, outlines the psychological theories that informed the background of the radical poetry movements of this period. Shifting toward the view that the psyche is culturally conditioned rather than universal as Freud had theorized, mid-century psychologists argued that neurosis is a form of resistance to culture (11). Especially in the thought of Herbert Marcuse, art represented “an adversary force against repression,” freeing the senses from the constraints of reason, which is dominated by the acculturated ego (14). In this context, the rhetoric of the New Left shifts, according to Breslin, from focus on class struggle to the opposition of “the falsification of consciousness in all classes.” Liberation from “the system” or “the establishment” comes not from the overthrow of economic relations, but from the individual’s “relative immunity” to society’s interlocking network of illusions. This immunity is “often acquired by the liberating therapy of art” (16). In addition, society was seen by psychologists and cultural critics as consisting of “one dimension” that is “ubiquitous” and reaches “even into one’s own psyche.” As such, “the poet had only to look about him, or even into his own soul, to be confronted with the crisis of American society,” making the private and public realms effectively interchangeable (17-18). In this context, Breslin argues, poets tended to either

become radical Freudian versions of the *poète maudit*, exhibiting their distorted consciousness as representative of society’s distorted consciousness, or to speak from the unconscious, which is untainted by acculturation but, for that very reason, has no language. To give the unconscious a means of representation, some of these poets have resorted to the irrational juxtaposition of images obviously intended to suggest a state of dream or trance. (18)
This framework for approaching mid-century poetry gives a starting point for regarding many of the most recognizable themes of the Beat movement. Particularly interesting here is the rationale Breslin’s approach offers for understanding the surrealist elements of their poetry and how those techniques are connected to their cultural message.

Many of the Beat writers alternatively positioned themselves as pathologically warped or as transmitters of an “untainted” consciousness. The first approach, a type of the poète maudit, functions mimetically, depicting social pressures and oppressions as private pathology. Ferlinghetti’s conception of the poet as a “seeing-eye dog” and mirror is a simple version of this. Such a poet is a surrealist not because of artificial or deliberate fabrication of fantasies but because the reality he reports is characterized by contradiction. The Beat poète maudit alienates himself through conscientious dissent as he works out the tensions and contradictions of his existence. This approach is observable in Kaufman as the cultural outsider, as I try to show below.

In the second approach—speaking from the unconscious “untainted by acculturation”—the poet searches for systems of meaning external to modern society that offers alternate, corrective approaches to life. Many of the Beats deliberately turn away from the value systems of the hegemonic monoculture of the ‘50s and seek ethical and metaphysical explanations in non-Western philosophies, mysticism, drugs, and jazz. Ginsberg is exemplary in this approach, fortifying his critique with alternative models of thought. Over the course of his career, his poems are increasingly inspired by Buddhism and Krishnaism. The jazz poets among the Beats also demonstrate this approach, as they counter social realities with the restorative, liberating energies of music. Kaufman’s jazz prosody and Kerouac’s improvisational poetics, for instance,
draw on the spontaneity and fluidity of thought to restore consciousness to a state of harmony.

I would add to the two responses identified by Breslin a third approach particular to the Beats: an alchemical model wherein the poet transmutes socio-political reality by subjecting mundane objects and phenomena from the social environment to the imagination. Poets employing this approach attempt to recuperate human values by conjoining society’s disparate elements into transformative combinations. Ginsberg’s term “reality sandwiches” (a phrase he used for the title for his fourth collection) suggests this model. Unlike the poète maudit, the alchemist goes beyond identifying distortion in the psyche by rearranging and reordering psychological experience, and rather than searching for restoration outside the “system,” the alchemist takes her ingredients from the elements available to her and common to experience. This third approach falls most distinctly in the surrealist tradition, postulating that consciousness itself—even the acculturated consciousness—contains the necessary ingredients for its restoration. The Surrealists were committed to basing their vocabulary on immediate experiential contexts (the human body, the domestic, the urban); since the “marvelous” stems from the quality of difference between objects, it was not derived from the worthiness or value of objects themselves, making it particularly suited to the dystopian societies the Beats often found themselves describing.

The Beats combine these three approaches and alternate among them, and different poets, as might be expected, place emphasis on different ones. In conditions of the mid-century, where private psychosis reflects the public environment, the unconscious becomes the site of political and social action, and surrealism was the opportune instrument for transferring this psychological model to poetic expression.
Greogry Corso

Corso’s single most important influence is Percy B. Shelley, whose poetic model forms a large part of Corso’s alchemical surrealism. In addition to his frequent allusions to Shelley in his work and declarations of fondness, Corso is reported to have reverently kissed the carpet in Shelley’s old quarters at Oxford and to have had his ashes scattered near his tomb (Skau 3-4). For Corso, Shelley is a “revolutionary of the spirit” who transmutes the mundane through poetic imagination. He calls him “‘a good example of a poet who, conscious and heartfelt for social conditions remedied such dour by ethereal inspiration’” (qtd. in Skau 4). In his *Defense of Poetry*, Shelley analogizes poetry and the imagination as the dialectical counterpart to reason. Whereas logic is analysis, poetry is synthesis, the harmonious blending of external and internal impressions. According to Shelley, the imaginative faculty is intrinsic to language because language is a fundamentally metaphorical system that works by comparing aspects of experience. Poetry, as the activity of combining, analogizing and harmonizing impressions, is the mind’s preeminent linguistic activity (356). Poetry recaptures life’s immediacy by “awaken[ing] and enlarg[ing] the mind itself by rendering it the receptacle of a thousand unapprehendable combinations of thought” (344). These “combinations of thought” turn good and beautiful that which is corrupt and ugly:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed: it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union under its light yoke all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all it touches, and every form moving with the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes; its secret alchemy turns to potable gold the poisonous waters which flow from death through life; it strips the veil of
familiarity from the world, and lays bare the naked and sleeping beauty which is
the spirit of its forms. (354)

Shelley envisions the poet as a word combiner, who, through his imagination, synthesizes
thought in vivifying and regenerative ways.

Surrealism provided Corso a way of applying Shelley’s model to modern experience. His
poem, “No Doubt What He Saw,” constructs the image of the “Daisytaur,” a bull conjoined to a
daisy, as an icon of the imagination’s ability to unveil the hidden unity of the world and the inter-
relatability of all things. The poem’s speaker recounts his childhood memory of seeing a horse
with a daisy in its mouth and being struck by the juxtaposition of beastly power and floral
fragility. The child interprets the sight as anticipating the eventual synthesis and harmony of the
plant and animal kingdoms. His “playmate” is skeptical until the child Corso takes his friend to
“a field of burning hay” and shows him “[a] pastoral metamorphosis! / A Daisytaur” (46). As
Gregory Stephenson points out, this story puts “[s]eemingly strange attractions and affinities,
incongruous unions of unlike things…in full accordance with the deepest natural law,”
suggesting that “all life and being…is ever seeking to restore itself to its original state, the
disparate parts striving to come together again” (38). It also recalls the surrealist game l’un dans
l’autre, which, Willard Bohn explains, illustrates “the idea that any object can be contained in
any other object” (50).

Corso’s poems are filled with variations of the “Daisytaur,” including the list of “Saleable
Titles” to The Happy Birthday of Death, which he printed opposite the book’s title page. These
alternate titles, some of which were real candidates for the book’s heading, form surreal
adjective-noun pairs such as “Fried Shoes,” “Pipe Butter,” “Radiator Soup,” “Flash Gordon
soap,” “Gorgoyle liver,” “Hairy abdomen,” “The Rumpled Backyard,” and “Treelight,” and other obtuse constructions like “Of all substances St Michael is the stickiest,” “Earth is not even a star,” and “Wrought reckless luke mood” (*Happy* n.p.). Like the word “Daisytaur,” these phrases exemplify the surrealist principle of contradiction through the conjoining of semantically incompatible terms. Several of the pairs, like “Fried Shoes,” are direct linguistic equivalents of Duchamp’s “readymades” and other surrealist objects. Congruent with Shelley’s alchemical combinations as well as surrealist contradiction, the synthesizing and transmuting process indicated by these titles succinctly summarizing Corso’s poetic philosophy.

Corso is considered one of the original “triumvirate” Beats with Ginsberg and Kerouac (Schwartz 118). Effectively growing up as an orphan, his childhood was difficult and unstable, which led to minor criminal activity and imprisonment. He spent three years in jail consuming literary materials, including the English dictionary and Shelley’s poetry. Ginsberg met Corso in Greenwich Village in 1950 and over the next few years encouraged and mentored him. He spent the latter half of the ‘50s traveling alone and with Beat comrades, first in Mexico City, then Tangier and Europe. The poems of his second and third collections, *Gasoline* (1958) and *The Happy Birthday of Death* (1960), were written during these travels and reveal an evolving surrealist aesthetic corresponding to his increasingly countercultural views.

Corso’s popularity rose with the publication of his second book, *Gasoline*. Ginsberg wrote the introduction to the collection, lavishing him with exuberant praise: “Corso is a great world-slinger, first naked sign of a poet, a scientific master of mad mouthfuls of language” (7). Ginsberg enshrines Corso as “probably the greatest poet in America,” and he props up his claim with the vocabulary and concepts from Breton’s manifestoes:
Open this book as you would a box of crazy toys, take in your hands a refinement of beauty out of a destructive atmosphere. These combinations are imaginary and pure, in accordance with Corso’s individual (therefore universal) DESIRE. (7, original emphasis)

He observes that Corso employs “weird haiku-like juxtapositions” and creates a style “hilarious with ellipses, jumps of the strangest phrasings picked off the street of his mind like ‘mad children of soda caps.’” These juxtapositions, Ginsberg writes, make Corso a part of “the real classic tradition—from Aristotle’s description of metaphor to the wildness of his Shelley—and Apollinaire, Lorca, Mayakovksy” (7). In addition, Ginsberg declare automatic writing is part of Corso’s repertoire: “He’s got the angelic power of making autonomous poems, like god making brooks.” He quotes Corso as saying, “‘With me automaticism [sic] is an entranced moment in which the mind accelerates a constant hour of mind-foolery, mind-genius, mind-madness’” (9).

Consistent with surrealist poetics, the automatic process is self-sufficient and not serving a larger purpose: “But what is he saying? Who cares?! It’s said!” (7, Ginsberg’s emphasis). The examples he cites point up the surrealist flavor of the book:

This is his great sound: “O drop that fire engine out of your mouth!”
Crazier: “Dirty Ears aims a knife at me, I pump him full of lost watches.”
What nerve! “You, Mexico, you have no Chicago, no white-blonde moll.” (7, original emphasis)

Affirming the incongruity and wildness of these images, Ginsberg sees in Corso more than mere deviance—rather, he breaks into “pure abstract poetry, the inside sound of language alone” (7). By pointing to Corso’s automatism and intense contradiction, Ginsberg positions him squarely within the surrealist tradition and insists on the value of this stance. His purpose is not simply to identify Corso as an “heir” to surrealism, but to affirm the aesthetic validity and ideological relevance of his method.
Corso’s alchemical poetics are based on “re-seeing” mundane phenomena as sublime and radically unfamiliar, a mode of perception that operates through his contingency as an observer and inhabitant of the modern world. *Gasoline*’s second poem, “The Fleeting Hand of Time,” is a *kunstleroman* depicting the speaker entering “the bright madhouse” of time and converting from his role as “wailing philosopher” on “the black steps of Nero lyre Rome” to the harder realism of the modern city:

born March 26 1930 I am led 100 mph o’er the vast market of choice  
what to choose? what to choose?  
O — — — and I leave my orange room of myth  
no chance to lock away my toys of Zeus  
I choose the room of Bleecker Street  

. . . Dark corridors of P.S.42 roofs Ratthroated pidgeons  
Led 100mph over these all too real Mafia streets  
profanely I shed my Hermean wings (14-15)  

His newfound commitment to contemporary experience culminates in a prayer:

O Time be merciful  
throw me beneath your humanity of cars  
feed me to giant grey skyscrapers  
exhaust my heart to your bridges  
I discard my lyre of Orphic futility (15)  

Corso enthusiastically and unreservedly enters into the modern world in order to unite himself to it and comprehend it despite its daunting scope (its “humanity of cars”) and inhuman features (like “giant grey skyscrapers”). This is held against the dispassion of the prophet-poet figure standing outside the world and attempting to dominate it in “Orphic futility.” Rather, his vision comes from within the condition of the modern and affirms its potential for beauty and humanity. Unlike Wordsworth, who calls the reader to a sympathetic identification of the human elements of modern life, Corso’s landscape, with its “all too real Mafia streets,” is in need of
transformation.

In *Gasoline*, the mechanisms for such transformation come, in part, through surreal images such as those found in “Vision of Rotterdam,” as when he sees “[p]leasure ships” that “send metalvoiced rats teeheeing a propaganda of ruin” and beholds “a madness of coughing bicycles” (16-17). Incongruous phrases such as these gain momentum when they are compiled into sustained passages. Two poems in particular, “Sun” and “To a Downfallen Rose,” combine his modernist “seeing” with an intensifying catalogue structure that functions as the means of exhausting and transforming the subject at hand. In “Sun,” he employs anaphora to construct an ecstatic litany:

Sun hypnotic! holy ball protracted long and sure! firey goblet! day-babble!
Sun, sun-webbed heat! tropic goblet dry! Spider thirst! Sun, unwater!
Sun misery sun ire sun sick sun dead sun rot sun relic!
Sun o’er Afric sky low and tipped, spilt, almost empty, hollow vial, sunbone, sunstone, iron sun, sundial.
Sun dinosaur of electric motion extinct and fossilized, babble on!

(25)

The poem proceeds centrifugally, starting with loosely representational and symbolic images and circling outward, broadening in semantic range and intensifying in contradiction, such as in the line “[t]he sun like a blazing disc of jelly slid over the Teliphicccian alps.” As the poem progresses, the images become topically tangential and abandon the pattern of figurative description: “Sun, season of the season, catching actual sunfish, on the green shore sunbathing like a madness” (26). Through these image sequences, the poem circumscribes and transmutes its subject. Cumulatively, the images iterate diverse and disparate versions of the sun; it is variably a source of cosmic energy, a mythic figure, and a playful lover: “The sun is shaped like a curved beckoning finger. / The sun spins walks dances skips runs” (26). The omniscience and
strangeness of the vision makes the sun distant and incompressible, rendering it unfamiliar, mysterious and terrible. Corso calls this an “automatic poem,” and its structure gives evidence of such a process, especially where images become increasingly distended and dissociated from the theme and where inconsistencies and non-parallel structures create disjointed sections. Through this mode of composition, Corso submits the subject to unpredictability of the unconscious, transforming and expanding it into something both unlike and more comprehensive than itself.

Similarly, in “To a Downfallen Rose,” Corso transforms and defamiliarizes an icon of nature by transmuting and extending its typical associations. The rose is heroic, reversing the natural order of things, as its birth “did cause bits of smashed night to pop / causing my dreamy forest to unfold” (37). The speaker draws inspiration and strength from the rose:

Rose! Rose! my tinhorned rose!
Rose is my visionic eyehand of all Mysticdom
Rose is my wise chair of bombed houses
Rose is my patient electric eyes, eyes, eyes, eyes,
Rose is my festive jowl,
Dali Lama Grand Vicar Glorious Caesar rose! (37-38)

As with “Sun,” a catalog structure compiles and intensifies the vision, increasing the element of derangement where incongruities emerge. For instance, the rose’s powers are here described as mystical (“visionic eyehand”), chemical (“electric eyes”), animal (“festive jowl”), and politically and spiritually revolutionary (“Dali Lama Grand Vicar Glorious Caesar”), but at the same time as fragile (“tinhorned”) and destroyed (“wise chair of bombed houses”). The latter image with its obtusely sublime description of violent demolition, recalls Corso’s commitment to re-seeing the modern world in “The Fleeing Hand of Time.” As in that poem, Corso here takes up a new poetic vision through which, Stephenson observes, he attempts to rise above the “‘vast fixedness’
of matter” (24). In the wild poems of Gasoline, Corso finds the means for transformative visions in expansive imagistic catalogs and automatic writing.

Gasoline demonstrates Corso’s expansiveness and energy, but, in spite of his declaration to join himself to modern reality, his subjects are hieratic and removed from social contexts. Poems like “Sun” and “To a Downfallen Rose,” while they demonstrate an ability to dramatically reshape symbolic landscapes and affirm the human imagination, retain moral and political neutrality. By contrast, The Happy Birthday of Death directly confronts destructive and erroneous social conditions and weighs them against a surrealist vision of transformation. The longer, more popular poems of the collection explore in an unorganized but encyclopedic way the subjects identified in their titles: “Marriage,” “Bomb,” “Food,” “Hair,” “Police,” and “Army.” Stephenson names these poems “anti-odes,” accurately recognizing them as parodies of the traditional ode form (31). Corso’s ecstatic engagement with these subjects introduces an implicit critique of society, as he dramatizes the moral dilemmas and existential agony of the cultural moment. They are humorous and incisive in their treatment of their subject, representing what Skau calls a “peculiar strain of surrealism, with its combination of humor and threat” (88).

“Marriage,” one of Corso’s best-known poems, is an internal monologue humorously dramatizing anxieties about marriage, reflecting the trend in the ‘50s toward conformity of family life. The poem loosely follows an imaginary chronology of events in which the speaker is introduced to the parents of his love interest, becomes self-conscious at the wedding ceremony, is teased by in-laws at the reception, and eventually finds himself trapped by fatherhood and domestic malaise. The tone is playful but poses profound questions. The speaker’s opening query, “Should I get married? Should I be good?” summarizes the mid-century heterosexual
white male’s social identity in existential and moral terms. Skeptical of established cultural traditions, he is unable or unwilling to be subsumed into prescribed roles, and thus he imagines himself protesting expectations through various clownish pranks. Resistance begins at the dating phase—“Astound the girl next door with my velvet suit and faustus hood? / Don’t take her to movies but to cemeteries / tell all about werewolf bathtubs and forked clarinets” (29)—and continues with an inability to focus while meeting his fiancée’s parents, contemplating “Flash Gordon soap” instead. At the wedding ceremony he substitutes “Pie Glue” for “I do,” and defiantly rejects sexual consummation later that night because everyone knows and expects it: “Everyone knowing! I’d be almost inclined not to do anything! / Stay up all night! Stare that hotel clerk in the eye! / Screaming: I deny honeymoon! I deny honeymoon!” (30).

His rejection of social convention stems from a perceived contradiction between his autonomy as an individual and social obligation. For him, the concept of marriage and all its trappings are “obscene” and threatening. Were he to consent to roles and rituals, he would become defined by the roles he plays and thus indistinct, invisible. Reciprocally, he can only evaluate potential brides in terms of stereotypes, which proves inadequate for discerning their potential suitability as partners. Still, he attempts to reconcile himself to the idea of marriage because the alternative, a life of bachelorhood, promises a lonely demise in old age. His imagined compromise is reserved participation characterized by arbitrary and irreverent demonstrations of autonomy. Later in the poem, for instance, he imagines himself incapable of normal fatherly conversation and shouts, absurdities (actually more surreal word pairs, “saleable titles”) at his children: “Christmas teeth! Radiant brains! Apple deaf!” To fend off suburban ennui, he executes Dadaist pranks:
So much to do! like sneaking into Mr Jones’ house late at night
And cover his gold clubs with 1920 Norwegian books
Like hanging a picture of Rimbaud on the lawnmower
Like paste Tannu Tuva postage stamps all over the picket fence

... And when the mayor comes to get my vote tell him
When you are going to stop people killing whales!
And when the milkman comes leave him a note in the bottle
Penguin dust, bring me penguin dust, I want penguin dust— (30-31)

While this behavior is humorously insincere, it puts the speaker in a pitiful light. Such acts are incapable of restoring the speaker’s individuality, which has been overwritten by socially prescribed ritual. He identifies himself to others as one who defies and rejects authority or only grudgingly participates in domestic rites. Thus, whether he foregoes marriage, accepts his social role, or does so only under protest, the result is the same—he is stripped of his identity and alienated from others. Given the impossibility of his situation, absurd humor is the only sensible response, as it at least offers him the consolation of registering his objection.

In another sense, though, these acts deflate the social situations in which they occur, bludgeoning the predictable and mundane with the exciting and strange. Behavior that incites irresolvable contradictions preserves the speaker’s imaginative vitality and playful innocence, making surrealist gaming a vehicle for coping with the dehumanizing influences of society. This particular form of resistance seems to sufficiently distract and lighten the ennui. And one might see an alternative value system obliquely offered up in the unlikely combination of Rimbaud, Norwegian books and Tannu Tuva stamps. Perhaps, Corso is suggesting, only the quirky and imaginative offshoots of culture can form a dynamic contrast to the ritualistic norm. The juxtaposition of the domestic and mainstream with the exotic and bizarre proposes an alchemical combination that transmutes the ordinary and miscellaneous into the extraordinary and
imaginative.

Nevertheless, behind the humorous mask is a lonely, paranoid persona—the modern individual who, due to a variety of social and psychological forces, does not know who he is or what he wants. Even when the prospects seem ideal, such as the “beautiful sophisticated woman” in the New York City penthouse, he is dismissive: “No, can’t imagine myself married to that pleasant prison dream” (32). In as far as he remains without companionship, his wellbeing is threatened, explaining his sense of urgency and his tone of desperation or mild panic. He becomes psychologically unstable, a poète maudit forced into “madness” by modern life.

While “Marriage” pits a maniacal persona directly against the social order, the poem stops short of cynicism, concluding that marriage, love and companionship are attainable: “Ah, yet well I know that were a woman possible as I am possible / Then marriage would be possible” (32). The hopeful implication is that others are equally capable of resisting the dehumanizing forces of society and connecting in an authentic relationship outside of or in spite of these pressures and premised on a generative and liberated position of openness to the world, the “possible.” Thus, rather than remaining in a state of psychological paralysis, Corso ends with an affirmation of the modern world as the site of potential transformation.

In Corso’s work the distinction between the poète maudit and the alchemist is not always firmly held, and the two modes or approaches often interact synergistically. Transformation occurs particularly when the poet-speaker is in a maniacal or pathological state of mind. The conditions leading to this mind-state emerge from his existence within the social environment and complicity with it, rather than as an external observer and objector. This creates a state of dissonance or psychological derangement stemming from the contradictions the self attempts to
contain. “Marriage” dramatizes this situation in monologue form. Another unfolding of the process is enacted in “Poets Hitchhiking on the Highway,” which recounts a clownish verbal duel between two poets who exchange increasingly dissonant images in a battle of surrealist wit:

Of course I tried to tell him
but he cranked his head
without an excuse.
I told him the sky chases
the sun
And he smiled and said:
‘What’s the use.’
I was feeling like a demon
again
So I said: ‘But the ocean chases
the fish.’
This time he laughed
and said: ‘Suppose the
strawberry were
pushed into a mountain.’
After that I knew the
war was on—
So we fought:
He said: ‘The apple-cart like a
broomstick-angel
snaps & splinters
old dutch shoes,’
I said: ‘Lightning will strike the old oak
and free the fumes!’
He said: ‘Mad street with no name.’
I said: ‘Bald killer! Bald killer! Bald killer!’
He said, getting real mad,
‘Firestoves! Gas! Couch!’
I said, only smiling,
‘I know God would turn back his head
If I sat quietly and thought.’
We ended by melting away,
hating the air! (Happy 28)

On the surface this poem seems to demonstrate the inefficacy of absurd word games. Skau, for instance, says “the purposeless imagistic stunting” appears futile, leading to “final discontent
with earthly—as opposed to verbal—existence, because the surrealist currency has no established system of priorities, turning the contest into mutual cheating” (95). At the same time, it celebrates the generative power of automatic language and its capability of affecting metamorphosis. The poets scale up the wildness of their statements by degrees. At first, the images describe simple reversals: “the sky chases / the sun,” “the ocean chases the fish.” They then shift to surrealist images of irreconcilable and contradictory semantic relationship: “the strawberry [is] pushed into a mountain,” “[l]ightning will strike the old oak / and free the fumes!” Next, the discourse escalates into explosive, absurdist phrases: “Bald killer!,” and “Firestoves! Gas! Couch!” With these expletive-like ejaculations, the tension mounts. In the final stage of the game, the companions undergo a transformation: “We ended by melting away, / hating the air!” Although the term “hating” offers negative connotations, it is nevertheless significant that the text ends with the poets’ disembodiment, indicating their sublimation into natural elements. The speaker’s statement, “I know God would turn back his head / if I sat quietly and thought,” extends the implications of the final image. The speaker “smile[s]” while issuing this statement, perhaps indicating the success of the game and their transformation into the ineffable. In spite of the ambiguity of the final lines (and the tenuous attitude toward surrealist sportsmanship), the poem dramatizes the ramifications of surrealist compositions on the poet’s consciousness, which eventually is elevated through the intensity of the game.

In many of the poems of *Happy Birthday of Death*, Corso writes in this form of ecstatic derangement from which arises a maniacal persona who, as Stepheson puts it, “unleash[es] an arsenal of antic, vatic babble and bombast” (31). Corso’s accelerated tempo comes from both the progression of images, epitomized in the catalog structure, and the incongruous juxtaposition of
the images to one another. This combination generates an energetic mode of composition that
distends and reimagines the subject. In several of the longer poems in *Happy Birthday of Death*,
Corso synthesizes psychological derangement and alchemical transformation in a form one
might name the *hysterical catalogue*, which comprises a paratactic series of incongruous images
often written in strained syntax and usually in longer lines. These catalogues grow increasingly
intense and uncontrolled, emulating hallucination or derangement. Paradoxically, this hysterical
style is dramatized as ecstatic or visionary speech. This technique might describe the first two
sections of “Howl.” In addition to associative leaps, incongruities and other surrealist elements,
the hysteric of Beat poetry is evident in its penchant for exclamation, rapid tempo, and
uninterrupted, explosive outbursts.

Corso’s “Bomb” is the quintessential articulation of this hysterical mode. The poem
begins a series of stretched metaphors for the atomic bomb, “[b]udger of history Brake of time
You Bomb / Toy of universe Grandest of all snatched-sky.” He articulates society’s absurd
and psychotic relationship to the bomb with the observation that

All man hates you they’d rather die by car-crash lighting drowning
Falling off a roof electric-chair heart-attack old age old age O Bomb
They’d rather die by anything but you (*Happy*, insert)

The speaker hypothesizes that he “cannot hate” the bomb because it is shares the same purpose
and poses no greater existential threat than other annihilating forces: “Do I hate the mischievous
thunderbolt the jawbone of an ass / The bumpy club of One Million B.C. flintlock Kidd
dagger Rathbone / Catapult Da Vinci [?]….” The speaker argues that dying in the grandness of
an atomic explosion is preferable to other forms of demise because of its suddenness and
“extravagance,” as compared to “[s]cary deaths like Boris Karloff / No-feeling deaths like birth-
death  sadless deaths like old pain Bowery/Abandoned deaths like Capital Punishment….”

Extending this line of reasoning, he argues that “no other death I know has so laughable a preview;” suggesting, presumably, that the atomic bomb’s destructive power is so exorbitant that it is simply comical and absurd to behold. His jaw-dropping admiration turns into homage, which begins with a litany of images that outlines the absurd possibilities of an apocalyptic super-explosion:

Turtles exploding over Istanbul
   The jaguar’s flying foot
   soon to sink in arctic snow
Penguins plunged against the Sphinx
   The top of the Empire State
   Arrowed in a broccoli field in Sicily
Eiffel shaped like a C in Magnolia Gardens
St. Sophia peeling over Sudan (Happy, insert)

Similar images throughout the poem, whether they refer directly to the effects of the explosion or not, create a wide-reaching semantic network, reflecting the bomb’s chaotic force. But as the speaker progresses through the vision, the images, rather than outlining horror and death, turn toward non-threatening, utopian scenes. First, “the temples of ancient times” are restored through “Electrons Protons Neutrons / gathering Hesperean hair / walking the dolorous gulf of Arcady,” and the bomb is described as a fox whose “field the universe [is] thy hedge” and who “frolic[s] zig and zag” with “a swarm of bees in thy binging bang” and “angels on your jubilee feet.” The poet envisions atomic explosion not only rearranging physical reality but also altering time, represented by the contraction of human history into a single point. Alternately, this is the afterlife. Either way, the bomb transitions the human race into a fluid, dream-like world wherein any imaginable associational possibility can be realized. This recalls Breton’s definition of the
surreal as the “resolution of these two states, dream and reality…into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*” (14). At first, Corso is humorously lighthearted about this new type of reality, which depicted as the playing field of human history:

Lo the visiting team of Present
the home team of Past
Lyre and tube together joined
Hark the hotdog soda olive grape
gala galaxy robed and uniformed
commissary O the happy stands
Ethereal root and cheer and boo
The billioned all-time attendance
The Zeusan pandemonium
Hermes racing Owens
the Spitball of Buddha
Christ striking out
Luther stealing third (*Happy*, insert)

Seemingly contradictory world leaders and philosophies are reconciled in the form of an innocuous ballgame, trivializing difference and emphasizing common human identity. But the second half of the poem takes a cosmological and spiritual turn. The bomb, in addition to changing religious leaders to ballplayers, supplants God, becoming a prime mover and worthy of veneration. The speaker declares him “[a] thunderless God A dead God / O Bomb thy BOOM His tomb….” and lauds the bomb “in which all lovely things / moral and physical anxiously participate,” a “fairy tale plucked from the / grandest universe tree” and a “piece of heaven which gives / the mountain and anthill a sun….” The speaker “stands before [its] fantastic lily door” with offerings of roses and musk.” In the climatic thirty lines, he shifts to Psalmodic rapture—

“BOOM ye skies and BOOM ye suns / BOOM BOOM ye moons ye stars BOOM / night ye BOOM ye days ye BOOM / BOOM BOOM ye winds ye cloud ye rains,” which soon devolves into hysterical babble: “Barracuda BOOM and cougar BOOM / Ubangi BOOM orangutang /
BING BANG BONG BOOM bee bear baboon / ye BANG ye BONG ye BING….” At this point, at the height of the vision, the poet is simultaneously visionary and mad, paradoxically both in a state of adoration and hysteria. The bomb’s power, reflected in the poet’s hysteria, is integrated into a transcendent vision. Even as hints of irony and sarcasm emerge in the final lines, the triumphant and transformative language is conspicuous: “Know that the earth will madonna the Bomb / that in the hearts of men to come more bombs will be born.”

The poem’s form mimics its subject, not just in its pictographic imitation of a mushroom cloud, but also in its “explosion” of stimuli, which overpowers and disorients the reader. As has been seen, the speaker establishes the rationale for his homage through an argumentative line of reasoning before proceeding through a series of associations that often interrupt the poem’s progression to develop an idea or metaphor: “Do I have the mischievous thunderbolt the jawbone of an ass / The bumpy club of One Million B.C. the mace the flail the axe / Catapult Da Vinci tomahawk Cochise flintlock Kidd dagger Rathbone….” Thematic sections intersect and overlap, transitioning fluidly and unexpectedly and creating an ever-shifting, unstable hypotactic structure. A second factor contributing to the poem’s hysterical quality is the speaker’s somewhat arcane lyricism:

You are due and behold you are due
And the heavens are with you
Hosannah incalculent glorious liaison
BOMB O havoc antiphony molten cleft BOOM

This stylized diction adds cognitive and sonic density to the texture, heightening and drama and increasing the sense of derangement. He fuses formal and informal diction, slang, and tortured phraseology: “tee-hee finger-in-the-mouth hop / over its long long dead Nor / From thy nimbled
matted spastic eye / exhaust deluges of celestial ghouls / From thy appellational womb…..” It is in this linguistic texture that the already challenging images are placed, extending the difficulty and unconventional reading the poem demands. In addition, the poem’s images are set against the poem’s fluid lineation and the absence of punctuation marks. Cutting against an illusory progression of thought, the poem, vortex-like, cascades aurally and visually, undercutting its logical structure. The poem disarms and imposes its will, catching the reader up in its forceful sweep of dissonant energy. Rather than persuading through argument, the hysterical catalogue immerses the reader in an absorptive vision. As a result, the audience “experiences” the bomb, simultaneously as a vehicle for chaos and as an instrument of ecstasy.

The poem demands different interpretations in different realms of discourse. On the socio-political level, it is an invective against weapons of mass destruction and Cold War paranoia. When it was suggested Corso was condoning the use of nuclear weapons, he was quick to affirm the poem’s parodic intent (Accidental 105). But to appreciate the poem as cultural critique, one must perceive its sarcasm. The poem’s persona, while mesmerizing, is psychotic and unreliable, and his argument is absurd. The poem is a parody of a society so petrified by the bomb’s threat that it effectively idolizes it and is paralyzed by fear. Corso attempts to liberate humanity from terror by showing the futility of this kind of abstract anxiety. By extension, it implicitly critiques the political ideas and choices responsible for creating cultural mania. Conversely, on the philosophical and existential level, the poem is somewhat serious. Although the bomb is made and controlled by mankind, the common person’s experience of its dormant threat is passive and intangible; seemingly, it is “[n]ot up to man whether [the bomb] boom[s] or not,” as ordinary citizens have no direct control over the diplomacy of the arms race (Happy,
insert). In a letter to Paul Blackburn, Corso writes that even though the poem is “very much against the bomb,” his approach is the “right way” because “one must not hate, for that which one hates is apt to destroy” (*Accidental* 104). In this way, the poem confronts the dilemma of the age and offers an alternative to existential paralysis. The prescription is not literal bomb worship but an embrace of the totality of human experience, including the forces of chaos and the cycle of life and death—a position implicit in the title *The Happy Birthday of Death* and in many of the book’s poems. Rather than settling for philosophical resignation or denial, Corso transforms the bomb into a symbol of primal energy and imagination. Contrary to expectations, the bomb’s detonation actualizes, in a figurative sense, the conditions of a totally liberated imagination, transforming reality into a site of the “marvelous.” Like “Marriage,” “Bomb” responds to and surmounts the threats of modern civilization through a bold assertion of the alchemical powers of human consciousness. These same powers, the poem implies, could be directed toward political and cultural liberation.

The hysterical catalogue is present in most of the poems in this collection, extending this paradoxically critical and affirmative posture. “Food” comically satirizes overeating, critiquing the consumerist culture that encourages it. The poem opens with obscure and exotic food phrases, such as “[w]hortdye spread of nepenthean beans; / Southernhorns alight on Hesiod carrots; / Hare visionary astrologer stew” (*Happy* 33). The poem’s title and topical focus clearly encourages the catalog to be read as a list of edibles, but incompatible adjectives drive up the degree of obscurity. “Hare . . . stew,” for instance, becomes “[h]are visionary astrologer stew,” and eggs, cheese and butter are “[c]orduroy eggs, owl cheese, pipe butter, / Firing squad milk” (my emphasis). The list also contains items that are shockingly incongruous to gastronomic
theme: “Talc and dolphinheart mixed kangarooian weep” (33). The poem follows a similar centrifugal structure as “Sun” and “Bomb” with the vocabulary increasingly widening to encompass inedible objects: “eat a steak of pone! A cut of spruce! Boil rock!” (34). The speaker soon becomes hysterical, speaking almost exclusively in exclamations, desiring to consume everything in sight, even to the point of self-injury:

Eat, eat! The table must go!
I rope my tongue! Gut my gut!
Goose legs stream from my eyes!
I plunge my hands into applegrease!
The plate avalanches!
Baked lions, broiled camels, roasted fennecs,
Fried chairs, poached mattresses, stewed farms! (35)

Both the form and content of these exclamations indicate the speaker’s hysterical performance, even while his exuberance and satisfaction, which is never directly qualified, seemingly embraces this mode of relating to the world. Thus this poem, containing the same structural technique as “Bomb,” suggests a paradoxical relationship between speaker and subject, dramatizing social psychosis and critiquing social behaviors at the same time as it re-sees human appetite a desire for transformation. Surrealism’s free play of associations and embrace of contradiction defamiliarizes and renews the subject, affirming the beauty of the world while revealing the disgust of gluttony. So, too, destructive biological appetite is held against the imagination’s inexhaustible capacity for creative and stimulating images, proposing a reordering of the human faculties. Poetry, as the liberating indulgence of the imagination, is offered as a substitute for the imprisonment of hyper-consumption. This interpretation supports Stephenson’s claim that “[p]oetry for Corso is a mode of rebuking, rebutting and refuting the phenomenological universe and of imposing inner desire on the external world” (33).
With *Gasoline* and *The Happy Birthday of Death*, Corso establishes a poetics of transformation capable of absorbing and responding to the destructive, dehumanizing cultural conditions of the day. Having, in *Gasoline*, declared himself as a poet of the modern era, he synthesizes his alchemical surrealism with the conflicted psychological persona of the poète maudit in the poems of *The Happy Birthday of Death*. The transcendence and ecstasy imagined in these poems are founded, paradoxically, on socio-psychological disorder and instability. Corso’s images originate in spontaneous and automatic language and yet are derived from his experiences of external, social reality. His poetic consciousness in this sense becomes indistinguishable from social experience, and his madness metonymically signifies prevailing cultural fears and psychoses. The dense semantic texture and incongruity of his style is an attempt both to capture the psychological experience of this cultural condition and to subsume it to the transformative powers of language and poetry. Surrealism’s principle of contradiction, in other words, becomes for Corso a prescription for the problems of life in America in the mid-twentieth century. By “eating” Man Ray’s tie and Duchamp’s shoe, Corso points to the defamiliarizing function of surreal absurdity. In his joking, though, transformations are at work. Blatant surrealist contradiction, seen in phrases like “pipe butter,” is not only an amusing trope but also a new aesthetic matched to the cultural moment. Without ignoring the negative aspects of contradiction when it is arbitrated through cultural values and socio-economic pressures, he affirms the intensity and diversity of experience the modern makes possible.

In this sense, Corso successfully advances a distinctly social application for surrealism. At times his excessive clowning can undercut the acuteness of his cultural critique, and his ecstatic passages can be indulgent to the point of shrillness. Nevertheless, these aesthetic
imperfections stem from his sociological consistent approach and are aligned with his affirmation of the human imagination and the role it plays in cultural renewal. The alchemical model he borrows from Shelley is strengthened by surrealism’s principle of contradiction and provides a compelling response to his cultural moment.

**Bob Kaufman**

Perhaps because of the exaggerations surrounding his legacy, the relative obscurity of his public life, and the under-representation of his work in publication, Bob Kaufman has been treated as somewhat of a minor figure in the Beat movement. This comes in spite of his popularity in San Francisco, where he lived for most of his adult life and the esteem with which he was held by the central figures of the movement. The unique confluence of forces at work in Kaufman’s life and career justifies the surge of scholarly attention he has recently received. In addition to his close alignment with the Beats, Kaufman’s conspicuously identified himself as both a surrealist and a poet of African-American musical traditions. Understandably, scholars have focused on his compelling inculcation of these musical traditions and the role of racial identity in his work. Amor Kohli, for example, argues that Kaufman engages jazz as a “vehicle for interrogating those structures of racial normativity embedded in a subculture dedicated to nonconformity” (106), and Maria Damon in “Triangulating Desire and Tactical Silences in the Beat Hipscap” sees Kaufman as a mediator of racial and sexual tensions in ‘50s San Francisco.6

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6 Other treatments of Kaufman’s jazz poetics include Damon’s *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* and T.J. Anderson III’s “Body and Soul: Bob Kaufman’s Golden Sardine.” Additional investigations into Kaufman’s complex racial identity include Jeffrey Falla’s “Bob Kaufman and the (In)visible
While Kaufman’s surrealism has been slightly less emphasized, it is hardly overlooked. Damon observes that Kaufman’s “surrealist techniques…challenge the logocentrism of Western poetic and philosophical discourse” (“Unmeaning” 706), and Nielson claims that Kaufman “joins a radical tradition and racial politics that reaches back through Garcia Lorca’s Poet in New York and Aimé Césaire’s Return to My Native Land to the radical politics of the French Surrealist Group.” Nielson claims, “Kaufman’s adaptations of surrealism were more historically engaged and more politically directed than were those of many among his white contemporaries” (141).

Adding to this work, I hope to show where and how surrealism is instrumental to Kaufman’s poetry and supports a persona that can handle the multiplicity of tensions he negotiates. Kaufman’s poetics expands beyond compositional techniques to encompass political, cultural and musical presentations of self. Surrealism saturates his approach, providing a means of consolidating separate and contradictory identities into a single consciousness where the unification of opposites can coexist.

Kaufman deconstructs the conventional barriers between art and life, reflecting the Surrealists’ mission to re-center beauty in experience and to challenge accepted notions of literary and artistic value. The permeable barrier between art and life is demonstrated in the primacy he places on embodied poetics and performance. In Whitman’s Wild Children, Neeli Cherkovski emphasizes Kaufman’s “commit[ment] to oral poetry.” He only wrote down his work in informal and transient mediums, such as on napkins and scraps of paper; the poems of Ancient Rain were compiled from an array of scraps, recordings and partially burned manuscripts

(109-110). Thankfully, “[m]uch of his work survives because his wife, Eileen, wrote it down as he spontaneously recited it” (109). Some of his poems reveal traces of oral composition, such as when lines and passages occasionally overlap and repeat with slight variation, as in the case of “The Poet” and “I Am a Camera” (Ancient 68-71, 73). In lieu of written composition, he avidly committed poetry to memory and often littered his conversations with quotes from other poets (Cherkovski 115). He even creatively and spontaneously jumped between poems during recitations, such as interjecting lines from Yeats’ “Sailing to Byzantium” and Lorca’s “Ode to Walt Whitman” into Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (109).

This privileged roll on the oral underscores how, for Kaufman, poetry is integral with identity. Social interaction and poetry are fluid concepts for which speech is the most natural and genuine vehicle. The value he placed on speech is underscored by his legendary ten-year vow of silence after the assassination of John F. Kennedy—a vow that he ended with a recitation of one of his poems spliced into Thomas á Beckett’s speech from Eliot’s Murder in the Cathedral (118). Cherkovski’s conversations with Kaufman reveal a reticent personality and a quietness usually broken by lyrical utterances that were often fragments from his own work or that of other poets. Artistic and personal expression is symbiotic in Kaufman, softening the distinction between self and public persona. As Cherkovski puts it, “Believing strongly in the reality his poems created for him, he lived comfortably within them, and that is why he became like a poem” (108).

His impressive integration of art and life corresponds to the three social and artistic identities that were most important to him: surrealism, jazz and Beat culture. These traditions take experience and consciousness as their starting point and view art as the primary and natural
basis for responding to and re-imagining experience. As such, art occurs primarily as performance rather than as text and demands the presentation of self as a social being. Kaufman, compiling and unifying these influences, engaged art and social identity as interdependent concepts. Each gives rise to and changes the other. This basic framework is highlighted by the metaphors he used to refer to the poetic act. Perhaps his phrase “cranial guitar” is the best example of his synergistic economics of language, music and consciousness. As a cranial guitar, the mind’s activity is inherently expressive, “strung with myths and plucked from / Yesterday’s straits,” filtering and restating human experience in emotive and aesthetic terms (Ancient 28). Even though it is the instrument of cultural expression, the “cranial guitar” is finite and subjective, influenced by the sense faculties, which are partially determined by the forces of chance:

The mind for all its complicated reasoning,
Is dependent on the whim of an eyelid,
the most nonchalant of human parts,
Opening and closing at random,
Spending its hours in mystique,
Filled with memories of glimpses
& blinks. (Cranial 73)

The mind takes partial and random glimpses of reality and conflates them with a rich inner life of thought (“mystique”), making poetry, like jazz, not primarily a chain of reasoning but a process of spontaneously combining and integrating thoughts and experiences. Furthermore, the process is intuitive and automatic, closely resembling the receptivity of surrealist composition. Like the improvisational turns of the jazz player, the mind generates beauty from a combination of chance and subjective expression. Surrealism, jazz and the Beats’ outlook on life each issue out of a counter-cultural perspective. The multiple and overlapping types of marginalization represented
in Kaufman’s identity puts him in tension with normative experience and mainstream values, inevitably giving his work a political and subversive subtext.

Kaufman’s activist ethos is visible especially in his early life. For a time he was an active labor organizer, openly defying law enforcement officers in his local hangouts, and reading his poetry disruptively in public (Cherkovski 120). These protest could be aggressively confrontational, such as the times, Jerry Kamstra reports, he “ran up and down Grant Avenue jumping on cars and shouting his poetry” (qtd. in Henderson 7). In Kaufman’s life, confrontational action coincides with and gives meaning to poetic expression. As a surrealist, Kaufman enacts protest both implicitly, through the disruptive forms and textures, and explicitly, through the themes and tones of his work. His poems are charged with the energy of surreal images that re-see the world in irrational and unfamiliar terms. In “Hollywood,” for instance, he describes “bisexual traffic lights, red-faced with green shades” and “hamburger-broiled charcoal / Served in laminated fortune cookies” (Solitudes 24-25). In a poem titled “Ginsberg,” Kaufman declares that “he was Gertrude Stein’s medicine chest,” and that “Allen passes through the Black Hole of Calcutta behind [his] eyes” (23). The “Song of the Broken Giraffe” is full of bizarre juxtapositions and disjunctive statements: “We waited in vain for the forest fire, but the bus was late. / All night we baked the government into a big mud pie. / Not one century passed without Shakespeare calling us dirty names” (35). Like Corso, he relies on conceptual or thematic unity to sustain the text, building surreal images into catalogues that achieve the effect of controlled hysteria. For instance, “I, Too, Know What I Am Not” begins:

No, I am not death wishes of sacred rapists, singing on candy gallows.
No, I am not spoor of Creole murderers hiding in crepe-paper bayous.
No, I am not yells of some assassinated inventor, locked in his burning machine.
No, I am not forced breathing of Cairo’s senile burglar, in lead shoes.
No, I am not Indian-summer fruit of Negro piano tuners, with muslin gloves.
No, I am not noise of two-gun senators, in hallowed peppermint halls.
No, I am not pipe-smoke hopes of cynical chiropractors, traffickers in illegal bone. (Solitudes 28)

Cutting against the paratactic structure is the incongruity and energy in each image, which operate on several levels of discourse simultaneously. Similar to other Beat poets, especially Ginsberg, Kaufman employs long, “decaying” lines that begin with standard syntax but eventually escalate into fused phrases and run-on sentences: “DEMENTED ELEVATOR OPERATORS IN SPACE SUITS SINGING HYMNS / TO GOTHIC BRAIN SURGEONS WEEPING OVER REMAINS OF DESTROYED / LOVE MACH(1)NES, O ULTIMA THULE (NO) MORE OAT(ME)AL” (Ancient 46). This syntax entropy suggests the dissolution of compositional control, even while imagistic intensity increases.

Kaufman’s surreal images are often satirical and frequently critique the political and cultural landscape. As Cherkovski notes, Kaufman’s political allusions are explicit even while they are “clothed in language that frees the perception from mere journalism” (108). His rendering of political subjects is often hilariously absurd: “[N]oise of two-gun senators, in hallowed peppermint halls,” for instance, compares partisan congressional debating to the blind force of western gun fighting, the mania of which is comically foiled against the hollow dignity of candy architecture. In “San Francisco Beat,” Kaufman also satirizes commercialism, mocking the

Hawkeyed baggy-pants businessmen,
Building earthquake-proof, aluminum whoreshouses,
Guaranteeing satisfaction to pinstriped murderers,
Or your money back to West Heaven (Solitudes 31)
Later in the poem he inveighs “balloon-chested / Unfreaked Reader’s Digest women grinning at Coit Tower” whose consumption of low-brow entertainment tranquillizes them despite their access to the “Tower”—an allusion to Corso’s symbol of imaginative freedom. In “Benediction,” he admonishes that although “your ancestor had beautiful thoughts in his brain,” Americans are now “experts in real estate” (*Cranial* 105). These and similar statements in Kaufman’s poetry point to various instances of the failures of mid-century monoculture.

In contrast to the complacency and paralysis of the mainstream, Kaufman embraces the insurrection of surrealism and jazz. In his series of manifesto-like texts about “Abomunism,” Kaufman erects the countercultural ethos of the Beat. First and foremost, he defies the dominant ideology through cultural withdrawal. Kaufman’s strategy of withdrawal relates to the anonymity and silence Damon sees as central to his identity (*Dark* 36-43) as well as Falla’s elucidation of Kaufman’s “invisible double” (183). Silence, withdrawal, and doubling are his forms of resistance, as Damon notes:

> Like Gandhi, whose assumption of ascetism enhanced his position of leadership, or more appropriately like Genet, who goes the authorities one better by embracing with enthusiasm the depravity projected on him by the straight bourgeois world, Kaufman, one of the politically marginal and silenced, turns the tables on authority by *choosing*, as an iconic poet-shaman, the silence of religious withdrawal and political disillusionment rather that *submitting* to the silence socially enforced on him as a Black person. (*Dark* 42, original emphasis)

In the Abomunist poems, withdrawal comes in a variety for forms, such as economic abstention—“ABOMUNISTS NEVER CARRY MORE THAN FIFTY DOLLARS IN DEBT ON THEM”—and the categorical rejection of political propaganda: “ABOMUNISTS DO NOT LOOK AT PICTURES PAINTED BY PRESIDENTS AND UNEMPLOYED PRIME MINISTERS.” The only value of journalism is to understand the cultural against which Abomunism is defined: “ABOMUNISTS READ NEWSPAPERS
ONLY TO ASCERTAIN THEIR ABOMUNIBILITY” (Solitudes 77). In “Excerpts From the Lexicon Abomunon,” protest is conspicuously centered on sexual liberation, referred to obliquely as “frinking,” and, in “Further Notes,” withdrawal entails the exploration of drugs, mysticism and non-western religious traditions (79-81). Abomunism seeks to return to a natural, primal humanism that affirms biological instinct and genuine interpersonal relationships. The “Manifesto” begins, “Abomunists join nothing but their hands or legs, or others same,” rejecting the abstract collectivity of cultural homogeneity and replacing it with community and connection. This trust in primal simplicity is reinforced by Kaufman’s tautological claims: “Abomunists love love, hate hate, drink drinks, smoke smokes, live lives, die deaths” (78). Rather than deviance for its own sake, Abomunism hopes to recuperate a preexisting ideal.

Like Corso, Kaufman’s rejection of the ideology of mass culture entails a healthy amount of Dadaesque pranking and absurdist humor. The Abomunist poems are full of whimsical neologisms, such as “Abomunist,” “Abomunarcosis,” “frink,” “Foot-printism,” and “rejectionary.” The extreme example of this trope is presented in the “Abomunist Rational Anthem,” which is composed in scat-like gibberish informed by bebop rhythms: “Geed bop nava glid, nava glied, nava / Speerieder, huyedist, hedacaz, ax, O, O” (85). He appropriates the high-pitched rhetoric of manifesto literature for absurdist statements, such as “[A]BOMUNISM’S MAIN FUNCTION IS TO UNITE THE SOUL WITH OATMEAL COOKIES” and “Abomunist poetry, in order to be completely (Eng. sp.) understood, should be eaten . . . except on fast days, slow days, and mornings of execution” (78). These antics highlight Abomunism’s confrontational and demonstrative nature: “[Abomunists ] must be prepared to read their work at dental colleges, embalming schools, homes for unwed mothers, homes for wed mothers, insane asylums, USO
canteens, kindergartens, and county jails” (79). Other “kicky tricks” for members of this hypothetical club include “selling middle names to impotent personnel managers,” “giving children brightly wrapped candy fathers,” and “biting their own hands after feeding themselves” (78). Such pranks disrupt the patterns of public life, allowing “[u]ncrazy Abomunists [to] crazy unAbomunists” (78, my italics).

“Abomunism,” a thinly veiled disguise for Beat culture, lays claim to a rich heritage of heroic figures that inhabit the social margins. Kaufman reimagines political and religious leaders, such as Christ and John Hancock, as cool beatniks. On the night before he is crucified, Christ writes in his diary: “I feel sort of abominable. Barabbas gets a suspended sentence and I make the hill. What a drag. Well, that’s poetry, and I’ve got to split now” (83). Similarly, John Hancock writes to Adam Smith, complaining that the “British Pushers have stamped a new tax” on tea and suggesting, “it would be [cool] if we make the Scene dressed as Indians” (86).

Kaufman folds literary figures within this model as well, framing resistance as the essential function of poetry. In “Hart….Crane,” Kaufman praises Crane for goading society out of complacency: “Crane….you whispered aloft, pains they buried forever” (16, Kaufman’s ellipsis). His poetry causes society to “fear,” “hate,” “miss,” “need,” “beat,” “seek,” “buy,” “paint,” “sell,” “worship” and “kill” him. After all this, they “are relieved” when Crane leaves, “taking [his] realities with [him].” But although the poet appears “safely dead,” he lives on through his hostile audience: “They live you, Crane….ON THE BRIDGE” (17). For Kaufman, these historical figures are heroes because they shrug off self-pity and creatively embrace marginalization. Perceiving the madness of society, they retreat from the center in order to reemerge and free those entrapped in self-deception and conformity. Through these Abomunist
poems, Kaufman declares that the Beat is the continuation of “uncrazy” activists preserving 
authentic humanity in the face of the hostile forces.

Retreat from the center is not presented as a form of personal escape or liberation, but as 
a torturous, sacrificial act. In the homogeneity and assimilative conditions of American 
modernism, conformity and nonconformity are seemingly caught in a mutually reinforcing 
paradox. “REBELS, WHAT ARE REBELS, HERE IN THIS LAND OF REBELLION, THIS LAND THAT BEGAN 
WITH REBELLION,” Kaufman asks in “Fragment from Public Secret,”

—ARE THEY THOSE WHOSE ACTIVITIES CAN OBJECTIVELY BE ABSORBED OR 
ASSIMILATED INTO THE PATTERNING TIME, REMEMBER, IT IS NOT IMPORTANT, FOR IN 
THE END, THE REBEL IS TIMELESS, AND IT IS ONLY IN THE PASSAGE OF TIME THAT WE 
CAN DISCERN THE REBEL FROM THE DISSENTER.

AMERICA WHO ARE YOUR REBELS, WHAT SHORES HAVE THEY BEEN CAST UPON? IS IT 
BECAUSE YOU HAVE DISCOVERED A USE FOR EVERYTHING THAT THEY HAVE FOUND 
THEIR ONLY RECOUP IS TO SEEK AMONG NOTHING, HOPEING TO FIND COMPONENTS 
WHICH, IN THE FINALITIES OF CONSTRUCTION, MIGHT ASSUME THE POSTURES OF 
PRINCIPLES, AND DISCOVERING THE HORROR OF FRUSTRATION, TURN TO DEATH AS 
THE FOUNT OF THE CREATIVE ACT? (*Ancient* 18)

Because the mainstream can “discove[r] a use for everything,” including the protest of poets, 
resistance seems impossible. The ever-expanding sweep of monoculture necessitates the extreme 
act of “seek[ing] among nothing” in order to dismantle the underlying cultural ideologies that 
threaten to absorb all forms of dissent. This entails “discovering the horror of frustration,” the 
monumental difficulty with which change is affected. The most extreme of measures is 

Three stages or aspects of Kaufman’s poetics—rejection, frustration and death—reflect 
the acute difficulty of effecting change. These stages of resistance form thematic threads in his
work. The first stage, rejection, is foregrounded conspicuously in the anti-conformist tone of the Abomunist poems. This necessary process of differentiation comes at a cost, alienating the rebel from his cultural and ideological context, necessitating a search for alternative traditions to provide interpretative frameworks for experience. The search, however, is complicated by the profound degree to which the self has been implicated in the American socio-cultural landscape that it longs to escape from. Problematically then, the self is nearly indistinguishable from the reality he rejects, and the struggle to transform America becomes approximate to reinventing the self. Thus, the poet finds himself at war with himself as he attempts to contain contradictory identities. Like Ginsberg, Kaufman turns to the untainted, unacculturated aspects of consciousness for “postures and principles.” Some of these alternative perspectives are represented by his intimate connection with jazz and Buddhism.

He is a painfully conflicted version of the poète maudit holding his distorted psyche in check with the rejuvenating forces of a deeper, untainted part of the psyche. Thus in “Benediction,” Kaufman denounces America for a litany of crimes including “[n]ailing black Jesus to an imported cross / Every six weeks in Dawson, Georgia” and “[b]urning Japanese babies defensively.” He mockingly “forgives” America, which has succumbed to the worst aspects of modern life and is a shadow of its former self: “Every day your people get more and more / Cars, televisions, sickness, death dreams. / You must have been great / Alive” (Cranial 105). He may partially understand the society that commits these heinous acts, but he cannot sincerely forgive it. At the same time, he remains committed to the idea of America, and this

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7 Damon traces similar themes in Dark End of the Street, focusing particularly on Kaufman’s alienation and shamanism (36-57).
motivates attempts to contain social realities, celebrating them even as he implicitly critiques them, as in the simple catalogue poem “On”:

On yardbird corners of embryonic hopes, drowned in heroin tear.  
On yardbird corners of parker flights to sound filled pockets in space.  
On neuro-corners of stripped brains & desperate electro-surgeons.  
On alcohol corners of pointless discussions & historical hangovers.  
On television corners of literary corn flakes & rockwells impotent America. (92)

These images convey a mix of criticism and sympathy. He neither approves nor condemns; rather, by seeing and unveiling these social realities, he integrates them into his idea of self as an emanation of American consciousness. The poet, as the teary-eyed prophet of the final line (“lonely poet corners of low lying leaves & moist prophet eyes”), is both defined by this world and contains it within himself. This exemplifies the difficulty of distinguishing the Beat from the culture that “beats” him, as his critique of society becomes to a large degree a journey of self.

The “frustration” of dissent is often framed in terms of mental illness. Schizophrenia offers an apt trope of the self torn into multiple, conflicted identities:

A cincophrenic poet called  
a meeting of all five of him at which four of the most powerful of him voted to expel the weakest of him who didn’t dig it, coughing poetry or revenge, beseeching all horizontal reserves to cross, spiral and whirl. (Cranial 114)

In addition to illustrating the dynamics of the relationship between Beat culture and a conformist mainstream, the “cincophrenic” is the common individual, one who is at war with himself, illustrating the tensions of the social and private self. Society and individual are interdependent frames of reference, and the distortions and contradictions of society are manifested in the poet
as forms of mental instability.

Insomnia and nocturnal pathological conditions are a further symptom of frustration, emphasizing the suppressed desires to which the marginalized self retreats in order to escape the “daytime” world. The day, normally associated with consciousness and order, becomes a realm of madness and terror. In “The American Sun,” for instance, the sun symbolizes America’s perverse diplomatic bullying by leveraging its superior nuclear capabilities (Ancient 61). In such a world, the rebel must hide from others, avoiding the commerce of the day through creative and artistic disguises: “In order to exist I hide behind stacks of red and blue poems / And open little sensuous parasols” (Cranial 104). The nighttime, on the other hand, is the time of jazz and dream, when the self can be actualized and affirmed. It is time when the marginalized aspects of identity come to life. “I have walked on my walls each night / Through strange landscapes in my head,” Kaufman declares in “Would You Wear My Eyes?” Additionally, he begins Solitudes Crowded with Loneliness by declaring, “I have folded my sorrows into the mantle of summer night” (3). In “Celestial Hobo,” Kaufman depicts the night as the time when life takes on its true form: “For every remembered dream / There are twenty nighttime lifetimes.” The nighttime world relieves one from the “confused and desperate poses” of the day and offers comforts like “bathtubs of wavy sex…hotly drawn.” The poem reverses the natural state of affairs such that what is proper to the night becomes the primary experience of reality—“[z]ombie existences become Existence” (7). The “celestial hobo” offers an analogy for the Beat who experiences a nomadic displacement in a world that has become disordered and confused. The self must recede into the unacculturated recesses of consciousness to preserve a sense of reality. Ironically, the unreal dream world is more natural and lifelike than the real world, and thus the Beat remains
caught in a restless dialectic between the world he desires and the inescapability of the one he rejects. Kaufman extends this irony in “I Wish…”: “I wish that whoever it is inside of me, / would stop all that moving around, / & go to sleep, another sleepless year / like that last one will drive me sane” (Cranial 84). This schizophrenic-insomniac is caught in a dilemma, desiring sleep but also fearing “sanity.” In this unnatural state of affairs, “sanity” is the true illness, whereas madness, in its various forms, ironically represents a form of health.

The third and culminating stage is the poet’s symbolic death, through which he both escapes from and saves society. Like Crane, society “kills” the poet by rejecting his message. The poet becomes a Christ figure who is tortured and martyred for the sake of humanity. This is suggested in Kaufman’s frequent images of bodily suffering and dismemberment. In “[These Days and Weeks],” he is “hacked by knives I do not see, stung by stinging bees” and “can only bleed in silence” (Ancient 6), in “Walking Hot Seasons,” he beckons his audience to “TEAR UP MY EYES,” (Cranial 49), and in “I am a Camera, “THE POET IS NAILED ON / THE HARD BONE OF THIS WORLD” (Ancient 73). The poet’s body becomes the site of cultural drama, where individuals and societies clash and merge:

My body is a torn mattress,
Disheveled throbbing place
For the comings and goings
Of loveless transients. (Cranial 111)

Later in the same poem, “Long-forgotten Indian tribes fight battles on [his] chest / Unaware of the sunken ships rotting in [his] stomach” (111). The poem Kaufman recited as he ended his vow of silence, “[All those ships that never sailed],” includes the declaration, “My body once covered with beauty / Is now a museum of betrayal” (Ancient 55). And in still another poem, he is
“kneaded by a million black fingers & nothing about me improves” (16). Elsewhere, one finds the poet’s body being burglarized: “pickpockets have lifted my navel,” and “I refuse to have any more retired burglars / picking the locks on my skull, crawling in / through my open windows” (10). Like Crane, Kaufman’s body is figuratively victimized, ransacked, and torn.

The violence inflicted on the poet makes suffering and death an intrinsic aspect of his identity. Late in his career, in “The Poet,” he declares, “THE POET KNOWS HE MUST / WRITE THE TRUTH, / EVEN IF HE IS / KILLED FOR IT” (Ancient 68). Poetic creation and death are closely aligned: “PAIN IS BORN / INTO THE POET. HE MUST LIVE / WITH IT. IT IS HIS SOURCE OF / PURITY, / SUFFERING HIS / LEGACY” (69). His mission is to “PROTEST THE DEATH HE SEES AROUND / HIM” even though “THE DEAD WANT HIM SILENCED” and will kill him because he “SHOCKS THOSE / AROUND HIM” and “BECOMES THE / ENEMY OF AUTHORITY” (70). As Falla argues, Kaufman “works the poetic tension between socio-cultural visibility and invisibility to describe a polysemic alienation that culturally, emotionally, physically, and psychically threatens to annihilate the self with enforced silence” (186). Kaufman’s figurative death enables him to surmount this enforced silence, because he, like Crane, lives through his poems: the poet “SURVIVES IN HIS / POEM, WOVEN INTO THE DEEPS / OF LIFE” (Cranial 70). Elsewhere he declares, “I am not a form, / I am me, sacred & holy, I am unimpalable” (Solitudes 57). Thus, although poets are subjected to “[d]aily crucifixions, on stainless steel crosses,” they are ultimately revealed as “[b]eaded Phoenix[es], burning themselves” (83). The poet’s body, then, is triumphantly, the site of new life:

The hairy little hairs
On my head,
Millions of little
Secret trees,  
Filled with dead  
Birds,  
That won’t stay  
Dead.

When I die,  
I won’t stay  
Dead. (Solitudes 30)

Aligned with the regenerative forces of nature, the poet becomes a healing and sustaining source of life. This trope recalls the Eucharistic allusion in last line of the first section of Ginsberg’s “Howl”: “with the absolute heart of the poem of life butchered out of their own bodies good to eat a thousand years” (139). The violent version of poetic martyrdom comes in “Fragment from Public Street,” where he writes: “HERE IS A REBEL, ONE LARGE, MONSTROUS REBEL, WHO FIRST TEARS DOWN HIMSELF, AND SNEAKS LIKE FIREWORKS INTO THE PATHS OF OTHERS, HOPING TO EXPLODE, OFTEN SHOWERED, EXISTENT TO THE END” (Ancient 18). These lines compare the poet’s figuratively exploding body to the confrontational public performances reminiscent of Kaufman’s own disruptive public readings.

The poet combusts because he is the conjunction of disparate realities. Social pressures impinge on his freedom and turn his consciousness into a maze of incongruence and violent contradiction:

EVERY TIME I OPEN MY BIG MOUTH  
I PUT MY SOUL IN IT.  
IT TAKES SO MUCH TO BE NOTHING,  
TO SHROUD THE MIND’S EYE  
FROM THE GAUDY THEATER  
OF THE HEAD.  
FALLENESS NOON OF THE MIND  
CLUTTERED WITH DISCARDED FANTASIES  
NERVE PANELED CORRIDORS OF IMAGINATION
OPENING ON HIDDEN UNIVERSE
GLIMPSED IN THE ECHO
OF A SCREAM. (Ancient 18)

The poet “shrouds” rational thought (“the gaudy theater / of the head”) allowing the horrific “clutter” of nightmarish images to emerge from the unconscious. This reveals a “hidden” reality that is comparable only to “the echo / of a scream.” The “scream,” like an explosion, is an energetic, chaotic discharge resulting from the contact of combustive element releasing their suppressed, dormant energy. As Damon states, “Kaufman’s body…appear[s] in his work in characteristic double guise. Like language itself, [his body] functions as an arena of oppression and…as ‘miraculous weapon’” (Dark 50).

Kaufman employs his body in a way that parallels Artaud, whom Stephen Barber says engages the body as “a wild, flexible but flawed instrument.” Social constructs destroy, immobilize and rob the self “to the point of a terminal incoherence and inexpressivity.” Subsequently, Artaud imagines “the explosion of that useless body into a delirious dancing, new body, with an infinite capacity for self-transformation” (Barber 7). Similarly, Kaufman rejects and counteracts the pressures threatening his identity, both through using his body as an instrument of song—as a “cranial guitar”—and as an icon of regeneration. Like Kaufman’s, Artaud’s exploded body is victoriously resurrected:

“you will see my present body
burst into fragments
and remake itself
under ten thousand notorious aspects
a new body
where you will
never forget me” (qtd. in Barber 20).

Kaufman similarly sees the rebel as the ultimate victor: “REMEMBER, IT IS NOT IMPORTANT, FOR
IN THE END, THE REBEL IS TIMELESS” (Ancient 18). The “explosion,” “scream” and “death” of the rebel is also his triumph and transcendence: “seekers of the truth…in time shall be naked in their own light” (18).

The paradox of Kaufman’s simultaneously “exploding” and regenerative body finds a meaningful context in surrealist poetics, which affirms the coexistence of contradictory aspects of experience and embraces the derangement of the senses as a channel of restoration. It also proposes the reclamation of self through a reintegration of unconscious and irrational elements of experience. Both principles are critical to Kaufman’s poetic philosophy and cultural message.

The monoculture of the mid-century was pointedly antithetical to his personal experience and perspective on life. The amalgamation of ethnicities and cultural identities he embodied (Creole, African American, Jewish, Catholic, sailor, peyote-smoker, poet and jazz enthusiast) exposed him to and made him the victim of a broad range of cultural prejudices and injustices. Yet, while he represents an acute case of complicated individuality, his situation is indicative of the modern, and especially American, condition. In this sense, he encountered the tensions that result from a system that imposes an impossible and unnatural model of identity. Kaufman rejects this system and, drawing on the resources of jazz and blues, Beat poetics and surrealism, contains and affirms these differences in direct opposition to social norms.

Conclusion

For both Corso and Kaufman, surrealist writing provided a means of transforming socio-psychological anxiety into cultural restoration. What stands out in these two case studies is the deep integration of surrealism with the other traditions these poets admired, creating a rich
synthesis of poetic perspectives. Rather than overlaying selective techniques on the surface of their writing, Corso and Kaufman develop their poetic approaches in direct and intimate contact with the essential ideas of surrealism. The surrealism of Corso’s alchemical poetry is visible from the microscopic level of his saleable titles to the grand design of his monumental works, such as “Bomb.” Similarly, Kaufman’s personal life and poetic career form a permeable barrier in which contradictions are held in productive tension by virtue of his surrealist outlook.

Of the American poetic schools that attempted to assimilate surrealism with other poetic traditions, the Beats’ attempt was the most graceful and successful. In part this was because of their broad-minded appreciation of Romanticism and modernism. Unlike the Surrealists, the Beats never segregated the contradictory poetics of surrealism from the expressive approaches coming out of Romanticism and modernism. This is evident in how Ginsberg found his way to the surreal image through modern poetry and impressionist painting, in how Ferlinghetti found surrealist “seeing” to be appropriate for the American landscape, in how Corso merges surrealism with Shelley’s alchemical model, and in how Kaufman effortlessly harmonizes African-American music traditions with surrealist derangement. These poets saw little antipathy between the surrealist approach to life and the larger objectives of poetic modernism, which allowed the parallels and connections between surrealism and other movements to emerge and interact.

In addition, these poets were sympathetic to a more fluid, improvisational form of writing than many of their contemporaries. Their desire to integrate spontaneity and emotion into their writing found a natural analog in surrealist automatism. The liberating aspects of automatic writing were well suited to the Beats’ need to channel elements of human experience being
suppressed by cultural pressures. No other American school of poetry has taken such an open and unqualified approach to automatism.

Finally, the defamiliarizing shock of surrealist contradiction complemented the Beats’ counterculture status and their unique cultural moment. Like the Surrealists, the Beats defined themselves against cultural uniformity and shared a skeptical attitude toward rationalism and industrial capitalism, which they saw as suppressing the unconscious. Their work called for a renewal of poetic language and for the recuperation and reintegration of unconscious experience.
CHAPTER 3
SURREALISM AND THE DEEP IMAGE:
A STUDY IN STRUCTURE

Whereas the surrealism of the Beats was characterized by ecstatic vision and derangement, the deep image poets proposed the nearly opposite approach to surrealism in their contemplative descent into the unconscious. The movement played an important role in facilitating an awareness and appreciation for less visible strands of modernism, especially from Latin America, and it reinforced a shift in American poetry to reconnect to nature and mythic consciousness. The movement originated as an attempt to fuse surrealism with the predominating lyric conventions of the mid-century. Robert Kelly, in an interview in 2009, states that the concept of the deep image was an attempt really to explore Surrealism without bringing in all the baggage of Breton and the French. In other words, we were interested in Surrealism but without Surrealist politics and frivolity. We thought the term Deep Image was a playful way of tipping our hat both to Pound and Imagism and to Jungian notions of depth psychology and putting that together and taking away the curse of doctrinaire Marxist Surrealism. (Bui, Strauss and Yau)

The attempt to merge surrealism, minus “the baggage,” with Imagism and Jungian depth psychology was interesting, but only partly successful. The larger poetic and philosophical objectives of the group, it would turn out, could not accommodate the unstable and unpredictable effects of surrealism’s contradictory poetics. As such, I will argue, their work draws more predominantly on these other lines of poetic influence—Imagism and symbolism filtered through Jung—than on surrealism. Yet the interest around the concept of the deep image gave rise to
what was the most concerted effort to conjoin surrealism to the lyrical mainstream, and much of how recent and contemporary American poets and their audiences think of surrealism can be traced to the development and evolution of the ideas of this group.

This chapter attempts to define the scope and limits of surrealism’s function in deep image poetry. After retracing the historical context, I identify the essential components of deep image model and offer an explanation of how they define and mediate its philosophical outlook. I draw on the work of several deep image poets for my analysis, especially Jerome Rothenberg, James Wright, Robert Bly, W. S. Merwin, and John Haines. The observations set forth below lay the groundwork for the next chapter, in which I examine Kayak magazine and the poetry of George Hitchcock as a case study of how a diverse community of poets in the ‘60s and ‘70s adapted and deviated from the deep image model and the vision of surrealism it offered.

Deep Image Poetry: Context and Background

The network of poets that would come to be grouped under the label “deep image” had their initial interactions in the early ‘60s in New York. At first, it was a band of alumni from the City College of New York, Jerome Rothenberg, Robert Kelly, and George Economou, plus a few from other universities, including Armand Schwerner, Diane Wakoski and Clayton Eshleman (Christensen, Minding 33-34). Their identity as a group was formed around their channels of publication, specifically “The Mad Yak” press and two magazines, Trobar, edited by Kelly, and Poems from the Floating World, run by Rothenberg. Their publishing activity soon provided exposure and engendered relationships with other poets and artists. Most notably, Bly and Merwin took interest in the group when they were staying in the city a few years later (37).
the end of the decade almost all these poets moved out of New York, and their careers branched in different directions reflecting their individual interests, even as the concerns they shared continued to give them a similar outlook and approach.

Dan Friedman usefully identifies three groups within the larger network, each centered on a representative figure. The first groups shared a general interest in Rothenberg’s emphasis on visionary imagism and orbited around his journal, *Poems from the Floating World* (123). The second group centered on Robert and Joan Kelly and their short-lived *Trobar* journal, which ran from 1960 to 1964. Its contributors included George Economou, Diane Wakowski, Amiri Baraka and Clayton Eshleman. This group is distinguished by its Black Mountain emphasis on open field poetics and imagism. The figurehead of the final group is Bly, whose work and that of other deep image poets, such as Wright, Galway Kinnell, Merwin and Louis Simpson, was published poetry in his *Fifties* journal, subsequently called the *Sixties* and *Seventies*.

Surrealism was a model for the movement at the outset—Rothenberg’s, Kelly’s, and Bly’s magazines all foregrounded works and ideas from surrealists of both French and Latin traditions. *Poems from the Floating World* published poems by Breton, Pablo Neruda, as well as American surrealists Philip Lamantia and Michael Benedikt, and the inaugural issue opens with an epigraph of Reverdy’s theory of surrealist juxtaposition. *The Sixties* featured translations of poets such as Neruda, César Vallejo, and Federico García Lorca, but an entire issue is also dedicated to the French poets, in which generous space is given to Surrealists and the symbolists who preceded them. Although *Trobar* did not specialize in translations, it featured poems by Lamantia and Benedikt. In all these cases, the new generation of deep image writers appears alongside surrealists from current and previous generations, indicating an alliance and allegiance.
Statements by these three figureheads about the deep image, however, reveal a less clear line of influence. While there was no definitive document describing the tenants of the movement, Rothenberg, Kelly, and Bly, mostly by way of defining the parameters for their magazines, wrote essays to explain and propose their ideas of what the group was aiming at. As might be expected, they each perceived the concept in somewhat different terms. Still, each of their perspectives reflects unique and fundamental aspects of what would evolve into the more identifiable principles of deep image writing. Examining these aspects of the deep image provides a basis by which the movement’s relationship to surrealism can be better understood.

**Symbolism**

Rothenberg’s interests were grounded in anthropology and linguistics, and his career quickly moved through his initial engagement with the deep image to the development of a new field of anthropological research and translation work known as “ethnopoetics.” The poetry of pre-modern cultures, Rothenberg observed, is consistently visionary and symbolic, exhibiting a “sense-of-unity,” “a reality concept that acts as a cement, a unification of perspective linking” of “man & world / world & image / image & word” (*Pre-Faces* 72). Rothenberg emphasized the “collective binding power” of the poetic image (Christensen, “Deep Image” 172). He looked for evidence of a primitive poetic consciousness in modern culture, especially in “a symbolist belief that the hidden world could be perceived through its external manifestations and that an image unifying the inner and outer could be found inside one’s own observations” (Friedman 123). Rothenberg is responsible for coining the term “deep image,” which first appears in his poem in the second issue of *Poems from the Floating World* (1960):
From deep within us it comes: the
wind that moves through the lost
branches, hurts us with a wet cry,
as if an ocean were caged in each skull:

There is a sea of connection that floats
between men: a place where speech
is touch and the welcoming hand
restores its silence: an ocean
warmed by dark suns.

The deep image rises from the shoreless
gulf: here the poet reaches down
among the lost branches, till a
moment of seeing: the poem. Only
then does the floating world sink again
into its darkness, leaving a white
shadow, and the joy of our having been
here, together. (17)

Poetry is here framed as “seeing” past the phenomenal world into the “sea of connection that
floats / between men.” In this poem, the “sea,” Paul Christensen remarks, is “the collective
waters of human imagination,” and by reaching into it, poetry reunites “what was once the tribal
or universal amity of human beings” (“Deep Image” 171). In an epistolary exchange with
Robert Creeley, Rothenberg wrote that the deep image is

_{perception as an instrument of vision_, i.e. a visionary consciousness opening
through the senses, grasping the phenomenal world not only for its outward
form…but winning from a compassionate comprehension of that world a more
accurate, more agonizing view of reality than by rational interpretation. (Pre-
Faces 56, original emphasis)

The term, he tells Creeley, distinguishes this mode of perception from the “merely literal…the
imitation or simple description of experience” (59).

Rothenberg’s visionary language evokes the expansiveness and breadth of the universal
and draws on the symbolist tradition, which developed its aesthetic around language’s potential
for resonant association. Rothenberg’s conclusions about primitive poetic consciousness led to an approach similar to the Symbolists who viewed the symbolic function of language as the essential element of poetic expression. Rothenberg’s first poetry collection, *White Sun Black Sun* (1960), demonstrates this return to a symbolic mode. The opening, prefatory prose poem begins, “By degrees we beheld the infinite Abyss, fiery as the smoke of a burning city; beneath us, at an immense distance, was the sun, black but shining” (8). The poem continues, unwinding a cosmology of suns and spiders. In “Three Times the Apparition Knocked,” the color white is associated with death:

Death in the morning.
The eye of the rooster is white, and the hills are white.

In the white furnace,
softly,
ashes falling like snow. (22)

In these images, phenomenon is abstracted into broad concepts, “death” and “white,” expansive enough in their associational reach to engage the aesthetic, psychic and mythic dimensions of consciousness and to suggest the unity or connection of multiple aspects of experience. “White” and “death” penetrate and unite reality in its totality. Like Blake, Rothenberg invests in symbolic and visionary language as a means of elevating poetic statement to a universal plane of meaning.

*Poems from the Floating World* placed a high currency on European poets writing in the symbolist vein. The first poem in the journal’s initial issue is by the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti, translated by Bly:

Oh my voice, decorated
With the emblems of the sailor:
Over the heart an anchor
And over the anchor a star,
And over the star the wind,
And over the wind the sail! (1)

Rothenberg saw in this use of language something that cut against the modernist emphasis on disinterested objectivity. He wished to resuscitate the visionary function of poetry, where a statement is taken “as given—as a way to transform my own sense of space & time.” He viewed the modernist poetic emphasis on irony and metaphor as forms of indirection that “seem to function as a kind of dodge.” He privileges instead the poetics of Dante where, for example, the rose at the end of *Paradiso* is visionary and without metaphoric equivalent (*Pre-Faces* 29-30). Alberti’s nouns, “sailor,” “heart,” “star,” “wind,” and “sail,” exhibit breadth in their semantic range and are primal concepts—they are “given” and not socially determined.

Through reclaiming poetry’s symbolic capacity, Rothenberg and the deep image poets sought a means of reestablishing a direct relation between self and world. In his article, “Why *Deep Image*?,” Rothenberg explains that “[t]he power of the deep image is its ability to convey a sense of two-worlds-in-one: directly: with no concept to come between the inner experience and its meaning” (32). The “two worlds” are the inner life of the poet and the world outside him. In attempting to “see the world in all its natural and contemporary detail as if no differences existed between the seer and the thing he sees,” the poet must look “through the self (emotively)” (31). To write in this way, “through the eyes-of-feeling,” entails “certain necessary changes”:

- a heightened sense of the emotional contours of objects (their dark qualities, or shadows);
- their free re-association in a manner that would be impossible to descriptive or logical thought, but is here almost unavoidable;
the sense of these objects (and the poem itself) being informed with a heightened relevance, a quickened sense of life;

the recognition of the poem as a natural structure arising at once from the act of emotive vision. (32)

These ideas recall the precepts of the Symbolists who had preceded the Surrealists and manipulated the ambiguity of language to approximate “the indeterminate in human sensibilities and in natural phenomena” (Balakian 1256). Rothenberg uses symbolic images for the expression of human consciousness and subjectivity, which is the conduit of meaning: “The poet discovers the unknown by creating it from the vast resources of his inner life, the savings of an experienced world still rich in meaning” (“Why?” 32).

Deep image poetics was built in good part on this emphasis on the symbolic capacity of the poetic image. The deep image poets would judge the success of their work to a large extent by how effectively they described the “emotional contours of objects” and correlated those objects to the poet’s “inner life.” An almost naïve confidence in the efficacy of symbolic language distinguished deep image poetry from their contemporaries.

The Image in situ

Like Rothenberg, Kelly’s participation in the movement was brief but his contribution was formative, as he transmitted principles of open field composition to the group by way of the Black Mountain poets. The diverse and experimental Trobar magazine proved fertile starting ground for a number of new poets and positioned these figures in relation to an older generation of experimental writers like Robert Duncan and Louis Zukovsky. Trobar also provided an important forum for theoretical discussion about the deep image, especially in the group’s early
phase. In “Note on the Deep Image,” Kelly approaches the deep image in the framework of Projective verse writing. Charles Olson’s concept of breath-units is represented in his statements that “the image is the measure of the line,” “[t]he line is cut with the image in mind” and “[o]ne line represents one breath period” (16). This concept never became important for other deep image poets but shows how Kelly approaches the deep image from a formal and compositional perspective. For him, a poem is a “fundamental rhythm of images” that gives the text meaning: “Nothing can be known unless it is know in situ” (14-15). The poet “dig[s] for ore” in both ordinary and unconscious perception and then builds this material into the poem by controlling and conditioning each image with the others around it. Images are arranged into a chain of ideas, from which meaning emerges:

The deep image must be transferred to the paper, BUILT into the poem, in language which gives it its fullest spatial, temporal, sonic & kinetic properties, as conditioned by its presence in a series & in a structure…. Basically, the fullest force is possible only by means of the successful employment of one image’s position in a context of other images… The subsequent image is conditioned, made to work, by the image that precedes it, and conditions, as it is finally conditioned by, the image that follows it: through the whole poem….

The whole poem is more than the sum of its parts. Very important for this superequivalence is the ORDER of images within a poem. (15-16)

Much of this develops out of the Pound’s concept of the image and Olson’s poetics, but Kelly puts special emphasis on the psychological echoes or “resonance” that each image has on the others. Notably, Breton is an example of this for Kelly: “The first image to appear in an André Breton poem will normally dominate all subsequent images and the poem as a whole, even when the reader seems to have forgotten it” (15). While this affirms the psychological effect of images, Kelly softens the surrealist penchant for radical juxtaposition. Rather than remaining suspended
in irresolvable contradiction, Kelly seems to see Breton’s images coalescing into a unified ecosystem of associations, where each image “has its field of force, its shadow moving darkly through the poem” (16).

For Kelly, the emphasis is not on the quality or type of images, but on the sequential organization of images for a desired effect. In other words, in his view the deep image is thematically neutral and does not directly correlate to a particular type of image, such as symbolism or pictorial description. Images of mundane and literal subjects are permissible; in fact, Kelly says “digging for ore” entails “[p]lucking things from the street” as well as “from the unconscious” (15). Kelly’s concept submerges the deep image as a function of structure—no single image is “deep” in its own right; rather, the linking or continuum of perceptions equates to meaning.

Because the deep image is a function of structure, the poem can absorb and account for diverse types of experience. The process or progression of material is what gives poetry its ability to represent and transform the world: “Transformation is process, involves truth as emergent from process and not distinct from it” (14). This recalls the operation of dramatic or narrative structure, which coordinates time and meaning by suggesting causality and purpose in temporal sequence. Of course, Kelly is not equating the deep image to narrative progression; indeed, he warns against a “rational progression of images” and favors the “superior rationality of the dream” as “an effective impetus for the movements of the deep image” (16). Nevertheless, Rothenberg’s statement that the poem is a “moment of seeing” evokes a temporal framework for the deep image. The deep image and poet are separate entities that come into contact with each other. This posits an experiential basis for the deep image: the image “rises” out of the landscape,
and the poet “reaches down” in order to find it (17).

Kelly’s theory of the deep image is thus grounded in experience and perception, including surface consciousness, which provides part of the material that is transformed by the work. His concept of form as process is the natural analog to this—just as penetration into the mind emerges from the basic elements and fragments of experience, so too texts generate meaning when their properties resonate in relation to each other.

**Leaping**

Bly’s contribution to the development of the deep image was twofold. First, through his concept of “leaping poetry,” he opened up a more flexible framework for the group’s associational technique. Second, he was instrumental in integrating Jungian psychology into lyric composition, ultimately introducing a new appreciation for poetry’s therapeutic potential. Both of these developed out of his extensive work in translating European and Latin poets and his appreciation for their intense passion and spiritual vision. Passion or vitality is what Bly was most interested in, and his stringent loyalty to a spiritual view of poetry is the defining characteristic of his career.

In a series of articles that were later published as *Leaping Poetry*, Bly proposes that the principle that unites great poetry across history and cultures is the intense associational energy conveyed by the poet. Bly calls this quality “leaping.” A “leap” is a shift “from the conscious to the unconscious and back again, a leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown and back to the known” (1). Like Prévét, Bly employs a spatial model to describe this idea—the more “distant” the objects, the further and more “energetic” the leap. Poetry should aspire to
“leap” through rapid and far-reaching association, a technique he credits especially to the Spanish surrealists. “Thought of in terms of language,” he says, “leaping is the ability to associate fast.” Neruda is Bly’s example of how speed of association “increases the excitement of the poetry” (4). “The real joy of poetry is to experience this leaping inside the poem” (3-4).

Jack Myers observes that Bly’s leaping was anticipated by Pound’s concept of logopoetics, which hypothesized that statements are charged by the discourse modes in which one typically encounters them. Moving between these contexts or discourse modes evokes “multidimensional levels of tone.” Bly expands on this idea by correlating these different frames of reference to “different kinds of consciousness” (Myers 52-53). The friction between these different modes or “kinds of consciousness” builds into a sense of excitement and possibility not unlike surrealism’s intensification of contradiction. The juxtaposition of images or ideas forms a “leap” for Bly because their associational tension activates emotional and psychological resonance.

Bly believes that the resonance generated by leaping penetrates the rational area of consciousness and contacts the unconscious and primal aspects of the self that are normally suppressed by social experience. Leaping moves one along an “arc of association which corresponds to the inner life of the objects.” He suggests that this associational principle is universal: “The links are not private, but somehow bound to nature” (Leaping 4). Bly supports this claim by arguing that ancient poetry exhibited this inner vitality by correlating human experience to the cosmos. Works like the Epic of Gilgamesh and The Odyssey contain a “long floating leap” at the center of the poem that the images gather around (American 42).

Bly values “leaping” because it reconnects external and internal consciousness. In
contrast to the surreal image, which posits an irreconcilable relationship between incongruous semantic terms—superimposing umbrella and sewing table—Bly’s leaping moves specifically between the “conscious” and “unconscious”: “A poet who is ‘leaping’ makes a jump from an object soaked in unconscious substance to an object or idea soaked in conscious psyche substance” (*Leaping* 4). Chance juxtaposition or mere incompatibility does not constitute a leap. This is a problem, according to Bly, in the work of New York poets, who lack “that ‘head of emotion’ that gives such power to many Spanish works of art” (*American* 68). In a review of Neruda in *The Sixties*, he distinguishes modern poetry, which exhibits “jerky imagination, which starts forward, stops, turns around, switches from subject to subject,” from Neruda, whose “imagination drives forward, joining the entire poem in a rising flow of imaginative energy.” Like Neruda, whose “imagination sees the hidden connections between conscious and unconscious substances,” Bly is interested in the link between external and internal reality, not merely between two objects or ideas (“Surprise” 18).

Behind Bly’s scheme is a trust in the vitality of the “collective unconscious,” a concept articulated by the psychologist Carl Jung. In Jung’s theory of psychology, an individual’s unconscious exists alongside “a sphere of unconscious mythology, whose primordial images are the common heritage of mankind.” These images are suppressed in the individual mind but arise in art (Jung, “On the Relation”). In “Psychology and Literature,” Jung explains that when one is in the “visionary mode” of artistic creation, the experiences of the conscious mind, which usually generate artistic material, are unavailable. Instead, the artist in the visionary mode draws upon “something strange that derives its existence from the hinterland of man’s mind, as if it had emerged from the abyss of prehuman ages.” This type of artistic content reminds us, Jung says,
of “dreams, night-time fears, and the dark, uncanny recesses of the human mind” (89-91). Along these lines, Bly’s theory of leaping privileges the unconscious as the arena of poetry. As an approximation of Jungian psychology, he affirms poetry’s ability to bring suppressed areas of the psyche to the surface and in order restore psychological balance. As Christensen points out, Jung’s theories offered deep image poets “a vigorous sense of self-integration…through the process of bringing the deep unconscious to the surface through art” (“Deep” 172).

As with the Beats, the alienating effects of modern civilization gave the deep image poets an “urge toward collectivism with a personal desire for therapy and liberation” (Christensen, Minding 172). David Elliot argues that the movement was an attempt to come to terms “with man’s relationship to himself, his environment, the universe” by reaching for this transpersonal level of myth in poetry (27). Kinnell reflected this in his remark that “it’s the dream of every poem—to be a myth” (“Deeper” 126). At the same time, Elliot notes that deep image poetry did not propose the formation of a symbolic system (28). Rather, in an attempt to reorient the self to the archetypal realm, it emphasized vocabulary and categories of experience that evoked this other world of myth and universal truth. Its semantic fields thus centered on the natural world and primal experience. For instance, in Wright’s The Branch Will Not Break, a book that is often taken to be one of the crowning achievements of the deep image movement, the words “dark,” “darkening,” and “darkness” show up more than 40 times in 26 pages (Bly, “Introduction” xix). Paul Breslin observes a specific category of terms comprising the deep image’s “lexicon”: “wings, jewels, stones, silence, breath, snow, blood, eats, water, light, bones, roots, glass, absence, sleep and darkness” (125). Bly’s leaping must be considered in the context of this thematic ecosystem. The open-ended process of association postulated by leaping was given
conceptual focus through the archetypal emphasis that Bly and the poets that gathered around him would cling to. Coming slightly after Rothenberg and Kelly, Bly pushed the movement in this therapeutic direction by building on the renewed richness of symbolic sensibility provided by Rothenberg and Kelly’s sensitivity to suggestive power of sequence and structure.

The ingredients for surrealist poetics were present in the deep image’s interest in symbolism, imagistic sequencing and far-reaching associational energy. Much in the same way that Ginsberg had discovered the surreal image through an encounter with impressionist painting and poetic modernism, the deep image poets were engaging a similar set of variables from which Bly had derived a technique similar to surrealist contradiction. However, the deep image, as it development in the ‘60s, moved away from surrealism’s principle of derangement toward a psychology of interiority and the “inner life” that approached the unconscious on quite different terms. While Rothenberg turned his attention to ethnopoetics and Kelly to his own work on linguistics and mythology, Bly’s visibility increased by means of his magazine, *The Sixties*, and important essays like “A Wrong Turn in American Poetry” (1962). His leadership through the magazine and his intensive mentoring of Wright and interaction with Louis Simpson, Donald Hall, John Logan, Kinnell and others in the ‘60s proved instrumental in developing the distinct lyric and narrative conventions of that would be referred for the next few decades as “deep image.”

**The Deep Image: An Analysis**

An examination of the work some of these poets were producing during the ‘60s reveals the character of these conventions. Critical analysis of deep image poetry usually starts from a
definition or explanation of the deep image as a concept and applies this to the poetry as an interpretive lens. Although the deep image is usually intelligible when stated in theoretical terms, its ideas translate haphazardly to the poems. Thus, I want to take the opposite approach here by examining the poems through close reading, paying attention to the structure and treating the poems as lyric and rhetorical texts. Of course, a poetic work’s meaning cannot be exhausted through structural analysis, but inspecting the deep image through the lens of form is helpful for drawing out distinctions pertinent to this chapter.

The three emphases I have identified summarized above—symbolism, imagism and leaping—can be observed as critical components of the deep image poem, but the manner and meaning of their function is not immediately obvious. All three, for instance, are present in Wright’s “Rain,” but he masks their distinctions by maneuvering among them gracefully, as if in a fluid development of a single thought:

It is the sinking of things.

Flashlights drift over dark trees,
Girls kneel,
An owl’s eyelids fall.

The sad bones of my hands descend into a valley
Of strange rocks. (141)

On one hand, the poem appears to be a metaphoric expansion of the concept of “rain.” Wright’s elucidation of the parallelism between these “sinking things” is intriguing, but the final stanza, while not inconsistent with this pattern, introduces a new variable—that of the speaker’s agency and subjectivity. The speaker involves himself in a way that adds or changes the framework through which the preceding images are interpolated. Even though there is no direct suggestion
that these images occupy the same spatial-temporal frame of reference, their semantic range suggests a natural and nocturnal scene: “rain,” “flashlights,” “dark trees,” “owl,” “valley” and “rocks.” Between the speaker’s action and the impression of a spatial context, the poem activates a dramatic level or axis of meaning. This dramatic focus is on the relationship between the objects in the scene or landscape and the speaker’s action in the final stanza. But because the images are presented plainly and without direct correlation, there is nothing other than the images and the associations they evoke to interpret the action. The progression of images seems devoid of the causal explanation. To discover meaning, the reader turns to a closer examination of the images themselves.

The images and their paradigmatic arrangement form a second axis of possible meaning. Along this axis, the images are appositionally correlated through association and metaphor. The relationship between images seems metaphoric, as each further defines or instantiates “rain.” The “owl’s eyelid” or “flashlights drifting,” for instance, are examples of “sinking” and “rain.” The images also carry symbolic weight, with their terms coming from nature. The final stanza is the meeting point between these two axes—it is both a further example of “the sinking of things,” as the action is one of “descend[ing],” but it also represents the speaker’s participation in, or response to, the scene. He is both a part of and separated from the scene as an observing subject.

The poem’s meaning is constructed through tension of these two axes. The associations between the images create a specific context in which the speaker articulates or has an experience of the world. The symbolic and associational resonance of the images presents in some way the nature of this experience. At the same time, the context is dependent on speaker’s perspective, emotion, and situation, making the experience subjective, even deeply personal.
These variables work together in “Rain” to imply that the convergence of these symbolic or natural elements has created a significant impression on the speaker. In the absence of contextualizing clues or commentary, this change is inferred from the relationship between the speaker and the scene. Perhaps the speaker in “Rain” was put into a melancholy mood by his encounter with the rain, dark trees, and owl. Perhaps he feels alienated in this landscape—it is, after all, dark and inhabited by “strange” objects. Perhaps an unsuccessful search (“flashlights drifting”) and subsequent sense of loss has prompted a meditation on entropy, “the sinking of things,” in a vague sense. These and other possibilities co-exist simultaneously, creating an interpretative gap between the scene and the speaker’s response or action. The reader has no choice but to acknowledge the unexplained and vague nature of this relationship. This shift from outward perception to internal response marks a “leap” in the poem. Even though the exact nature of the correlation between the scene and speaker’s psyche remains elusive, the shift from external to internal frames of reference seems inspired and intuitive. The speaker has responded in some ineffable way to his experience.

Imagism, symbolism and “leaping” come together in “Rain” to create a precise kind of tension constructed by the opposing axes of dramatic progression and the imagistic progression. The indeterminacy of meaning along the image axis cuts against the linearity of the dramatic arc. The contradictions of these opposing forces generates a “leap” in the unconscious of the persona (and, by extension, the reader), who attempts to supply a rationale to correlate these tensions meaningfully.

In Wright’s “A Blessing,” the leap is conspicuous. After describing in sensitive and perceptive detail his encounter with two ponies, who have been waiting to see him and “can
hardly contain their happiness,” and after caressing one of the ponies’ ears, he “suddenly… [realizes]” that “[I]f I stepped out of my body / I would break into blossom” (143). These final lines mark a break in dramatic continuity specifically thorough the juxtaposition and contradiction in the images: the “blossom” of the final image is not logically or conceptually connected to the preceding action. The reader recognizes that this image describes the speaker’s experience in an emotional or psychological sense, and it is clear that his encounter with the ponies is implicitly responsible for his heightened sensibilities. The tension between dramatic development and imagistic juxtaposition creates the sensation of a connection or unity between the world and the inner self.

The leap in “Blessing” closely resembles the literary trope of the epiphany, referring to a special experience of consciousness, a “‘moment of vision,’ ‘moment of being,’ or ‘glimpse’” (Jahn 140). In “Rain” and “A Blessing,” the speaker is moved to a greater awareness of some kind; at least on an unconscious level, he senses his own life and his relationship to the world, perhaps in a way that might be described as spiritual, existential or profound. Interestingly, Kelly implies an analogous relationship between the deep image and the epiphany when he writes in “Notes” that “[e]piphany is meaningless display outside the context of incarnation” (14). Rothenberg, too, could be describing epiphany when he defines the deep image as “ris[ing] from the shoreless gulf” in “a moment of seeing” (“Poems” 17).

Like the epiphanies of modern literature, the deep image is only sensed psychologically and can only be represented indirectly. It is experiential rather than rational in form and is intrinsically personal and private. In order to replicate the moment and context of epiphanic awareness, the external world and internal world must be differentiated. In deep image poems,
the sharper the distinction between these fields of reference, the more sudden and prominent the indication of an epiphany. In “Rain” and “A Blessing,” this is accomplished through turn or break in discourse and other linguistic clues. In “Blessing,” there is an abrupt disjunction in the mode of reference. It is no coincidence that the term “suddenly” signals a shift to the speaker’s internal experience. “Suddenly I realize” and other similar phrases amplify the abruptness of the intuitive, implied connection. In “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota,” a similarly epiphanic moment is suggested in the shift of reference in the last line: “I lean back, as the evening darkens and comes on. / A chicken hawk floats over, looking for home. / I have wasted my life” (122). Here, Wright reflects consciously on the value of his life, but the reason and rationale behind the reflection remains implicit in the images and dramatic development of the preceding lines.

“Rain,” “A Blessing,” and “Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy’s Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota” were all published in *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), after Wright had spent time on Bly’s farm. The image-centered approach that Bly promoted helped Wright break away from the metrical basis he had relied on previously. Like the other poets often associated with the movement, Wright would migrate away from the deep image style after a few years. Still, the work he produced in this period became a source of inspiration for poets emulating deep image concepts later in the decade and in the ‘70s. Judging from these poems, deep image poetry might be described as progressing or leaping from an experience or apprehension of the external world, depicted in imagistic terms, to internal or unconscious apprehension, signaled through more symbolic language. The final image of “Blessing,” with its fanciful suggestion of “stepping out of [one’s] body,” can only be thought of in figurative terms, whereas the observations preceding
the gap, reflecting the external world, are described literally or in descriptive metaphors.

Similarly, the final image of “Rain” relies on the symbolic reach of its language more than the preceding images. The “owl’s eyelids” simply close—the literal action is the image’s primary role—whereas the phrase “[t]he sad bones of my hand descend into a valley / of strange rocks” is primarily figurative and describes a mood or idea rather than an experience. The referential gap between imagistic and symbolic language provides the distinction between conscious and unconscious worlds.

This model of deep image writing can be adjusted and extended by examining the kind of work Bly was producing around the same time Wright wrote The Branch Will Not Break. Bly tended to build his poems on deliberate and extended symbolism after a point of thematic reference is established. In “The Mushroom,” Bly’s mode of reference shifts from descriptive and external to symbolic and imaginary halfway through, like a volta turning a sonnet:

This white mushroom comes up through the duffy lithe on a granite cliff, in a crack that ice has widened. The most delicate light tan, it has the texture of a rubber ball left in the sun too long. To the fingers it feels a little like the tough heel of a foot.

One split has gone deep into it, dividing it into two half-spheres, and through the cut one can peek inside, where the flesh is white and gently naive.

The mushroom has a traveler’s face. We know there are men and women in Old People's Homes whose souls prepare now for a trip, which will also be a marriage. There must be travelers all around us supporting us whom we do not recognize. This granite cliff also travels. Do we know more about our wife's journey or our dearest friends’ than the journey of this rock? Can we be sure which traveler will arrive first, or when the wedding will be? Everything is passing away except the day of this wedding. (Eating 105)

The observations of the first two stanzas are visually descriptive, as if written from a naturalist’s sketchbook. But the statement, “[t]he mushroom has a traveler’s face,” commences an associational chain of thoughts only peripherally related to the mushroom. This image of the
traveler’s face is the conduit between the internal and external realms of signification; after this point, the language becomes visionary, and the mushroom is ostensibly irrelevant. The resonance of the final line comes from the ambiguous combination of its a-temporal, symbolic language (‘[e]verything is passing away’) and its correlation to the narrative progression. The conceit of the poems is that these thoughts are occasioned through an external point of contact, suggesting a substantive connection between conscious experience of the world (the mushroom observed naturally) and a symbolic or unconscious awareness (the psychological associations the mushroom evokes). Rather than an abrupt moment of epiphany, the speaker’s subjectivity circulates around the object until the images create an experience of the profound. Here, the deep image is reached by degrees rather than in a flash, but like Wright, Bly gets there by moving from the outer world to the inner world and from imagistic to symbolic reference.

A leap can occur more than once in a poem and in either direction. Wright’s poems often move in a specific direction, from literal and external image to symbolic image and emotive statement. Usually, this direction builds to a single, climatic leap. Bly, on the other hand, will leap several times in a poem. One of his common strategies is to accumulate a number of epiphanic moments through an extended a dramatic situation, as seen in “Poem in Three Parts”:

I
Oh, on an early morning I think I shall live forever!
I am wrapped in my joyful flesh,
As the grass is wrapped in its clouds of green.

II
Rising from a bed, where I dreamt
Of long rides past castles and hot coals,
The sun lies happily on my knees;
I have suffered and survived the night
Bathed in dark water, like any blade of grass.
III
The strong leaves of the box elder tree,
Plunging in the wind, call us to disappear
Into the wilds of the universe,
Where we shall sit at the foot of a plant,
And live forever, like the dust. (Eating 26)

Bly leaps in each section, taking several “passes” at the same general experience or moment in
time, reiterating through different perspectives the profound mystery signaled in these events.
The recursive pattern of moving from conscious to unconscious expression in this manner
highlights the vitality and frequent “leaping” that Bly values. In this type of poem, Bly creates
the impression of a consciousness continuously on the verge of profound perception.

The Abstract Image and Generic Consciousness

While the shifts between conscious and unconscious experience in these poems can be
plotted in a variety of ways, they work by virtue of tension between imagistic arrangement and
dramatic unfolding, and, by implication, the distinctions that this kind of tension creates.
Thought of in these terms, the deep image poem can be described as an organization of
contraries: self and world, conscious and unconscious experience, real and psychological
perception, imagism and symbolism. Most deep image writing, however, blurs these distinctions.
In particular, the distinction between different modes of imagery becomes tenuous when the
writers combine or conflate concrete and abstract representation. Jonathan Holden calls this kind
of image “abstract.” The abstract image “evokes simultaneously two kinds of epistemological
conventions,” conjoining “concrete overtones,” which suggest “the logic of an image—of
physical description intended to speak for itself,” with abstract “range” and “the quality of a
The abstract image describes the type of phrases common in deep image poems, such as these lines from Bly’s “Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River”: “[t]he small world of the car / Plunges through the deep fields of the night.” Later in the same poem Bly writes, “This solitude covered with iron / Moves through the fields of night / Penetrated by the noise of crickets” (Eating 28). Such images correlate to the poem’s dramatic context but are filtered through the speaker’s emotions and psyche. The mixture of realistic observation and emotive or psychological perception creates an ambiguous reference where the image describes both the landscape and the speaker’s psyche in a type of dual focus.

The abstract image allows the poem to expand its subject matter beyond the limits of dramatic context: “[T]he action of the poem, instead of taking place in the mind of an imagined persona responding to a particular situation, may take place almost entirely within the language of the poem” (Holden 70, original emphasis). In this sense, the abstract image effectively disguises subjectivity: “The abstract image, which manages to generalize observation of the single self…without risking the tests which most generalizations invite, enables the poet to speak personally, out of his own life, yet to preserve that sense of generality which serious literature demands.” This lends subjective or psychological expressions, which would otherwise seem insignificant, a “sense of aesthetic distance” and “general relevance” (69). The abstract image is especially useful for the deep image poets because it provides a way to infuse emotional tone into the poem while avoiding the mediating effects of personality. The individualized self, reflected in the speaker’s persona, represents a boundary to archetypal consciousness. Lyric subjectivity, if it is associated with a particular ego or individual, is antithetical to the general and universal nature of the archetypal. The deep poets sought primal consciousness because it
counteracts the alienation of individuality. It is unchanging and incorruptible. In the abstract image, personality-driven subjectivity is overwritten as objective expression that inheres beyond social particulars, allowing experience to reflect a generic human consciousness.

The deep image’s preference for generic consciousness appears in the form of a neutral “I” that functions as a placeholder for the common human subject. In Merwin’s “The Cold Before the Moonrise,” for instance, the first-person pronoun is reduced to a hypothetical postulate:

It is too simple to turn to the sound
Of frost stirring among its
Stars like an animal asleep
In the winter night
And say I was born far from home
If there is a place where this is the language may
It be my country (110)

The persona here is universal and conveys a generic and primal sense of solitude. In the analogue to the hibernating winter animal, this “I” is identified not even as particularly human but, rather, as an aspect of animal consciousness. The responding persona of the final line, too, has no particular identity.

The natural and mundane landscapes of deep image poems plays a supporting role to this generic consciousness. Wright’s persona is usually on a farm; Bly’s is often hiking in nature, driving on country roads, or performing domestic chores. Frequently the “I” is encountering nature in a passive, receptive posture, as in Merwin’s “New Moon in November”: “I have been watching crows and now it is dark / together they led night into the creaking oaks / Under them I hear the dry leaves walking” (108). There is little else for the persona to do in this scene except watch and report what it sees. Simply exposing oneself to the world is enough—indeed, it is all-
important, as the almost ascetic displacement of the ego is the primary condition for accessing archetypal consciousness. Stripped of personality and re-contextualized in nature, the persona becomes a primal human being—but one that has no personality or social dimension, a blank consciousness. Even in Wright’s case, whose persona often engages self-doubts and other ego-laden themes, personal and confessional content is minimized, and it rarely examines itself in relation to other people. The corollary to this tendency is the de-personalization of others, leaving the poem with a cast of generic pronouns. Bly is fond of invoking the authority of the “we,” as if he were speaking on behalf of the collective unconscious itself, as in “The Mushroom”: “We know there are men and women in Old People's Homes whose souls prepare now for a trip” (Eating 105).

This explains how some deep image poems seem to lack a persona yet successfully approximate a leap or epiphany, as if the poet were standing outside the poem, insisting that what is stated is deeply significant. Bly’s “The Celtic Church” would simply be an imagistic collage were it not for a symbolic heaviness imposed through sequencing and authorial cues:

An owl on the dark waters.
And torches smoking
By mossy stone.
The horse gallops through the night.
A candle flutters as a black hand
Reaches toward it.

All of these images mean
A man with coins on his eyes,
And the vast waters,
The cry of seagulls. (Eating 61)

Similar to Williams’s “Red Wheelbarrow,” upon which “so much depends,” Bly’s statement, “[a]ll of these images mean” creates reflective distance through rather gratuitous rhetorical
manipulation. Perhaps with self-ironizing intent, this line foregrounds the artificial cohesion of the collage structure. The statement is the linguistic version of an equal sign, compelling the reader to examine the images of the first stanza as in some way instantiating the images of the second stanza. Without it, the poem would have merely picturesque resonance. The discourse creates a distinct cognitive gap between the stanzas; the image-cluster of the second stanza is held in a distant but definite relationship, suggesting a mysterious parallelism. At the same time, the impartiality of the statement—the images simply “mean”—implies that the symbolic correspondences are a result of the arrangement of the objects themselves rather than the poet’s arbitrary construction.

Generic consciousness is also achieved through exclamatory amplification, a motif the deep image poets adopted from the Latin American poets they admired and translated. García Lorca punctuates his statements with lyric intensity through the exclamation mark: “What long road this is! / What a brave horse I have! / How death is looking for me / Before the arrival at Córdoba!” (23, Bly’s translation). Lorca’s spirited voice clearly implies the speaker’s emotional connection to the scene. This generic subjectivity can adhere outside of the first-person pronoun as well, as when the Spanish poet Antonio Machado applies the exclamatory mode to a landscape scene:

The blue mountain, the river, the erect coppery staffs of slender aspens, and the white of the almond tree on the hill. O flowering snow and butterfly on the tree! With the aroma of the bean plants, the wind Runs in the joyful solitude of the fields! (9)

Like the abstract image, Machado’s exclamation simulates a human emotion while mitigating
subjectivity and mediation. Bly borrows these techniques. In “A Note on Antonio Machado,” he praises Machado’s ability to “[make] the poem transparent, so that the poem simply becomes” the scene it describes. Referring to the poem quoted above, Bly declares, “instead of using the bean field as some sort of argument in a poem for an intellectual position, he simply brings the poem to the bean field and leaves it there” (14). This “transparency” is the opposite of the “ideas and intellectual formulations” that Bly sees as “the world of all American poetry today” (14). Without dramatic constraints or discourse markers, Machado’s “Blue Mountain” relies on exclamation to establish a tone of awe and aesthetic distance in what is otherwise a direct presentation of a natural landscape.

Through exclamations, Bly approaches ordinary experience transparently and passionately. In “Waking from Sleep,” “Now we wake, and rise from bed, and eat breakfast!” (Eating 27); in “Thinking of Tu Fu’s Poem,” “You haven’t combed your hair for a whole month!” (35); and in “Winter Afternoon in Greenwich Village,” “The Missouri River must be flowing / The same muddy brown!” (46). Often, he joins exclamation to the abstract image, creating the effect of generalized psychological revelation. In “Written in Dejection Near Rome”: “Horrible eternities of sea pines!” (57). Elsewhere he declares, “There is a solitude like the black mud!” (38). In another poem, “Near the shore, reeds stand about in groups / unevenly as if they might / finally ascend / to the sky all together!” (163). In these figurative and psychologically blended statements, Bly is “leaping” without directly imposing his individual subjectivity on the reality he describes. The function of the persona is necessary to create dramatic context for epiphanic experience, but its mediating role is minimized and neutralized, allowing the marvels of the phenomenal world to pass unobstructed through the senses to the
The Interior Landscape

The abstract image accounts for a middle or mixed mode of imagery in deep poems by providing a conduit between the external, imagistic world and the interior, symbolic world. It blurs the line between sensory experience and psychological content while working around the limitation of individuality and ego. But the abstract image does not adequately explain poems that seem to take place entirely in a non-realistic, imaginary space, without obvious reference to external consciousness. Take, for instance, John Haines’s “Awakening”:

Soundlessly, a tide at the ear
of the sleeper, a wave
is breaking on an inner shore.

Barriers crumble in the chest,
the arteries surge full and subside,
and flood again…

And behind the eyelids, a sun
struggling to rise,
throwing its light far inland

where a man neither living nor dying
shifts in his soiled flesh
and remembers… (“Awakening” 309)

Consider also Merwin’s “The Room”:

I think all this is somewhere in myself
The cold room unlit before dawn
Containing a stillness such as attends death
And from a corner the sounds of a small bird trying
From time to time to fly a few beats in the dark
You would say it was dying it is immortal (111)
In these poems all the content seems to originate from the poet’s imagination and to be interpolated according to implicit or symbolic meaning. The poems are not in the “real world,” but are visions or dreams, as if the phenomenal world has been folded into the realm of interiority.

It may seem that such poems effectively collapse the distinction between external and internal content, obliterating the crucial distinction I have posited above. On the contrary, these poems uphold the tension by duplicating or resituating the dramatic structure within the psyche. The same relational axes detectable in Wright’s “A Blessing” or “Lying in a Hammock” are identifiable in “The Room” and “Awakening,” only the landscape is imaginary. There may not be a farm, but both poems exhibit persona functioning as a reflexive, thinking subject who has a transformative experience. In Haines’s poem, the “man” of the final stanza who “shifts in his soiled flesh / and remembers” represents a generic human consciousness changed by an epiphany, a “moment of seeing” that is here a moment of remembering (309). In Merwin’s vision, the details of the speaker’s interior “room” facilitate a deeper reflection manifested in the judgment of the final line. The same realizations and prerequisite tensions are transferred to an interior landscape that is analogous to conscious experience. Hidden beneath the imaginative landscape of images is the basic, primal part of the consciousness that can only be represented symbolically. But while it is important to recognize how this arrangement underscores deep image psychology, it is hardly meaningful to interpret the scenes in these poems as being fixed in some definite location, whether in the poet’s mind or the “world.” Rather, as Holden remarks about the abstract image, the action insists only in the conceptual space of the text, “entirely within language of the poem” (70). In this way, deep image poetry often tends to obfuscate
frames of reference. Literal and imaginative scenes are combined, and their point of origin is rendered of secondary importance. The meaningful distinction is not whether the actions take in waking life or the imagination but how and in what sense the details affect consciousness.

By obfuscating modes of reference, the poet gains more intense and fluid access to the inner life. Like Bly’s high frequency of leaping between spheres of consciousness, these interior landscapes suggest a mind that perceives and integrates both modes of awareness continuously and synergistically. Wright’s poem, “After the Snowstorm,” seamlessly blends outer and inner perception, as he filters a winter landscape through symbolic images related to the sea:

```
Though haunches of whales
Slope into whitecap doves,
It is hard to drown here.

Between two walls,
A fold of echoes,
A girl’s voice walks naked.

I step into the water
Of two flakes.
The crown of white birds rise
To my ankles,
To my knees,
To my face.

Escaping in silence
From locomotive and smoke,
I hunt the huge feathers of gulls
And the fountain of hills,
I hunt the sea, to walk on the waters.

A splayed starling
Follows me down a long stairway
Of white sand. (138)
```

The realms of snowy prairie and ocean shore continually interact, exchanging qualities both
metaphorically and literally. Describing the drifts of snow as “whales” and the act of hiking over snow as “walk[ing] on waters” gives rational, sensory connection between the two terrains, as snow is both literally and figuratively “water.” And while this psychological dreamscape coheres loosely around ocean imagery, it is flexible enough to absorb unrelated images, such as those of the second stanza. The action is discontinuous and fantastical, and the distinction between external scene, interior landscape and the speaker’s subjectivity steadily deteriorates. What is “rising” to the “ankles,” “face” and “hands” in the middle stanza could be snow, water or simply a symbolic circle of birds without metaphoric equivalent. Each interpretation of the image would privilege a different sphere of reference: read as “snow,” the speaker is hiking into deeper drifts, underscoring the external plane of reference; if “water,” the speaker is wading into ocean, highlighting the interior landscape; and if the birds are a distinct symbolic part of the vision, the image suggests the speaker’s interior response to both (and neither) of these landscapes. The image evokes all of these references simultaneously, bringing these spheres of reference into a contiguous or synergistic relationship. When we get to the “locomotive and smoke” of the fourth stanza, there is little telling which “world” is being emphasized, and the rest of the poem plays out as a synthetic blend of experience, analogical comparison, and fantasy.

Is Deep Image “the new surrealism”? The deep image style of writing came to be viewed as a new form of surrealism. In 1973 Paul Zweig described it as part of “the new surrealism,” and William Young later called it “wilderness surrealism.” Friedman labels the deep image poets “neosurrealists” (123). Often the association with surrealism was negative. For some, it was “sloppy surrealism” (Mitchell 16).
Kevin Bushell, in trying to describe the deep image, proclaims, “This is essentially the Pathetic Fallacy with a surrealist twist.”

Several factors have led to this classification. In addition to making themselves the literary inheritors of surrealism through their translations of the French Surrealists and their admiration of Latin surrealism, the deep image poets developed a style that bore several strong points of resemblance. Like surrealist writing, deep image poems center on the irrational. Their work privileges the unconscious as the primary locus of poetic content and the key to person transformation. Their foregrounding of psychologically charged imagery follows surrealism’s imagistic mode of representing the unconscious, and Bly’s concept of leaping seems directly culled from Prévert’s concept of the productive tension between disparate objects.

Perhaps more importantly, Prévert and regardless of how we might qualify these parallels, deep image poems often contain indisputably surrealistic content. Take this short poem by Bill Knott printed in The Sixties:

When our hands are alone,
They open, like faces.
There is no shore
To their opening. (23)

Following a familiar surrealist trope, the first line isolates and disjoins the hands from the human body and gives them an alien objectivity. The image of the hands opening “like faces,” too, is markedly surreal—with the irresolvable conceptual gaps created in the comparison of the hands to faces. At the same time, the denotative description of the hands “open[ing],” as a bodily gesture, evokes a sense of symbolic space, which sets up the resonance of the last two lines. Revisiting the poems from earlier in the chapter reveals similar examples. Haines’s
“Awakening” imitates the surrealist game *l’un dans l’autre* by nesting disparate objects within other objects, especially within the body: “Barriers crumble in chest,” and “behind the eyelids, a sun / struggling to rise” (309). Wright provides many of the deep image’s most memorable constructions using this motif: “A butterfly lights on the branch / Of your green voice,” he writes in “Spring Images,” and in “Trying to Pray”: “This time, I have left my body behind me, crying / In its dark thorns” (136-37). His well-known poem “The Jewel” is exquisitely surreal:

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There is this cave
In the air behind my body
That nobody is going to touch:
A cloister, a silence
Closing around a blossom of fire.
When I stand upright in the wind,
My bones turn to dark emeralds. (122)
```

Here and elsewhere, the speaker’s inner life is expressed through configured images that fuse objective and subjective content, literal and symbolic language, in incongruous and marvelous ways. The best interaction between the two traditions comes in such moments, when a surreal image instantiates the correspondence of conscious and unconscious worlds without losing its beauty as a contradictory image in its own right.

A closer look, though, shows the relationship between the two poetic systems to be informal and contingent. In terms of literary inheritance, surrealism is not the exclusive or even primary reference point. In “Some Notes on French Poetry” in the fifth issue of *The Sixties*, Bly credits the French modernists, especially the Symbolists (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Mallarme, Verlaine), for reopening of the pathways of the imagination and embracing the unconscious and animal life. Rothenberg likewise takes a broad view of twentieth century avant-garde movements and searches among them for traces of a primal poetic consciousness. While these writers are
fond of pointing to surrealism for a guiding light, it is evident that there is something else they are ultimately seeking.

For one thing, it is clear that the disjunctive structure and associational “leaping” in a deep image poem is designed as means to a greater end—namely, the restoration of the psyche, particularly through a reunification with the primal self and nature. That is to say, the deep image places disparate realities alongside each other in order to clarify or reveal something about the self or the world, whereas surrealism’s automatic principle is unpredictable and anarchistic. As Joron puts it, “[t]he deep imagists tended to rely on the ‘intensification of intuition’ (citing Jung) rather than on the intensification of contradiction” (389). Wright infers this difference by stating that surrealism’s influence was “dangerous” and that its detection in a poem was a sign of poor execution: “[If my poems] sounds surrealistic, all that means is that my attempt to be clear has failed” (qtd. in Paul Breslin 158). If we take this statement as generally indicative, the difference between the two poetic approaches seems to turn on the notion of transparency or intelligibility. Wright sees his poems as driving toward a definitive “clear” statement and as psychologically coherent. As Elliot observed, deep image poems, unlike surreal poems, are clearly not “the product of automatic writing, chance methods, and the complete rejection of conscious of rational control” (10-12). In contrast to the uncontrolled and literal language of surrealism, Wright’s poems usually correlate to a definitive frame of reference or lyric situation and ultimately resolve its tensions in a meaningful and comprehensible way. There is a logical progression to sense impressions that creates directness and clarity. This recalls David Haskell’s description of the deep image as “the rational manipulation of irrational materials” (142).

This technical difference points to a larger, ideological incompatibility. In a deep image
poem, the world is metaphysically unchanging and intuitively knowable, and the poet strives to represent it authentically. It conveys “material reality, especially nature” (Elliot 10-12). Although the process of knowing is subjective and psychological, the poet’s task is to represent the world. By contrast, surrealism is, Balakian writes, “a building process, not…an expression or statement of existence as it is, but…a modification or an addition to it” (46). Furthermore, surrealism conveys an epistemological skepticism in its celebration of chance and the beauty it sees in the unpredictability of language. Finally, the surreal image is characterized by an intractable, irreducible quality, a resistance to assimilation outside the conditions of its own disparate terms.

When surreal images are present in a deep image poem, however, they are typically subordinated to a larger structure of meaning and are made to function as an imitation of experience, figuratively. In the above poem by Knott, for example, the ambiguous impressions created by the surreal image of the hands are conscripted by the symbolic context and made to point to a sense of hidden meaning in the world. The surreal image is pressured by the surrounding discourse to indicate something about the world. The poet’s carefully designed sequential structure forces the image toward greater significance. Similarly, Haines and Wright use surreal imagery to describe or infer something about the inner life. The “man neither living nor dying” in Haines’s “Awakening” is the primal man beneath the surface of the conscious awareness. The poem’s surreal images illustrate in dramatic and symbolic terms the vitality of this inner life—it is the “sun struggling to rise” within. Wright’s “The Jewel,” too, uses abstract images and symbolism, such as the “blossom of fire,” to direct emotional resonance and turn the images into indicators of a deeper experience. The surreal transformation of the final line is only incidentally surreal—its primary purpose is illustrative, to show in figurative or symbolic terms
in what sense the inner self consists. In these examples, the obscurity arising from the image’s contradictory quality is overwritten by the resonance of the surrounding context in a manner that resembles symbolism more than surrealism.

Further evidence of surrealism’s marginal role in the deep image is indicated by the fact that many deep image poems do not require any surreal images to create the impression of a profound experience of inner life. “Lying In a Hammock” is a good example, with its simple antithesis of visual observation and psychological epiphany. Nothing in this poem is surreal, yet it exemplifies deep image writing’s valuing of an incisive incarnation of “a moment of seeing” that correlates self and world in implied, irrational or intuitive ways. Bly’s “The Celtic Church,” too, needs no surreal images, even though the “black hand” reaching for the candle is markedly gothic.

Beyond concerns about the function of surreal imagery in these poems, their basic structure is itself in opposition to surrealist poetics. I have argued that deep image poetry is built on the tension between the imagistic and dramatic axes of meaning, and that the epiphanies and “leaps” of these poems are signaled through the sudden or gradual resolution of this tension. This generates an impression of emotional and psychic resonance—the poem concludes when the self has made contact with the world. This lyric architecture erects a closed system of meaning. As Paul Breslin puts it, “In every poem, ‘we are left with ‘the same story’, the descent into the self, as the only possible event” (121). By contrast, surrealist texts are unpredictable systems that resist closure through their indeterminate structure and meaning. Instead of the satisfaction of reconnecting with the self and world, surrealism’s “convulsive beauty” is premised on the experience of dynamic possibility through the indeterminate nature of chance encounters.
In addition to its schematics of closure, the deep image proposes a psychology of inwardness, in contrast to the outward-facing impetus of surrealism. Breslin argues that the deep image is characterized by its intensely private meaning; the psyche of the speaker is cut off from the reader by hermetic language: “[W]e attribute an inherent significance to a recurring symbolic vocabulary, quite apart from the uses to which that vocabulary is put in any particular poem” (120). The deep image’s “curious self-referentiality of symbolism” dissolves into clichés and predictable formulas. By simply “uttering the words…the poet expects to awaken powerful resonances in us” (125-26). This pattern points to a “shallow psychology.” Readers who do not understand or do not grant the “inherent significance” of the deep image’s vocabulary are left bewildered or unimpressed: “If the temptation of the confessional poet is self-aggrandizement of self-pity, that of the deep-image poet is sentimentality, the belief that one can simply walk out of the ego, and thus out of history, into the benign pastoral of the collective unconscious” (132). The troubling proposition is that this “withdrawal into the ‘vast otherness’ represents a giving up on the outside world, a retreat from psycho-politics to a solipsistic religion of the unconscious” (129).

This development is strikingly demonstrated in the deep image’s evolution over the course of the ‘60s, toward increasingly rural and pastoral themes. The journey to the interior self, the trend seems to imply, cannot take place in the context of modern society but must be segregated from cultural and economic circumstances. When Bly praises Rimbaud and French symbolists, it is because their work “mov[es] on the life that flows beneath the historical world” (“Some Notes” 69). The turbulent unconscious of repressed desires and traumatic memories that Freud theorized is viewed by the deep image as merely an “upper story” of consciousness,
beneath which lies the more “‘archaic’ self” the poet wishes to access (Breslin 123-24). The modern, rational ego is antithetical to this archaic self, and only a retreat from society can allow this deeper part of the psyche to emerge. Bly recommended that poets literally trek to the outer reaches of civilization and seek inspiration in wilderness solitude. A poet should compose, he writes, while “really out in the field…alone out there in the non-human,” not while “sitting at his desk, in his usual place” (“First Ten” 48). Coincidently, Wright wrote most of The Branch Will Not Break while spending time on Bly’s farm in rural Minnesota, and Haines composed most of his poems in ‘60s in the mountain ranges of Alaska. This is a stark shift for a movement that originated in New York City.

The most extreme articulation of this anti-social tendency, Breslin continues, is in the deep image’s symbolism of stone. The poet is so eager to “recover innocence and faith at any cost, even the abolition of social reality and the conscious self,” such that he longs for the “absolute zero” of geological stasis. He cites several poets who write pastorals of stone, including Kinnell, who states: “If you could go even deeper, you’d not be a person, you’d be an animal; and if you went deeper still, you’d be a blade of grass, eventually a stone” (qtd. in Breslin 130). Stone is the “sacred Other within—the collective, impersonal unconscious” (130). Associating the inner self with the unchanging and enduring forces of nature, “these poets too often dismiss human life within culture as a trivial phenomenon of the surface” (132).

Breslin contextualizes these propensities as part of the New Left’s blurring of the line between therapy and protest. The “sentimental reasoning that bridged the gulf between revolution and therapy” exorcised the guilt consciousness of the white, middle-class American by condemning rationalism and the ego for the modern civilization’s exploitation and destruction
of other cultures. By disavowing the ego and aligning with “instincts and the unconscious,” one can “declass [one]self,” mitigating one’s responsibility for cultural and political evils (128). This approach contrasts with surrealism’s revolutionary and materialist perspective. Its proposed method of transformation occurs through an intensified contact with society, material culture and the unconscious.

The deranging effects of unresolved contradiction have no place in the poetics of the deep image. Rather, the contact point between disparate realities—the external and internal self—is asserted as mysterious and harmonious. The epiphanic and disjointed structure of a deep image poem conceals rather than explores the nature of this connection between self and world. This strategy of concealment creates the necessary distance between the acculturated ego and the untainted, primitive self. If ego-laden perception were shown to exert influence over the primitive self, the incorruptibility of the individual’s access to collective unconscious would be questioned. On the other hand, sensory experience must be assumed to stimulate the unconscious in some consistent way, lest access to the archaic self become random and uncontrollable, mitigating its therapeutic potential. Thus, deep image poems avoid looking too directly at the “handshake” between experience and intuition, preferring to assume and assert its reliability through the mystery of “leaping.” In the epiphany-centered poems of James Wright, such concealment is absolute, and the leap from conscious to unconscious experience is merely inferred through referential gaps between images. This is not to say that it is incumbent upon deep image poets to articulate a robust epistemology, but only to point out that their poetic practice presumes the connection between these spheres to be unproblematic and reliable.

To some extent, these poets were aware of the danger this presented. Rothenberg
anticipates this weakness in “Why Deep Image?”:

In spite of [the deep image’s] essential directness of communication, the recasting of the world in the self’s image will seem to some a distortion of whatever world they habitually take for “the real one.” Some such discomfort has accompanied the introduction of deep image by other modern poets. But any disruption of a bad habit should be welcome. (32)

He wrote these words, which read like a concession and compromise, only a year after, in a letter to Creeley, he identified and resisted this temptation, stating that deep image perception should not be conceived narrowly as the “psychology of reference,” but should “be left free to develop beyond the closed subjective” (Pre-Faces 56). Treating the poem as anything less than “emerging from the act of vision: completely organic” reduces its form to a “closed system” (57). Rothenberg’s remarks indicate a preference for inclusiveness and openness. At the earliest stages, the deep image demonstrated this vitality of “organic” vision. Still, when, as Rothenberg says, the poet’s “direction of seeing…is into a man rather than outside him,” and he views the world “through the eyes-of-feeling,” it seems inevitable that there will be some degree of “recasting of the world in the self’s image” (31-32). In these reflections, Rothenberg identifies a problem that the deep image movement failed to solve.

While it is accurate to see the deep image as reinvigorating an interest of the poetics of unconscious associations, and while it gained some of its ideas from surrealism, it changes too significantly the ontology of the image to be viewed as a continuation of surrealism. Rather, it was a reiteration of imagism that was informed and emboldened by surrealism to employ symbolic imagery as a medium of expression for buried parts of the psyche. In its best iterations, it suggests a holistic interconnection between rational and irrational experience. The new tools it developed for exploring the unconscious, however problematically, energized a generation of
poets to apply these devices in a variety of contexts reflecting their individual preferences and dispositions.

The deep image poets could have followed a path more robustly aligned with surrealism, exploring in a more nuanced way the interaction of conscious and unconscious experience. As it was, the partial equivocation of the group with surrealism engendered a substantial degree of interest in surrealist poetics, even while, by doing so, it implicated surrealism with its strengths and weaknesses. This did not prevent others, however, from exploring more extensively the potential for surrealism within a broader framework of the mid-century American imagistic lyric. An example of this can be observed in the work of George Hitchcock and the poets of *Kayak* magazine, to which this study now turns.
CHAPTER 4

“THE GOLD SNAKE / COILED IN THE SUN”:
GEORGE HITCHCOCK AND KAYAK MAGAZINE

Who shall distinguish the sun
from the gold bee of artifice?
—George Hitchcock, “The Death of Prophecy”

George Hitchcock’s Kayak magazine provided a unique moment for surrealism in American poetry by creating a place where poets could experiment with more dynamic surrealist textures in the context of the deep image. Kayak became for many poets the prototype of the small press magazine and of a fraternity that allowed various aesthetic, political and cultural expressions to congregate and cross-pollinate. Joseph Bednarik writes that “[t]aken in its proper historical perspective, Kayak was the vanguard of modern independent presses and George Hitchcock a most daring and perceptive editor” (28), and Vern Rutsala attests that it was “one of the foremost new poetry magazines in the country” in which “everyone was pleased to appear” (“George” 34). Philip Levine recounts that Kayak was “the first poetry journal I knew that was dedicated to the image and the only one I’ve ever ransacked with…feverish anticipation.” It gathered poets, he writes, who were “wild enough to be truly American” but were “underground” because American poetry’s “official organs…were too sterile to allow them life anywhere else” (xiv). Through the magazine and a modest book press, Kayak Books, Hitchcock is responsible for initiating or increasing the visibility of many young poets who have developed into well-
known figures, including Charles Simic, John Haines, W.S. Merwin, Bill Knott, Wendell Berry, James Tate, Margaret Atwood, and John Taglibue.

Although Hitchcock is a minor figure in American literary history, he is one of its most unique and diverse characters. Born in 1914, he majored in English at the University of Oregon, became a journalist in the Bay area in the 1930s, and served as a waiter in a Marines passenger ship in World War II. After the war he organized labor unions for dairy farms and taught philosophy at California Labor School (Hitchcock, One Man 301). His testimony in 1958 before the Un-American Activities committee was nationally broadcast, and his uncooperative and humorous answers have become a notorious part of his reputation. He spent the 1950s involved in theatrical arts, writing eight plays and acting in over forty leading roles (Bedarik 28). In 1958 he was invited by Roy Miller to be an associate editor of the brand new San Francisco Review (Hitchcock, “Hitchcock on kayak” 288). Although the Review failed, it introduced Hitchcock to editing and publishing, and in 1964 he founded Kayak, which he ran for the next twenty years. During his years editing Kayak he wrote and published over ten collections of poetry.

Hitchcock’s own writings have gone unexamined, perhaps because he has been considered a poet more by hobby than trade, but those who knew Hitchcock’s work professed its worth. Levine confesses, “For many years I did not take George’s poetry as seriously as it merited” (xix). His work serves as a natural lens into the aesthetic sensibilities that governed his editorial vision for Kayak. By considering Hitchcock’s poetry alongside the magazine, this chapter hopes to identify the manner in which Hitchcock’s surrealism engages with his editorial role in the Kayak community and to consider the implication of the magazine’s iteration of American surrealism. First, I examine the unique qualities of his poetry, looking carefully at how
his work relates to the deep image model examined in the previous chapter. Then I analyze Kayak’s connection to the deep image and the issues the magazine encountered as a point of convergence for multiple perspectives on the recent resurgence of surrealism in American poetry. I identify the central points of contention in the dialog that transpired between these perspectives and suggest how Hitchcock offers an alternative paradigm to the deep image.

**Hitchcock’s Surrealism**

While he promoted in *Kayak* an interest in all “the various branches of contemporary Romanticism,” he saw surrealism as “the quintessentially modern guise of the Romantic movement” (Hitchcock, “Hitchcock on *kayak*” 290). He recognized that an “American Surrealism” had evolved in the States retaining “all the well-known devices of the Surrealists—but utilizing them with American material, American consciousness, and elements of our American experience” (“Interview” 154). He had encountered the Surrealists in his twenties, long before he started the magazine or dabbled in poetry writing. This formative early encounter included the work of Neruda, Garcia Lorca, Breton, and Soupault (*One Man* 291). In an interview with Durak, where he describes his writing method as derived from automatism, he says, “The real task in my poetry is to discover the extent and geography of my own subconscious” (155). Cecelia Hagan points out that the titles to his collections, such as *The Dolphin with the Revolver in its Teeth, The Piano Beneath the Skin*, and *Ship of Bells*, “give you a good idea of what it’s like to dive into a Hitchcock poem” (14), and William Harmon’s introduction to Hitchcock’s collected poems, *The Wounded Alphabet: Poems Collected & New, 1953-1983* (1984) focuses almost exclusively on the relevance of surrealism for contemporary
Hitchcock’s surrealism has a theatrical flamboyance suggestive of his experience in theater. He indicates that acting helped him become a better surrealist by “[overhauling his] personality” and changing his “preconceptions of art forms,” which gave him “a great deal more faith in what you might call the instinctual, subconscious or non-rational elements in art” (“Interview” 163). Hagen testifies that his personality bore the marks of theatrical affect: “[H]e wears berets and ascots, carries colorful hand-carved canes, and can (and will) portray a series of comically exaggerated emotions through facial expressions, like a silent-film star” (12). Levine admits that Hitchcock could be found wearing “anything from a foundry-worker’s coveralls to a purple tuxedo”—a kind of “post-Hemingway baroque” taste in fashion (xvii).

His dramatic flair is translated to his writing in the artifice and showmanship of his metaphors: “Geologists / in white gowns / investigate my / knees for signs / of immaturity” (Wounded 6). His images can be especially ostentatious

The sky fills with spoonhandles
eggshells
testes
Fire engines scream in the forest. (4)

He often constructs images of spectacle and humor: “The Kingdom of Heaven is permanently closed / to tourists wearing stilts” (8). In another poem, the speaker shuts his eyes “and see[s] the manes of lions / entangled in the exhaustpipes / of glittering Porsches” (147). His style is both intensely sensuous and opaque, a kind of rococo saturation that can be suffocating:

The fern nods in the foyer. Mrs. Browning moulds in her morocco box. The mah-jong tiles, wrapped in a felt bag in the closet, emit the odor of camphor. Astronauts rise and fall
with the regularity of tennis balls. (15)
The title of his third collection, *The Rococo Eye*, alludes to this strain of sensory overload.
Replete with various forms of amplification, these traits suggest the poetic equivalent of the theatrical performance, where symbolic or gestural miming is often raised to hyperbolic proportions: “One nation, said Mr. Lincoln, and added some / heart-felt apothegms. Geranium petals fall / like blood on the pavement” (*Wounded* 15).

He often employs theatrical motifs, usually with the effect of complicating and problematizing his lyricism. “The One Whose Reproach I Cannot Evade,” for example, posits a romantic encounter as a succession of scripted movements, turning narrative development into a trite rehearsal. The poem begins with a woman who is waiting in a “glass garden” for the arrival of strange visitors, such as “fish clothed in languages” and a “dolphin with a revolver in its teeth.” Then, “Dusk enters from stage left: / its voice falls like dew on the arbor. / Tiny bells / sway in the catalpa tree” (*Wounded* 52). Later in the evening, “at eight precisely / the moon opens its theatrical doors.” This dramaturgical language, by its foregrounding of affect and performance, creates rhetorical distance, undercutting what might otherwise be a transparent psychological confession. It also underscores the falsity of love and sexual desire. Love is represented by the woman’s net, “her net / of love,” and in the end the guests do not arrive at all: “you wait in vain.” Seen through the eyes of the theater, the world is a garden of masks, illusions, and bizarre spectacles.

Hitchcock’s theatrical motifs and surrealist aesthetic coincide and reinforce each other and become constructive analogs. Both exist in a zone external to the world and individual consciousness, being composed of concrete references but constructed according to principles of
artifice and decorum. Both privilege imaginative presentation over re-presentation, yet both rely on spectacle and technique to elevate their subject. Both are well suited to resisting closure by removing authorial discourse and elevating ambiguity through complex subjectivity. In “Trompe l’Oeil” surrealism and dramaturgy seem practically indistinguishable:

...I see you among your woven acrobats, Circassian horses and retinue of plumed beasts and migrant flames.

I approach with offerings of earthquake and cymbal. You snap your fingers: the asbestos curtain rises revealing the wheels of unicycles, toupees, blonde eyeballs, ambulatory masks, old key-holes stuffed with hair, rubberplants and discarded scapularies. The orchestra applauds. (Wounded 58)

Images are flattened into dramatic actions that are as artificial as they are perfunctory: “The play begins. I go to my death. // Thus I create beginning and end… but always the middle escapes me.” Conversely, the stage provides a fanciful imaginative space that sustains surrealist vision. This is a “play” that exists out of time, a “tragedy in no acts” (58).

Another important aspect of Hitchcock’s surrealism is his aggressive mixing of semantic categories. The world in his writing is a diverse, heterogeneous cosmos where contrasting concepts converge and intersect. Joron observes that his style “embodies an aspect of Surrealism that treats the past—especially the recent past—as a storehouse for the unconscious, where all that is half-submerged, caught in the act of (material or memorial) disappearance, seems pregnant with unrealized meaning” (390). Hitchcock transgresses the psychological and cultural boundary between nature and society. His work offers a balance of urban and rural setting, but in
a good deal of his work, these two categories are brought together in a dynamic heterogeneity.

The untamed, idyllic, and archetypal overlaps with the industrial, social, and transitive. His juxtapositions often present garish intersections of the natural and artificial, where uncanny congregations of plants, animals, and natural elements are superimposed on industrial machinery, domestic and commercial production, and other commodified paraphernalia. “How My Light is Spent,” for instance, begins:

I celebrate the swans with their invisible plumage of steam, I pursue fragrant bullets in the blue meadows, I observe in the reeds the sacraments of cellulose (*Wounded* 32)

In “The Gift,” the season and cityscape are conjoined: “Spring enters my window / carrying a small bouquet of steeples” (90). In “An Exorcism,” the natural and social are enmeshed in an apocalyptic drama where an army of squid “mount our verandahs / invoices in their tentacles / their breath sweetened with sen-sen.” These deep-sea rioters are armed with the regalia of fashion and social status, donning “moustaches,” “a plethora of cuffs,” and “prefabricated flowers” (1). In this mode of aggressive heterogeneity, preceding connotations of terms and categories are overwritten with novel associations. In “Villa Thermidor,” Hitchcock conjoins elements from both the social and natural into a diorama of excess and flamboyance:

He sits in a deckchair reading Colette and fanning himself with a pair of shoelaces. In the rose garden

giant snails copulate in rhythms undulant and infinitely beguiling. His ancestors lie snoozing

in the family urns. Fog has lately attacked the poinsettias. On the pier
by the lake there are adenoidal
swellings—the boathouse no doubt is
ill. Umbrellas are described gliding
above the local peaks.

Undulant and infinitely beguiling.
Next year, says the Oakland Tribune,
snowshoes may be taxed
for their illicit oils. Stingrays
flap in the sand like wounded moths.
Infinite and undulant.

Cocktails are served from five
to seven at the bottom of the pool. (Wounded 124)

Although the perspective is consistent with a lakeside resort, nature seems lascivious and
grotesque, as it is presented in images of corporeal sluggishness, with “giant snails copulating in
rhythms” and “swellings” by the pier. Rather than glorifying nature, Hitchcock puts it under a
grotesque lens: the snails “copulate,” the boathouse is “ill,” and the stingrays are “wounded.”
This last image is particularly deflating, as the struggle for survival is reconfigured as spectacle:
the stingrays “flap in the sand like wounded moths,” a sight “infinite and undulant” to behold.
The fleshy excess in the images of excretion (“illicit oils”) and bloating (“adenoidal //
swellings”) suggests sensuality and overindulgence. The poem counterpoints the benign luxuries
of the California resort with decadent urbanity. The cameo of Colette, umbrellas, and the
Baudelairean flavor of the refrain “undulant and infinitely beguiling,” charges the poem with
associations of a vintage French sensibility. “Thermidor,” a French term, is an egg-based
delicacy stuffed in lobster, but the reference also recalls the political turbulence of the French
Revolution in the Thermidorian Reaction. Such images contain complicated and socially
determined layers of meaning that cut against the backdrop of the idyllic wilderness resort. Yet, while the poem might be read as satirizing resort culture or the new luxury class emerging in California in the ‘60s, no alternative vision of nature is offered. Indeed, the cultural critique seems masked by the ostentatiousness of the imagery, and to this point Morton Marcus cites the poem as an example of Hitchcock’s preference for “the amusing, the witty, or the grotesque” rather than the “truly penetrating” (23). The poem’s conjunction of disparate sensations and cultural contexts is not serving an overt purpose, inviting readers to speculate and draw their own conclusions.

While Hitchcock’s images often create an antagonistic relationship between the natural and synthetic, they paradoxically converge in surprising beauty. In “Tactics of Survival,” a “sepia hurricane enters / driving before it clouds of starfish,” while “[s]ubterranean oceans are rising / through the supermarkets of America” (Wounded 46). In the earlier example from “How My Light is Spent,” “bullets” and “cellulose” seem to be sacralized by their contextualization in the natural landscape, even as this sanctity is checked by the perverse suggestion of cellulose plants. Surreal in their convergence of opposites, these images propose an attractiveness arising from the irrational.

At times the conjunction of these two realms escalates into violent confrontation, as in “An Exorcism.” Although in this poem civilization succumbs to an ecological apocalypse, the defeat is the convergence imagined in the conclusion:

Therefore
let me wave before their menacing gloves

the rose the wand the snowflake
the whale the wind the breath of spume
In the moment of dissolution, the manmade and natural are antagonistically conjoined. Even though the vision seems able to absorb the excess of experience, there is an ambiguity that makes the images unfamiliar and resistant to interpretation. In “The Song of What Remains,” Hitchcock describes “petals of newsprint which die beneath the tread of dark ferris-wheels” and “[t]he plastic legs of old television consoles dozing in twilight at the edge of glaciers”—images that simultaneously lament and celebrate the modern world (70). In “Sign of the Times,”

Hats, shawls, violins, regattas of birds,
bronze hinges, flowers and Dixie Cups,
spring from the dark earth and disappear
into the mouths of aeroplanes. (67)

The conjunction of organic and inorganic is paradoxically corrupt and sublime—a compost of cultural debris that creates a seemingly transcendent energy “spring[ing] from the dark earth.” The implications are politically and morally ambiguous. Have the aircraft, too, been subsumed in the continuum, or is this a perverse transcendence, with the planes ominously engulfing the social simulacra analogous to Moloch in Ginsberg’s “Howl”? Neither utopian nor dystopian, such images indicate the aesthetic distance and dispassion of Hitchcock’s poetics.

Through its theatricality and aggressive dissolution of oppositions, Hitchcock’s surrealism emphasizes the potential for beauty and transcendence arising from the incongruity of experience. His approach generates images that are congruent with Breton’s concept of “convulsive beauty” and point to a radical openness of the world. In Hitchcock’s work, this
openness is manifested as sublime antagonism—the idealization of the difference and convergence in a world of categorical oppositions.

**Hitchcock and the Deep Image**

While it is accurate to say that Hitchcock’s poetry centers on surrealism, his work also reverberates with the semantic and psychological tension of the deep image. He admired and worked with many poets associated with the deep image movement and invested his publishing prospects on their work. He recounts, “In the early sixties I was certainly influenced…by Robert Bly and his rediscovery of what was then popularly referred to as ‘the deep image’ of European and Latin American surrealist poetry” (*One Man* 291). The archetypal awareness that shapes his work became a predominate aesthetic for *Kayak* as well. The influence is most noticeable in his poetry collection *Ship of Bells* (1969). His poems “A Hot Day With Little Result” and “Before the Storm” are examples of engaging with and sensitively imitating the deep image model. In the first poem, Hitchcock’s persona “rest[s] in the shade of a covered bridge,” observing the landscape, such as the stream and a farmer at work, then dives inward by means of expressive symbolism: “I sit in the shade and think / of that great tortoise who carries / the Bay of Naples on his back” (*Ship* 24). “Before the Storm” likewise describes a series of observations of the natural landscape before the speaker bursts into epiphanic gesticulation in symbolic language: “Gulfs! Abysses! Caverns! / And in the distance / dark violets” (*Wounded* 30). In “Afternoon in the Canyon,” lush nature imagery leads to the conclusion that “I must fill my pockets with bright stones” (35).

According to Hitchcock, “a certain empathy toward nature” is one of the prerequisites of
a successful writer (“Interview” 162-63), a trait he developed during his childhood in the Pacific Northwest. He remembers “going on specimen-collecting trips with his grandfather, climbing mountains, walking from one of Oregon’s spacious counties to another, camping out for weeks at a time, and carrying his grandfather's heavy equipment for pressing the botanical specimens they gathered” (Hagen 9). Many poems show Hitchcock in quiet attentiveness to nature, giving it direct and unaffected treatment. In “May All Earth be Clothed in Light,” “the waves lie still, they / glitter with pieces of light” and “a heron on one leg, / its plumage white in the green banks / of mint” (Wounded 49). These simple encounters are filled with mystery. In “Records,” he recounts holding still “for / 28 / minutes / while a / butterfly / folded its / trembling / wings / and rested / on my knee” (113). The sentiment of such moments is strikingly sincere compared to his surreal flamboyance. Essential to this sensitivity to nature is a sense of the “inner life,” the integrated self that penetrates through experience and perceives the world as mysteriously interconnected. At its most transparent, Hitchcock’s persona senses the direct cause-and-effect link between nature and the individual psyche:

Slowly the bird
opens its dazzling wings.
I am filled with joy.
The fields are awake! (49)

Reminiscent of Bly’s spirituality, the poet’s mythic sensibilities are tuned through inner silence and ascesis: “I return from errands of penance / I speak with the voice of the cicada / I paint my face with clay and coal” (Turns 48). Later in this same poem, “Rites of Passage,” he “fall[s] silent” and “grow[s] weak with fasting.” The reward for this journey of self-deprivation is penetration into the hidden dimensions of the world. The poems of Ship of Bells point to
Hitchcock’s commitment to the phenomenal, checking the propensity for total dissolution in imaginative fancy.

Beyond his naturalism, Hitchcock’s persona often plays the role of a passive observer to whom the world is revealed, and who in turn testifies to the world’s mysterious otherness. This framing does not occur exclusively in natural contexts. In the suburban setting of “Insomnia,” signs of archetypal consciousness hover under the surface, lending images a weighty portentousness: “All night long / the rattan silently / uncoils / on the lanw [sic] / furniture...” (Wounded 57). The progression of images builds toward a climax, the morning’s “discovery,” while the persona is located at the center of a sensory experience that is implicitly transformative:

This morning I discover scarlet aphorisms in my shavingwater and a tangle of dying adjectives on the tile floor (57)

Here, even where Hitchcock is not in the wilderness, the tropes and dramatic structure of the deep image are felt.

Hitchcock’s deep image sympathies push against his surrealism. Manipulating the deep image pattern of paratactic disjunction and topical shifts, he sometimes envelops surreal imagery within a nexus of resonant symbolism, as in “1961”:

Above us the geese return like arrows to the arctic; the attic fills with chromolithographs: all fade.

On the doorstep an old man sits plaiting a girdle of straw: he fears war.
I pause on the sidewalk and listen
to the anticipatory song of earthworms.

Potatoes rot in their skins; hydrants overflow;
the ingots stir in their sleep at Fort Knox;
monsters are born of their delirium.

The geese return, the attics fill: all fade.

In time the great polar ice-cap
will walk southward
grinding in its belly
hub-caps and ash-trays. (17)

The images of the opening stanzas are descriptive and meditative, with phrase-length lines and
sentence-length stanzas marking a deliberative, contemplative pace. An underlying tension is
created through juxtaposition and synchronicity. The disparate actions in the third stanza, for
instance, are assumed to occur concurrently, invoking a sense of simultaneity. The final stanza
dramatically breaks away from this pattern, turning toward symbolic language, the
expansiveness of which is underscored by the future tense and prophetic tone. Although the final
image is surrealistic, it is held against the preceding images and the context of the poem’s
dramatic arc and thus is connected to the poem’s associational context as a prophetic glimpse
into the world, an experience of deepened awareness. This anamorphic ice-cap illustrates an
imagined consummation or synthesis of the tensions alluded to previously in the poem—the
earthworms’ anticipation, the old man’s “fear of war,” the entropy of potatoes. The poem’s
symbolic and archetypal undertones in this sense resolve the surreal qualities of the concluding
image. Here, then, Hitchcock follows the deep image pattern of containing the surreal within a
larger dramatic framework that mitigates its incongruous effects.
Hitchcock’s Poetics: A Synthesis

These two sides to Hitchcock—on the one hand, a poet of theatrical surrealism, and on the other hand, a poet of the inner life—converge in his work as interconnected modes of perception. From the deep image, he retains imagistic attentiveness to concrete detail and symbolic expansiveness. From surrealism, he combines semantic incongruity and imagistic ambiguity in a poetics of derangement. He modulates between these modes of composition, sometimes in close proximity:

the blowflies land on the earlobe
the blowflies land on blossoms of bone
the blowflies leave their boiling gloves
on the manes of diagonal horses (*Wounded* 192)

In this anaphoric unit, for instance, the initial image is matter-of-fact description, while the second is resonant, archetypal language. The third, however, is ostentatiously arbitrary, an ornate distortion or transformation of experience. Next to the preceding modes of perception, its excessive specificity and representational incongruities disrupt lyric momentum.

What are the implications of the deployment of this convergence of styles synthesized across Hitchcock’s dramatic structure and of its effect on lyric subjectivity and psychology? His poem “Dawn” suggests the possibilities and ramifications of combining these modes of perception in a dramatic framework:

Clouds rise from their nests
with flapping wings, they whisper
of worn leather, bracken, long
horizons, and the manes of dark
horses. In the waking stream
the stones lie like chestnuts
in a glass bowl. I pass the bones
of an old harrow thrown on its side
in the ditch.

Now the sun appears.
It is a fish wrapped in straw.
Its scales fall on the sleeping
town with its eyeless granaries
and necklace of boxcars. Soon
the blue wind will flatten the roads
with a metallic palm, the glitter
of granite will blind the eyes.

But not yet. The beetle still
stares from the riding moon, the ship
of death stands motionless on
frozen waves: I hear
the silence of early morning
rise from the rocks. (Wounded 86)

The deep image template is detectable: the poem moves from concentrated attention on the
external world, constituted by imagistic description, to a profound experience of an inner or
unseen world, signaled by symbolic figuration. In the first stanza, the figurative ellipsis is meant
to expound apprehended phenomena. The final stanza, by contrast, is archetypal and symbolic.
Its images refer to types rather than to immediate sensory experience. The speaker realizes or
indicates something about an unseen world. Cutting against the motion of the day is this other
world—“frozen,” “motionless,” and “silence”—a place where the self reaches mysterious
depths. In the moment of sensing it, the speaker can clairvoyantly “hear / the silence” coming
from rocks.

The shift from outer to inner world passes through the strange imagery of the second
stanza. This is Hitchcock’s surreal mode of perception. The images, such as the sun as “a fish
wrapped in straw,” replace the preceding concrete observations with an exaggerated, non-
mimetic interpretation of the landscape. They are objective and concrete, yet semantically
incongruous and insufficiently abstract for archetypal suggestiveness. “A fish wrapped in straw” whose “scales fall on the sleeping / town” is a garishly skewed (and paradoxically sublime) representation of the sun. Similarly, the town’s “eyeless granaries / and necklace of boxcars” are distorted and grotesque. And although one could argue for the synesthetic appropriateness of “blue wind…flatten[ing] the roads / with a metallic palm,” this image’s blatant semantic mismatch (“metallic palm”) maintains the tone of obfuscation.

At the same time, perhaps surprisingly, the middle stanza’s exaggerated perspective is only temporarily disruptive to the poem’s structure. It provides a gradual transformation from the outer world to the resonant, psychological interiority of the final stanza. And while there is a sense in which disrupting the poem’s semantic texture reflects a shift in the speaker’s attention and mood, the images of the final stanza restore the sense of simplicity evoked in the first stanza. That is to say, although the first and final stanzas are different modes of perception, the two sections resemble the deep image’s sense of quiet concentration and psychological integration. The images in the middle stanza, comparatively, are psychologically disjoined and convoluted.

Hitchcock tends to favor this surrealistic mode of perception, seen in the second stanza, over the deep image’s “abstract image” as the transitional device from outer to inner experience. The abstract image, recalling Holden, combines “two epistemological conventions” by making an image that has both the concrete quality of an image and the emotional range of generalization (63). Associational expansiveness, especially in terms of emotions, is the main effect. Sensory stimulus is viewed through the speaker’s emotions or psyche, consolidating and intensifying lyric focus. The images in the middle stanza of “Dawn” neither faithfully describe the reality of the circumstances nor correlate the context to the speaker. Of course the image conveys some
mimetic and expressive information, but this function is secondary. The main effect of the images of the middle stanza is to alienate the audience through obstructing meaning rhetorically and dramatically.

In “Dawn,” then, Hitchcock interjects a surrealist mode of perception into a deep image dramatic form, frustrating the poem’s development and continuity. As a result, “Dawn” does not suggest the same degree of closure and resonance typically implied in a deep image poem. The dialogue between the conscious and unconscious is more complicated than the unproblematic “leap” Bly describes. For Hitchcock the transition between the two areas of consciousness is the region of derangement. Rather than a luminous, mysterious “leap,” the process for Hitchcock entails the influence of irrational aspects of consciousness.

One could argue that the poem critiques the fanciful mode of the middle stanza, associated with the sun and daytime, and affirms the integrated perspective achieved by the calm stasis of nighttime and dusk, a common archetype in deep image writing. Surrealist derangement, in this sense, would pose a threat to the inner life and must be opposed. The problem with this reading, though, is that the distortions of the middle stanza are a direct effect of natural cycles—the orbit of the earth, the effect of the sun on the atmosphere—and not a product, as seen in Bly and Wright, of the social self. For Hitchcock, the world in some (natural) conditions cannot be faithfully apprehended. Even for a healthy observer in full control of his faculties, aspects of reality remain unclear and disjoined. This limitation on perception reinforces the problem with affirming the “leap” as reliable and immune to subjectivity. When “the sun appears,” the mind is prone to its hallucinating influence. In this sense, the uncontrollable and irrational elements of consciousness are intrinsic to the encounter between the self and the world.
Hitchcock’s surrealist modifications to the deep image are executed in other ways as well. One of his more frequent techniques is the anti-climax or (one might call it) “false leap,” where a surreal image replaces or arbitrates the anticipated epiphany at the poem’s end. In “April,” symbols and images of spring, such as the “tree” that “moves its fingers cunning / as a priest,” develop into a deepened, sensory awareness (“I feel / the air enfold me the air / its face / scarred with rain”), but when the final stanza turns toward the symbolic language expressing an interior, private experience, not all of its images align with the poem’s emotional framework:

I take in my cupped hands its benisons I take the hush of salt the boughs the lupin my father’s memories I take the shoulders of lions I take its breath (Wounded 50)

The gestures of gratitude and blessing, the nature imagery, and even personal reminiscence correlate nicely to the vernal theme. The synesthetic reference to salt, while a slightly more incongruous association, also has a complimentary resonance. The “shoulders of lions,” however, is surprisingly specific and disparate. The image is constructed from symbolic language but fails to correspond emotionally or psychologically to the preceding images. Other examples of anti-climaxes can be detected in the final lines of “Insomnia,” discussed above, “I discover scarlet / aphorisms / in my shavingwater” (57), and in the comic conclusion of “Villa Thermidor”: “Cocktails are served from five / to seven at the bottom of the pool” (124). These endings do not resolve the tensions of the poems, but rather, leave the persona in ennui.

A degree of ironic and affected posturing is implied in these “false leaps.” In “The Death of Prophecy,” for instance, he ends with an aureate and reflexive image: “Who shall distinguish
the sun / from the gold bee of artifice?” (63). The question comes after a deep image context has been mapped out. The poem begins, “The moon passes its zenith / its secret guarded by devout / archers,” and moves with visionary energies through emotive, abstract images: “O mountain with eyes of green malachite, / the moon is enmeshed in the folds of your breasts!” The section preceding the final image, too, seems to prepare us, with its sereneness, for a climatic leap:

The egret stands alone in the sedgy stream.  
In its cave of water  
the sacred snake hisses and moans. (63)

The closing lines, however, directly cast doubt on the viability of segregating self and world, and question the degree of artifice at work in his presentation of the natural world. The semantic terms of the image (“sun,” “gold bee”) are pleasingly evocative, but if “artifice” is a “gold bee,” it may indeed be difficult to discern the real sun from the fake. This notion undercuts the reliability of the preceding images and the sense of lyric continuity they create. Like “Dawn,” the poem does not conclude that archetypal awareness has final descriptive authority, but rather, that it must be qualified by a problematic epistemology and the poet’s propensity to distort and embellish. But if Hitchcock understands the limits of ascertaining the world, he also embraces the liberating implications of these limits. Poetry, the “gold bee of artifice,” gains its power through masquerading as the sun. He embraces the power of images as artifice and holds this recognition over and against the deep image’s claims of transparent authenticity.

In the concluding lines of “Rites of Passage,” he subsumes the mysticism of deep image writing into his surrealist vision with another auspicious twist. Having prepared himself through various rituals, the speaker’s consciousness is attuned to see through external phenomena to a hidden world:
on the sixth day I hear sledrunners creak in the snow
on the seventh day gates will be thrown back
and I shall speak to the gold snake
coiled in the sun. (Turns 48)

It is interesting to observe that, having arrived at the peak archetypal awareness, reality is revealed as image—an image at once suggestive and hermetically sealed, a snake “coiled in the sun.” Its paradoxical nature reverses the typical function of deep image epiphany as revelation, exposing its teleology of mysticism, where (in the final analysis) meditation usually culminates in ponderous obscurities. From the vantage point of surrealism, on the other hand, the image’s irresolvable and autotelic quality is indicative of the marvelous. Hitchcock’s theatrical surrealism capitalizes on the creation of such images, which are compelling as much, if not more, for their irrealism as for their cursory verisimilitude. Here, at the brink of the deep image move toward resolution, underscoring this mysticism seems appropriate, even perhaps more successful. In its own way, too, it is more honest.

Hitchcock’s originality stems from his awareness of the self as social and performative, even as it is estranged by its own subjectivity. Through its theatricality and dissolving of perceived contradictions, his poetry emphasizes the potential for beauty and transformation to rise from the incongruity of experience. His approach employs surrealist derangement to disrupt the binaries normalized in deep image poetry. His willingness to engage the tension between these two poetic approaches directed the formation of Kayak magazine and the larger Kayak aesthetic that would influence ideas and attitudes about surrealist poetry in the latter third of the century.
Kayak Magazine

A kayak is not a galleon, ark, coracle or speedboat. It is a small watertight vessel operated by a single oarsman. It is submersible, has sharply pointed ends, and is constructed from light poles and the skins of furry animals. It has never yet been employed as a means of mass transport.

So reads Kayak’s motto, printed on the back inside cover of each issue. Its language parades Hitchcock’s humor, but it also proposes an analogy for the kind of mid-century lyric poem he had in mind for his publication: short, well-constructed, incorporating diverse materials, and delicately constructed to mediate between self and environment. The vessel’s qualities—built of light materials yet skillfully fit together for optimum integrity and maneuverability—suggest a poetics of skilled precision and craft. At the same time, its visceral components and “sharply pointed ends” suggest a quality of crudeness and acuity. The wilderness connotations indicate the magazine’s northwestern roots, but also might allude to a particular attitude toward the predicament of modernist poetics in the mid-century. As James E. B. Breslin argues in the first chapter of From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965, young poets at mid-century, trapped in the shadow of recent literary giants (Eliot, Pound, Williams), seemed to face a dilemma of either formalizing modernism into a “powerful hegemony” or replaying its ideological rebellion and revolution with ever-increasing amplification (1-2, 13). The kayak suggests an alternate approach—exploration on a smaller scale of the newly discovered conceptual territory, of navigating smaller waterways that larger vessels are ill equipped to manage.

The magazine as a material object and its means of production also underscore the analogy. Hitchcock crafted the publication in meticulous fashion and remained in full control as
the editor, printer, and illustrator for the entirety of its twenty-year existence. This was a deliberate strategy Hitchcock formed in response to his experience with the *San Francisco Review*, which failed because of multiple editors, elaborate printing logistics, and poor financial planning. Hitchcock states that the *Review* was “ambitiously conceived”; with the letterpress printing based in England and a three-person board sharing responsibilities, the periodical encountered debilitating setbacks. After a few years it went into considerable debt and closed. From this experience, he ascertained that “the number-one law of little magazine publishing” is to have “either financial subvention from a patron or the discovery of some way to beat the printer’s bills” (Hitchcock, “Hitchcock on kayak” 288). He elected the latter approach by printing *Kayak* in his basement on “an offset press from the Pacific Steamship Line that had been used to print menus” (Grimes). He often printed the magazine on paper he had acquired from factories and other unusual sources (Marcus, “George” 21). In one case, he appropriated target-range paper “rejected as substandard by the U.S. Defense Department” (Hitchcock, “Editor’s Note”). Staple-bound, printed in letterpress, and assembled by hand, each copy is a kayak-like object produced on a small scale. This independent and artisan model provided occasions for building community of artists. He held “collating parties” quarterly at his house to assemble the issues; Bay area poets would mingle during the assembly process. As Marcus recounts, Hitchcock would have participants rotate through each of five tasks, facilitating social interaction. Marcus testifies to meeting and becoming lifelong friends with several poets through these meetings (“George” 21). “In this conviviality, a whole generation kayaked,” Laura Beausoleil writes (8).

The magazine’s artistic design, easily the most conspicuous aspect of the magazine,
further elucidates the analogy. Obtaining engravings from various nineteenth century print sources and arranging them in proximity to the poems or assembling them into collages, Hitchcock’s visual aesthetic gently interacted with and commented on the texts. The collage form itself, as well as the juxtaposition of art and text, reflects the kayak’s construction as a coarsely-textured object made from cultural mélange. The vintage decorativeness of the illustrations saturated the design, creating a veneer of kitchiness. Reflecting Hitchcock’s preference for the flamboyant and theatrical, this layer of affect distances or qualifies the tone of some of the more self-important poems. A grotesque human figure with mismatched limbs and an industrial clamp for a headdress, for instance, is printed opposite John Haines’s “Signs” in issue 11, altering the poem’s interpretive context (see Figure 1). The poem’s political pointedness comes from the aggravation of the persona, who positions himself as a soothsaying humanist attuned to the cosmos and grieved by the events alluded to in the second stanza:

Every evening at supper
I hear that a well-known delta
has swallowed
another platoon of soldiers;
that the presidential stones
are being consulted again;
that a muddy congress
is eddying around
some laws
that will surely be broken. (3)

But Hitchcock’s visual arrangement, recalling Dada’s criticism of mechanistic technology, evokes an image of decline and fragmentation, turning the poem’s voice more apprehensive and hysterical than authoritative, as if the final stanza is a plea for help rather than a silencing pronouncement: “Are benign spirits out there, / wishing us well? / If so, I have not heard them”
JOHN HAINES

signs

One morning last summer
I saw incredible numbers of rodents
scurrying through the grass —
I said to myself:
They are all
moving in the same direction.

Every evening at supper
I hear that a well-known delta
has swallowed
another platoon of soldiers;
that the presidential stones
are being consulted again;
that a muddy congress
is eddying around
some laws
that will surely be broken.

And long before midnight
the hands of astronomers
are gathering in
the planets and stars,
and perfectly normal men and women
have gone to bed, believing
they have witnessed
a glowing miracle in the skies —

Are benign spirits out there,
wishing us well?
If so, I have not heard them.
What would otherwise be a poem of dark prophecy is partially absorbed into the magazine’s larger aesthetic of disjointed agony. Such visual arrangements in the pages of Kayak offer a juxtaposition of two interpretations of the modern world, the tension of which I see as the magazine’s unique contribution to the development of surrealist aesthetics.

Shared editorial control, too, was out: “I was convinced that the only effective way of publishing a little magazine was through an absolute dictatorship” (Hitchcock, “Hitchcock on kayak” 289). Hitchcock consciously embraced the responsibility of guiding the magazine’s surrealist aesthetic: “An editor who is not prepared to be an autocrat in matters of literary taste, who is not ready to face with a smile the raucous cries of ‘Elitism’ would be better off somewhere else” (289). The point of Kayak, he says, was to promote poetry with qualities he “admired and felt to be gravely under-represented by the then existing poetry journals” (290). He excluded writing reflecting his “irrational hates”:

neoclassicism, the neo-Hemingway ‘tough guy’ posture, most of the New Criticism, the Vietnam war…, the banal eclecticism of Poetry (Chicago), excessive academic analysis at the expense of feeling, our national administration, the pseudo poetics of Charles Olson and his Black Mountain disciples, the cliquish pretentiousness of many of the Beats, poets preoccupied with the trivia of suburban existence—in short, ninety percent of what was being written or down in my time. (290)

The submission guidelines Hitchcock printed in the first 19 issues state, “Kayak is particularly hospitable to surrealist, imagist and political poems; prose poems and vehement articles on modern American poetry.” While these guidelines correspond to Hitchcock’s preferences, they are flexible enough to absorb a diverse range of styles: “At the same time that I was prepared to flaunt my own predilections… I didn’t want to shut any editorial doors on Romantic poetry in the English tradition where it was still alive” (290). Even with the renewed attention to
surrealism spurred by the deep image movement, he still detected a deficiency. Asked if he conceived *Kayak* as the sole publication “hospitable to surrealism” at the time, he states:

Certainly Robert Bly’s *The Sixties* was hospitable to surrealism, but I felt that it was published spasmodically at best and that what was needed was a journal published with great regularity and frequently enough so that various dialogs could be launched in its pages and relevantly discussed soon after. (“‘Light Poles’” 294)

*Kayak* satisfied all these goals largely because of the variety of poets he included. The most active surrealist and deep image poets of those years can be found in its pages, from surrealists Michael Benedikt, Philip Lamantia, and Ivan Arguelles to deep image poets Bly, Merwin, and Haines. But he also featured poets from traditions that are derived from or exist contiguously with surrealism, such as “proletarian” poets like Philip Levine and Bert Meyers, Latin magical realists like Cardona-Hide and Nanos Valaoritis, and experimental outliers like David Antin. The excitement and momentum of the journal also stemmed from the steady unearthing of new poets of which roughly half a dozen were published in each issue (297).

But more than a promotion of his “literary taste” or an aesthetic movement, *Kayak* was an extension of Hitchcock’s personality. The single underlying reason, Levine writes, for the magazine’s “potent and unified vision of the America of the sixties in spite of the fact it seemed to have room for almost every talented poet not writing Petrarchan sonnets” was “the character of George Hitchcock.” Through Hitchcock’s “fine sense of irony” and commitment to his vision, he energized the magazine community with levity and humor (xvii-xviii). Notoriously, Hitchcock replied to submissions he did not find to his liking by mailing mocking rejection letters that paired nineteenth century wood engravings that were “appropriately ghastly and ironic for a rejection” with trite messages. In one of these letters, an image of a boy about to behead a wolf
with an ax is captioned, “Sorry, but the editors of kayak feel that your submission is not quite what we need this season” (One Man 274-75). Another sets an image of man falling into an icy lake to the declaration that “[t]he editor of kayak regrets that your submission, although worthy, didn’t quite make it” (282). This produced a natural winnowing effect: “It was good for a laugh although some people were terribly insulted. But the ones who are terribly insulted you wouldn’t want in the magazine anyway” (275). It also illustrates the lengths to which Hitchcock could go to construct an ethos for the magazine; unafraid of ornamentation and dramatic rhetoric, Hitchcock cultivated a theatrical editorial persona that proved part of Kayak’s charm. Bringing these expressions of modern poetics and his own personality under the auspices of an exploratory surrealist-imagist aesthetic, Hitchcock forms his figurative kayak, assembling varied materials for a pioneering enterprise.

A tabulation of the first twenty issues (1964-69) reveals the following poets appear most in the magazine: John Haines (34 poems in 11 issues), Charles Simic (27 poems, 9 issues), Lou Lipsitz (26 poems, 7 issues), Louis Z. Hammer (23 poems in 5 issues), John Taglibue (21 poems, 8 issues), H. R. Hays (13 poems, 7 issues), and Bly (14 poems in 4 issues). In addition, Hammer, Hays, and Bly each contributed three articles in that time frame, and Haines wrote four. Hitchcock printed only seven of his own poems. With issues averaging about 45 poems by 22 poets, this group gives an indication of the magazine’s central tendencies. While Bly and Haines are firmly grounded in deep image depth psychology (illustrated by my analysis of their poems in the previous chapter), the others represent a range of derivative versions of deep image and surrealist models. What unites these poets is their focus on the disjointedness and fragility of modern experience and an interest in appropriating the irrational to transform contemporary
society. Some of these poets, such as Haines and Bly, pursue these ideas by moving oneself (insofar as possible) away from the dissonance of society. Others look for mechanisms of redemption amid the detritus of acculturated consciousness. The latter approach borrows surrealism’s outlook by presuming that experience in its totality, littered as it is with fragmentary and artificial objects, can be transmuted through an associational praxis. There is a balancing effect in the apposition of these approaches. The surrealist poets loosen and disrupt the normalized tensions of the deep image, while the deep image poets retain a stronger grounding in the natural landscape. This provides a productive means of broadening and diversifying a poetic milieu that has been criticized at times for narrowness.

Perhaps the best testimony to the productivity of the union is that some of the poets who were incubated by the *Kayak* network in their early careers went on to flesh out their own successful surrealist and deep image-inspired styles. Charles Simic, whom Joron calls “[o]ne of the poets who has most successfully synthesized imagism and Surrealism” (391), is perhaps the best example of this, and his unique vision in its own way underscores Hitchcock’s preference for the bizarre and mysterious. His *Kayak* poems, several of which were collected in his first two books, drill down into common objects—insects, needles, pigs—in hopes of finding revelation. Often these phenomena are uncannily distorted through his intense meditative focus: shoes become the “secret face of my inner life: / Two gaping toothless mouths, / Two partly decomposed animal skins / Smelling of mice-nests” (33), and a knife becomes “[a] tongue / All alone / Bearing the darkness of a mouth / Now lost” (“Knife” 36-37). In the concluding section of “Meat,” he underscores this intense gaze as the instrument of apprehension: “I am baptized in this sight, / As when a child immersed in water / Feels the hand of death / At its throat” (21).
Simic’s imagery, while intense and penetrating, is also distended and elevated, similar to Hitchcock’s surreal mode of perception. In “Northern Wind,” “[t]he earth turns its dark prow / Like the barrel of a cannon / Towards the Milky Way” (52), and in “Five Naked Men Lined Up for Army Physicals,”

The second one raises his head:
A common human foolishness
Floats on silver candlesticks
To the surface of his eyes. (54)

Counterbalancing the urban surrealism of other contributors with rural phantasmagoria, Simic is Kayak’s folk-surreal counterweight. Reducible neither to Bly’s deep image or Hitchcock’s surrealism, his style is enigmatic, drawing on, as Adam Kirsch aptly describes, “the dark satire of Central Europe, the sensual rhapsody of Latin America, and the fraught juxtapositions of French Surrealism to create a style like nothing else in American literature” (“More Than”).

Hitchcock lets each side of the Kayak community display its graces, like paddle strokes on either side of the vessel. The side represented by Bly and Haines constructs an archetypal ambiance in the early issues. Haines was known as the poet of the Alaskan wilderness, writing with the grim lyricism of northern mountain ranges. Hitchcock featured Haines frequently in Kayak during the same period that he was writing Ship of Bells, his most deep image-influenced work, even if he never went to the same extremes of solitude. Perhaps the closest one can come to Bly’s concept of the poet as ascetic naturalist, Haines looked for mysteries at the intersection of the natural environment and individual. In his Kayak poems, Haines draws out the terse beauty of his physical surroundings—animals, ice, and austerity, but he rarely departs from deftly handled modulations between the world of concrete images and resonant symbolism. In
one of his best known poems, “The Moosehead,” printed in the fourth issue, the mysterious images that open the poem (“Stripped of its horns and skin, / the moosehead is sinking”) elucidate the interwoven abstractions that follow (“the sleepy, / green marrow of Death”) and sustain the extended metaphor, “Over the bridge of the nostrils / the small pilots of the soil / climb and descend.” With the final stanza, one gets a clear sense of a concrete connection between the natural world and archetypal consciousness: “In the cabin of the skull / where the brain once floated / like a ruddy captain, / there is just this black water / and a faint glowing of phosphorous.” (29). In Haines’s poetry, the dialog between self and world is untroubled by modern society because experience for him does not typically extend beyond uninhabited wilderness. Hitchcock seems to favor Haines’s more political poems, but even here, Haines is a recluse who contrasts governmental atrocities with pastoral imagery, and his occasional visit to the city is only tolerable because it can be imagined in pastoral terms. In “The Sweater of Vladimir Ussachevsky,” “the indifferent city block by block” is “changed,” buildings become “mountains / that fled as I approached them,” and “[t]he traffic became sheep and cattle / milling in muddy pastures” (5). For Haines, the dichotomy between nature and society is crisp.

Hammer, Lipsitz, Hays, and Simic, on the other hand, reside closer to the surrealism that Hitchcock demonstrates in his own writing. Each of these writers offers a derivative deep image poetics, significantly expanding its vocabulary, relocating its landscape, and reconfiguring its psychology. Levine recalls reading the first poem in the first issue, by Hammer, who he had never heard of before: “This was something new and different…[t]his was surrealism, or better an ultrarealism” (xiv). Surrealism bordering on “ultrarealism” might aptly describe the Kayak style in an era when political and cultural circumstances seemed to produce a dissonance in
collective consciousness. Only models that accounted for radical discontinuity could absorb and explain experience. “Poetry,” Hammer writes in one of his Kayak essays, “is the opening up in language of a vertical movement through strata of itself which had not previously been revealed as strata.” Hammer, who taught philosophy, sees the therapeutic potential inherent in the poetic image, which is “language…in the process of uncovering its own world-fibers.” He conjoins the deep image sense of a primal experience and measured observation with surrealism’s aggressive linguistic outpouring of the unconscious. Identity and meaning are recuperated through associational strata by means of image-making, of language “bearing the world as image” (“How” 58). His intimidations reflect the magazine’s proclivity for surrealist images; more energetic hammer swings, his essay seems to argue, are needed to chip away at the layers of the psyche.

Hammer, Hays, and Lipsitz parallel Hitchcock’s poetics at several junctures. First, they often focus on the archetypal moments of city and suburban life, imagining a kind of urbane deep image. Lipsitz searches among the fragmented aspects of modernism for a coherent vision of human experience. In “Evening & Nighttime Blues,” Lipsitz sounds like a Baudelairean version of Bly, evoking the polluted, stifling elements of the post-industrial landscape. A polluted river is “like our lives, / shallow, muddy and full of shit,” while loiterers outside a bar indicate a shiftless ennui, “A part of everything / is unemployed.” Nevertheless, the self looks for meaning. When “it is late” and the city is dark, “the heart may venture out, / trying to find its way” (4). By chance, however, the potentially redeeming moment is cut short:

    like a man slightly drunk
    who suddenly recalls
    something urgent he’d forgotten
and runs into the street--
to be blinded by headlights
and cursed for blocking traffic. (4)

The premature terminus to the man’s desire no doubt evokes the oppressive and frustrating unpredictability of the modern world; yet, the convulsive nature of the man’s instinct (“like a man slightly drunk / who suddenly recalls / something urgent he’d forgotten”) and the chance encounter with light (at once threatening and revealing) point to the presence of the marvelous in a crowded and incongruous world. In a still more urgent tone, Hammer presents a world where commercial and ideological forces have undermined individuality and freedom:

We have taken tarpits
And called them eyes,
we have taken the little edges of smiles
Around the cheeks
And called the roses of murder,
We have taken the small apparitions of altars
Seen through the doors of lilies
And called them bedrock of love:
Now those sad breasts are hung
Silently over the window,
We are surrendering to bodies
That are burned down to a word. (“Postlude” 19)

In contrast to the pastoral deep image, where purification of psyche comes through apprehending an untainted, natural order, Hammer’s imagery punches violently through modern detritus in hopes of eventual regeneration from within.

In addition to their urban focus, these poets also read like Hitchcock in their aggressive heterogeneity and apocalyptic tone. For Litpstiz, the self must confront modern experience through direct revolt. Poems like “Fantasy for Those Who Hate Their Work” imagine a violent purging of the economic order:
Clerks will 
vomit tables 
of multiplication 
ruining their shoe 
shines.

In the middle of America 
assembly lines will be covered 
by the Atlantic Ocean 
of pain.

The sealed gates of the mind 
WILL BE SMASHED 
by waiters with serving trays. (5-6)

Hays specializes in bizarre dystopias, often coming closer to the monstrous than the archetypal. In poems like “Message from a Madhouse” and “The Case,” he echoes the phantasmagoria of the Beat surrealism. “The Case” is a dystopian vision where “traces of strontium” contaminate the environment, bizarre science inventions “control the sex of unborn infants / and endow them all with photoelectric cells” and “every male American / with an IQ over a hundred” is subject to forced sterilization and brainwashing (30-31). The environment, too, partakes of these horrors: “An enormous eye, / glossy as fried egg” hangs in the sky, and “the brittle / skeletons of birds / fell like snowflakes, / fell continually” (30-31). Analogous to Hitchcock's apocalypses, these eschatological images directly critique modernity through surrealist defamiliarization.

Beneath these deliberate executions of surrealist dissent, these poets maintain a playful self-awareness and flamboyance in their embrace of contradiction. Hammer employs intensified, baroque images to counterpoint his visionary rhetoric and tone. “Love Song” turns on the declaration that “[a] fire in the compression of my eyes / Lights from no distance / The ray of your beloved hand” (5), and in “Character of the Desert,” he writes, “[t]he sky is soft / As the
meat of an olive” (4). He describes the poet as “[a] man whose head is a battery / Whose dream is a current / That shocks the anemones” and who “has scorched his eyes” as he beholds a marvelous vision of “white harbors” and “[t]he dance...burning / In the navel of the skies” (“Modern Poet” 46). With the same grandiosity, Lipsitz declares that man is “the creature who dreams surrealistically / of women's hair overcoming the sea / while snoozing on the roach-eaten mattress of history” (“Man” 14), and Hays writes in “When,” “A bathtub and a curtainrod / Will dance a minuet…And from their moorings / Of poverty and soot / Cities will set sail” (20). Similar examples of surreal extravagance are abundant in Kayak, and the new and amateur poets Hitchcock printed seem to lead the charge, as with these lines by art student David Searcy: “The pepsi-cola dirigible moves / Around the sky in big, slow circles,” and “Africa is bleeding all over my toast” (43).

This extravagance heightened the sense of the magazine’s artifice. Hitchcock leaned toward styles that elevate and intensify the imagery through indefinite time frames and imprecise imagistic progression, as in this passage from George Jonas’s “Humming Birds”:

A solution met a
loaf of bread
and broke it in half.
It was nine o’clock:
merry fat people
bit each other’s throat.

Windows were misty.
Dark seas rolled.

Concubines decorated
pussycats
with pink ribbons.

In chimneys
perfect loneliness
reigned. (44-45)

Such skewed dramatic presentation becomes at once defamiliarizing and artificial. Jonas modulates between the symbolic and concrete, interweaving profound and mundane evocations, but the metaphysical weight is counterbalanced by surrealist humor: pink ribbons co-exist with rolling seas. The reader is offered a magical vision of the world, but one that is replete with distortions, artificial constructions and static temporality. Such poems, recalling Hitchcock’s “golden bee of artifice,” seem to bare their devices proudly and to place their value in the curiosity and marvel of their images rather than in the authority of their claims.

The “Kayak Poem” and the Problem of Artifice

This final aspect of Kayak became a point of controversy. Deliberate artifice went against the “antiliterary stance” of poets at this time, who, James E.B. Breslin argues, rebelled against the ‘50s academic retrenchment of traditional forms and sought instead “a rough, ‘unpoetic’ authenticity, a return to the existential freshness of the world” (59). The deep image poets epitomized this trend, claiming, as we saw in the previous chapter, a sincere and depersonalized persona as fundamental to archetypal consciousness. At the core of Kayak, on the other hand, was a cohort of poets who subscribed to a combination of authorial immediacy and hieratic distance, a blend of natural and unnatural images, a fusion of personal expression and constructed performance. Just as Hitchcock seems to enjoy the excesses of a theatrical style, so too the poets he published embellish their work with spectacle and affect. In his poetry and his editing choices—marked by decorative flourishes and ironic gestures, such as the visual design
elements and rejection slips—Hitchcock’s embrace of artifice is quite conspicuous. While most of the poets involved in the magazine maintained an ambivalent attitude toward artifice, attempts to articulate a less problematic view of artifice can occasionally be found in the magazine. For example, in a book review, Vern Rutsala offers an approach that seems representative of Hitchcock’s poetic:

Absent from most poetry, or most lives where slavish imitation stands in for it, style indicates that you are in touch with some fundamental part of yourself and have found a way of moving with some degree of agility under the steady pressure of existence. To have found a style means that a kind of grim serenity has been achieved. While a style may seem only the product of necessity and thus a functional thing, there is always in it an element which is purely decorative, seemingly gratuitous, and this is usually the quality which gives the style depth. For some this quality may be called “soul”, but whatever term is used exposure to this quality gives you a brief bit of sustaining energy to use against the surrounding absurdity. (63)

From Hitchcock’s perspective as a thespian, the dichotomy between “authentic” and “artificial” must have seemed strange, since acting was for him a natural and poetic mode of expression. Levine could see that transparency and pretense were a seamless whole in his personality: “I believe we all learned the age-old conflict between art and life was nonsense: in George’s case nothing was more obvious than that art was his life and his life was an art” (xvi). Indeed, Levine detects no distinction between Hitchcock’s persona and his “real” self: “no pose, no effort to charm” (xviii).

Hitchcock’s unconventional favor of artifice led to uneasiness with what was perceived as contrived and formulaic work. Paul Zweig, author of the influential essay, “The New Surrealism,” saw a “classical cleanliness” in Kayak poets that had become mere “literary technique” (275). A definitive moment came in 1967 when Hitchcock asked Bly to write a
review of the magazine. Not one to turn down an opportunity for invective, Bly’s essay, “The First Ten Issues of Kayak,” printed in issue 12, is bluntly negative. He states that the magazine’s poetry is “on the whole clogged and bad” and that Hitchcock “[a]s an editor… is too permissive”:

Too much foggy stuff gets in: in kayak poems usually someone is stepping into a tunnel of dark wind and disappearing into a whistle; the darkness is always pausing to wait for someone. One gets that feeling that as long as there are a few skeletons of fossil plants in the poem, or some horses floating in the mind, or a flea whispering in Norwegian, in it goes! (46)

To show just how predictable the imagery of the poems has become, he offers a grammatical analysis of the images: “[T]hey are made of a) an animal or object, b) a violent action, c) an adjective (often tiny, dark, or great), and then d) the geographic location” (Bly’s emphasis). He backs this with examples from previous issues, such as David P. Etters’s “‘Birds fly in the broken windows / of the hotel in Argyle,’” and Hitchcock’s own line, “‘Lighted cigars fall like meteors on a deserted football field in Pierre, South Dakota.’” He also points out that the magazine’s images are often written in passive constructions, quoting again from Hitchcock, “‘Policemen were discovered in the cupolas waving felt erasers’” (from “The War Must Go On”) and employ the present progressive tense, such that the poems “seem to take place in the eternal present,” as in Hammer’s “‘Hands are choking a cat in a small liquor store in Connecticut’” (from “American Music”). Finally, Bly disapproves of sudden and arbitrary shifts in discourse, such as contrasting “literary resonance” to the disruptive and mundane statements, “off-hand remark[s] from the world of truck-drivers” (46).

These three points—formulaic images, inexact verb constructions, and jarring shifts in topic—form the basis of Bly’s larger concern that Kayak substitutes technique for authenticity:

Of course adoption of a style cannot make a poet free. The mind has too
many tricks in reserve for that—it hates change. In order to keep a restless poet quiet, the rational mind will even slide down to him some floating breast images and extinct dinosaur bone images, perhaps enough for a whole poem! But these images remain perfectly rational. When we read them, we feel something not genuine there.…

[...]

So a lot of poems that appear to have escaped from the mind-walls really haven’t at all. A conventional form of underground lakes poem is beginning to appear, and kayak publishes too many of them. (47, Bly’s emphasis)

A paragraph later, he states bluntly that a poet writing this kind of poem “has mistaken a way of living for a style” (48). Interestingly, he blames the formulaic style on “sociability.” In his estimation, since Kayak poets aim for “a greater simplicity of style” and because “cluttered complexity and rhetorical flourish are the natural expression of an over-socialized life,” socializing is antithetical to their poetic mission. Solitude—which he says is the preferred condition for poetic creativity—corresponds to simplicity, which is “a natural expression of solitude.” Thus, for poets to improve they should “stop their usual sociability” (48). This includes insulating oneself even from countercultural groups: “Poets in artistic colonies or hippie colonies are better off, but still are with a sociable world” (48). Nothing short of rigorous asceticism will suffice, as, against the “colony” model, he upholds the example of a haikuist, Basho, and a Buddhist monk, Kuya. The sign off to his article is particularly ostentatious: “If an American poet wants to write of a chill and foggy field, he has to stay out there, and get cold and wet himself. Two hours of solitude seem about right for every line of poetry” (49).

The numerous responses to the essay in subsequent issues inveigh against Bly’s hypocrisy and naivety. Bert Myers states that the article is really “an evaluation of [Bly’s] own first book, and of the American poetry he has advocated through publication in The Fifties and The Sixties.” Accordingly, “[o]ne could say [Kayak poems] resemble certain foreign poems in
translation, or some of *Silence on the Snowy Fields*, and that Robert Bly provided the models” (Haines, “Letter” 13). Haines supports Bly’s basic points, but doesn’t think his work stands up to his own guidelines: “‘Physician, heal thyself’” (19). Hays “think[s] [Bly] should be jumped on for the obvious rationalizations of his own shortcomings” (19) and Marcus caricatures him as “Captain Bly,” the “good skipper” whose “trusty astrolabe enables him to find the right direction, but somehow…[miss] port by several thousand miles,” an “Ahab” with “his moral harpoon poised above his head as he thrusts home again and again” (Marcus, “Letter” 19).

More substantive, though, are responses that identify the underlying assumptions to Bly’s rationale. Meyers rejects Bly’s retreat into the unconscious as premised on an incorrect assessment of the modern condition: “What inner mind does Bly mean?...The American inner mind isn’t tranquil, and I get the impression from Bly’s insistence on asserting his own taste as a general rule that he currently prefers oriental models because they provide an escape from chaos.” He sees Bly’s pastoral retreat as a Romantic illusion:

Bly reminds me of Wordsworth—faith in nature, human nature, universal nature, a Utopia called Id where all men are equal and good. All we have to do is open its doors, speak its language, and the vile enchantment of our culture will disappear. Maybe. But imitating Basho’s serene contemplations isn’t the only way to achieve this. (13)

Echoing this skepticism toward wilderness escapism, Marcus questions Bly’s assumptions, arguing that specificity in an image is a virtue, not a flaw: “they [Kayak poets] use specific referents which anchor the poem to reality and make the surreal or fantastic image more meaningful” (“Letter” 20). For Marcus, *Kayak’s synthesis of imagism and surrealism improves and sharpens the effect: “[T]he imagery of the poems is generally kept clear and uncluttered, thus avoiding the crammed-attic feeling of early surrealism. In fact, the kayak poem to me is
exemplified by the short lyric whose imagery is vivid, although surrealistic.” He refutes the notion that simplification is superior to complexity or that pain is prior to pleasure: “There are not only guilt and suffering in this world, but joy and rapture as well. We can reach our inner selves that way, too: we can empty the mind by overloading it” (20). Hitchcock never interjected in this debate, maintaining admirable neutrality. Later, though, he would admit that while he was “happy” to publish Bly’s article, he “certainly didn’t think kayak had any greater weakness for ‘formula surrealism’ than Robert did himself” (“Light Poles” 298-98).

On one matter, though, Bly seems to have had the upper hand. While the responses make clear that few Kayak poets share Bly’s exact methodology, even those comfortable with surrealism are hemmed in by his preference for authenticity. No one admits to the charge of artifice; rather, they insist their writing is, in fact, genuine and that Bly simply misreads it. For example, Myers objects to the fact that Bly claims that Kayak poets have “mistaken a way of living for a style”: “How does Bly know? Isn’t he assuming this on the basis of his criticism, rather than from what the poems say?” (13). A few protest that sincerity cannot be equated with “solitude,” but none directly question the notion of authenticity as an evaluative standard, implicitly accepting Bly’s ontological framework. Lipsitz admits that “Bly’s emphasis...on falseness vs. authenticity...is fundamentally sound,” complaining only that “he really overdoes it and gets condescending” (Lipsitz, “Letter” 21). Haines concurs that Bly’s equating of a simple rhetorical style with a “‘a natural expression of solitude’” is “a very true thing,” and only wonders whether Bly himself has achieved this simplicity (Haines, “Letter”19). He adds that “[t]he typical ‘kayak poem’…is purely an invention” (18).

The confusing tendency to use the terms “surreal” and “deep image” somewhat
interchangeably partly explains this apprehensiveness about artifice. Undoubtedly, many Kayak poets aimed for deep image’s transparency and sincerity, and where the models became conflated surrealist posturing seems faked or contrived. Read as a deep image poem, for instance, James Tate’s “Nakedness” would seem to abuse deep image motifs, almost satirically:

The blithe blanket of death  
is slowly removed from the meadow  
in mid-April; an infinite number of creatures  
rub sleep from their eyes,  
hesitant and drowsy on the threshold  
of such marvelous land and weather.  
I am unprepared when the skein  
of a spider out of the past  
suddenly clings to my body. (41)

If authenticity and resonance is the goal, Tate has botched the images and undermined the lyric voice through trite phraseology, such as “I am unprepared when”—an awkward equivalent of Wright’s “suddenly.” These peculiarities undermine sincerity of voice and break the impression of transparent mediation of experience. But Tate is not attempting to reconnect with the world in a sweeping symbolic gesture; rather, he reflects Hitchcock’s sense of irony and indulges in the illusion the poem makes possible. Bly’s narrow perspective discredits this aspect of the magazine, insinuating that the wildness of surrealism must be tamed and directed toward his pre-established metaphysical vision.

It was not only Bly, and those he held sway over, who distrusted artifice and imposed their anti-literary expectations on their surrealist counterparts. In 1973, for instance, R. D. Rosen attacks James Tate for “an obscurity that is comic” (189). Although he acknowledges that Tate’s surrealist connections sometimes work, usually the result “seems like an adolescent game” that is only “saved by a sincerity reflected in the poem as a whole” (189). Tate’s superficial personality
displeases Rosen: “If one is going to be calculating, one should be calculating throughout” (190). Such “conscious manipulation” and “calculation” are “abstruse,” “sloppy,” and suggest a “slick craving for individuality” (189-91). Rosen labels Tate’s weaker moves as “surrealism,” even though he clearly is evaluating his work according to the standards of the deep image: “The poet...through whom an unconscious, archetypal form expresses itself, is not engaged in a deliberate act” (185, original emphasis). Like Bly, Rosen sees correctly that deep image poetry fails if one appears to be trying, but, also like Bly, he falsely assumes the poetry he is addressing operates in the deep image frame of reference—an understandable mistake given the close proximity and equivocation of the terms during these years. Since sincerity is the proclaimed standard of the deep image, misinterpreting surrealist playfulness for deep image austerity exacerbates its seeming pretentiousness.

Addressing or transcending such preoccupations with sincerity, however, Hitchcock imagined in his own work and in Kayak a style that is generative and sustaining. While skepticism of artifice dissuaded part of the community from directly addressing the criticism that eventually became the consensus view on the “new surrealism,” the magazine nevertheless allowed these important distinctions to emerge, and by continuing the Kayak experiment for two decades, Hitchcock implicitly rejected the devotion to sincerity that guided many of his contemporaries.

At this watershed moment for surrealism in American poetry, Hitchcock experimented and combined deep image and surrealist sensibilities in a way that preserved surrealism’s distinctiveness. Perhaps Hitchcock’s contribution can be summarized as fostering experimentation and exploration in what otherwise was a narrowly defined movement. These
explorations were productive because they often recognized the social self as one of the layers of the collective unconscious in need of excavation. Aided by his proclivity for acting, he was able to see past the deep image’s claims of authenticity and to appreciate the poetic artifice of both deep image and surrealist writing. In this sense, the two styles are contiguous, and in their apposition Hitchcock engendered an environment that permitted an open investigation of the irrational image as a mediator of modern experience.
CHAPTER 5
THE SYNTAGMATIC TURN:
SURREALISM IN CLARK COOLIDGE’S SOLUTION PASSAGE

While the Beats, deep image poets, and George Hitchcock were rediscovering and appropriating surrealism in the ‘60s and ‘70s with varying personal and cultural emphases, the language poets were working out their own relationship to surrealism on very different terms. Emerging in the ‘70s in the Bay area, the avant-garde writers of the language poetry movement take their name from their focus on the workings of language as a social and material medium. Most language poets are skeptical of the conventional understanding of poetry’s expressive functions and subjectivity. From the outset, language poetry’s formative thinkers put themselves in an intense dialog with surrealism. Even though there are intuitive connections between the two movements—both center on technical experiments aimed at subverting normative ways of reading and writing and are motivated by progressive political views—language poetry’s leading figures have largely defined themselves against surrealism. Barrett Watten, Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman have delineated fundamental incompatibilities, including surrealism’s reliance on dream narrative and images. Their vexed relationship with surrealism prompts a revaluation of concepts that have trickled down from surrealism from a vantage point informed by poststructuralism. Because of language poetry’s important role in defining the terms of contemporary avant-garde writing, whether it deflects or absorbs surrealist ideas and techniques has significant bearing on the prospects for surrealism in poststructuralist poetics.
Surrealism offers important points of intersection and complementarity for language poetry, particularly where surrealism explored “objective chance” through non-intentional writing methods, emphasizing language as a material and extrinsic medium. Clark Coolidge offers an intriguing starting point for exploring these intersections. With a prolific writing career spanning over five decades, Coolidge has developed a uniquely experimental style that relies heavily on juxtaposition, improvisation and syntactic deviation. His work has intrigued the language poets, who have subsequently adopted and promoted him as a prototype and close antecedent of their movement. In this chapter I focus on the surrealist dimensions at play in Coolidge’s writing and the implications this has for language poetry. The distinguishing feature of Coolidge’s style is his improvisational syntax, which he describes as “an approach to the sentence as axial armature” (Quartz 56). The peculiar images this approach generates emerge out of the totality of the pressures he creates on multiple linguistic levels and manifest the surreal properties detectable at the intersection of the semantic and syntactic axes of language.

Clark Coolidge

Coolidge found his way to poetry by the unlikely combination of jazz music and geological science. Since he began publishing in 1966, these interests have been the inspiration and touch point for his innovative experiments with syntax and improvisation. His love of music may have been inherited from his father, who was a music professor at Brown University, where Coolidge attended college. Coolidge originally wanted to major in geology. He had long loved collecting and studying rocks and rock formations, but at Brown he realized the field “was
changing from being a descriptive science to a real high-toned mathematical, geophysical, super-laboratory stress-and-strain type science” (“Arrangement”). Coolidge switched to the English department, but his musical and rock collecting hobbies have proved strong influences. In the period after college his serious hobby as a jazz drummer briefly blossomed when he joined David Meltzer’s band, Serpent Power, which enjoyed brief local success in the Bay area. When Coolidge initially began advancing his writing career in the ‘60s, he was affiliated with the New York school and was published in Ron Padgett and David Shapiro’s *Anthology of New York Poets* (1969). He spent most of the ‘70s and ‘80s living in New England, occasionally collaborating with experimental poet Bernadette Mayer and giving periodic poetry readings.

Coolidge’s style has evolved through distinct stages, each giving an important layer of context for his acclaimed works of the ‘80s. The early phase of his career was characterized by unusual language experiments. From the beginning, Coolidge demonstrated a willingness to encounter the complexity and tenacity of language, ripping words from their most basic semantic and syntactic contexts and arranging them into juxtapositional clusters that clot and clog into thick, intractable phrases. *Space* (1970), for instance, includes word strings like “pill’s an ape gone throats fly slips green decks / propeller slick cancer in onion book” and “classic umbra open fur reds a lemon” (11). Charles Bernstein describes the coagulating noun clusters of Coolidge’s earliest work as having a gooeyness and gumminess, a thickness of texture, hard, ungiving and indigestible — “clump — bends trill a jam” “mid punt egg zero” “copra stewage” “globule” — making the poems dense and heavy, filling their space with a high specific gravity that weighs them down to earth, keeps them resistant to easy assimilation, lets them hold their particular space through time. (“Maintaining Space”)
The term “dense” seems especially apt in light of Coolidge’s fascination with rocks. At a lecture at Naropa in 1977, he compares words to “minerals themselves as an arrangement of molecules” and to a piece of chalk or “instructional toys that [come] from another planet in the future” about which one can ask,

Where do I put it? What happens when I put it there? What does it do to this? How close is it? Does it repel me? Does it repel you? How much does it weigh down the table? Can I look through it? What do I see when I look through it, and another whole vector of stuff coming in visually? (“Arrangement”)

Tom Orange, in his excellent essay, “Arrangement and Density: A Context for Early Coolidge,” investigates this frictional texture in Coolidge’s writing. He notes that Coolidge is attracted to semantically inflexible words: “Rather than resonating with any other immediate fields of reference, they resonate primarily with their own sound and sense.” Orange points out that other New York school poets, such as Koch and Bernstein, were experimenting with juxtapositional techniques around the same time, but unlike these poets, who retain the phrasal units and idiomatic coherence, Coolidge bores down to the level of words themselves, and his “compositional units appear rarely to be longer than an individual word or two” (“Arrangement and Density”). Coolidge’s poem, “Ounce Code Orange,” illustrates this intensely tactile approach to language:

ounce code orange
a
the
ohm
trilobite trilobites (Space 68)

In his own commentary on this poem, Coolidge spells out the qualities and connotations of each
“ounce code orange”: ways of measuring, in a sense. Weight, a symbol system, a color. “a/the”: the indefinite article, the definite article. “ohm” is the unit of electrical resistance, a quality of metal, let’s say, that requires a certain amount of juice to go through. In other words, this is a fuzzy, resistant word. It hangs down here, it affects particularly this space. I wanted these things hanging in the middle because they could adhere to words in either the top line or the bottom line. “the ounce,” “a/the code,” “the orange.” You can’t say “a ounce” or “a orange,” practically. You can say “a code.” So there are those vectors going there.

“Trilobites”: you know what a trilobite is, it’s an early animal of the Paleozoic Age that was a crustacean divided into three lobes. As a word, to me it’s completely irreducible. What are you going to do with it? “A trilobite”: it’s like a clinker. Angular, uneven, heavy word. (“Arrangement”)

This methodical process is similar to a geologist turning over and scrutinizing stones in careful examination. The high point of these investigations of semantic “density” comes in Suite V, where Coolidge pushes the limits of resistance. Coolidge centers two words on a page, one near the top, one near bottom. The words are plural nouns, all four letters long: “lads // inks,” “webs // cuts,” “tins // jets.” These pairs are separated by large fields of white space, Barrett Watten notes, creating a “time lag” that calls to mind the energy of Reverdy’s theory of the image, where “light” is produced in the “gaps” between words (94).

The importance of semantic juxtaposition for Coolidge during this period is further evidenced by Supernatural Overtones, a work in which he collaborated with Ron Padgett. In it, short poems are enclosed within a large box on the top two-thirds of the page. Directly below the box are sentence “captions”:

```
the say
on the one
and as it
might
as add word
```
A young girl shuns romance because she fears her own power to change into a huge boulder. (11)

This format pits Coolidge’s non-syntactic word compositions against statements that are grammatically normal but no less “dense” in meaning. It is as if words as objects are being weighed against “thought” and the rhetoric of journalistic prose. It features a more complex type of gap involving syntax and generic cues—here typography and design conventions come to bear significantly on how one reads the text, creating complex and overlapping interpretive possibilities.

Coolidge soon expanded on these granular experiments and began playing with an ambitious, improvisational syntax. *Polaroid* (1975) is a book-length work made up entirely of prepositions, conjunctions and nonsubstantive terms. This restricted word bank compels an inventive reading that stretches and strains syntactic conventions:

```
this
is from or for into near how long
a much nor whom itself
yet all only under
are
nor much whole not often kind of yet
a while a since a yet some part
often only all of same (2)
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Watten aptly calls the effect this produces syntactic “buckling,” as “words snap in and out of different combinations in a line” (97). Terms and phrases function arbitrarily as other parts of speech. Some words, for instance, read like nouns as the sound patterns imitate phrase-like groupings: “all part whole of a same even,” “tends yet kinds / about / a such like” (3, my
emphasis). As Orange notes, this kind of writing “follows virtually no stylistic precedent: in such radical constructivist works, Coolidge was building a language uniquely his own” (“Everything” 579).

Quartz Heart (1978) extends this basic approach to longer units formed from a wider range of vocabulary. Coolidge’s phrases at this stage, while still relatively simple clausal units, are deployed as sentence units that rub against each other:

Kind of pipe could you do. Time standing as an eye. This is not uncapping and there is no. One of the spine up. A circle a triangle in the drawer that’s the rub. More head off to some coffee. He fell from the sponges and cried. Walls in the horizontal. Math flaking. Hollows you send out back for. All the two times mesh. (20)

The density of Space is seen in phrases like “[m]ath flacking,” but also present is Polaroid’s clustering of non-substantives, as in “and there is no” or “send out back for.” The combination of semantic density and syntactic buckling became Coolidge’s signature technique. Coolidge calls this style “prosoid” and writes that Quartz Hearts was “in every sense a hinge work, reflecting a fresh interest in sentence structure as axial armature, the final movement of Polaroid had pushed me toward” (56). Orange argues that for Coolidge, “density” and “arrangement” go hand in hand, producing a range of tensions from within language: “When [words] are properly arranged and made to go together...their dense, intractable sound and semantic qualities release an energy into the field of the poem” (“Arrangement and Density”). Indeed, Coolidge’s essential contribution is the way his work draws out the interdependent relationship of language’s semantic and syntactic planes. For Coolidge, each word implies its own grammar as an extension
of its semantic properties, and thus each phrase represents a unique syntactic instance.

_Quartz Heart_ represents another important innovation for Coolidge. The work’s compositional process involved numerous source texts that Coolidge had recently read. He describes _Quartz Heart_ as “meditations on the state(s) of things,” a “procession” through a series of topical areas, such as “Franz Kafka’s Stories, Diaries, Notebooks and Loose Pages…the continuing metamorphoses of Philip Guston’s pictures…Roberto Longhi’s Piero della Francesca; Gertrude Stein’s Everybody’s Autobiography and Stanzas in Meditation” (56). Coolidge describes his method of borrowing and reinventing these pre-existing materials by quoting a phrase Beethoven scribbled on the manuscript of Opus 131, “‘Zusammengestohlen von verschiedenen Diesem und Jenem’ (Stolen together from various theses and thoses).” When asked if this was meant to imply the work was not new, Coolidge explains, Beethoven answered that it was “‘funkelnagelneu’ (brand new) (nailheads shining)” (57).

_Quartz Heart_ was a preparatory step for the “longprose” piece that Coolidge worked on from 1973 to 1981 and read from at length in 1979 at Langston Street Gallery. Originally projected to span a thousand pages, this poem, recently published as _A Book Beginning What And Ending Away_, represents the productivity of the “prosoid” concept applied on a large scale. In its final state, the work comprises twenty sections, each roughly thirty pages in length “occasioned by [Coolidge’s] immersion in texts and/or subject areas of interest” (Orange, “Everything” 584). While Coolidge declines to divulge the details of his writing techniques, Watten offers the following likely scenario:

> [W]ords or materials (open books, clippings) are on a table next to a typewriter. Some of these materials might be past pages of the work. The writing is a
spontaneous invention starting from these "exterior" materials, and the argument of the work that develops is a projection of the interior voice onto exterior words within a specific temporal frame. This argument is both associative (words lead to arrangements in terms of linguistic affinity and memory traces of their prior use) and dissociative (sequence is used to disrupt habitual patterns of thought). (101)

Coolidge had dabbled in collage and juxtapositional processes in works like The Maintains, but in Book Beginning What and other works employing the “regions” approach, Coolidge is thoroughly reinventing his source texts. Orange calls it “a more integrated and organic improvisational approach” with Coolidge “freely...rang[ing] over his source text, lifting a phrase here and turning it there” (585). Orange offers, by way of example, the transformation of a passage from The Secret Life of Salvador Dali. Dalí’s original phrase, “‘At the age of six I wanted to be a cook,’” becomes in Coolidge’s riffing, “‘I wanted to be a clock’” (“Everything” 585). Dalí’s “‘I would stand around for hours, my mouth watering, till I saw my chance to sneak into that place of enchantment; and while the maids stood by and screamed with delight I would snatch a piece of raw meat’” becomes “‘I wanted the chance to sneak by foot into the hot meat I saw with my maids’” (585). The results, says Orange, are “perhaps more Surrealist than Dalí’s own [narrative]” (585). Watten, like Orange, acknowledges the resemblance of this method to surrealist automatism (102).

“Prosoid” allowed Coolidge to fit his syntactic shifts to sentence-length, punctuated statements that recall the phrasing of lyric poetry. After Quartz Heart, Coolidge began writing shorter poems with his improvisational syntax, producing works like Own Face (1978), Solution Passage: Poems 1978-1981 and Sound as Thought: 1982-1984. His work in this period provides an intriguing example of surrealism’s contradictory tension manifested in the strange imagistic
textures that emerge from his automatic writing processes. A unique imagistic layer surfaces in these works, not because Coolidge introduces a new technique or mode of writing; rather, it is the residual effect of his approach to the sentence as “axial armature.” His images and the syntactic webs are incidents of the intersection of juxtapositional poetics and language turning on itself. These phrasal assemblies display a strange internal tension. Notice, for instance, the obscuring effect of uncommon words like “jounce” and “prim” in the phrase, “I jounce out from under the stiff bird / holding the whole glass home in prim,” or the vagueness created by the participial and nominal terms in “[a] submergible / but still brimming oaken audible” (Solution 121, 111). These phrases delineate concrete and semi-concrete sense perceptions but lack immediacy or eidetic distinction. There is an impressionistic haziness to them. As statements, their indicatory function is distorted or suppressed. Yet in Solution Passage, “half-formed” images such as these predominate. Take for instance this section from “Glove”:

What draws me on fastens, apparels the magnet to dice abode. Twine blocks of a day encasement, feathers how the day sieves down. Pictural moon clipped at the fingers. Mitt raise mug in draught of slag. Eye burns with a tonging sway. Iron withers by which the owl sees. The clock dim away, the graspers clog in a sighting taken. Yeastshoes of newt in a feldspar jar. I don thorned mind and spit that it chew. (53)

The semantic content provides the basic components for sensory information, but most of these phrases are contextually and emotionally indistinct and do not attain symbolic or psychological resonance. By traditional standards this would seem to be a handicap, but for the language poets, it provides an intriguing solution to the problem of representation, as I shall explain shortly.
Coolidge’s approach to imagery stems directly from his perspective on language. He claims that images are intrinsic to the composition process, but he speaks of them as elusive and organic, as growing out of the text rather than as a distinct tool or mode of creation: “I haven’t thought about image as image, as any kind of separate element or even a primary element in my work; I think that the images are more often produced out of the movement in language, and when I get an image, that’s how they arrive” (“Panel” 5:27). Deliberately including or excluding images from writing is not possible since they can be neither planned nor controlled. Their essential nature is ephemeral and transitive: “The thing has either just moved or is about to move, that’s the sensation you get” (“Arrangement”). Like sense experience itself, imagistic information moves by in a continuous stream of awareness that only tenuously consolidates into meaningful impression. Images are generated as an extension of syntax rather than as a compositional unit inserted into a dramatic or rhetorical structure. This approach to the poetic image runs counter to the conventional understanding of images as units of signification and expression.

To gain a better understanding of the linguistic and psychological makeup of Coolidge’s unusual images, I wish to examine four kinds of tension in Coolidge’s writing, particularly in the short lyric poems of Solution Passage. These aspects of tension are detected by considering the semantic, syntactic, sonic and generic levels of the text. Coolidge’s images emerge from these four forces, ultimately creating a torqueing effect experienced at the imagistic level of the work.

Firstly, Coolidge’s lyric phase retains the semantic density of his early writing, mining the juxtapositional method to unlock the hidden vectors and energies of words. The lexical
weightiness of *Solution Passage* is evident in commonly occurring noun clusters, such as “Paris vortex green” (289), “clattering blockage density verse” (183), and “pillow rubber ceiling” (217). Often the intractability of the words Coolidge employs and the incongruity of their combinations compresses their imagistic potential. This is especially true when the terms are technical, specific or abstract, as in “forensic asperities docking” (43) or “blockage density verse” (183). Even when the jostling of substantives is eased through coordinating syntactic elements, the quantity and incongruity of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs often obstructs denotative and descriptive clarity: “Twine blocks of a day encasement”; “Mitt raise mug in / draught of slag” (53). The important role semantics plays can be seen in how imagistic definition increases when the vocabulary exhibits greater topical consistency and associative flexibility, such as in “[a] finger to my / lips lights my eye” (248) or “[t]he sun then rose on the spoken long / dusty array” (216). In *Solution Passage*, Coolidge is generally not constraining himself to particular semantic categories, thus producing a variety of results along this spectrum of “density” of statement. This heterogeneity means that imagistic formations are continuously forming but few constructions achieve referential efficacy or figurative suggestion.

Secondly, Coolidge’s reinvented syntax directly undermines the integrity of indicative statement, which is needed for descriptive and imagistic phrasing. Improvisational and unpredictable grammatical structures break sensory reference out of traditional forms. At times, this uncovers novel linguistic possibilities that are inaccessible through standard syntax. Take, for example, “[i]n the sky dark as its boil starts” (35). Here the terms “sky” and “boil” correlate in a manner unfeasible in standard grammar. Coolidge embeds the energy of “boil” *within* the
“sky,” making it one of its properties—“its boil.” To bend the phrase back into standard syntax, the line might read, “the sky’s darkness boils,” “the sky’s dark boiling” or “the dark sky boils.” Not only do these phrases fail to recreate the sense of the line, their figurative structure and familiar syntax dilutes the thick sensory texture of Coolidge’s phrasing. Anthimeria, the substitution of one part of speech for another, is the operative move here and occurs with high frequency. Like the experimental phases of Space and Polaroid, Coolidge forces nouns to behave like verbs and adjectives: “He that had bearded the lynx in the eye” (217), “I snack my head back down by the / crane lake” (67), “an intrusion sky” (114). Alternately, verbs are made to sound like nouns: “those locks are scald” (289), “a varve makes deem” (208). This technique gives Coolidge’s phrases an ambiguous and polysemic quality that alters their figurative potential.

Coolidge’s penchant for anthimeric polysemy is evidenced by its frequent appearance in his poems’ titles, such as “Pauses Covered with Looks,” “Yawns on the Canyon,” “Contracted Hurries,” and “Glaze Spreads.” “Light As Mica Broken” could be referring to the weight of crumbled mica, or it might be stating that particles of light are broken like mica. Conjointly, “Glaze Spreads” could be tableful of glazed confections, like a buffet of donuts, or, if “spreads” a verb, it could be indicating that confectionary glaze tends to spread out. The book’s title, Solution Passage, also exhibits anthimeric play. Is “solution passage” an answer key to a cryptogram or the traversal of a chemical solution, a beaker carried across a science lab? The consistent ambiguity and loosening of reference constrains the imagistic aspects of phrases and denies them a sense of finality or closure. This goes a long way in explaining the transient
quality of his images.

Sentences also play a role in defining where syntactic buckling disrupts coherence in and between phrases. Coolidge’s statements are held together by the ghostly presence of the sentence and the quality of coherence it suggests. The sentence, an extension of syntax, is Coolidge's basic compositional unit, both in that it is the regulative measurement of his improvisational phrasing and in that it brackets and contains syntactic structure. When asked about his views on the poetic image, Coolidge discusses the sentence. Coolidge explains that his turn toward the prose sentence, on which “prosoid” is based, was motivated by his dissatisfaction with Charles Olson’s reliance on manipulation of the typographic line. Coolidge felt that fluid lineation and typography was an ineffective means of generating “fine-grained distinctions” in language. “The energy of language was somehow being lost.” This drove him back to “writing really long lines of prose…and basing things on the sentence” (“Panel” Part 2, 5:30). In Solution Passage, sentence units soften the grammatical ruptures and create an illusion of coherence. This can be seen in the passage quoted above from “Glove.” Sentences like, “The clock dim away, the graspers clog in a sighting taken,” or “Twine blocks of a day encasement, / feathers how the day sieves down,” do not sound syntactically broken in spite of their strained grammar. Consequently, the imagistic axis of these statements can still be felt because the sentence’s illusion of unity overtakes the indeterminacy of syntax.

The sonic dimension of the work represents a third factor of imagistic tension. Coolidge creates harmonious and pleasing aural textures that hold sway against syntactic chaos. His improvisational style tends toward the register and rhythm of ordinary speech. Similar to the way
Coolidge’s sentence units cut against syntax, the aural integrity of phrases and sentences lends cognitively fussy clauses a natural and conversational flow. That Coolidge wants us to be aware of the tension between meaning and sound is evidenced by his delivery style during readings. When Coolidge reads, his tonal modulation and studied pauses gives sentence and phrase units an unexpected sense of cohesion. One can hear it in his fluid delivery of phrases like “put the what to do you mean” or “blue pool and it is well” in the recording of his reading at the Naropa Institute from *American Ones* (0:25). These factors create the illusion of idiomatic statement, as might be sensed in passages like the following lines from “The Lid”:

> Nations predacious on a bottle of gel.  
> Bed as helictite, and bed as a smell  
> to a snail. When question of slumber is raised  
> who will be eager to bow at its beams?  
> The sparrow is an awning to the village roof.  
> I have no doubt but what my doubts will provide. (*Solution* 220)

Sentences such as these resemble indicative and colloquial speech. This effect disguises or masks the obscurity of their explicit meaning. The elliptical structure of the final sentence, for example, hides its incoherence in its chiasmic form.

> The most important aspect of Coolidge’s sound, however, is temporal progression through cadence or rhythm. Even though semantic and syntactic density blocks or blunts meaning, sonic structure pushes the reading through to the next thing—there is a progression in time that can’t wait for the referential meaning to catch up, as in these lines from “Glaze Spreads”:

> What you said I don’t listen now I pardon to.  
> All the glad enoughs must exchange. Surely  
> as dated up to now the girl on tips a woman
of tulip lip. Could be raised what as skin
the coming back from going where and touching
shows in its deepening rose. (120-21)

Like improvisational jazz, tempo is quickened when clauses are fused or elided, as in “[w]hat
you said I don’t listen now I pardon to,” or when sentences start or end with non-traditional
clauses: “Could be raised what as skin...” (120). This rhythmic push comes at the expense of the
images, which progress too quickly to be sufficiently contemplated. Watten detects this aspect of
Coolidge when he writes, “There’s too much signification, and the rhythmic insistence is too
much. It’s detaching and becoming transrational sound” (Total 20).

The fourth factor of tension concerns the pragmatics of interpretation. Thematic context
and generic cues aid in narrowing ambiguity and condensing reference and can be the primary
determining factor in directing imagistic meaning. For instance, because it occurs in a poem
titled “Glove,” the phrase “[w]hat draws me on fastens” may suggest, among the range of
possible interpretations, a glove being drawn on an arm, even though this image does not match
the subject-object relationship in the statement. Without the contextual associations of “glove”
hovering in proximity to the statement, this possibility is not as likely to occur to the reader.
“[D]raws me on,” for instance, could be read as an allurement or trap. To the extent that
Coolidge’s readers can narrow and prioritize the range of likely meaning, images increase in
specificity. Conversely, when thematic momentum is distended or suspended, or when generic
cues are disrupted, imagistic meaning decreases. Alien Tatters, for instance, reads differently
when one knows that Coolidge’s inspiration for the book comes from UFO reports and alien
abduction accounts, a fact he reserves for the afterword. Read in light of this “region” or
category of source texts, the language of the poem gains a subtle, additional layer of meaning:

Under the ledge came out a babble. Relegated tongues to here. I came home from a frond locale, it was penetrable. Now I go to school in a dome.

I think a holding pattern has come from this which has stolen my life. One mother was taken. The other is injured, a solo injury. Stop trying and delve. (55-56)

Interpretative tension is operative between surface meaning and inferred, thematic meaning. On one hand, these sentences read as disconnected and largely generic statements; on the other hand, the thematic context draws out novel suggestions. Phrases such as “holding pattern,” “stolen my life,” and “was taken” take on narrative meaning in the alien abduction context. Yet because the text is only implicitly and speculatively “about” alien abduction, and many statements cannot be correlated to the theme (“[s]top trying and delve,” for instance, is harder to assimilate to the context), the indeterminacy of reference cannot be dismissed.

The poems of Solution Passage teasingly dabble in many of the conventional features of the lyric tradition. The first poem of the collection, for instance, begins with an interrogative statement that incites reflective distance, common to lyric situation: “What makes it like this that here could stand for you” (18). Similarly, the poem’s sections end with reflexive and resonant statements: “All I am has been, closed” (19). Additionally, clichéd symbolic terms, such as several of the phrases quoted above from “Glaze Spreads” (“a woman,” “tulip,” “deepening rose”), points to a lyric field of reference. First and second person pronouns, scattered liberally throughout the poems, also evoke elements of lyrical situation: “Seems I must say words the way / you must say words until they say / mechanical doves and crabs” (49). Nevertheless, these lyric traces are tightly constricted by the various semantic and syntactic limitations outlined above,
ultimately preventing them from coming to fruition as emotional and ideational content.

Dramatic situations are disrupted by syntactic shifts or dissolve into indistinct statements and actions. “Nice,” for example, begins “I brought myself to school,” but moves through intimations only nebulously associated with the schoolroom:

> The copying of knowledges in a pile as catchall
> as can strain. I cement this to the skein of
> trends. You can lose a globe off the world,
> it says, it silences. Finish as an attribute
> of nice. (110)

Such passages fail to develop dramatic tension, leaving no thematic complexity against which to measure the possible implications of reflective statement (111).

One result of this problem—that Coolidge’s dramatic frames tend to *dissolve* rather than *resolve*—is a kind of hermeneutical stalemate. In a conventional lyric poem, dramatic situation is taken as primary, while various images and statements are brought to bear on the main subject. In a Coolidge poem, however, it is not obvious that dramatic situation or topic has primary status. Most of the constituent elements of his poems, including the images, are as vague and unfamiliar as the subject they would otherwise be presumed to elucidate. Thus, dramatic situation and imagistic statement often remain imperfect antecedents to one another. “Reading Walking In Ice” illustrates this:

> The bus came back home, what will we do now?
> I list a foot and the antlers snake into the
> covering. Three moons, no longer one, trying
> the purple door, a smudge purple. At the core
> of the coin a cow heart. Boots of tarry
> substance in a refrigerator. If I leave
> by night the stars will not rise, swirl in
> gel, whatever they do, barely and with the strain
of a stocking downhill. Why in the road is there always only one shoe? On the toad we depend, on the sureness never changes the basis. If the rain were to charge, how would they eyes. And on a wall a girl, she knows and bends, turning all the grins to pollen. I walked all the way, following, talking with increasing wings to the far. (247)

While the first and last sentence offer a sense of dramatic framing, the images and types of statements throughout the poem pose serious challenges to coherence. In particular, the third through fifth sentences are uncoordinated imagistic statements that completely forestall narrative development. While they employ terms often compatible with lyric themes (“moons,” “purple,” “door,” “heart”), they are arranged into unfamiliar and impenetrable combinations—a “cow heart” is inflexible symbolically, especially located “[a]t the core / of a coin.” Grammatical ambiguity (such as “substance” possibly functioning as a verb) further hampers imagistic suggestiveness. Concurrently, integrating these images into the opening frame of reference proves troubling. The absence of conjunctions in these sentences might suggest an elliptical configuration, common in the imagistic lyric, where images are related paratactically and are correlative to the dramatic situation. Yet there are no obvious parallels between these images and the opening line to encourage such a reading. An alternate but equally awkward possibility is taking the images as sequential actions unfolding in narrative time. However, imposing this interpretation fails to provide a correlation to the presumed dramatic situation. Thus, these images remain suspended in uneasy indeterminacy, unable to be absorbed by the ambient pressure of the dramatic and lyric context. The sentences in the second half of the poem reinforce this generic pressure. These statements, characterized by interrogative and conditional phrasing,
are reflective in tone and contain traces of subjectivity: “If I leave / by night,” for instance, has emotional overtones, while the observant query, “Why in the road is / there always only one shoe?,” creates reflexivity. On the whole, however, the dramatic potential of the middle section of the poem is suppressed by shifting contexts and tangled syntax: “[o]n the sureness never changes / the basis.” One senses the emotional possibilities of the final sentence, “I walked all the way, following, / talking with increasing wings to the far,” but without a coherent situation in which to position it, it cannot achieve climatic significance. Rather, this final statement and the other lyric queues in the poem stimulate generic expectations, forcing the reader to try to fit the incongruous images and statements into the model of complex subjectivity the lyric conventionally entails. Because Coolidge’s does not entirely eliminate traces of subjectivity, the reader is not satisfactorily able to diffuse this generic pressure.

Regularly these four layers of tension (semantic, syntactic, sonic and generic) intersect and create a surreal plane of interconnected and contradictory linguistic ruptures. Incongruous word combinations produce surprising and oblique images. Occasionally images are surreal in a traditional sense of pairing disparate objects: “[t]he core of bees is alight with leaded peals” (34), “the furred planet misplaced” (43), “[t]he railroad is a change-charge of Obsidian / Midnight, locked to the very packet bottom of its / jardinière whales” (161), “[e]yeless scarves pollute these tapiocan waters we thought of as / a boulevard for sweaters” (221). But a further facet of surrealism is activated by Coolidge’s linguistic texture. The interaction of semantic density, syntactic buckling, sonic progression and generic framing creates an overflow of contradiction, a surplus of oppositional forces experienced as language’s chaotic energy. In a simple way this
occurs when Coolidge creates fused image-statements through buckling syntax. This occurs in the example above, where the term “boil” gains additional associations through the unique imagistic and syntactic configuration.

On a larger scale, the intensified experience of dissonance can be sensed in the progression and interrelation of competing linguistic and generic elements sustained through longer passages, such as in the first two stanzas of “Whole Day,”

The sky is of a wash so blue, the stones.
As has been proposed, polished, and left to line our pockets.
The awareness, a drain or ounce, an all around loaf

But I care, said the face. Throttles weed, and an inevitable limping. Sticks up to move the sky. What shuttles in its tread. But I have the experience of large glands or overall plans. Styling over the flat in a glance machine. Shown over and once again, the wobbles balance. A whole emergence, but is this mereness. (113)

Forces of continuity and discontinuity pull in opposite directions. A certain degree of semantic consistency (“sky,” “blue,” “stones,” “weed,” “sticks”) is counteracted by the ambiguity of the statements and a lack of narrative momentum. Sonic resonance and sentence-based cadence increases the friction of jarring syntactic surprises, as when a half-rhyme competes with the unbalanced and non-parallel syntactic structure of “[a] whole emergence, but is / this mereness.”

On the one hand, the poem clings to coherence through generic pressure—the conjunctions “but” and the use of pronouns suggests a discursive mode of thought, as if the speaker is weighing conceptual alternatives in a posture of meditative focus; on the other hand, the vagueness of thematic context disperses imagistic associations and restrains the formation of thought. To
accommodate this pressure, oblique statements and associations are forced to congregate above the level of syntax. For example, the dramatic tension of “[b]ut I care, said the face,” imposes narrative pressure on the subsequent statement, “[t]hrottles weed, and an / inevitable limping,” in spite of its anfractuous syntax. “Throttle weed,” a particularly dense formulation in its own right, is thus forced to supply meaning in spite of the irresolvability of its terms. In these conditions, reading becomes a titanic effort, a strained attempt to hold together all of the poem’s contingencies. As the web of incongruity inevitably overwhelms traces of recognizable and stable elements, language becomes an experience of surplus chaotic signification. In this way, Coolidge’s writing spontaneously and incidentally generates surrealist textures.

To a great extent, these complex tensions are made possible by Coolidge’s compositional process, which emulates and renovates surrealist automatism. Breton’s notion of writing “in the absence of any control exercised by reason” finds a language-centered iteration in Coolidge. After finding his “prosoid” approach in Quartz Heart, the majority of Coolidge’s work takes its jumping off point from media—primarily books, film and radio broadcasts. With textual sources and other material arbitrarily determining content, Coolidge is properly freed from the burden of invention and can his turn attention to the sonic and syntactic continuities of the language. Improvisation loosens his control over denotative meaning, and while traces of authorial subjectivity remain present, they are unstructured and fragmentary. In a sense, Coolidge’s method, which Watten calls “involuntary memory,” supersedes surrealist automatism. Watten points out that surrealism’s automatic writing was “bounded by fixed parameters of style” and was rendered through these parameters “only partially successful in terms of psychology.” By
contrast, he argues, Coolidge both significantly expands the vocabulary of automatic writing and, more importantly, shifts the point of creative production away from the writer’s subjectivity:

In Coolidge, involuntary memory is taken on directly. The improvisatory mode of writing has access to the vectors of subjectivity precisely because its initial objects--words--are conceived of as exterior to the writer, to be taken on in the ongoing construction of the work. (103)

As “involuntary memory” comes into contact with language, signs are manipulated, jostled and probed to reveal complex networks of “associative contiguities.” By centering automatic writing in language as an external medium, Coolidge accesses areas of consciousness that Breton’s automatism could not. As Watten notes, “Other aspects of the phenomenology of language than the irruption of the pleasure principle are primary—namely, the axis of memory and the associative contiguities of words.” “[F]or Coolidge,” Watten continues, “‘pure psychic automatism’ is coincident with words as objects” (102).

As Watten points out, the Surrealists’ concept of automatism seemed to be largely academic: there was no need to generate vast amounts of automatic text—a few examples were sufficient (103). For Coolidge, on the other hand, automatic writing is the primary interface of self and world and implies an indefinite, ongoing process of uncovering meaning through a continuum of production:

In Coolidge's work the sign is a multiple and possibly exterior reality, and words like "thus and so" have the status of substantives in the work. The relation to language is evaluative as opposed to convulsive--there is a “thinking with things as they exist” as much as any flux of the automatic image…. Any word in the text can become the enigma of the plural impasse; the act of writing is the continual querying of these impasses by words. (102)

Coolidge notes that after he developed his “prosoid” method, he had “‘an expansive feeling...like
[he had] a thing to write now, no end in sight’” (qtd in Orange, “Everything” 584). He subsequently made good on that impression, writing dozens of volumes using variations of the procedure, including the nearly 700-page *Book Beginning What and Ending Away*.

**Language Writing and the Problem of Surrealism**

While Coolidge can be understood in the context of surrealism, his innovations have proven primarily important for language poets. Several figures integral to the language writing movement have known and interacted with Coolidge for decades through readings, correspondences and publications, and have “discuss[ed] and eagerly promot[ed] his work” (“Everything” 579). Charles Borkuis states that language poets are not only admirers of Coolidge’s work but direct beneficiaries of his laboring in “linguistic quarries[,] [which] opened a new space for materialist experimentation that ‘Language’ poets began to utilize” (246). Silliman found in Coolidge many of the qualities that became distinctive in the “new sentence,” and his own poetry took a turn toward the signature prose style of *Ketjak*, which he began writing after discovering Coolidge (“Everything” 580).

Coolidge offers the language poets an enticing demonstration of an approach to poetry that treats language as an objective and non-transparent medium. For Bernstein, Coolidge’s achievement is in working out a way of writing that derives meaning from modulations of form in the text, independent of correspondence to external reality or authorial intent. He compares this with Denise Levertov’s concept of organic form:

In Coolidge, the experience captured is the one set down, internal to the individual poem, to its compositional integrity, its limits. Internal to the poem is
the experience it is about: the “inscape” of it. So not the recording of a reality outside the poem but the reality of the experience in it—or perhaps—during it. (“Maintaining Space”)

Similarly, Silliman sees Coolidge “frontally attack[ing] referentiality” and props one of his important essays on Coolidge’s statement that “‘poems are not referential, or at least not importantly so’” (58). On the other hand, with the exception of Watten’s lucid observations about Coolidge’s automatism in Total Syntax, their admiration is unrelated or in spite of his surrealism. And even Watten carefully delineates between Coolidge and surrealism and leans into these points of differentiation. This selective approach to Coolidge may be a result of contextual emphasis, but it is more likely informed by the language poets’ concerns with separating their work, and the work of their avant-garde predecessors, from comparisons to surrealism.

The language poets’ problems with surrealism stem from their theory of language. The goal of language poetry is to challenge ideas and values that it judges to be deeply embedded in material and linguistic culture. Poets like Silliman see language as profoundly shaped by the socio-economic conditions of its production. Silliman argues that linguistic signs in capitalist societies undergo a bifurcation: for the labor class linguistic signifiers are gestural, pointing directly toward objects in an individual’s environment, but the privileged class employs language referentially, inscribing an entitled, consumerist view of objects. Language ceases to be actionable and centered in materiality; rather, it constructs a passive relation to the world. Consumerist values and the capitalist economic system that sustains it gives reference the “‘mystical’ character of the fetish,” allowing commodities to hide their means of production and
present objects to the individual “as if by magic,” disconnected from considerations of production, class and environment (New Sentence 11). Language thus appears to be “transparent,” a neutral medium that promises immediate and direct access to the object of desire: “Under the sway of the commodity fetish, language itself appears to become transparent, a mere vessel for transfer of ostensibly autonomous referents” (11). Transparency makes language of secondary concern and suppresses readers’ “immediate attention” to how meaning is being constructed (Demo 50).

Under this argument, a variety of textual conventions and devices become suspect, as they seem to erect and reinforce transparency as the essential and ubiquitous condition of language. For instance, narrative forms, such as realist fiction, rely on the illusion that language is reconstructing, rather than constructing, the world it describes. Realism, with its attempt to move closer to a psychological equivalent of experience itself, is the epitome of transparent language. The novel, as the converging point of realism and narrative is thus for Silliman capitalism’s direct and insidious byproduct:

Freed from a recognition of the signifier and buffered from any response from an increasingly passive consumer, the supermarket novelist’s language has become fully subservient to a process that would lie outside syntax: plot. The dynamic implicit in the novel's rise toward the illusion of realism is this divorce, conducted in stages over the centuries, of the tale from the gravitational force of language.... This dream of an art with no medium, of a signified with no signifiers, is inscribed entirely commodity fetish. (New Sentence 14)

Against “the homogeneity of large-scale narrative,” Silliman’s “new sentence” aims to de-naturalize and “de-narrate” language. Essentially a series of disconnected statements that are continually re-contextualized by the surrounding sentences, his new sentence aims “to
reinvigorate verbal perception” and reveal the extent to which narrative forms are artificial constructs (Perelman 68). In the new sentence, Perelman writes, “the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences” (60). In the new sentence’s paratactic method, Silliman sees “the technicolor epics of false consciousness being swept away” (Perelman 68).

Another device that language poets see as problematic is the poetic image, especially its modernist understanding as an alternative mode of discursive statement. In a symposium at the Tyler School of Art in 1985, Coolidge, Rachel DuPlessis, Michael Palmer, John Yau and Geoffrey Young, describe the poetic image as an elegant metaphoric “proposal” or grand cultural gesture, as in Eliot’s iconic lines, “When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized on a table.” This image, Palmer explains, which exemplifies the comparative structure in Eliot’s objective correlative, is “an act of distancing the emotions of the poet by an elegant form of metaphorizing the landscape.” The “politics of the image as a gesture” needs to be reconsidered, Palmer continues, “in order to divest ourselves of a cultural heritage that Eliot was desperate to pretend that he was a part of” (Part 1, 29:03-30:19). For language poets, the finite and unitary structure of images runs counter to the way language itself operates. In *The Language of Inquiry*, Lyn Hejinian writes

> Language is nothing but meanings, and meanings are nothing but a flow of contexts. Such contexts rarely coalesce into images, rarely come to terms. They are transitions, transmutations, the endless radiating of denotation into relation. (1)

In contrast to contextual “flow,” poetic images in the modernist tradition gain their authority
through an illusion of stability and stasis. Silliman observes a related problem operating on the lateral axis of language. Silliman argues that the collage technique in modern poetry, especially as it is exemplified in Pound, constructs meaning through a conceit he calls the “tyranny of the whole.” For Pound, various disparate fragments of experience can be conjoined and unified as a meaningful whole within the arbitrary confines of the poetic work. Gaps in meaning, the collage technique suggests, are only illusions; beneath the disjointed and shifting surface “lies a continuous and seamless deep structure” (New Sentence 154). Images become the building blocks of “an overall unity which is not, in the end, questioned” (153).

In order to combat transparency, language poets employ a variety of disruptive writing strategies, such as parataxis, disjunction, syntactic deviation and reflexivity, to draw the reader’s attention to the functioning of language in the text. The impetus behind their deployment of these devices is indicated in Silliman’s concept of “torque.” In the specific context of his theory of the “new sentence,” Silliman describes torque as the “pressurizing of syntax” (89). He sees it as a quality in writing, now lost in realist fiction, which was formerly achieved primarily in poetry by the tension created between syntax and the line, as manifested in formal devices such as rhyme. He seeks to reintroduce torque into language by placing analogous devices at the “interiors of prose.” Torque draws our attention away from the paradigmatic level of language toward the syntagmatic axis, shifting “the projection of the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into that of combination” (89). This is crucial for demystifying language in a capitalist society, since, for Silliman, “the syntagmatic axis of language is not value-free” (76).

Surrealism presents problems for language poets because, even though it originated many
torque-like devices, surrealism in their view employed language in a way that reinforced transparency and exalted absorption in imaginative fiction. Silliman and Watten dissociate themselves in particular from what they perceive as surrealism’s commitment to the dream narrative. Silliman states that “[t]he dream narratives of surrealism, because they were narratives, could never hope to go beyond the fetish of plot, as hopelessly trapped within it as ‘socialist realism’” (New Sentence 15), and Watten writes that dream narratives are sustained by surrealism’s “static images, simple objects,” which “can then be incorporated directly into the poem…without any loss in translation” (88). Further, because surrealism employed normative syntax, Silliman sees it as limited to “the systematic distortion of the maximum or highest order of meaning,” while leaving fetishistic reading practices unchallenged on the sentence level (90). Watten’s concerns also extend to surrealism’s untroubled embrace of reference, which he believes lays the groundwork for total absorption in the language of the subjective interior. Watten points out that surrealism’s fantasy of the unification of the self was subsequently incorporated into American art in such a way as to engender a static, non-dialectic reduction of “self” whereby “the predictive potential of method degenerated into the condition one is in” (49). Surrealism, for Watten, was “above all a defense of the self and its value in art” (35). Borkuis succinctly summarizes the problem Watten and Silliman are getting at, observing that “orthodox surrealism asks to take the reader on a hypnotic, transparent swoon into an absolute, surreal otherness that resists self-conscious critique” (245).

In spite of these barriers, language poets openly acknowledge surrealism as one of the particular sources from which they draw technical inspiration. Watten identifies Breton’s
“‘regard for certain arrangements of objects’” as a touch point for the work of several language poets and predecessors including Coolidge (88-89), and Perelman includes surrealism in the language poets’ family tree of influences (36-37). It is no secret that surrealism’s technical influence is near-at-hand in language writing. Collaborative writing, disjunction, collage and parataxis are prominent features in language poetry. They form the architecture of Silliman’s method, while Perelman gestures towards the Surrealists by calling the Grand Piano project “automatic listening” (32). Given this schematic overlap, the main posture the language poets have taken with surrealism is to work diligently to distinguish how they borrow its ideas while orienting their own work in a very different direction. Bernstein is pointing to this paradox when he writes in *A Poetics*:

Surrealism
as expounded by Breton, is the most radically absorptive poetry imaginable; its quest is not to foreground artifice but to reveal “surreality.” Nonetheless its procedures involved using antiabsorptive techniques to reach this “deeper”, more absorptive reality. (49)

While language poets are not prepared to go with surrealism to this “‘deeper’...reality,” they value the anti-absorptive effects of many of its technical innovations.

The language poets’ immediate goal of pushing away surrealism as a direct antecedent to their movement does not adequately explain these connections, nor does it account for the ways in which surrealism has expanded and changed to fit poststructuralist theories of writing.

Borkuis, in “Writing from Inside Language: Late Surrealism and Textual Poetry in France and the United States,” argues that French surrealism changed directions in the ‘50s and ‘60s,
creating a more reflexive automatic writing that he calls “parasurrealism.” Manifested in second and third generation French surrealists like Henri Michaux and Philippe Sollers, and American poets like Coolidge and Palmer, parasurrealism is “a shift away from the search for the marvelous to a search for the mechanisms of the marvelous in the thought process itself” (239). Filled with syntactic deviations and dislocations, these poets bring a new, self-reflexive dimension to automatism that, like language poetry, “frequently turn[s] an ear to the murmur of the mind as it talks to itself” (245). This change demonstrates how language writing and surrealism share similar views of composition. Borkuis notes that each primarily consists of writing about objects and processes in language, not about “real things” or events in the world. They are directly addressing this protean realm of signifiers that links the writer to the world. Each hold to an antimimetic view of language that resists explaining, translating, or illustrating experience. (243)

For surrealism, this “protean realm” is accessed on the level of the image, semantically; in language poetry, it is found in the horizon of syntax. Yet both work toward a similar goal of “advancing a critical, antiabsorptive strain of writing that rips at the fabric of phenomenological perception” (245). Notably, Coolidge is one of Borkuis’s primary examples of “parasurrealism” and represents a transitional figure between surrealism and the textual writing practices of poststructuralism.

Where Borkuis sees surrealism turning a more language-centered path in later years, David Arnold detects the seeds of language poetry present even earlier, in the work of the original Surrealists. In his book, Poetry & Language Writing, he contends that language poets misguidedl judge surrealism on its ideals rather than on the practices that actually formed as the
movement “inevitably came up against the materiality of language” (16). Arnold emphasizes the movement’s praxis over its theories. For him, the movement’s more important and interesting innovations come from the points where the Surrealists labored to overcome the boundaries of language. For instance, if one considers automatism from a practical rather than philosophical point of view, it would appear, contrary to Breton’s hope, that automatic writing is just as likely to disintegrate the writer’s consciousness as to reintegrate it (16). Rather than enabling dream narrative, “automatic texts often exhibit a bewildering alternation of narrative suspense and resolution,” thus “lay[ing] bare the device of classical narrative” (26). A parallel situation, it seems to me, occurs when Coolidge’s automatism comes into contact with lyric forms and conventions, such as when dramatic continuity and emotional momentum in the poems of *Solution Passage* are elusive and indefinite. Subjectivity is dissolved by this process of dismantling the lyric’s structural apparatus. By multiplying the degree and range of tensions activated by a juxtapositional approach to language, Coolidge points back to surrealism’s own wrestling match with linguistic form.

Arnold posits that although surrealist writing is intrinsically expressive because it “aims to integrate writing at the level of psychology,” the Surrealists’ goal was never practically attainable: language, “‘a system of signs whose very mode of operation entails a certain negation and separation,’” was their prospective medium of unification (21, original emphasis). Arnold finds that the Surrealists are most intriguing in the ways they strain against these inherent limitations. He recognizes that “[l]anguage...is not successfully overlooked by the Surrealists but remains to ‘constitute’ the conditions in which the subject encounters both thought and the
external world.” This brings surrealism’s approach to language much closer to the language poets’ own, where “the lack of fit between language and world is similarly animating, and meaningful” (21).

Coolidge is situated in relation to language in a manner similar to the one that Arnold sees in practical surrealism. Coolidge, like the Surrealists, imagines a fluid continuum of writing and consciousness, and his starting point is at the basic levels of language, where the forces of negation and separation wrench words and phrases out of coherence. Building a syntactic method from this principle, Coolidge’s expressive elements are broken up and reorganized through his interaction with his source materials and the unpredictability of his quasi-automatic writing process.

By extension, Coolidge suggests a complex surrealist subjectivity. Presenting language as a problematic medium of expression, his work counters traditional notions of subjective continuity and authorial control. His compositions do not contain dissonant elements within an authorial consciousness, as in Pound’s “tyranny of the whole.” Rather, the automatic and unpredictable production of semantic and imagistic incongruity keeps his work radically open to interpretation. This contrasts sharply with Watten’s view of surrealism as a “defense of the self.” Borkuis argues that the self in surrealism is not absorptive and absolute, as Watten conjectures, but is “decenter[ed]”; in its desire for convulsive beauty, the self “jumps between poles and is thus framed by opposites: the I and the Other” (244). Surrealism’s shifting contexts and intense contradiction do not produce “literature composed by a particular ego with a predetermined subject in mind,” but rather build “an accumulation of poetic evidence after a certain antirational
writing process has taken place” (245). For poet Mark Tursi, too, Watten’s concern with the surrealist subject is misguided—while it is true that “[t]he surrealists did center the political in and through the psyche,” its methods “represent a kind of subversion of self and identity in a way that Watten suggests occurs in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E” (121). Arnold, as well, echoes these sentiments: “Although the mediation of language forecloses the Surrealist aspiration to unify thought and expression, it opens up an alternative path along which the subject’s search for personal freedom is bound up with a critique of the world around him or her” (21).

With this revised understanding of surrealism worked out by writers like Borkuis, Arnold and Tursi, and with the work of a poet like Coolidge demonstrating the additional potential guises surrealistic writing can take, a productive interaction between the two views of poetry seems viable. One of the benefits of this dialog would be to reanimate how readers approach the works of language poets. Tursi points out that many language poets display a renewed interest in automatic writing, improvisation, and psychic mechanisms. They are similarly interested in “the way in which language enacts a certain pressure on reality and how our psychological impulses are created and filtered through language” (103). He demonstrates, for instance, how Silliman fuses chance methods and automatism to create an oneiric quality to his poetry. From his “straightforward imagistic description that goes on for page and page,” we get “a hyperawareness by the narrator, who remains forever a part of the language being used” (104). The parataxis of Silliman’s new sentence technique “force[s] us into an almost ‘encyclopedic’ awareness of different possible associations” (108). This ultimately achieves surrealism’s concept of convulsive beauty: “Silliman is attempting to see the world, its objects and its
relationships in a new way, free of preconceived references and expectations; i.e. the world is what it is at the moment it is perceived and constructed” (108-09). The “hyperawareness” of which Tursi speaks is the same effect that occurs in Coolidge’s overflow of tension.

By the same token, a more generous reading of surrealism by language poets could enable a richer articulation of language writing, one that accesses torque on a wider scale and beyond rational levels of signification. Borkuis concludes his study with the observation that

[...]the emergence of a parasurrealist tendency in today’s textual poetry may be a sign that language writing is still too narrowly rooted in cognitive processes and that what ‘postlanguage poetries’ are seeking is a more contemporary, scientific model of intelligence, one that is more widely dispersed throughout the entire sensorium. (252-53)

Surrealism’s sensitivity to “entire sensorium” accounts for a crucial aspect of Coolidge largely passed over by language poets and critics. The theories of the language movement emphasize the linguistic, technical and ideological aspects of texts often to the exclusion of aesthetics. Watten, for instance, calls Coolidge’s method “evaluative as opposed to convulsive” (102). Yet Coolidge, perhaps because of his musical and naturalist tendencies, embraces the aesthetic dimension of writing. Despite the difficulty of his work, the sustained production of complex linguistic textures, sonic rhythms, and transient images is frequently pleasing. So too the aesthetics of disorder and contradiction are inevitably at play in the experimental texts of language writing.

Surrealism’s orientation toward convulsive beauty offers a corrective to language poetry’s more intellectual focus. The Surrealists recognized that chance relations engage the aesthetic faculty precisely because they originate outside the parameters of social discourse and motivated reference. The poetics of “objective chance” imagined a rupturing of the illusion of
socially constructed reality through a radical re-seeing of the world in original ways. Rather than further entrenching one’s aesthetic sensibility in the language of fetishism, the surrealist concept of the marvelous orients the reader away from consumerist modes of desire and toward poetic sensibilities beyond cultural and material modes of production. Even if the surrealist movement was cumbersome in some of the ways it enacted its ideas, it at least recognized the importance of beauty in guiding and interpreting non-rational experience.

Coolidge’s tentative affiliation with language poetry has allowed him to craft a body of work that shares language writing’s textual focus without being burdened with the influence of its ideological and institutional pressures. Partly because of this freedom and his loyalty to creativity and his personal interests, he has independently worked out a productive interaction between the parallel techniques and philosophies of surrealism and language writing. Given the remarkable range and variety of language poetry’s explorations in the last several decades, it is important that readers see the broader historical and aesthetic context that led to its achievements. Coolidge represents a rich point of intersection and transition between surrealism and the ambitious ventures of poststructuralism. He should be given credit for reinventing and expanding the possibilities of automatism and contradiction to language-centered writing, bestowing future poets with a renovated set of tools for transforming modern consciousness.
CONCLUSION:

A HISTORICAL AND AESTHETIC APPROACH TO SURREALISM

It is my hope that this study has gone some way in demonstrating the continued relevance of surrealism as a meaningful critical denominator. Perennial skepticism about the term is typically based on the perception that it is too vague, abstract or ambiguous to be useful. On the contrary, there is both historical and aesthetic justification for retaining and cultivating the term. Surrealism originated in a specific time and place and centered on specific concepts. At mid-century this history was less known and subject to problematic and whimsical interpretation. Recent decades have seen renewed interest in and clarifying research of the movement’s history, mitigating this concern. From a historical point of view, there is little reason to think the term is so flexible and unbounded as to be devoid of meaning. More importantly, to dismiss the term and the ideas it signifies would be to deny and silence an important area of American poetic history. Building on the work of scholars like Joron and Borkuis, I have argued here that specific writers in American poetry participate in a tradition of surrealism stemming dynamically from this historical point of origin. In addition, whether in the form of studied imitation or qualified acquisition, several significant movements in American poetry have not only undergone productive experimentation with surrealist principles, but also have brought these elements to bear on other poetic traditions.

The relevance of surrealism as a historical moment might be understood in the context of the larger epochs of Romanticism and literary modernism. Surrealism was shaped by both, yet retains an identity distinct from either. Breton called surrealism Romanticism’s “prehensile tail,”
suggesting that it is attached to Romanticism but is anatomically in tension with it (Breton 153).

In this way subsequent surrealists tend to have affinities toward both Romanticism and surrealism. Hitchcock, for instance, subscribes to both Romanticism and surrealism. At the same time, surrealism separates itself from many aspects of the Romantic tradition, and contemporary poets, no doubt, can be influenced by Romanticism without subscribing to surrealism. The Wordsworthian affinities of Seamus Heaney or the renewed interest in nature and transcendence indicated by a recent anthology, *The Arcadia Project: The North American Postmodern Pastoral*, edited by Joshua Corey and G. C. Waldrep (2012), are a few examples. At the same time, aspects of surrealism fall outside the scope of Romanticism and point to distinctly modern and proto-postmodern perspectives. The mechanistic underpinnings of automatism and objective chance, for instance, are complicit in the modernist response to the anti-human and arbitrary forces of the twentieth century. In this sense surrealism represents a specific combination of both Romantic and modernist sensibilities. This combination provides a unique perspective that retains a distinct identity from among the multitude of influences contemporary poets negotiate. Surrealism inherits from Romanticism an enthusiasm for the imagination, beauty, human subjectivity, and the irrational. At the same time, it is bound by epistemological skepticism and employs a psychological, as opposed to spiritual, model of consciousness.

Breton’s concept of the marvelous insists on the efficacy and possibility of an irrational and inexplicable aesthetic experience of the world. This Romantic element valorizes the integrity of human consciousness as more than elegant machinery. Perhaps this is partly why poets sympathetic toward a mystical or supernatural view have tended to look sympathetically on
surrealism. Lamantia was deeply entrenched in religious experience and eventually synthesized surrealism with it. The Beats were Romantics at heart with a keen interest in mystical experience. The deep image poets devoted themselves to the archetypal and other forms primal humanity. Like these other traditions, surrealism represents a stubborn belief in transcendent experience, mind-body holism, and the irreducible nature of desire and beauty. On the other hand, surrealism is fundamentally incompatible with these orientations—a fact reflected in its materialist orientation and its gratuitous embrace of chance, which renders its outlook impervious to rational systematization. Surrealism does not offer a unifying narrative of human experience, nor does it present itself as a mystical science. Its idolization of chance stems from the chaotic and unpredictable aspects of modernism’s naturalist perspective. The tension presented by these opposing situations offers what seems to me to be a compelling and honest confrontation of modern experience. Surrealism concedes, on one hand, that consciousness is much more complex and less predictable than once thought; nevertheless, it insists on the integrity of consciousness, proposing that apparent chaos and chance are ultimately reconciled to a higher order of unity and meaning that yet lies beyond our apprehension.

There is also an aesthetic basis for recognizing the term. In this study I have pointed out numerous times where poets employ surrealism’s principles of automatism and contradiction. These ideas propose an aesthetic distinct from and irreducible to the other twentieth century poetic models. The difference between surrealism and both symbolism and imagism perhaps best illustrates this. Surrealism proposes an encounter with sense experience that is different from and contrary to either of these modalities. Surreal language is gratuitous, literal, irrational and
intensely contradictory. Unlike imagism and symbolism, which operate in the realm of representation, surrealism imagines art, Balakian observes, “as a building process, not as an expression or statement of existence as it is, but as a modification or an addition to it” (Surrealism 14).

While it may be true in an anecdotal sense that surrealism is “everywhere,” having seeped into the collective consciousness of American culture, this fact clouds the distinct aspects of surrealist poetics at work in specific places and at specific times in American poetry. Adherence to the principles of contradiction and automatism are by no means to be taken for granted in contemporary poetry. The majority of American poets who make claims to surrealism are influenced by its ideas only in a cursory sense. Misappropriation of the term, unfortunately, is now part of surrealism’s history, as my analysis of the deep image in Chapters 3 and 4 illustrates. But this is no reason to abandon the designation or to ignore the legitimacy of surrealism’s influence where it is genuine and important. By tightening and clarifying the concepts at play in surrealism, the movement’s relevance to later generations can be comprehended and appreciated.

A possible objection to an aesthetic basis for surrealism’s place in the critical history of American poetry could come from a concern that surrealism fails to provide a sufficient rationale for serious poetic activity. A noticeable pattern that emerges from these studies is the apparent tendency for poets to defect or veer away from surrealism after an initial, enthusiastic phase. For instance, Corso’s later work decreased in surrealist flavor, while the deep image poets felt the need to turn surrealism into something else entirely. A study of the New York poets, too, would likely reveal that encounters with surrealism in their early careers needed to be supplemented or
expanded in order to create a mature and viable poetic enterprise. Against these examples, however, must be held others who held (or continually returned to) a consistent, flexible and legitimate surrealist frame of reference throughout their careers: Lamantia, Kaufman, Hitchcock. Each of these writers sustained a mature poetic praxis by adhering faithfully to surrealist principles and maintained this position throughout the course of their careers. While more poets than not have had only fleeting interaction with surrealism, this does not mean it lacks the theoretical grounding to be a viable basis for poetic production.

It is interesting to note that those who cling to surrealism as a lifelong praxis also demonstrate a willingness to negotiate a sometimes-uneasy tension between surrealism and other poetic outlooks. Lamantia labored at the *aporia* between surrealism and his religious convictions, Kaufman conjoins surrealism with African American music and Beat social psychology, and Hitchcock sustains and prolonged and productive dialog between surrealism and the deep image. One might speculate that surrealism’s potential requires an antagonistic relationship with contrasting approaches. Perhaps this is no surprise for a theory for which contradiction is an essential principle.

While surrealism as a formal movement is over, the implications of its ideas continue to unfold and proliferate. One could go so far as to argue that surrealism may only now be coming into its own as a view that imagines a synthesis of Romantic, modern and postmodern sensibilities. For example, “Metamodernism,” a term currently gaining ground as description of twenty-first century art and culture, features several aspects of surrealism, including the coexistence of multiple contradictory and continually shifting identities, openness toward
artifice, and oscillation between enthusiasm and doubt. Seen in light of such developments and the young poets currently professing an interest in surrealism, it seems that the movement’s insights into contradiction and chance remain relevant for contemporary experience. Consequently, the history of these concepts and their impact on American poetry offers profitable terrain for scholarly exploration.

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8 See “Notes on Metamodernism” by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as well as the website Notes on Metamodernism.
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