"The beautiful white ruins / of America":
Surrealist Poetry and the Cold War

Peter Roswell Henry
Richmond, Virginia

M.A., University of Virginia, 2007
M.F.A., University of Oregon, 1997
B.A., University of Virginia, 1995

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Abstract

This dissertation focuses on the rise and fall of American Surrealist poetry, a mid-twentieth century aesthetic movement that has been largely dismissed by the major critics, anthology-builders and literary historians of contemporary American poetics (Shetley, von Hallberg, Ramazani). Indeed, the prevalent narrative is that American Surrealism was an awkward adolescent moment in contemporary American poetry, falling between the birth of contemporary poetics in the 1950s and its maturity in the canon-opening and postmodernist work that began to bloom in the 1980s.

This dissertation attempts two goals. Firstly, it seeks to tell a fuller story of this movement: by examining the poetic successes of the Surrealists—and the intense threat they posed to their more canonical peers—I argue that this movement played a far more significant role in the development of postwar American poetics than it is afforded. Secondly, this dissertation interrogates the cultural, historical and literary phenomena that allowed American Surrealism to emerge in the 1950s and, just as quickly, to disappear. Ultimately, I argue that American Surrealism was a poetic response to the Cold War, and the study of American Surrealism offers unique insight into the relationship between literature and politics during the Cold War. The Surrealists came at a moment when American poetry—and American culture— was roiling: amid the global expansion as a new postwar superpower; amid the post-GI Bill swelling of universities and the further democratization of education in general and literary study in particular; amid changing ideas (geographically, culturally, educationally) of what it meant to be American. In their history, we see a series of tensions at play in Cold War America and our collective memory of the Cold War. As the concluding chapters of this dissertation argue, the

disappearance of American Surrealism occurred as the academy became far more concerned with the Culture War than the Cold War, and American Surrealism was a casualty of this erasure.

In the introduction, I provide a brief historical overview of the rise of Surrealism out of the Dadaist movement and follow its spread across three continents in the years between World War I and World War II. Chapter One examines the first generation of American Surrealists by looking at two Midwestern poets, Robert Bly and James Wright, and placing them in an era defined critically, politically, and popularly by Robert Frost. I argue that the emergence of Surrealism in their writing was both a political and a poetic response to American empire-building and the idea that the Midwestern heartland was the epicenter of essential American values. Chapter Two examines the links between the Cold War, American Surrealism, and poetic form by focusing on two 1967 responses to the emerging crisis in Southeast Asia, Robert Lowell's *Near the Ocean* and W.S. Merwin's *The Lice*. In comparing these volumes, I argue that Merwin's volume established American Surrealism as the poetic mode of Cold War dissent. Chapter Three examines the pinnacle of the movement in the 1970s, focusing on the Surrealist volumes of a number of practitioners—James Tate, Charles Wright, Larry Levis, Charles Simic—and positioning them against the context of the "poetry wars" of the 1980s. In the Conclusion, I chronicle the disappearance of American Surrealism and argue that this was the result of two phenomena: the Culture Wars' displacement of the Cold War at the center of American letters; and the embrace of literary theory in American poetry; finally, I suggest the ultimate costs of forgetting American Surrealism and suggest the possibility of the movement's heirs.

iii

Table of Contents

Introduction:

Surrealism, from Paris to the Dakotas

This dissertation provides a history of American Surrealist poetry, an aesthetic mode that

traced its lineage to the French Surrealism of the 1920s.[1] Arriving on the American poetry scene

in the 1950s, Surrealism celebrated the nonsensical, the arbitrary, and the marvelous; it quickly

rose to become perhaps *the* preeminent aesthetic mode of American verse by the 1970s, causing

one critic to remark in 1974 that "to look for the influence of surrealism in American poetry

today is like looking for references to aquatic animals in Moby Dick" (Zweig 314).   Indeed,

journals and literary magazines brimmed with American Surrealist verse, poets who embraced

American Surrealism won award after award, and two generations of American poets turned

their attention towards the French Surrealists and their South American, Spanish, and Eastern

European protégés.

American Surrealism's arrival was explosive, and its disappearance was just as abrupt.

During the 1980s, it all but vanished from American poetry and criticism. Though its poets

continued to write, they adopted all sorts of new aesthetic identities, from eco-poetry to neo-

Romanticism to deconstructionist "Ellipticism" to the men's movement. American Surrealism

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[1] The correct term for this poetry—whether "Deep Image" or "American Surrealist"—is complicated. Both James
Breslin and Paul Breslin use the term "Deep Image" to describe the generation of Bly and Wright; this term comes
from Bly's invocation of a poetry that draws upon "deep images of the unconscious" in his 1959 essay "On English
and American Poetry" (47). In turn, W.S. Merwin, James Tate, Charles Simic, Charles Wright and Larry Levis
(among many others) have been called "Surrealist" by Paul Zweig, Robert Pinsky and Paul Breslin. For the sake of
consistency, I will use the terms "American Surrealism" and "American Surrealist."

Paul Breslin offers a useful discussion of the distinctions and correlations between "Deep Image" poetry and what
he terms the "New Surrealism" (and what I believe to be "American Surrealism") in *The Psycho-Political Muse*
(118). Joron is also quite useful on this distinction (19-21).

has been largely dismissed by recent histories of American poetry, and it is entirely possible that future histories of twentieth-century American poetry will no longer even mention the movement.

Such an omission would be a grave mistake. This dissertation advocates for the importance of the American Surrealist movement and to suggest that its disappearance is not, in fact, due to its irrelevance but, in fact, due to the larger political and cultural shifts taking place within the academy as the Cold War gave way to the Culture War.

I argue that American Surrealism was a poetic response to the Cold War, and the study of American Surrealism offers unique insight into the relationship between literature and politics during the Cold War. The Surrealists came at a moment when American poetry—and American culture—was roiling: amid the global expansion as a new postwar superpower; amid the post-GI Bill swelling of universities and the further democratization of education in general and literary study in particular; amid changing ideas (geographically, culturally, educationally) of what it meant to be American. In their history, we see a series of tensions at play in Cold War America and our collective memory of the Cold War.

An inevitable question follows: "If American Surrealism is so important, why did it fall out of favor during the 1980s and, furthermore, why has it disappeared from literary study?" As the concluding chapters of this dissertation argue, the disappearance of American Surrealism occurred as the academy became far more concerned with the Culture War than the Cold War, and American Surrealism was a casualty of this erasure.

To understand American Surrealism, one must first look back to the French Surrealism out of which it grew. The great irony of French Surrealism is that it likely began somewhere other than France. Some argue that Surrealism began in Zurich via the meeting of Dadaists Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, and Richard Helsenbeck; others point to the interaction of Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia in New York; still others point to the conversations between André Breton and Jacques Vaché in Nantes (Shattuck 13; Auster *xxxviii*). What is generally agreed upon, however, is that these first stirrings of Surrealism emerged during World War I, and furthermore, that the birth of Surrealism occurred as these various figures came together after the war (Shattuck 13; Auster *xxxviii*).

Inasmuch as there was a singular "Surrealism," it started in 1919 and lasted perhaps five years as these poets and artists converged in Paris. Breton, Vaché, Tzara, Picabia, Duchamp, Philippe Soupault, Max Ernst, Louis Aragon, Paul Éluard, Max Ernst, Robert Desnos, Benjamin Péret, Jacques Prévert, René Daumal, Raymond Queneau, Robert Desnos, Antonin Artaud, René Char, Salvador Dalí, and many others came to form a Surrealist circle, with Breton taking "moral and executive control" of the group through the eventual publication of his *Manifesto of Surrealism* in 1924 (Shattuck 15).[2] While the creation of the review *Littérature* by Aragon, Breton, and Soupault in March 1919 is often seen as the founding moment of the movement, little else is agreed upon; some argue that the movement began to fall apart as early as 1922, while others argue that the movement's last gasp occurred in 1938 with the International Surrealist Exhibition (Shattuck 16).

The Surrealism of Breton's circle was a movement equally political and aesthetic, as evidenced both by the Surrealists' links to the Communist Party and the Popular Front as well as Breton's notorious definition in the *Manifesto of Surrealism* that "the simplest Surrealist act

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[2] Breton in fact wrote two separate *Manifestos of Surrealism*: the original in 1924 and a second in 1930.

consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd" (125).[3] As envisioned by Breton in the first of his two "Surrealist Manifestos," Surrealism was a movement designed to regenerate and revivify the minds of a generation. Drawing from Marx, Hegel, and Freud—and at the same time Apollinaire, Lewis Carroll, Rimbaud, Lautréamont, and the Marquis de Sade— Breton argued that the horrors of modernity (industrialization, World War I, and class conflict, among others) arose from the final triumph in the twentieth century of the conscious mind and its components: rationality, logic, clarity, and control (Morris 3; Zweig 316-318; Young 125). Consequently, he offered Surrealism to the world as an antidote; it was a systematic program of writing, and its ultimate goal was not literature but liberation from the tyranny of the rational world; its goals were "bluntly, complete social, political, economic, and psychological revolution" (Young 125). If successful, Surrealism would "ruin, once and for all, all other psychic mechanisms and ... substitute itself for them in solving all the principal problems of life" (Breton 26). Indeed, Roger Shattuck argues that the French Surrealists were "the first important group of artists since the Romantics to attempt political action in order to improve society" (15).

So what did the art that arose from these beliefs look like? Shattuck points out that the connotation of the word "surreal" in contemporary usage as meaning something "crazy, dreamlike, and funny" is actually quite correct (12). He argues that the movement was marked by three equally important emphases: random chance, passionate (but not exclusively erotic) love, and humor (21-25). C.B. Morris, in turn, adds to this list of characteristics the group's sophomoric cheekiness, demonstrated through a lexicon that is forever drawing the reader's attention "to the bed, the gutter and the lavatory" (1). The Surrealists built art through a series

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[3] Dean Young elaborates on the ambiguous relationship between politics and art in the Bretonian circle, noting the irony that "Breton again and again through his writing expresses disdain for the 'taint of literature' even as he labors over his prose poetry" (125). See Young 122-126.

of deliberately esoteric and irrational techniques, including "automatic writing, collaborations, experiments with random assemblages, simulations of paranoid states, dream journals, party games" (Shattuck 26). In the Surrealist mode, Breton and Éluard argued, a poem is not a gem-like creation but instead "une debacle de l'intellect" ("Notes sur la poésie" 53).

The central component of this sense-less art was its use of "pure" images. To define the Surrealist image, Breton looked to Pierre Reverdy, a poet from a slightly older generation of French poets. According to Reverdy:

The image is a pure creation of the mind.

It does not result from a comparison, but from bringing together two more or less distant realities.

The image will be stronger, and will have a greater emotive power and poetic reality, as the relationships between the two realities are more distant and exact....

(Breton 20)

To see examples of the Surrealist poetry this definition inspired, one might look to the lines of Tzara, Éluard, or Breton himself:

dip little chickadees in ink and clean the face of the moon

--Tzara, from "Evening" (Auster 165)

The drawing-room with its black tongue licks its master

Embalms him performs the office of eternity...

--Éluard, from "Confections" (Auster 207)

My wife whose hair is a brush fire

Whose thoughts are summer lightning...

Whose teeth leave prints like the tracks of white mice over snow

Whose tongue is made out of amber and polished glass

Whose tongue is a stabbed wafer...

--Breton, from "Free Union" (Auster 183)

In each of these selections, the reader sees what Breton has called "the light of the image"(*Manifestos of Surrealism* 37)—the creation of a marvelous and discordant reality: a woman's tongue as a "stabbed wafer," for instance, or the cleansing of the moon with chickadees dipped in ink. According to Breton, the greatest image is "the one that is arbitrary to the highest degree, the one that takes the longest time to translate into practical language" (38). It is precisely this arbitrariness that distinguishes the poetry of French Surrealism from other Modernist poetic projects.

Indeed, though the Surrealists' emphasis on the image may suggest the Imagism of early Ezra Pound and though the Reverdian "bringing together of...distant realities" may suggest a chaotic work like *The Waste Land* of T.S. Eliot, what separates the French Surrealists from these Anglophone Modernists is the Surrealists' supreme faith in the uncanny, the gratuitous, and the bizarre. Shattuck points out that the Surrealists drew upon three favorite metaphors from science

to explain the "disequilibrium and latent pressure" their work sought to achieve: interference; short circuit; and communicating vessels. As Shattuck notes,

> All three belong to physics: *interference*, the reinforcement and canceling out that
> results from crossing different wave lengths; the *short circuit*, the dangerous and
> dramatic breaching of a current of energy; and *communicating vessels*, that
> register barely visible or magnified responses among tenuously connected
> containers. (23)

This Surrealist emphasis on disconnection, misconnection, and "tenuous" connection begins to reveal the differences from Anglophone modernism.[4] As the name would imply, Pound's Imagist circle did place a premium on the poetic image; nevertheless, the Imagists' greater goal was—as Pound himself directed in "A Few Don't's for an Imagist" –a "direct treatment of 'the thing'" itself, and this "direct treatment" was "to use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation" of the poem's subject (Pratt 18); in other words, Pound's Imagism insisted upon connection just as ardently as the Surrealists insisted upon disconnection. Consequently, an Imagist poem like Pound's "In a Station of the Metro" is a spare and unyielding portrait of the metro station, and its famous analogy between the "faces in the crowd"

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[4] I have very deliberately used the term "Anglophone modernism" here due to Eliot's and Pound's transnationalism; whether Pound and Eliot identified as British or American or Italian, they wrote (mostly) in English. As for the presence of Surrealism in "purely American" modernist efforts, Shattuck contends the relationship between American modernism and French Surrealism is incidental at best and that "we will not find a native surrealist strain" in American writing during the modernist period (31). To be fair, Shattuck acknowledges an American role in Surrealism: the movement's possible genesis in the meeting of Duchamp and Picabia in New York during World War I; the publication of work by Aragon, Picabia, Soupault and others in American journals *The Little Review*, *Broom* and *Secession* during the 1920s; the publication, in *New Directions 1940*, of a range of Surrealist writing; finally, the figures of Man Ray and Eugene Jolas who were "the only Americans absorbed into the European stream of surrealism" (30-32). Nevertheless, these events are haphazard and incidental in Shattuck's view, and Surrealism remains a principally European phenomenon through the 1930s.

and the "[p]etals on a wet, black bough" is an attempt to render the experience of being on the

Metro platform in the most direct manner possible. The French Surrealists, on the other hand,

had no concern for concision and even less concern for a "direct treatment" of the physical

world. What French Surrealism wanted, instead, was an escape from the physical world through

an invocation of the marvelous.[5]

It is this singular commitment to the marvelous that likewise distinguishes French

Surrealism from Eliot's *The Waste Land*. As Marjorie Perloff has written, though *The Waste*

Land is a disjointed and bizarre poem—bringing together figures and languages both Eastern

and Western, pagan and Christian, classical and modern--these disjunctions nevertheless reveal

"a perfectly coherent symbolic structure" (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 13). She writes:

[In *The Waste Land*,] the echoes are so richly orchestrated that images and

allusions are constantly intensified. When we come, for example, to the climactic

line in Part V: "I sat fishing with the arid plain behind me," we have a complex

sense of what it means to "fish" in such circumstances, and the "arid plain" brings

up memories of all the places we have traveled through in order to get where we

are: the "stony rubbish" and "dead tree that gives no shelter" of Ezekiel's Valley

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[5] The American Surrealist Robert Bly elaborated upon the differences between Imagism and Surrealism in *The Fifties*. Making a clear distinction between the Imagism of Pound and Amy Lowell—which Bly dismissed as mere "picturism"— and the Surrealist project of images that liberate the reader, Bly argues:

> An image and a picture differ in that the image, being the natural speech of the imagination, cannot be drawn from or inserted back into the real world. It is an animal native to the imagination. Like [Yves] Bonnefoy's "interior sea lighted by turning eagles," it cannot be seen in real life. A picture on the other hand, is drawn from the objective "real" world. "Petals on a wet black bough" can actually be seen.

Bly further distinguished his poetry from the Imagism of Pound and Amy Lowell by arguing that while the Imagists sought to present a poetry that, in Pound's words, offered a "direct treatment of the 'thing,'" Surrealist writing sought to produce "a poem in which the image is released from imprisonment among objects" (Bly "The Work of Robert Creeley" 14).

of Dry Bones (Part I), the "brown land" of "The Fire Sermon" which "The wind /

Crosses...unheard," and the "endless plains" of "cracked earth / Ringed by the flat

horizon only" of "What the Thunder Said." (*Poetics* 17)

In other words, though *The Waste Land* may seem uncanny and irrational, it is a

"reverberating echo chamber of meanings" with a very conscious, deliberate design (*Poetics*16).

In contrast, the poetry of the French Surrealists, despite its synthesis of Reverdian "distant

realities," has little concern for coded meanings or well-wrought symbolic structures; its sole

concern lies in summoning the bizarre and inexplicable.

Unlike their Anglophone contemporaries whose goals were considerably more complex,

the French Surrealists wrote poems solely to bring about the end of "the reign of logic" and to

herald the beginning of a new "surreality" (Breton 4).   As Breton writes in the first *Manfesto of

Surrealism*:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are

seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a *surreality*...Let us not

mince words: the marvelous is always beautiful. (16)

Breton laid out the precepts that informed this poetry in his 1924 "Manifesto of

Surrealism." He later revised them in his 1930 "Second Manifesto of Surrealism," but by then

the Surrealist circle of the early 1920s had dissolved into various camps of political factions,

apolitical factions, social movements, anti-social movements, and pure aesthetes. Breton, the

unofficial "Pope of Surrealism," excommunicated all the members of his circle (except Péret) for

having ambitions that were either too literary or too political (Shattuck 15; Auster *xxxix*). Soon

only Breton was left, with no one remaining to proselytize. The movement itself, according to

Shattuck, thus splintered into "personal quarrels, experiments, fruitful collaborations, corporate

decisions, posturing, mutual backscratching, and incidents of minor gangsterism, of which the

written accounts give only a muted version" (15). While it is debatable when French Surrealism

explicitly ended, World War II brought an end to whatever few embers of the movement were

still burning in the late 1930s; indeed, many of the early Surrealists fled Europe entirely

(Shattuck 31).

Even as Surrealism died in Paris, however, it lived on elsewhere. Indeed, Surrealism was

never an exclusively French movement, and the afterlife of French Surrealism was experienced

throughout Spain, Latin America and Eastern Europe. As C.B. Morris has chronicled, a powerful

intermingling of French and Spanish writers occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, with French

Surrealist writings appearing in Spanish publications and Spanish Surrealist writings appearing

in French publications (190-214). Though Morris notes that the genealogy of Spanish Surrealism

is nowhere near as well-documented or clear as that of French Surrealism and often lapses into

"a haze of half-truths and generalizations" (4), he nevertheless cites a group of writers and artists

who formed the core of Spanish Surrealism: Rafael Alberti, Vicente Aleixandre, Luis Buñuel,

Luis Cernuda, Salvador Dali, Juan José Domenchina, Agustín Espinosa, Josep Vincenç Foix,

Federico García Lorca, and Juan Larrea (8).

During the 1930s, Surrealist circles formed in Madrid that included two Latin American

expatriates in their number: the Peruvian César Vallejo and the Chilean Pablo Neruda (Morris

25, 33-34). Neruda and Vallejo had lived in Paris during the 1920s and through their interactions

with Alberti and others in Madrid, Surrealism became an increasingly international phenomenon,

changing subtly as it spread from culture to culture and language to language. Thus, the

Surrealism that American poets drew from in the postwar years was not monolithic; it was not

Breton's Surrealism anymore, but instead a literary movement with many local variations, and

these variations affected American poets in manifold ways. As Susan Rosenbaum has argued,

whereas the Surrealist circles of 1920s Paris were quite regimented with a protocol of "leaders,

formal meetings, journals and manifestos," the Surrealism*s* that emerged after the collapse of a

singular, centralized French Surrealism were more open, localized and haphazard, a series of

"chance juxtapositions and mongrel mixtures of old and new" (268-9). Certainly the early years

of American Surrealist poetry support Rosenbaum's notions of heterogeneity: Robert Bly and

James Wright—the so-called "Deep Image Poets"— drew heavily from the Latin American and

Spanish Surrealists during the 1950s; [6] W.S. Merwin, in turn, drew strongly from the French

tradition as his writing turned increasingly Surrealist during the 1960s.

The cohort of poets who came of age during the mid-to-late 1960s looked to Bly, Wright,

and Merwin as their immediate predecessors. This second generation of Surrealists included

Mark Strand, Charles Simic, James Tate, Diane Wakoski, Bill Knott, Russell Edson, Greg Orr,

and Frank Stanford, as well as Charles Wright and Larry Levis—a group even less bound by

common experience or geography than the Confessionals, the New York School, or the Black

Mountain poets. [7]   Nevertheless, it is in the work of this second growth generation that American

Surrealism blossomed and became an established period style. And just as French Surrealism

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[6] I must note that not all scholars are in agreement over American Surrealism's membership during the 1950s. Karl Malkoff argues that Louis Simpson and James Dickey were American Surrealists (143-45), while Zweig argues that Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara were American Surrealists (318). Alan Williamson adds Galway Kinnell and Gary Snyder to their number (61). The one thing that Malkoff, Zweig, Williamson, Paul Breslin, and James Breslin can all agree upon, however, is that Bly and Wright were American Surrealists, and so I have used their unanimity in choosing to focus on Bly and Wright.

[7] For my purposes, I define this second generation as those poets who published first books of poetry between the years 1965 and 1975.

became localized and hybridized as it penetrated into Spain and Latin America, so the multivalent Surrealism that this second growth generation inherited became further distilled into an American idiom; by the 1970s American Surrealism had grown to encompass "[c]arefully composed dream poems, incoherent torrents of language, obscure humor, jiving anti-rhetoric, nonsense, fantasy landscapes, images, obscure abstraction" that bore little resemblance to the work of the French anti-poets who began the movement (Zweig 316).

While anthologies and awards cannot alone prove the success of American Surrealism, they do reflect the ways in which American Surrealists had been incorporated into the poetry "establishment." Indeed, by the mid-1970s, second growth Surrealists were certainly enjoying their share of official laurels. They were showered with American Academy of Arts and Letters Awards (James Tate in 1974, Mark Strand in 1975, Charles Simic in 1976, and Charles Wright in 1977) and Guggenheim Fellowships (Mark Strand in 1974, Charles Wright in 1975, James Tate in 1976, and Greg Orr in 1977). Meanwhile, Robert B. Shaw's *American Poetry Since 1960* (1974) featured chapter-length discussions of both Tate and Strand, a remarkable tribute to poets whose first books had been published just a few years earlier. Similarly, Daniel Halpern's *The American Poetry Anthology* (1975) ushered the young Tate, Simic, Charles Wright, Larry Levis, and Greg Orr into the prominence of mainstream anthologization. By 1978, American Surrealism seemed to be such a certain direction for American poetry that Penguin published Edward B. Germain's anthology *English and American Surrealist Poetry*, which ends with the optimistic— but ultimately short-lived—assessment that "[t]he spirit of surrealism has become the spirit of modern poetry" (52).

In addition to the awards and anthologization attained by American Surrealists, criticism – and sheer antagonism – met the second generation of American Surrealism, not the least of

which was the pejorative nickname "stones and bones poets."[8] In 1976, the poet-critic Robert

Pinsky published *The Situation of Poetry*, a response to the primacy of American Surrealism. In

it, Pinsky dismissed the American Surrealist poem as simply a "thick, rich handful of words"

(163), pointing out its lack of fidelity to the original French Surrealism: "This is not Breton's

pistol at the head of all ordinary values" (83). In 1978, Paul Breslin dismissed this "New

American Poem" as little more than a set of "trivial mystifications" ("How to Read the New

Contemporary Poem" 358).

Not all critics, however, rejected American Surrealism. Paul Zweig defended the writing

of second growth Surrealists, arguing that it existed independently of "the intensity and the

original ambition of the French poets" and was a distinctly American style that "loosely

recognizes surrealism as [its] homeland" (325, 315). Yes, Zweig admits, this is not French

Surrealism. But unlike Pinsky, who writes off American Surrealism as a poetry of a "mock

naïve, teen-age sort" (6), Zweig argues that it has "a spirit of novelty and exuberance it never

attained even in France in the 1920's," celebrating the many contradictory forms of American

Surrealism (314-16).

Nevertheless, Zweig's defense of the Surrealists and Pinsky's book-length attack on them

have largely disappeared from critical histories.[9] Subsequent decades have seen a critical neglect

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[8] See, for instance, Gioia 75. The term "stones and bones poets" arises from the frequent totems that appear in American Surrealist poetry: stones, bones, ice, wings, light, and so forth. While the origin of this term is unclear, a probable source is the final stanza of Charles Simic's poem "Knife" from his breakout volume *Dismantling the Silence* (1971):

> Through bones of animals,
> Water, beard of a wild boar—
> We go through stones, embers,
> We are after a scent. (78-9)

[9] Alan Williamson remains the lone exception to this critical neglect among major contemporary poetry scholars, writing about the "'Surrealism wars' of the seventies" as young American Surrealists poets were confronted by Pinsky's *Situation of Poetry* ("Cynicism" 119) . The historical significance of this period, he writes, was that "young poets [were] the most discussed" (108).

of the American Surrealists in favor of the early Surrealists' contemporaries in the New York

School, the Black Mountain School, and the Confessional circle. Meanwhile, the critical

significance of later Surrealists—Levis, Simic, Tate, Charles Wright, and the rest—has been

ignored because their work during the 1970s doesn't fit neatly into the conventional critical

narratives of postwar American poetry.

Indeed, for the contemporary period of American poetry—the years after World War II—

two epochs have garnered the lion's share of literary criticism: on one end of the spectrum are

the 1950s and 1960s; at the other end of the spectrum lie the 1980s and beyond. Between these

two poles of critical attention lies the poetic no-man's-land of the 1970s. It is true that certain

poetries of the 1970s—John Ashbery's work (especially the 1975 collection *Self-Portrait in a*

Convex Mirror), the late work of Robert Lowell, and the arrival of Adrienne Rich as an explicitly

political poet—have received generous and deserved attention. Yet remarkably little criticism

has focused on *emerging* poets and poetries of the 1970s, and the decade has remained

something of a critical dead zone. For many critical histories, the poetry of the 1970s doesn't fit:

the crises of the 1950s and 60s (when various poetic "schools" were emerging and poets like

Lowell and Berryman were going through their aesthetic transformations) have already passed,

yet the literary theory-inspired Language poetry of the 1980s has not yet arrived.[10]

Vernon Shetley's seminal *After the Death of Poetry* is a useful example. Though

acknowledging that "a great deal has happened in American poetry since the 1950s" (17),

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[10] Even recent scholarship about the Surrealist influence in contemporary poetry falls prey to the tendency of
focusing on the "schools" of the 1950s and the deconstructionist Language writing of the 1980s. David Arnold's
Poetry and Language Writing Objective and Surreal (2008), for instance, attempts to link the Language poetries of
the 1980s and beyond to Breton's circle by way of Louis Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams. Susan
Rosenbaum's "Exquisite Corpse: Surrealist Influence on the American Poetry Scene, 1920-1960" (2012), in turn,
devotes its discussion of Surrealism in the 1950s to the New York school of Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank
O'Hara. Despite these critics' interest in Surrealism in American poetry during the postwar period, neither of them
discusses Robert Bly or James Wright, reflecting the critical fascination with the "schools" of the 1950s and the
Language poetry of the 1980s and beyond.

Shetley's guide follows a basic dichotomy: he devotes chapters to individual poets who established themselves in the 1950s and early 1960s (Bishop, Merrill, Ashbery); he then devotes his remaining chapters to poets of the 1980s and beyond (the Language Poets in particular). Despite the 35-year span in its title, Robert von Hallberg's *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* shows a similar narrow focus on the 1950s, arguing that the decade was the period when the "great" poets of the 1960s—Creeley, Ginsberg, Olson—were doing their best work (14). Like Shetley, von Hallberg devotes chapters to poets whose careers were largely made in the 1950s and early 1960s—Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Robert Creeley, John Ashbery, and Ed Dorn; the book's later chapters on Ashbery and Dorn allow him to argue for a trajectory that links the emergent poetries of the 1950s to the deconstructionist poetries of the 1980s, and thus *American Poetry and Culture 1945-1980* largely elides the 1970s.

Recent scholarship on surrealist poetry has continued to disregard the two decades of American Surrealist poetry this dissertation explores, in favor of the "schools" of the 1950s and the theory-driven Language writing of the 1980s. The second generation of American Surrealism—Tate, Levis, Charles Wright, and their contemporaries—has been particularly slighted by this neglect. Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry*, for instance, devotes two sentences to "the preciosity of the image-based poetics prevalent in the 1970s" (169). Von Hallberg, in turn—despite acknowledging American Surrealism as "the most easily recognized and widely employed" period style of the 1970s with "epigones too many to name"—discusses the movement for approximately one paragraph in his nearly 300 page *American Poetry and Culture* (17). And while Von Hallberg and Shetley are dismissive of American Surrealism, they are among the few scholars of the past decades to even acknowledge its existence. Indeed, most of the major scholars of contemporary American poetry— Marjorie Perloff, Helen Vendler, Cary

Nelson— have neglected to discuss the American Surrealist movement in their studies of postwar American poetry.[11]

When they are written about by critics, the American Surrealists have all-too-often been regarded as an embarrassing moment from postwar American poetry's awkward adolescence. Paul Breslin's chapter devoted to Surrealist poets in *The Psycho-Political Muse*—tellingly titled "Deep Images, Shallow Psychologies"—is a useful example. Breslin sees the Surrealist writing of the 1950s and early 1960s as inextricably linked to the nascent New Left. While Breslin acknowledges "the correlation between the deep-image style and political radicalism," citing the anti-Vietnam War activities of Bly and Wright, he contends nevertheless that the relationship between poetics and politics in American Surrealist poetry is "less wary" and more naïve than, say, the writing of the Confessionalists (128).[12] This lack of "wariness," Breslin argues, lies in the simplistic politics and psychological posturing of both American Surrealism and the New Left:

> The sentimental reasoning that bridged the gulf between revolution and therapy
> went something like this: White Americans and other Western Europeans, from
> whom I am descended, have imposed their will on other peoples in terrible ways.
> What they have done to others is analogous to what they have done to their own
> instincts, justifying such oppression and repression to reason and law…If I side
> with the instincts and the unconscious, my guilt falls away. (130)

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[11] Admittedly, these critics have devoted significant scholarship to American Surrealists discussed in this dissertation: in particular, W.S. Merwin and Charles Wright. However, the attention these poets have received has been as individual poets and not in the context of the American Surrealist movement of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

[12] Breslin chooses to call this "Deep Image" poetry rather than "surrealism," but as he and I are talking about the same group of writers, I shall continue to use the term American Surrealism. See Breslin 118.

Ultimately, for Breslin and many other critics, American Surrealist poetry was dismissed as something between a sophomoric response to 1950s postwar conformity and the 1970s political theatre of the Symbionese Liberation Army.

The lone exception to American Surrealism's three decades of neglect has been Andrew Joron's *Neo-Surrealism or the Sun at Night* (2010). Joron's project to trace "transformations of American Surrealism in American Poetry 1966-1999" is ambitious, and his canon of American Surrealists is far more expansive than mine.[13] However, his volume is quite slim: at a mere 52 pages, the book is simply a reprint of an essay that first appeared in 2000, augmented by a brief afterword (45). Moreover, Joron's history is one of a devoted enthusiast rather than an academic scholar: it lacks any sort of bibliography and is published through Kolourmeim, an "underground and experimental press" out of Oakland, California ("Kolourmeim Press Homepage").

The literary and critical history of American Surrealism raises two fundamental questions: Did American Surrealism really matter? And if it did matter, how could a movement that seemed so significant by the 1970s have disappeared so thoroughly from poetic practice and literary history?

This dissertation argues that American Surrealism was not a poetic flash-in-the-pan but rather a poetic response to the aesthetic consensus of Cold War America. It rejected the political, geographical, pedagogical, and stylistic foundations that had galvanized American poetry's readership in the years after World War II. Its rise overlapped the escalation of the Cold War, and its disappearance occurred shortly after the end of American involvement in Vietnam; these

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[13] Joron's taxonomy of American Surrealists is extensive, and he is dismissive of the poets I focus on here. Indeed, he argues that Bly and his circle "poisoned the roots of surrealism itself for many of the poets of the American avant-garde" (20).

parallel histories are not coincidental. Finally, the disappearance of American Surrealism from poetic practice and literary history is a casualty of the larger cultural erasure that has occurred as the Cold War has been eclipsed by the Culture War in American universities, arts, and letters.

While no single episode can capture the complexity of the relationship between American Surrealism and Cold War poetics, the Kennedy Inauguration provides a useful place to start. In January of 1961, John F. Kennedy put poetry quite literally on center stage by having another New Englander, "the uncrowned king of poetry in America," Robert Frost, read at his inauguration (Parini, *Robert Frost* 392). The story is a famous one: the 86-year-old poet came to the lectern and began a poem he had composed for the occasion, "Dedication." Yet Frost could only read the poem's first three lines before exclaiming "I'm not having a good light out here at all. I can't see in this light." Lyndon Johnson tried to shade Frost's eyes from the glare with his hat, but it was to no avail. Frost thus drew upon memory to recite "The Gift Outright" from his 1942 collection *The Witness Tree:*[14]

> The land was ours before we were the land's.
>
> She was our land more than a hundred years
>
> Before we were her people. She was ours
>
> In Massachusetts, in Virginia,
>
> But we were England's, still colonials,
>
> Possessing what we still were unpossessed by,
>
> Possessed by what we now no more possessed.
>
> Something we were withholding made us weak

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[14] These events are chronicled more fully in Schlesinger 1-3.

Until we found out that it was ourselves

We were withholding from our land of living,

Such as we were we gave ourselves outright

(The deed of gift was many deeds of war)

To the land vaguely realizing westward,

But still unstoried, artless, unenhanced,

Such as she was, such as she will become. (Kennedy 12) [15]

Contemporary scholars have savaged Frost's recitation as a paean to empire, pointing

both to its romanticization of the English settlers and its implications as a Cold War prophecy of

American expansion. Bob Perelman argues that "in terms of the explicit or subterranean political

allegiances of poetry, Frost's position—lone sage facing and possessing the landscape for the

nation—is an affirmation of the American status quo that is difficult for poets to ignore" (113).

Pointing to the fateful twelfth line ("To the land vaguely realizing westward"), Perelman

condemns the poem as imperialist and racist, a "prophetic-colloquial invocation of manifest

destiny" that excuses past actions in the Pacific Theater during World War II and future actions

in Vietnam (111-113). Other critics have been equally severe. [16] Jerome McGann has denounced

"The Gift Outright" as a "supremely Anglo-American poem" that willfully ignores any other

possible narratives of American history, pointing to the tension between the Native American

word "Massachusetts" and the "lying, European word" "Virginia." (77).

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[15] The last line of "The Gift Outright" as it appears in *The Witness Tree* is "Such as she was, such as she would become." For the inaugural reading, it was Kennedy himself who suggested that Frost change the last line from "she would become" to "she will become," seeing it as more "optimistic and emphatic" (Parini *Robert Frost* 413).

[16] Jay Parini further expands upon Walcott's notion of Manifest Destiny in the "Gift Outright" in "The American Mythos," particularly 56-57. Jason Schneiderman, in turn, takes a more ambivalent view, noting that the poem seems to him both "an erasure of America's violent past" as well as a "careful exploration of the viewpoint that condoned and embraced that violence" (12).

Perelman ultimately argues that the work of the Language poets of the 1980s (as well as their forebears Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, John Ashbery, and Charles Olson) provides the political leadership to reject Frost's vision. I, in turn, believe Perelman's argument reflects the critical infatuation with deconstructionist Language poetries. Pereleman, like many of his contemporaries, romanticizes the Language poets to the exclusion of other politically-engaged poets and poetries. Indeed, one of the fundamental arguments of this dissertation is that the rejection of Frost's "The Gift Outright" came far earlier, in a poem like James Wright's "Having Lost My Sons, I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon: Christmas, 1960." Published the same year as Frost's recital at the Kennedy inauguration, Wright's poem is a *contemporaneous* condemnation of "The Gift Outright" :[17]

Having Lost My Sons, I Confront the Wreckage of the Moon: Christmas, 1960

After dark

Near the South Dakota border,

The moon is out hunting, everywhere,

Delivering fire,

And walking down hallways

Of a diamond.

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[17] Though it appeared in book form in *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963), "Having Lost My Sons…" was first published in the *Hudson Review* in 1961. Moreover, though "The Gift Outright" was, in fact, originally published in 1942, I am not alone in arguing for two different identities of this poem. Bob Perelman has also argued for two different historical interpretations of "The Gift Outright," one arising from its publication date in 1942, the second from Frost's recitation of the poem at the Kennedy inauguration in 1961 (111-113).

Behind a tree,

It lights on the ruins

Of a white city:

Frost, frost.

Where are they gone,

Who lived here?

Bundled away under wings

And dark faces.

I am sick

Of it, and I go on,

Living, alone, alone,

Past the charred silos, past the hidden graves

Of Chippewas and Norwegians.

This cold winter

Moon spills the inhuman fire

Of jewels

Into my hands.

Dead riches, dead hands, the moon

Darkens,

And I am lost in the beautiful white ruins

Of America. (48-9)

 "Having Lost My Sons…" rejects "The Gift Outright" at every level: politically, aesthetically, metrically, and geographically. In doing so, it also rejects the poem's tribute to an expanding American Empire and crystallizes the many characteristics of American Surrealism that will be developed in the chapters of this dissertation.

First of all, "Having Lost My Sons…" doesn't "work" the way poems like "The Gift Outright" do, which is to say it doesn't yield to the interpretive strategies in common practice at midcentury. As I shall detail in Chapter One, Frost's work occupies a neutral common ground for four competing modes of teaching and reading poetry in the years following World War II: the "analytical" mode, which sought to understand poems in terms of their theme, moral or meaning; the Deweyian "experience" mode, which sought to understand poems in terms of the way they might help readers understand their own experience; the New Critical mode, which sought to understand poems as artifacts that were to be deciphered in terms of their interplay of formal structure, irony, diction, allusion, and paradox; and finally, the poetry-as-patriotism mode that sought to understand poems as useful teaching tools for understanding American history and civic values. Whereas "The Gift Outright" can be understood through each of these modes, "Having Lost My Sons…" refuses explication through *any* of these modes.

Second, "Having Lost My Sons…" does not share the imperial triumphalism of "The Gift Outright." As Derek Walcott has argued, "The Gift Outright" offers "the calm reassurance of American destiny that provoked Tonto's response to the Lone Ranger," noting that the poem

mentions "nothing of the dispossession of others that this destiny demanded" (93-4). "The Gift Outright" offers a narrative of a United States that materialized the moment the Anglo-Americans of Massachusetts and Virginia decided "it was ourselves / We were withholding from our land of living." Wright's poem, in turn, complicates this Anglo-American narrative of American history by observing in South Dakota that those people "who lived here" are now "gone." Moreover, Wright suggests that South Dakota has its own pioneers in the Chippewas and Norwegians whose "hidden graves" populate the landscape, as opposed to the English settlers of "The Gift Outright."

Third, "Having Lost my Sons…" rejects the midcentury notion of the Midwest as a place upon which the United States could be "expand[ed] vaguely westward." The South Dakota Wright presents is an eerie landscape of "Dead riches, dead hands" and "white ruins," a far cry from the passive "unstoried" land that Frost's early Americans could conquer. As Chapter One will discuss, what James Shortridge has called "the Cult of the Midwest"— the cultural mythologizing of the American Midwest as a naïve and provincial antithesis of the imperial cities of the Northeast—solidified during the 1950s, in part through farcical representations of the Midwest like Meredith Willson's *The Music Man* and Mosinee, Wisconsin's "Day Under Communism." The first generation of American Surrealists, Bly and Wright, rejected this notion and its larger imperial implications. They presented a Midwest that was at once deeply local and innately foreign; it featured places like Rochester, Minnesota and Martin's Ferry, Ohio and at the same time—indeed, often in the same poems—places like the Congo, the Spanish Sierras, and ancient Manchuria. In other words, at the very moment Kennedy's New Frontier was attempting to re-cast the world in America's image, American Surrealism was challenging that image from within.

Finally, in terms of poetic structures and tropes, the two poems work in two fundamentally different ways. "The Gift Outright" is a textbook example of the poetics the New Criticism celebrated: namely, a poetry of "mythical resonance, literary allusion, paradox, irony, tension, buried metaphoric systems, authorial distancing" (J. E. Breslin *xiii*) in which, as Cleanth Brooks asserted in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" in which "*every word* in a poem plays its part" (2).[18] Let us look, for instance, at line 11 ("The deed of gift was many deeds of war"). In perfect iambic pentameter, the line pits the two senses of the word "deed" against one another. In the first half of the line, "deed" means a written document "purporting to effect some legal disposition"; in the second half of the line, "deed" means an action "which is done, acted, or performed by an intelligent or responsible agent" ("Deed"). It's this sort of nuance and wordplay that works—and is understood—by careful, rational analysis.

Wright's poem, in turn, does not rely in any way upon nuance or careful syllable-counting or wordplay. Its rhythms are conversational, its lines are gauzy, its strophes are free-form. The few rhetorical devices it employs are exclusively figures of repetition.[19] And yet what the poem offers us are inscrutable metaphors: the moon is a "hunt[er]," a diamond has "hallways," and his "dead hands" hold the "jewels" the moon has "spill[ed]" into them. What do these metaphors mean? Whereas the multiple meanings of the word "possessed" in "The Gift Outright" point to some larger idea—the idea that "possessing" (i.e., "owning") the land "possessed" ("motivated" or "obsessed") the early Americans—that then enriches the whole

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[18] The italics here are in the original.

[19] Technically, the poem's rhetorical figures are *iteratio* ("Frost, frost"; "alone, alone"), *polyptoton* ("After dark … dark faces"), and *auxesis* ("Dead riches, dead hands"); nevertheless, all three are rhetorical schemes of repetition.

of the poem, what do the "hallways / Of a diamond" add to Wright's poem? What does such a phrase even mean?

It is this meaning—or lack thereof—that is the foundation of American Surrealism's importance. For in their embrace of the inscrutable and uncanny, the first generation of American Surrealists—Robert Bly and James Wright——rejected the way metaphors and prosody and, ultimately, poems were "supposed" to work in the 1950s and 1960s. Whereas poetry like Frost's "The Gift Outright" drew upon a reader's critical and analytical faculties, the poetry of the American Surrealists plumbed imagistic and psychological depths. Rather than Frost's pitting the two meanings of "deed" against one another, the Surrealists offered the moon "walking down hallways/ Of a diamond." In 1961, at the height of the Space Race, when logic and rational analysis were presented as the keys to freedom, such an inscrutable, opaque image was a radical departure.

As the Cold War manifested itself in Southeast Asia, American Surrealism became all the more significant. With the publication of W.S. Merwin's *The Lice* (1967), American Surrealism established itself as the pre-eminent poetic mode of dissent against American involvement in Vietnam. This mode reigned as Wright, Strand, Tate, Levis, Orr, Wakoski, and the other Second Generation Surrealists began publishing in the 1970s. While these poets seldom invoked Vietnam directly, the spectre of Vietnam hovered over their poems just as surely as the spectre of World War I hovered over the poems of Breton and Éluard or the Spanish Civil War hovered over the poems of Alberti and Lorca. While much critical ink has been spilled over the relationship between the French Surrealists and the first World War and the Spanish Surrealists and the Spanish Civil War, the relationship between American Surrealists and the Cold War has been unexplored. This dissertation seeks to change that.

In Chapter One, I offer a reading of Robert Frost at midcentury in an attempt to show what the first generation of American Surrealists were reacting against. I offer Frost as a model of Cold War consensus, a figure who was simultaneously Modern and traditional, read by young students in universities and yet loved by their parents and grandparents as a popular writer in the "fireside" tradition of Whittier and Longfellow. Moreover, I suggest that Frost's work was a neutral space where competing modes of midcentury reading (the analytical mode, the Deweyian mode, New Criticism, nationalism) could comfortably overlap. Chapter One then shifts to the first generation of American Surrealists: Robert Bly and James Wright. I argue that their work in the late 1950s and 1960s was far more than just a rebellion against the type of 1950s consensus symbolized by Frost. Their work was instead an intellectual and aesthetic response to expanding American empire and, in particular, the cool rationality and imperial world view that allowed such expansion to occur. As their writings suggest, the psychology necessary to, say, refashion Europe through the Marshall Plan was just as necessary to flatten out the Midwest into the sort of caricature presented in *The Music Man*. In presenting the American "heartland" as an uncanny and global space (linked to the Congo, for instance) at the very moment the State Department was attempting to re-cast the world in America's image, Bly and Wright challenged what Perelman called "the explicit or subterranean political allegiances of poetry" in his critique of "The Gift Outright" (113).

Chapter Two focuses on two 1967 responses to the emerging crisis in Southeast Asia, Robert Lowell's *Near the Ocean* and W.S. Merwin's *The Lice*. In comparing these volumes, I argue that Merwin's volume established American Surrealism as the "official" poetic mode of Cold War dissent. Furthermore, I argue that *The Lice* is simultaneously forward-looking and

rearward-looking: on the one hand, the text remembers the origins of French Surrealism, recognizing its history as an aesthetic response to the horrors of war; at the same time, the volume looks forward to the second generation of American Surrealism, offering a model for the hermetic and bizarre poetry produced by the young Surrealists of the 1970s.

Chapter Three is devoted to the second generation of American Surrealists, and in particular James Tate, Charles Simic, Charles Wright, and Larry Levis. I argue that these writers fused important elements from their American Surrealist predecessors: from Bly and Wright, they received regionalism and Spanish-language Surrealist tradition; from Merwin, they received the disembodied, French-language Surrealist tradition and an oblique "open" poetics. In doing so, they created a unique poetic form in which they could write about the United States in the ways that Merwin had written about Vietnam.

In the conclusion, I offer three possible explanations for why American Surrealism disappeared. The first of these possibilities is biographical: the 1980s witnessed the death of James Wright, Robert Bly's shift to the Men's Movement, and W.S. Merwin's shift to an environmental poetics of place; as the "Big Three" of American Surrealism disappeared, the movement collapsed. The second possibility is that, as the Cold War gave way to the Culture Wars, it became less desirable to identify as an American Surrealist, even if one were writing in an American Surrealist style. A third and final possibility is that American Surrealism never truly disappeared, but it did take on a different shape in the form of the "Elliptical" poetry Stephen Burt discovered in the late 1990s. Finally, I suggest what the loss of American Surrealism—and a lack of critical understanding of its significance—has cost in terms of a fuller literary history of the modern and contemporary period.

Chapter One

Poetic Centers and Poetic Dissenters: Frost, Bly, Wright

This chapter seeks to provide the framework to understand the first wave of American Surrealism that arrived in the poetry of Robert Bly and James Wright in the late 1950s and early 1960s. It argues that these men saw two concurrent and interrelated American crises in the mid-1950s: first, the artistic crisis of a stagnant national literature that had lost its way; second, the political crisis of a nation engaged in the dark and bloody business of Cold War empire-building. Bly and Wright saw a new American poetry, inspired by the Spanish-language Surrealists, as a means to solve both crises. An American Surrealist poetry would serve, they believed, as a second coming of the "Make It New" spirit of the High Modernism of the teens and twenties, curing the malaise that had taken root in American culture; this iconoclasm, Bly and Wright supposed, would in turn shatter the political consensus that had allowed the United States to become increasingly imperial in its global actions.

In its attempt to provide a foundation for the arrival of American Surrealism, this chapter builds upon Robert von Hallberg's notion of the interplay of literature and politics during the Cold War:

The idea of a cultural, even a specifically literary, center cannot be altogether separated from a more inclusive, coherent ideology. A consensus about the state

of literary life means most when it rests on a larger sense of where letters fit into a

nation's understanding of the world—political, social, economic. (33)

The 1950s, von Hallberg argues, offer such a "consensus about the state of literary life" in

relation to national identity, positing that a High Modernist canon had provided the means for

the United States to demonstrate—to other nations and to its own citizens— that its national

culture was "vital and coherent at multiple levels" (28).

Joan Shelley Rubin, in turn, shares von Hallberg's belief in the political and cultural

power of poetry at midcentury; she is not as convinced as he is, though, of the "consensus about

the state of literary life." Rubin chronicles how, throughout the first half of the twentieth century,

non-Modernist poetry was vital in American civic events, classrooms, universities, and public

life. What was unstable, Rubin contends, was *which* poetry was central to American life: was it

the Modernist poetry of Eliot and Pound or the popular, so-called "fireside" poetry of Whittier

and Longfellow? Furthermore, although there was midcentury consensus that poetry was vital,

the keys to reading and understanding that poetry were widely debated.

The larger question that both Rubin and von Hallberg raise in their work is one of the

purposes of reading American poetry at midcentury. Was poetry exclusionary, a means of

separating careful readers from sloppy illiterates, of separating college students from factory

workers? Or was it inclusive, an attempt to expose all readers to a shared cultural experience?

Did it still serve the Americanizing function that poetry had during the early years of the

twentieth century, when public schools found themselves full of immigrants with strange

accents, limited English, and heterogeneous cultures, as Rubin contends? Or did it serve as a

high-culture tool of American empire, as von Hallberg insists? A final question concerns one of

poetry's locus. Did poetry belong in country schoolhouses and civic pageants or did it, as John Crowe Ransom famously argued in *The World's Body*, "have its proper seat…in the universities"? (329)

The emergence of American Surrealism comes directly out of these debates. As such, this chapter seeks to accomplish four distinct goals.

First of all, it seeks to provide the necessary context for understanding the political and aesthetic shock that occurred when Surrealism made its way, through the work of Bly and Wright, from South American and European circles into American poetry. It provides a scholarly framework for notions of literary consensus at midcentury, pointing out the deep divide between how scholars have often viewed midcentury American poetry either through the lens of high culture poetry (Eliot, Pound) or through the lens of popular culture poetry (the "fireside" tradition). I ultimately argue that the poetry of Robert Frost served as a convenient neutral ground upon which these competing visions of American poetry could come together in the midcentury consensus that von Hallberg and Rubin advocate; I present multiple midcentury readings of Frost's "Mending Wall" to support this view.

Second, this chapter will establish that, though Bly and Wright saw themselves as shaking up a stagnant literary and political culture, they didn't see themselves as creators of a new movement. Instead, they saw American Surrealism as a continuation of the Modernism of the teens and twenties, an extension of the Modernist project of "Mak[ing] it New." Wright's and Bly's project becomes clearer when we understand that they saw themselves as heir to the "men of the Tens," using Surrealism to unsettle an old order symbolized by Frost. Spanish-language

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Surrealism, Bly argued, was a natural extension of the project that the "men of the Tens" had initiated.[20]

Third, this chapter will explain that Bly and Wright believed that American literary consensus at midcentury was innately linked to the American political consensus that had allowed global atrocities to occur, starting with the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They saw the poetry that was being produced by their midcentury contemporaries—in the shadow of High Modernism and under the precepts of New Criticism—as rearward-looking. Pointing to other rearward-looking movements of the twentieth century, notably Fascism, Bly and Wright argued that aesthetic nostalgia, even for something as seemingly harmless as poetry, had insidious possibilities. They thus posited Surrealism not only as a means to shatter the nation's literary stasis, but to jar its citizens from their complicity in Cold War bloodshed.

Finally—and perhaps most important—this chapter will argue that American Surrealism was not merely a refutation of New Criticism or Robert Frost or popular modes of reading; it was a refutation of the growing postwar American empire. It broke down the Cold War dichotomy of a safe and boring Midwestern "heartland" and a dangerous, menacing globe by blurring the lines between the Midwest and the Third World.

While this chapter will investigate the links among Frost's role as official poet, Cold War political consensus, and American empire, a single episode from the early days of the Kennedy administration serves as a useful synecdoche with which to begin this exploration. On May 25, 1961, President Kennedy broke with tradition and addressed an emergency joint session of

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[20] I do not mean to suggest that Bly and Wright did not respect Frost. Bly saw Frost as giant of American verse, and Bly's tribute "Robert Frost and his Enemies" (1994) reveals that Bly's respect for Frost endured some thirty years after Frost's death. Wright, in turn, saw Frost as one of the great presences behind *The Green Wall* (1955) and *Saint Judas* (1957). For an example of Wright's abiding enthusiasm for Frost, see his essay on Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" 877-881.

Congress, citing "extraordinary times." Kennedy's speech—known as the "Special Message to the Congress on Urgent National Needs"—was precipitated by Yuri Gagarin's successful orbiting of the earth a month prior. The speech is most famous for its pledge of "landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth" within a decade's time.

Robert Frost's role in the famous speech, however, has been largely ignored.

Kennedy opens the speech by acknowledging the "extraordinary challenge" the nation faces without directly acknowledging the Soviet Union's accomplishments in space. Kennedy lays the foundation for his policy initiatives by downplaying their inherent militarism and instead emphasizing their role in maintaining "freedom":

> We are not against any man--or any nation--or any system--except as it is hostile
> to freedom. Nor am I here to present a new military doctrine, bearing any one
> name or aimed at any one area. I am here to promote the freedom doctrine.

Ironically, the spectre of "freedom" in the post-colonial world is the key to Kennedy's appeal:

> The great battleground for the defense and expansion of freedom today is the
> whole southern half of the globe—Asia, Latin America, Africa and the Middle
> East—the lands of the rising peoples. Their revolution is the greatest in human
> history. They seek an end to injustice, tyranny, and exploitation. More than an
> end, they seek a beginning.

Kennedy's argument in the speech is that a stronger United States—through, among other initiatives, an enhanced space program—will show the decolonizing "lands of the rising peoples" that they must ally themselves with America. Kennedy draws upon a series of dualities—Americans and Soviets, freedom and tyranny, the northern hemisphere and the southern hemisphere—and in this, he reveals his debt to Frost's "The Road Not Taken":

> If we are trying to win the battle that is now going on around the world between freedom and tyranny, the dramatic achievements in space which occurred in recent weeks should have made clear to us all, as did the Sputnik in 1957, the impact of this adventure on the minds of men everywhere, *who are attempting to make a determination of which road they should take*. (italics added for emphasis)

The "men…attempting to make a determination of which road they should take" echo the speaker of Frost's well-anthologized poem, famously trying to choose between the two roads in front of him. In this moment, we see the links between Kennedy and Frost come full circle: where Frost had alluded to Kennedy's *Profiles in Courage* in his inaugural poem "Dedication" ("There was the book of profile tales declaring / For the emboldened politicians daring/ To break with followers when in the wrong"), Kennedy now alludes to Frost's famous work in his own speech.

Of the two roads diverged—"freedom and tyranny"—Kennedy's speech here makes clear that the Space Race and the American expansion into the "whole southern half of the globe" were cut from the same cloth. If the United States were to take Kennedy's challenge of May, 1961—"the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him

safely to earth" and thus expanding the New Frontier to the moon –then so too would it expand the New Frontier to the de-colonizing "lands of the rising peoples."

While it is impossible to know if Kennedy and his speechwriters cited Frost purposefully, the speech reveals how profoundly Frost's influence had bubbled up into the political subconscious of the Cold War in much the same way that von Hallberg suggests. Moreover, the speech reveals how Frost's two inaugural poems provide the literary imprimatur for the imperial "golden age of poetry and power" Frost prophesizes in "Dedication." The strategy Kennedy offers for facing down the Soviet threat—expanding American influence into the developing world and into space—fuses the opening line of "The Gift Outright" ("The land was ours before we were the land's") with the closing lines of Frost's "Dedication" poem ("Firm in our beliefs without dismay / In any game the nations want to play").

The argument of this chapter is that Robert Bly and James Wright—the first generation of American Surrealists—saw themselves as iconoclasts shattering the cultural foundations that served as the foundation to the Cold War "golden age of poetry and power." Formally, their work rejected the New Critical principles (allusion, irony, traditional form, and meter) that had served to lionize Frost in the academy; aesthetically, their work—through its embrace of the bizarre and uncanny—refused to be understood through the Deweyian and analytical modes that had served as the predominant ways to read, teach, and think about poetry for the first half of the twentieth century and that had served to further lionize Frost among a popular readership.

Yet it would be a mistake to see their work as anti-New Critical or anti-Frost. Their work was anti-imperial. Bly and Wright rejected the "golden age of poetry and power" by attacking its geopolitical underpinnings. As I shall argue, thanks to the influence of Spanish language Surrealism, Bly and Wright transformed the American Midwest into "the lands of the rising

peoples." In their work, Illinois became a banana republic, Ohio became Spain under Franco, and Minnesota became the Congo.   In doing so, Bly and Wright shattered the Cold War dichotomy of a safe, steadfast American "heartland" and a dangerous, volatile globe.

II.

For all its differences, scholarship about American poetry in the 1950s agrees on one narrative: consensus gave way to atomization. The interplay of politics and poetry at midcentury is, in many ways, the interplay of unity and disunity.

James Breslin argues for a "literary hegemony of the fifties" in which the High Modernism of the teens and 1920s had been codified by the New Criticism (59). The fundamental event of American poetry at midcentury, Breslin contends, was a poetic rebellion against this "hegemony." Through the embrace of more open form and a less self-consciously literary style, multiple poetic schools emerged in the 1950s—Beat, Confessional, Deep Image, New York, and Black Mountain (1-22).

In Breslin's formulation, the emergence of these schools was tantamount to rebels defeating a tyrant. For midcentury readers and poets alike, the "canonized revolutionaries" of the Modernist era—Eliot, Pound, Williams, Frost, cummings, Moore, Stevens —had dominated the poetic and cultural landscape for thirty years (2). Indeed, Breslin traces the psychological, spiritual, and artistic struggles of emerging midcentury poets—Delmore Schwartz, John Berryman, Theodore Roethke, Louis Simpson, and Adrienne Rich, among many others—who felt they were doomed by having been "born in the shadow of great names" (Kunitz, qtd. in J. Breslin 5). The key to the power of these "great names," Breslin contends, came through their lionization via the New Criticism (11-22). The New Criticism had acquired "a dominance that was virtually

unchallenged" in picking the winners and losers of a Modernist canon (15). Breslin furthermore traces the postwar growth of American universities as a result of the GI Bill, and details two challenges: newly swollen English departments were full of faculty who needed to produce scholarship and who also needed to teach literature systematically to large populations of undergraduates. The New Criticism solved both problems, and figures like Frost and Eliot became firmly established at the center of syllabi and scholarly monographs (16-17).[21]

Breslin contends that the yield of these forces was threefold: first, a poetic landscape exclusively defined by the New Criticism; second, a collective sense that the Modernist impulse of pushing limits was over; finally, a common belief that poets should rally around the New Critical principles of irony, tension, received poetic form, allusion, nuance, and paradox. Louise Bogan, for instance, warned fellow poets against "insist[ing] upon a stubborn avant-gardism when no real need…any longer exists" in her essay "At Mid Century" (12). Bogan instead argued for "a consolidation of resources and for a canvassing of the ground already gained" (12). Breslin suggests that sentiments like these revealed the scope of the "deference" to and "reverence" for the Modernist greats that defined midcentury arts and letters (24-26).

Robert von Hallberg, in turn, examines many of the same poets as Breslin and offers a similar midcentury assessment of a postwar "deep rooted agreement" that broke apart by the 1960s (33). Breslin and von Hallberg differ, however, in what exactly it was that midcentury poetry was unified around. Where Breslin saw a poetry calcified around the "literary hegemony" of the New Criticism and its "canonized revolutionaries," von Hallberg saw the aesthetic consensus that lionized the Moderns as a literary outgrowth of American empire. Von Hallberg argues that American Modernist poetry was the high culture equivalent of the postwar surge in

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[21] Breslin's assessment of the "literary hegemony" of the 1950s and its "canonized revolutionaries" is foundational to more recent scholarship about the poetry of the era. See Brunner 1-13 and Thurston, "Tranquilized Fifties" 487-506.

American troops stationed abroad or the invasion of American mass culture offerings like rock-and-roll and Coca Cola (28). A high culture unified around Modernists like Eliot and Frost was useful for the postwar American empire in that it showed other nations that American culture was "vital and coherent at multiple levels" and this allowed the United States "to demonstrate its ideological integrity" on a global stage (28). Such a display of ideological unity was necessary, von Hallberg argues, given the American postwar role of "colonizer" on the world stage:

> An extended culture has an interest in showing that it is not overextended
>
> and vulnerable in its diffuseness; it must display the coherence to confront
>
> aliens and hold its own. (28)

In von Hallberg's schema, the midcentury American canon that had calcified around the Modernists was a tool in the Cold War battle for hearts and minds. Where Breslin argues the Modernist canon arose from the success of the New Critics, von Hallberg argues that it arose from imperial objectives:

> When critics have as an objective the formation of a canon and the
>
> selection of classic texts, they tacitly presume or deliberately construct a
>
> culture with a strong authoritative center, a metropolitan culture. A canon
>
> demonstrates not only the quality of a culture but also its coherence,
>
> especially in terms of quality. (28)

Under Von Hallberg's formulation, as American culture was "spread[ing] over the globe" during the Cold War, it needed a center; this necessary center was simultaneously geographical, ideological, and cultural (28). The lionization of Eliot and Frost and their Modernist

contemporaries, Hallberg contends, was an attempt to construct this center for Americans and foreigners alike.

Joan Shelley Rubin, in turn, argues for a far more expansive midcentury spectrum than the handful of Modernist poets who compose von Hallberg's "authoritative center." Rubin contends that during the 1950s, the differences between Modernist rebellion and the older literary traditions were nowhere near as stark as they may have seemed in 1920 at the height of Modernism or, for that matter, at the end of the twentieth century after a half-century of criticism, anthologies, and syllabi had established a firm demarcation between Modernist poets and popular poets (229). Arguing for "the fluidity that exists between high and low culture before a figure becomes ensconced in the academic canon," Rubin notes that numerous wartime and postwar anthologies united Modernists like Carl Sandburg and James Weldon Johnson with popular "fireside" poets like Eugene Field (190, 229).

Rubin's midcentury canon is far broader than von Hallberg's and far more complex than Breslin's. She argues that an exclusive focus on the aesthetically difficult High Modernist canon—as is the tendency of most academic critics —ignores the numerous ways poetry was experienced in the twentieth century at public gatherings, civic festivals, pageants, funerals, and other occasions. And while the New Critical approach of Brooks and Warren held sway at American universities and elite high schools, Rubin notes that the vast majority of Americans experienced a very different model of understanding poetry in their elementary and secondary schools. Indeed, by midcentury, several competing models of learning poetry coexisted uneasily (158-162).

The first of these— the "analytical" model—had gained currency in the 19th and early 20th centuries; this model forced students to memorize work of the "fireside" poets like Whittier

and Longfellow, to think of poems in terms of lesson and content, and to classify poems thematically. Rubin gives examples of this classification model from public school curricula such as "Extending Our Experience with Respect to Community Living," "The Happiness of Home-Keeping Hearts," and "Developing a Feeling of Pride and Appreciation for the Nation of Today" (159). A second model of thinking about poems—the "experience" model—emerged at the turn of the 20th century from the Progressive movement and the work of John Dewey. The experience model saw poetry as a way for young readers to connect to their own personal experiences and for those reader to "re-enact the behaviors and emotions an author evoked" (Rubin 129). In this way, the goal of poetry was individual—a reader could use a poem to understand his/her life rather than a universal moral or lesson.

III.

I would argue that the poetry of a figure like Robert Frost served as a coming-together of these competing educational, critical, and nationalist interests. The New Critics saw him as a consummate Modernist thanks to the irony, nuance, and prosodic craftsmanship of his poems. The narratives, characters, and often agricultural and small-town settings of Frost's poems, meanwhile, allowed him to work as a popular "fireside" poet within the terms of the two principal interpretive modes of midcentury poetry: the "analytical" approach that sought to study, memorize and classify poems in terms of themes and moral lessons and the Deweyian "experience" approach that used poems as a way for readers to understand their own lives. Finally, Frost's political and cultural prominence during the 1950s transformed him into a larger-than-life figurehead for American literary identity in the Cold War.

Frost thus serves as a useful touchstone of where the "center" lay at midcentury, whether one is using the lens of Rubin, Hallberg, Breslin or, in fact, all three. He was a neutral territory where competing ideas of the role and function of poetry in American life could overlap.[22]

Frost's complexity at midcentury can be summed up in "Pawky Poet," *Time*'s cover story from October 9, 1950. The anonymous article celebrated Frost and his "commanding" popularity, noting that more than 375,000 copies of his work had sold by that year. The article prophesies that "Of living poets, none has lodged poems more surely where they will be hard to get rid of." Yet this praise was tinged with the paradox that Frost was *too* popular to be taken seriously:

Today's bright young men look to the intricate, mannered, literary methods of T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden for their models. They grudgingly admire Frost as a kind of 19th Century relic, resent his commanding popularity, and smart under the reproach. (76)

Time's suggestion that Frost is a "19th Century relic" suggests the degree to which Frost has inherited the mantle of the "fireside" poet, passed down from the likes of Whittier and Longfellow. These "fireside" poets were nineteenth-century literary celebrities, and their poems appeared in public ceremonies, popular readers, children's books, and anthologies; in short, their work featured none of the "intricate, mannered, literary" difficulty that marked Modernist poetry.

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[22] Frost's complexity and competing identities did not end at midcentury. Writing in 2012, Jason Schneiderman notes that "[m]y educational experience has always presented Frost in one of two lights. Either he is the charming New England curmudgeon—hardworking, honest, straightforward—or he is the sly parodist, playing at Northeastern grit while winking at the careful reader" (11). While Schneiderman's distinctions are a bit different from mine, they reflect the persistence of two of the roles I argue Frost offers: larger-than-life "fireside" poet and New Critical ironist.

The anonymous writer of this article suggests that Frost's popularity made his work incompatible with the High Modernism of Eliot and Auden.

And yet Frost was far more than a "fireside" poet. If these "bright young men" of 1950 were in colleges and universities thanks to the G.I. Bill, however, they almost undoubtedly would have been reading Frost and hearing from their professors that he was a Modernist *par excellence* thanks to the 1950 edition of *Understanding Poetry,* the nearly ubiquitous handbook of college literature courses in the postwar years. Whereas only five of his poems had appeared in the text's first edition (1938), Frost had suddenly become central to *Understanding Poetry* with eleven poems anthologized within the pages of the 1950 edition; as a means of comparison, *Time*'s "intricate, mannered, literary" poets Eliot and Auden had only four and five, respectively.

As his inclusion in both *Time* and *Understanding Poetry* made clear, Frost occupied a precarious and uncomfortable space in 1950: he was celebrated by popular readers who wanted poetry that was understandable and by critics who wanted poetry that was difficult. At midcentury, there was a blurring between high art and common art, and Frost—whether he liked it or not—was at the center of it.[23]

To demonstrate the ways that Frost and his work existed in multiple capacities at midcentury, I offer an examination of the multiple lives of his famous poem "Mending Wall." Though the poem was published prior to World War I, the midcentury responses to Frost's anthology chestnut provide a useful example of the ways his work served as a canvas upon which these competing ideas could comfortably coexist.

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[23] The relationship between Frost and his celebrity is quite complicated. Peter Davison provides a useful overview 114-117.

The multiple readings of "Mending Wall" I offer below are meant to suggest that Frost was a figure of midcentury consensus, a Hallbergian "center" in a Rubinian universe. His poems could be understood in both Deweyian and analytical classrooms. He could be held up as a latter-day "fireside" poet, yet he was celebrated by the New Critics and thus managed to be simultaneously popular *and* elite. His poems were used as propaganda during World War II, and he himself became a diplomat during the Cold War.

Frost, I argue, is therefore a convenient meeting place for all of these overlapping visions of art, education, foreign policy, and national identity in play at midcentury. In understanding Frost's role as a midcentury center, the roles of Bly and Wright—and ultimately of the second growth American Surrealists who followed them—become all the more significant.

Mending Wall

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,

And spills the upper boulders in the sun,

And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

The work of hunters is another thing:

I have come after them and made repair

Where they have left not one stone on a stone,

But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,

To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,

No one has seen them made or heard them made,

But at spring mending-time we find them there.

I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;

And on a day we meet to walk the line

And set the wall between us once again.

We keep the wall between us as we go.

To each the boulders that have fallen to each.

And some are loaves and some so nearly balls

We have to use a spell to make them balance:

'Stay where you are until our backs are turned!'

We wear our fingers rough with handling them.

Oh, just another kind of out-door game,

One on a side. It comes to little more:

There where it is we do not need the wall:

He is all pine and I am apple orchard.

My apple trees will never get across

And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.

He only says, 'Good fences make good neighbors'.

Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder

If I could put a notion in his head:

'*Why* do they make good neighbors? Isn't it

Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know

What I was walling in or walling out,

And to whom I was like to give offence.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,

That wants it down.' I could say 'Elves' to him,

But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather

He said it for himself. I see him there

Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top

In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.

He moves in darkness as it seems to me,

Not of woods only and the shade of trees.

He will not go behind his father's saying,

And he likes having thought of it so well

He says again, "Good fences make good neighbors." (11-14)

Appearing in book form in *North of Boston* in 1914, "Mending Wall" had by midcentury become a sort of blank canvas upon which multiple modes of reading and using poetry could be cast. It lent itself equally to New Critical *and* analytical approaches. It could be seen as a purely aesthetic object *and* a propagandistic anthem. It allowed Frost to sit among both the Moderns *and* the "firesides." It was, in short, all things to all midcentury readers.

The protean nature of "Mending Wall" lends itself quite naturally to the two principal modes of literary study in public schools during the first half of the twentieth century: the analytical and experience models. As Rubin notes, the analytical mode was a method of literary education that gained currency in public schools during the 1880s and held sway well into the 20th century; arguably, it continues in many primary and secondary classrooms today. The

analytical mode used poems as a means to improve a student's moral and intellectual cultivation; its hallmarks were the "equation of theme with meaning" and the "structured extraction of an ethical principle" (Rubin 123). The work of the "fireside" poets—Longfellow's "Paul Revere's Ride" and "The Courtship of Miles Standish," Lowell's "The Vision of Sir Launfal," Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus" and "Washington's Birthday," and Bryant's "Thanatopsis"—played a key role in this pedagogical approach. Students read, memorized, and recited Bryant's "Thanatopsis," for instance, with an eye towards its final imperative "So live" rather than any other component of the poem; in doing so, they took away an understanding that the poem served to instruct them to live their lives "in a way that will permit one to face with a clear conscience the inevitability of death" (Rubin 112). Poems were read for their moral lesson, and anthologies were created, in the words of one such editor, "with the hope that good may result to the children from the mastery of such a range of strong and beautiful quotations" (qtd. in Rubin 117).

"Mending Wall" fit quite naturally into such a pedagogical framework. In a 1931 article—tellingly titled "Moral Values in Literature Teaching"—from the journal of the National Council of Teachers of English, teachers are encouraged to use "Mending Wall" as a means to arrive at the moral lesson of tolerance. The article guides teachers to arrive at "moral value" when "pupils are helped by the poem to understand that kind of neighbor and to share the poet's good-humored respect for a man whose views he does not accept" (Neumann 809). A Frost reader for students, meanwhile, asserts that "almost everything Robert Frost writes has a lot of meaning" and that no matter what occurs within the poems, "they end, as [Frost] says they should, in wisdom" (Frost, *You Come Too* 7). The text then examines "Mending Wall" and offers

that one of its meanings is that "the poet has never added a single stone to the wall that so often separates age from youth" (7).

The insistence that "Mending Wall" ends "in wisdom" and yields "moral value" through a lesson is characteristic of the "analytical" mode. It stands in stark contrast, however, to the other midcentury model of reading and teaching poetry: the Deweyian "experience" mode. The Deweyian mode emerged out of the Progressive education movement at the turn of the twentieth century. In general terms, Deweyian education sought to focus on the intellectual growth of the individual student as a critical thinker; it rejected the traditional model of public schooling, with its emphasis on uniformity, duty, and homogeneity. Thus, where the "analytical" approach to "Mending Wall" yielded "moral value," the Deweyian model encouraged each reader to understand "Mending Wall" in terms of his or her own life. Where the "analytical" model encouraged readers to understand and accept a poem's universal meanings, the Deweyian model encouraged individual readers to create individual meanings.

A telling example of the Deweyian approach to "Mending Wall" appears in a 1943 issue of *The High School Journal*. Intended to serve as a teaching guide, the article "Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall': A Lesson in Human Understanding" offers a model that is almost entirely self-referential and individualized; that is to say, the authors teach the poem by modeling how the poem helped them understand their own personal experience. The authors Mary Houston Davis and Elizabeth Lamar Rose—two teachers at elite private schools in New York—begin with a three-paragraph summary of the poem.   Very quickly, however, they take the poem and begin applying it to two different episodes in their own lives.

The first of these episodes features a pair of aged sisters Rose and Davis had met while travelling to "a beautiful ante-bellum home in the deep South." Though housemates, the sisters were divided by suspicion and mistrust, and they locked their rooms from one another. "Mending Wall," the authors argue, helped them understand the sisters: "Sometimes people, like the cautious and conventional man in Robert Frost's poem, build unnecessary walls about themselves as well as their property—walls that act as barriers between themselves and other people." These walls, the authors contend, "can separate people who should be near and dear to each other" (Davis and Rose 70-1).

The second anecdote concerns two Iowa farmgirls who visited Rose and Davis in New York. In trying to give the girls "the most exciting visit possible," the authors brought the girls to a Swedish smorgasbord. One of the young girls tried all sorts of exotic Scandinavian foods while the other ate "only those things she had eaten at home, ham and potato salad, stuffed eggs and pickles." This episode, the authors argue, made sense when filtered through "Mending Wall," for in the second girl's rejection of "the unknown, the unfamiliar," she helped them understand the neighbor's refrain that "good fences build good neighbors." The young Iowan, the authors conclude, was closed to experience just like the neighbor in "Mending Wall" (Davis and Rose 71).

The authors of this Deweyian interpretation thus devote well over two-thirds of an article on "Mending Wall" to their own personal experiences in the South and New York and little more than a scant few paragraphs to the poem itself. As "Robert Frost's 'Mending Wall': A Lesson in Human Understanding" demonstrates, the poem lends itself to the Deweyian approach that had come into vogue in the first half of the 20th century.

The Deweyian mode of interpreting "Mending Wall" by recalling one's own personal experiences stands in stark contrast to the third model of literary interpretation in play at midcentury: the New Criticism. Indeed, the sort of personal, individualized reading Rose and Davis reveal is exactly the approach to literature that the New Criticism sought to correct. By New Critical standards, Frost's "Mending Wall" is a superior poem, demonstrating characteristics of literature the New Criticism most valued: paradox, irony, complexity, tension, dramatic persona, received form, and a linguistic structure that reflects and underscores theme. As Cleanth Brooks asserted in *The Well Wrought Urn*, "the language of poetry is the language of paradox," and "Mending Wall" is certainly a poem of paradoxes (2). In its substance and its style, the poem argues that freedom is a kind of restriction, and that restriction a kind of freedom. "Good fences make good neighbors," the neighbor repeats, and this highlights the central paradoxes of the poem: that boundaries create bonds, and that freedom is dependent upon constraints. This paradox relies upon the New Critical principle of pitting, in I. A. Richards's formulation, "what seems to be said" against "the mental operations of the person who has said it" (11). Indeed, the poem reveals two remarkable ironies: that in the act of building a wall between properties, the two neighbors grow closer; and that the easy, conversational Yankee speech of the poem is, in fact, tightly structured blank verse.

Close textual analysis rewards this formulation. At first blush, the poem seems to cast the neighbor as a misanthrope who believes in "good fences" and the speaker as a reflective man who interrogates the value of building fences ("Before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, / And to whom I was like to give offence").   Closer attention reveals this to be a misreading and that the poem is far more complex. Indeed, it is the speaker who "lets my neighbor beyond the hill" know that it is time for the annual ritual, and it is he who maintains

the wall by repairing the damage hunters have wreaked upon it. Richard Poirier's interpretation of this easily misread relationship between the poem's "mischievous" speaker and his "savage armed" neighbor is a useful example of such careful textual analysis:

> Though the speaker may or may not think that good neighbors are made by good fences, it is abundantly clear that he likes the yearly ritual, the yearly "outdoor game" by which fences are made. Because if fences do not "make good neighbors" the "making of fences" can. More is "made" in this "outdoor game" than fences. The two men also "make" talk…(104-5)

Poirier's scrupulous attention to the multiple uses of the verb "to make" demonstrates the kind of literary thinking that the New Criticism spawned among a generation of readers: that the multiple inflections and meanings of a single word are important and essential to the understanding of a poem. Indeed, the poem is an exemplar of Brooks's assertion that "*every word* in a poem plays its part" (2).[24] The poem is carefully crafted in blank verse but plays with enjambment ("But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather / He said it for himself. I see him there"). In this interplay of end-stopped lines and enjambed lines, Frost demonstrates and formally underscores the play between restriction and freedom that is at the poem's thematic core.

Furthermore, Poirier's analysis highlights the "speaker"—not the *author*—of the poem, thus serving as a useful example of another New Critical tenet: the author is distinct from the person narrating a poem. M.L. Rosenthal and A.J.M. Smith's introductory textbook *Exploring Poetry* uses "Mending Wall" as a model of this lesson, emphasizing that "it is the voice of a Yankee farmer we hear, shrewd, pungent and reflective," *not* the voice of Frost (4). Rosenthal

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[24] The italics here are in the original.

and Smith use this distinction between Frost the author and the "Yankee farmer" narrating the poem to teach young poetry readers the importance of dramatic personae and authorial distancing:

> The voice the poet uses, then, is essential to the structure and meaning of his
> poem. It may be primarily personal expression, as though he were writing a letter
> to the world, but ordinarily this is not the case. The reader must learn to hear the
> voice and tone in relation first of all to what goes on –what is being said and
> thought and worked out—in the poem. (6)

Rosenthal's and Smith's insistence on reading "Mending Wall" as the act of understanding "what is being said and thought and worked out" demonstrates the legacy of yet another New Critical precept: that the mental processes the reader goes through to experience a poem's interplay of structure, irony, paradox, complexity, allusion, and narrative distancing are poetry's great value to humankind. It is the *experience* of a poem's "intricate puzzle," not its moral or lesson, that is the essence of poetry (Rubin 101):

> We are interested not merely in getting the information about the conclusion, but
> in following the process by which the conclusion is reached…we like a poem, not
> because it gives us satisfaction of our curiosity or because it gives us an idea we
> can "carry away with us," as people sometimes put it, but because the poem itself
> is an experience. (Brooks and Warren 32)

Brooks's and Warren's emphasis on the "experience" and "process" of reading a poem like "Mending Wall" thus stands in stark contrast to the experience of reading "Mending Wall" according to the Deweyian or analytical methods also in vogue at midcentury. And while "Mending Wall" can be read through Deweyian or analytical modes, the New Critical approach to the poem has become, over time, perhaps the most significant of these modes in the academy.

Here it is necessary to look to Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's *Understanding Poetry*. First published in 1938, *Understanding Poetry* was the seminal teaching text for poetry at the university level well into the 1970s, and it is a virtual manifesto of the ways that New Critical modes should be applied to poetry. Brooks and Warren make the case for scrupulous textual analysis—what has come to be called close reading –through looking at the "relationship among the elements" of "meter, rhyme, figurative language, idea" (16). With his conversational yet formal poetry, Frost was an ideal poet for Brooks and Warren, and he became increasingly central to *Understanding Poetry* as the textbook went into subsequent editions. Whereas the first edition of 1938 included five of Frost's poems, by the third edition of 1960, nine of Frost's poems were included, greater than even New Critical favorites Eliot (four), Shakespeare (eight), and Donne (two). Brooks and Warren were effusive in their praise: Frost's highly structured lines of "euphonious and delicately expressive" verse yield "a set of contrasts gradually developing" over the course of his poems, several of which are plumbed for every imaginable meaning on metrical, narrative, metaphoric, and metonymic levels (365-6). By the third edition of 1960, Frost had become the central poet of *Understanding Poetry;* if Breslin's arguments are correct, by 1960 Frost had also become the central poet to understanding poetry.

A fourth and final midcentury approach to the work of Robert Frost was through the lens of nationalism. This role was multifaceted: his work was used to serve propagandistic ends during the war years and, as the Cold War emerged, Frost's work took on greater significance as a model of American virtue; ultimately, he evolved into a diplomat of American arts and letters and served the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations. Even Robert Penn Warren, who admired Frost for his technical mastery rather than his patriotism, had to acknowledge Frost's cultural and political significance in the postwar years, noting that "[a]fter the war, the only two American poets on the mountain peak were Eliot and Frost, but Frost was more American." Warren notes that Eliot's "remoteness" in living abroad prevented him from serving as a nationalist poet whereas "Frost was rooted in his own landscape, he was America's own voice... There was no end of honor" (qtd in Parini, *Robert Frost* 382). This "honor" came to include numerous laurels from public, arts, and governmental bodies; indeed, he became, in the words of Lionel Trilling's 1959 tribute to Frost, "virtually a symbol of America" (448).

This nationalist understanding of Frost reached its apex with his reading at the Kennedy inauguration, but the war years laid a foundation to this role. One of the earliest examples of reading Frost in this capacity comes through the inclusion of "Mending Wall" in the guidebook *Teaching English in Wartime: A Brief Guide to Classroom Practice*. A publication of the National Council of Teachers of English and intended for primary and secondary English teachers, *Teaching English in Wartime* was quite direct in its goal from the very first sentence: "Teachers of English in this time of war must re-examine their aims and materials in order to better the things which they have been trying to do all the time." The volume's goal was unabashedly propagandistic: "How can we help young people to realize what it is that America is fighting for?" is the problem posed on the very first page of the text, and the authors insist that

"[t]his question *must* dominate the whole of English instruction" (1).[25] The text encourages teachers to "examine our anthologies and other teaching materials for reading selections which may be applied to this purpose" and offers reading lists to this end. Many of the suggested readings are unsurprising: *The Declaration of Independence*, Lincoln's *Second Inaugural Address* and Emerson's "Self Reliance," among others. Other suggested readings are more aggressive in their attempts to repurpose traditional materials to serve a wartime agenda: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* can be taught "as the story of the original Roman Fascist leader" while Byron's Childe Harold can be taught as chronicle of "the successive efforts of the Greeks, from ancient to modern times, to gain and guard their liberty and to build a great civilization"(6).

As its primary model of this repurposing of familiar texts to serve a nationalist agenda, the guide offers teachers a re-reading of "Mending Wall." English teachers are encouraged to take "Mending Wall," the guide suggests, because it "can be used to illustrate the principles which underlie any peace program" (1). Sample questions for students are then offered:

In discussing the poem, we might ask such questions as: What is it that doesn't love a wall? Why does Frost speak of the gaps where "Two men can walk abreast"? Why does he use the symbol of the "old stone savage arm'd" in describing his neighbor? What is the significance of the lines, "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know What I was walling in or walling out"? (1)

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[25] The italics here are in the original.

In raising these questions to students, teachers are encouraged to suggest that "Mending Wall"

offers an "emphasis upon human relations and the principles of democracy" that underlie the

American war effort (1).[26]

This reading of "Mending Wall" offers a fourth overlapping identity for Frost at

midcentury: the poet as national muse. As *Teaching English in Wartime* demonstrates, Frost's

work became increasingly useful during the war years as a literary expression of American

"principles of democracy." Thanks in part to Frost's prominence in wartime, the years following

World War II saw Frost emerge as the de facto national poet. His role was somewhere between

that of "fireside" poet and national booster.

Frost's inclusion in many anthologies, readers, handbooks, and textbooks of the period

reflects this newfound capacity. *My American Heritage: A Collection of Songs, Poems,*

Speeches, Sayings and Other Writings Dear to Our Hearts (1949) is a useful example of Frost's

emerging role in the postwar years. The collection, edited by Ralph Henry and Lucile Pannell,

is divided into three sections ("Childhood," "Youth," "America") and is intended to give young

readers a sense of "our American heritage…[through] the most gladsome flowers ever pressed

between the covers of a book" (15). The anthology places Frost's "The Runaway" and "The

Pasture" among *The Declaration of Independence*, *The Monroe Doctrine*, Lee's farewell letter to

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[26] The use of "Mending Wall" as a text that helps readers understand complex political relationships continues to this day. For the Presidential Address of the American Political Science Association annual meeting in Toronto in 2009, Peter J. Katzenstein gave a talk entitled "'Walls' between 'Those People'? Contrasting Perspectives on World Politics." Katzenstein used Frost's poem to illustrate the "two existential positions" of the characters in the poem and "what these two positions entail for our understanding of world politics" (11). Indeed, Katzenstein invokes "Mending Wall" to argue that "Like Frost's neighbor, President Bush often spoke and acted like a man who mends walls. President Obama, like Robert Frost, speaks and acts like a man who tears them down" (11). Interestingly, Katzenstein rejects the New Critical principle that the speaker of the poem is someone *other* than Frost.

the Army of Northern Virginia, and the *Gettysburg Address*, as well as the poems of Whittier, Longfellow, Holmes, and James Russell Lowell.

Frost's role as national poet is even more apparent through his inclusion in the *American Citizens Handbook*. First published in 1941 by the National Education Association, the *Handbook* was a reader intended for young citizens reaching voting age. Its first edition sold out quickly, necessitating a second edition in 1941; this second 1941 edition also sold out. Paper restrictions during World War II delayed the release of a third edition until 1946 (Rubin 235-6); it was this edition that first featured Frost. The *Handbook* remained a popular text through the 1950s and 1960s, and saw further editions in 1951, 1960, and 1968.

The *American Citizens Handbook* is remarkable in both its popularity and its content. It offers its readers a systematic taxonomy of how they are to think of American history, civic institutions, politics, and culture. This vision is uncomplicated, jingoistic, and sanguine, with readings like "America, I Love You!" and "The Man America Needs" alongside the "Oath of the American Boy Scout" and "A Tribute to the Teacher" (6th edition 313-324). Frost's "Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening" was placed among these paeans and oaths. Memorizing works like these, the *Handbook* asserted, was necessary so that young people "who are to live and work together shall have a common mind—a like heritage of purpose, religious ideals, love of country, beauty, and wisdom to guide and inspire them" (3rd edition 345).

As this passage from the *American Citizens Handbook* suggests, the years following World War II saw Frost's role shift in the public sphere; whereas he had been, in the pre-war years, a widely anthologized poet and a public figure, the 1950s saw Frost blossom into Trilling's "symbol of America." Frost became the Modernist-as-patriot; he was an elder

statesman of American arts and letters but also a political figure himself, doing the cultural work of building and protecting the nation.

The first real stage in this process occurred in 1950, when the US Senate passed a resolution to give him "the felicitations of the Nation which he served so well" (Parini, *Robert Frost* 382). As Parini notes, this award came shortly after the 1950 Nobel Prize in Literature had been awarded to Bertrand Russell. Frost had been nominated for the Nobel, and many had expected it to be awarded to him; Parini thus argues that this Senate resolution was, in part, a nationalistic gesture meant to save face (*Robert Frost* 382).

Frost slowly evolved, over the course of the decade, into perhaps the pre-eminent representative of Cold War arts and letters. In July, 1954, at the behest of the US Information Agency, Frost served as the US Emissary to the World Congress of Writers in São Paulo, Brazil and traveled from there to the US Embassy in Peru.[27] The US Information Agency then asked Frost, on the behalf of President Eisenhower, to help with public relations by writing an essay about "American life." Frost declined, but said he was willing to help out the nation as he could. Frost's offer ultimately took shape in a diplomatic mission to England at the height of the Suez Crisis in 1956 (Parini, *Robert Frost* 394-97).

Though Frost's trip to Britain lasted barely a month, the ties between the poetry of Frost and the power of the White House continued to strengthen through the late 1950s. In February of 1958, Eisenhower invited Frost over to a stag party at the White House. That same year, Eisenhower named him Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. By 1960, the Congressional Gold Medal for Frost was passed by Congress and signed by Eisenhower (it would later be awarded to him by Kennedy in 1962). In May of 1961, Frost gave "An Evening with Robert Frost" at the State Department in front of foreign dignitaries, members of the

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[27] For a fuller discussion of the State Department's use of writers in Latin American diplomacy, see Cohn 397-399.

Supreme Court, many Senators and Congressmen, and numerous ambassadors; Kennedy could not attend because of the crisis in Southeast Asia that would ultimately become the Vietnam conflict (Parini, *Robert Frost* 405-408, 419-20). Frost even served on a diplomatic junket to Moscow in September, 1962 and met with Nikita Khrushchev. Frost immediately brought up the Berlin situation and proposed the reunion of East and West Berlin. Krushchev, in turn, angrily responded by reminding Frost of Soviet military might. Frost, trying to defuse the situation, asserted that "the next hundred years belonged to the United States and the Soviet Union together," reminding Khrushchev of the shared European heritage of the two nations. Frost pointed to the literary sophistication of the United States and the Soviet Union and asserting that "a great nation"—like the United States or the Soviet Union—"makes great poetry, and great poetry makes a nation" (Reeve 112).

IV.

The heated exchange with Kruschev is a unique Cold War episode in which the "golden age of poetry and power" Frost prophesies in the "Dedication" poem seems to come to life. A world away from Moscow is the rural Minnesota of Robert Bly's short, three-part lyric "Summer, 1960, Minnesota," and yet, as I shall argue, this region provides an unlikely but important setting in the interplay of Cold War poetry and politics.

The poem opens with a series of standard tropes of the Midwestern landscape:

I

After a drifting day, visiting the bridge near Louisberg,

With its hot muddy water flowing

57

Under the excited swallows,

Now, at noon

We plunge though the hot beanfields,

And the sturdy alfalfa fields, the farm groves

Like heavy green smoke close to the ground. (*Silence* 31)

Louisberg's sleepy, unhurried setting ("a drifting day") and agricultural imagery ("beanfields," "alfalfa fields" and "farm groves") are stereotypes of the Midwest; as I shall discuss later in this chapter, they reflect the midcentury surge in what James Shortridge has called "the cult of the Midwest," the idea of the region as a nostalgic place of simple (and simple-minded) agrarian life (135).

This clichéd view of the Midwest ends abruptly in the second strophe, however:

II

Inside me there is a confusion of swallows,

Birds flying through the smoke,

And horses galloping excitedly on fields of short grass.

As we move out of the first strophe, the poem abruptly turns away from the idealized pastoral setting of Louisburg, Minnesota in 1960 to the interior world of the poet. And while a poet's turning from an exterior landscape to his/her own interiority is no novelty in and of itself—indeed, it is the familiar structure of what M.H. Abrams has called "The Greater Romantic Lyric," with Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" as its supreme example—what *is*

58

remarkable is the poem's sudden rupture with both the pedestrian language and stereotypical

Midwestern landscape of the first strophe (Abrams 201-209).What, after all, can it mean that

"[i]nside me there [are]…horses galloping excitedly on fields of short grass"?   For all intents

and purposes, we are in an entirely different poem. It is true that Bly chooses to recall the

"swallows" of the first strophe— now a "confusion"— but to what end?

       To answer this, let us look to the poem's third and final strophe:

III

Yet, we are falling,

Falling into the open mouths of darkness,

Into the Congo as if into a river,

Or as wheat into open mills.

       Were this poem to operate under the protocol of Abrams's "Greater Romantic Lyric,"

Bly's speaker would have emerged in the third strophe having "achieve[d] an insight, face[d] up

to a tragic loss, come… to a moral decision, or resolve[d] an emotional problem" (201). Instead,

the poem's final strophe presents only further uncertainty, and the "open mouths of darkness"

that appear in the third strophe illustrate this tension best. Yes, these "open mouths of darkness"

are the "open mills" of the nostalgic Midwestern scene he has evoked in the first strophe. At the

same time, the image of "open mouths of darkness" is inscrutable and uncanny.

       On one level, these lines are meticulously crafted: Bly draws a metaphorical

correspondence among four receptacles—"the open mouths of darkness," the "Congo," "a river"

and "open mills"; he draws a second correspondence—both aural and metaphorical—between

the falling "we" of the strophe's first line and the falling "wheat" of its final line. The foreign

Congo, in turn, is a counterpoint to the familiar Minnesota of the first strophe.

At the same time, the poem is, as a whole, disjunctive. Most obviously, the pastoral

images and straightforward description of the first strophe are incompatible with all the horses

and birds and "open mouths" of the rest of the poem. Yet other disjunctions are equally

important: the haphazard shifts between a "we" (whose membership is never articulated) and an

"I"; the tone, which oscillates between a casual chattiness ("visiting the bridge near Louisberg /

With its hot muddy water flowing / Under the excited swallows") and an elevated indeterminacy

("Falling into the open mouths of darkness, / Into the Congo as if into a river, / Or as wheat into

open mills"); finally, the structure, which can't seem to hold a consistent pattern at either the

stichic or the strophic level.

While the poem is confusing and contradictory, it is not the hermetic "hymn to

possibility" presented in a poem by, say, Gertrude Stein or Samuel Beckett, rejecting the mimetic

impulse of representation for the meontic impulse of non-representation.[28] Indeed, Robert Bly

has a specific set of principles by which he rejects both the prevailing poetry and the prevailing

politics of the Cold War, particularly those embodied in the work and life of its unofficial poet

laureate Robert Frost. First of all, as we see in "Summer, 1960, Minnesota," Bly's work rejects

the poetic structures and modes the New Criticism insisted upon and of which Frost's work had

literally become a textbook example (through, for instance, the 1960 edition of *Understanding

Poetry*): nuance, irony, ambiguity, authorial distancing, and, above all, traditional form and

meter. Beyond his break with traditional form and meter, however, Bly's poetry breaks the

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[28] Here I draw upon Marjorie Perloff's distinction between the two central impulses in poetry: the meontic (the imitation of "what is not there") and the mimetic (the imitation of "what is there"). For a fuller discussion of this dichotomy, see Perloff, *Poetics of Indeterminacy* 31-44.

linear, rational mimesis of, say, Frost's "The Gift Outright" with the surreally disjunctive imagery of lines like "Inside me there is a confusion of swallows / birds flying through the smoke;" this sort of imagery refused to yield to the two primary interpretive modes of reading poetry at midcentury, the Deweyian "experience" mode and the theme-driven "analytical" mode.

At a more fundamental level, Bly's work subverts the Anglo-American poetic tradition. Bly fuses Anglo-American poetic structures with Surrealist influences from faraway lands like Spain, Peru, and Chile—the same places Kennedy referred to as the "lands of rising peoples." Indeed, "Summer, 1960, Minnesota" at first *seems* familiar to an American reader because it recalls the pastoral opening of so many poems in the tradition of Abrams's "Greater Romantic Lyric"—certainly Coleridge's "Dejection: An Ode" and Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind," but also Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," Stevens's "The Idea of Order at Key West," and myriad other lyric meditations in the Anglo-American tradition. However, in the second strophe, we leave the familiar order and structures of the Anglo-American post-Romantic tradition and suddenly find ourselves in a poem written in the style of Spanish-language Surrealists like Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, or César Vallejo. This aesthetic departure from the First World to the Third World is echoed, in turn, in the poem's leap from Minnesota to the Congo. In drawing the correspondence between the American Midwest and Sub-Saharan Africa, Bly seeks to unravel the Cold War dichotomy of an American "heartland" ruled democratically and "lands of the rising peoples" ruled by strongmen.

As a poet, Bly has proven difficult to pigeonhole. Traditional critical approaches have tended to classify him according to four independent categories: he is a Midwesterner; after initially writing in a style that was characteristic of a Harvard-educated poet of his generation,

his poetry shifted, becoming image-driven and in the style of Spanish and Latin American Surrealists; this reliance upon a poem's imagery came at the cost of more traditional prosodic strategies; finally, his life and career have been marked by political and cultural activism, first in response to the Vietnam War and later in the Men's Movement. [29]

Richard Howard's synopsis of Bly in *Alone with America* is fairly representative of this critical evaluation. Howard begins by nodding to Bly's geographical origins (indeed, Howard's very first sentence notes that Bly was "[b]orn on the western plains of Minnesota") before discussing Bly's very public political stances, "his poems of protest, his abuse of the Great Society and his abhorrence of the Small War" (57). Finally, Howard addresses Bly's lack of traditional poetic form and structure in favor of the Surrealist image:

…the characteristic Bly music [is] lagging, irregular, profound, and casting about the image, the image alone, a kind of ontological glamour which leaves unattended so many other kinds of decorum, of propriety, of keeping which we may find, or hope to find, in poems; rhetorical splendor, rhyme, a rhythm constructed or at least contested by more than the drawing of breath, wit, elevation, even humor—none of these… (58)

Like other critics, Howard sees these four components as largely independent of one another: Bly's Midwestern origins, for instance, have little to do with his rejection of traditional poetic form.

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[29] For examples of such a critique, see Simpson 21 and Gitlin 375-380. Bly's two most famous political-literary acts were his co-founding (with David Ray) of American Writers Against the Vietnam War in 1965 and his donation of the prize money he received for the 1968 National Book Award to The Resistance.

As I shall argue, however, these disparate elements of Bly's life and work—his use of free verse, his insistence upon the Surrealist image as the organizing principle of a poem, and, finally, the Midwestern landscapes of his poems—are all intricately linked to his political opposition to Cold War orthodoxies and his embrace of Spanish-language poetry from the "lands of the rising peoples." Nowhere is this more apparent than in Bly's collection *Silence in the Snowy Fields*. Though published in 1962, the poems were largely composed during the late 1950s, and they illuminate Bly's concerns regarding the interplay of poetry and power during the Cold War.[30]

In Bly's work, even something as seemingly pedestrian as prosody revealed a political choice. What Howard sees as "lagging, irregular" poetry was not, in fact, a lazy approach to verse on Bly's part. Instead, it was an ideologically consistent response to the prevailing poetic principles of the 1950s. In short, Bly saw the New Criticism that ruled English departments and had lionized the Moderns as poetically suspect and politically bankrupt.

Bly admired the Moderns—whom he alternately called "the men of 1914" and "the Men of the Tens"—for the scope of their accomplishment and daring as they "suddenly raided modern life and brought back large portions of it" ("Five Decades of American Poetry" 39). The problem, Bly argued, was not the Moderns' project, but the fact that it stopped:

…but often, as with Eliot in THE WASTE LAND, one large raid, and it was over.

The single raid was so astonishing it amazed, even petrified with amazement,

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[30] Though *Silence in the Snowy Fields* is considered Bly's first book, he had actually written two prior poetry collections. The first was a book of self-described "classical poems" that he did not publish. The second, *Poems for the Ascension of J.P. Morgan*, was explicitly political, but, Bly contends, "those were political poems at a time when America didn't want any political poems" and so the volume went unpublished (Bellamy 64).

even themselves, so that they did not continue opening the doors of their

work….("Five Decades of American Poetry 39).

Bly's awe for the Modernist project was matched in intensity by his dismay that the Modernist spirit of "making it new" had disappeared from American letters in the years following the "men of the Tens." What was "natural," Bly argued, is that American poetry should move beyond its forty-year stasis:

> If America were truly iconoclastic in thought, the ideas suggested by the names
>
> Ransom, I.A. Richards, Eliot and Warren would long ago have been replaced by
>
> other ideas. Such supplanting is natural. ("Poetry in an Age of Expansion" 352)

To Bly's dismay, the natural "supplanting" of Modernist aesthetics by a new poetics had not occurred by midcentury. The iconoclastic poetry of Eliot—a poetry of irony, paradox, nuance, and allusion – had been calcified by the New Critics and become the dominant mode. Where James Breslin saw this influence as the source of midcentury anomie, Bly likened it to a military conquest: "When the Forties came…the iamb came back into poetry and settled itself with a vengeance, like an occupying army returning on a people that had temporarily evicted it" ("Five Decades…" 37). Indeed, for Bly, the New Critical lionization of the "men of the Tens" – as well as the midcentury poetry the New Criticism sanctioned--was evidence of a larger and more insidious conservative assault:

Yvor Winters and several contemporary followers advise us to reimpose old form. That may be all right. But we know from the experience of Germany and Italy in this century that modern society cannot be made livable by the reimposition of old forms. (*American Poetry: Wildness and Domesticity* 229)

Bly's allusion to the Axis Alliance in this passage is not haphazard. For Bly, the New Criticism was not only rearward-looking but in fact sinister. Indeed, he equated New Critical principles with the same sort of rationality that had yielded the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In his seminal 1961 essay "A Wrong Turning in American Poetry," Bly rejected the tenets of New Criticism codified in *Understanding Poetry*: its reliance upon authorial distancing, paradox, and irony; its separation of "speaker" and poet; its faith in traditional, received poetic structures and forms; its dismissal of free verse. Such New Critical ideas, argued Bly, "encourage the poet to construct automated and flawless machines" (*American Poetry* 15).

According to Bly, the use of traditional meter produced poems that were cold, perfect, and heartless:

Such poems have thousands of intricately moving parts, dozens of iambic belts and pulleys, precision trippers that rhyme at the right moment, lights flashing alternately red and green, steam valves that whistle like birds. (*American Poetry* 15-16)

As this passage suggests, Bly's "A Wrong Turning" ultimately connects a "technical" poetry with the scientific, "destructive" impulses of war (*American Poetry* 34). After all, can the

passage's allusions to "precision trippers" and "lights flashing alternately red and green" be read innocently in 1961, with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962 looming?

For Bly, the sort of creative minds that would draw upon traditional meter and rhetorical structure were not far removed from the hyper-rational minds that had produced the atrocities of the twentieth century. In Bly's taxonomy, those poets who adopted received metrical codes and rhetorical formulae were "engineers," nearly analogous to those who made possible "the Nazi camps [and] the terror of modern wars" ("Five Decades …" 39).

Ultimately, Bly saw the static, rearward-looking literature of the United States at midcentury as indicative of a retrograde, imperial culture:

> Suppose a country's literature never does shed its skin, what will happen to it?
> Suppose it doesn't move on to anything new…? Suppose also that the human
> being is not studied in relation to non-human lives, or lives in other countries, but
> simply in relation to itself? One can predict first of all that such a nation will
> bomb foreign populations very easily, since it has no sense of anything real
> beyond its own ego. (*American Poetry* 236)

Bly argued that a literary age in which no writers challenged aesthetic pieties was the product of political culture in which no one dared to challenge official propaganda. What Bly advocated, therefore, was a poetics that forced American literature to "shed its skin" in the same way the Moderns had challenged American literature in the early decades of the twentieth century.

"What we need now is not the men of the 1910s but something different" Bly opined in the first issue of *The Fifties*, the magazine he created to usher in the "different" poetry of a new

age ("Five Decades of American Poetry" 39). Bly used *The Fifties* to promote what he believed to be the proper direction for a continuation of the Modernist project of "Mak[ing] It New": Spanish-language Surrealism.

> If we keep our eyes too closely on poetry in English, we see when we look for something new nothing but Eliot, Pound, Williams, and others, all men of the Tens, but if we look abroad, we see some astonishing landscapes: the Spanish tradition, for instance, of great delicacy, which grasps modern life as a lion grabs a dog, and wraps it in heavy countless image, and holds it firm in a terrifically dense texture. ("Five Decades of American Poetry" 38)

Bly saw Spanish-language Surrealism as the antidote not just to a moribund literary culture but to a cowed political culture and a crippled collective psychology. Indeed, Spanish-language Surrealism offered American literature a vehicle to react against the neutrality of midcentury consensus:

> Why then have so few American poems penetrated to any reality in our political life? I think one reason is that political concerns and inward concerns have always been regarded in our tradition as opposites, even incompatibles. ("Leaping Up Into Political Poetry" 9)

The Surrealism of Spain and Latin America—a poetry Bly began reading in Norway while on a Fulbright in 1956—provided a model for what such an "inward" poetry might look like.

Above all, it was a poetry of images rather than syllables, a poetry "in which everything is said by image," indeed, a poetry in which "the poem *is* the images" ("The Work of Robert Creeley" 14).

Bly argued that midcentury injustices—from wars to assassinations to Jim Crow laws—arose from the neglect of the "inward": "It's clear that many of the events that create our foreign relations and our domestic relations come from more or less hidden impulses in the American psyche." The answer to such injustice, he contended, was not a "force[d] political poetry" that explicitly laid bare its allegiances, but instead poetry that sought to "penetrate that husk around the American psyche" ("Leaping Up Into Political Poetry" 10).

The remedy to this "outward" poetry of rationality, "technical skill," and imperial power, Bly argued, came via the Surrealist image, for it arose from the conscious mind and the unconscious mind working in tandem to "unit[e] the world beneath and the world above" (*American Poetry* 21; "Work of Robert Creeley" 14).

The promise of Spanish-language Surrealist poetry, Bly believed, came from its series of imagistic and linguistic contrasts, its ability to "put together … words that have different natures—like strange animals in a wood" (*American Poetry* 18). This disjunction forced the reader, Bly believed, to "leap from the known part of the mind to the unknown part," thus leaving the rational mind behind (*Leaping Poetry* 1).[31] He saw a poet like Federico García

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[31] While this description of Spanish-language Surrealist poetry (as a series of jarring contrasts) may suggest the work of Pound and Eliot, Bly was very careful to distinguish his project from the project undertaken by these turn-of-the-century High Modernists. Indeed, Bly spoke directly to the "mistaken" assumption that poetry inspired by Spanish-language Surrealism would, in English, simply replicate Pound and Eliot:

> I think it is mistaken to think that if we work in this style our works will resemble Eliot's and Pound's. Two things make me think different. First, some profundity of association has entered the mind since then. Freud's ocean has deepened, and Jung's work on images has been done. To Pound an image meant "Petals on a wet black bough"; to us an image is "death on the deep roads of the guitar" or "the grave of snow" or "the cradle-clothes of the sea." Secondly, Europe and

Lorca as the ideal, pointing to Lorca's awareness of "the different kinds of fur that words have" in the following poem:

> One day
>
> The horses will live in the saloons
>
> And the outraged ants
>
> Will throw themselves on the yellow skies that have taken refuge in the
>
> eyes of cows. (*American Poetry* 18)

Uncanny and inscrutable, lines like these inspired Bly to look to his models—Lorca, Henri Michaux, René Char, Pablo Neruda, César Vallejo, Manuel Machado and Juan Ramón Jiménez, among others—and apply their work to American English. The synthesis between Surrealism—Spanish Surrealism in particular—and American postwar poetry arrived in Bly's 1963 collection *Silence in the Snowy Fields*.[32] Bly's translations of Neruda and Vallejo and his careful study of other poets yielded a poetry in *Silence in the Snowy Fields* that was profoundly uncanny, as lines like these from "The Clear Air of October" can attest:

> And I know the sun is sinking down great stairs,
>
> Like an executioner with a great blade walking into a cellar
>
> And the gold animals, the lions, and the zebras, and the pheasants,

South America have continued to write poetry with the new association, and the poems are in no way related to Pound or Eliot. ("Five Decades of American Poetry" 37-38)

[32] Bly's influences were not all French and Spanish (or Spanish-speaking) Surrealists. He also cited the Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen, the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer, and German poets Rainer Maria Rilke and Georg Trakl among his most important predecessors. See *American Poetry* 16.

Are waiting at the head of the stairs with robbers' eyes. (*Silence* 52)

Or these, from "Waking from Sleep":

Inside the veins there are navies setting forth

Tiny explosions at the water lines,

And seagulls weaving in the wind of the salty blood (*Silence* 13)

These are moments of the bizarre and the unexpected—"navies" inside the bloodstream, mysterious "gold animals…with robbers' eyes" waiting at the head of the "great stairs" the sun has just descended. These chains of eerie and inexplicable images drive Bly's poetry; in his dichotomy, they are the "inward" poetics that counter the "destructive motion outward" of American Cold War policy.

The final component of Bly's poetry—its use of the Midwest—is intricately linked to his work against American foreign policy. While a poem like ""Summer, 1960, Minnesota" takes Anglo-American post-Romanticism and turns it upside-down, Bly's poem also subverts the Cold War idealization of the Midwest. Indeed, by suggesting parallels between the Midwest and "the lands of the rising peoples," Bly undermines what cultural geographer James R. Shortridge has called the "cult of the Midwest": the midcentury romanticization of the American Midwest as a simple, agricultural space full of simple, agricultural people.

While the Midwest had long been associated with traditional social values and a romanticized agrarianism, a powerful wave of nostalgia for the Midwest as "America's

Heartland" arose during the 1950s. [33] Cold War perceptions of "the East as the embodiment of

American technological might" gave rise to a deep cultural longing for parochialism,

pastoralism, and simplicity, all of which was projected upon the Midwest (Shortridge 67-96,

134-144, 135).

Two moments in particular stand out as emblematic of this Cold War romanticization of

the Midwest: the Communist "takeover" of Mosinee, Wisconsin in 1950 and the success of the

Broadway musical *The Music Man* between the years 1957 and 1961. Though situated at

opposite ends of the 1950s, these two events, when taken together, suggest the idea of the

Midwest during the Cold War. In the popular imagination, the region stood for all things

virtuous, decent, and uncomplicated; it was profoundly moral and ardently anticommunist. A

symbol of both the foundation and the objective of the American way-of-life, the Midwest was,

in short, what the imperial metropolises of the Eastern seaboard were fighting for.

Mosinee, Wisconsin's "Day Under Communism" is a useful example of the "cult of the

Midwest" that Bly was destabilizing in his poems. Though a powerful media event of the Cold

War, the actual episode itself was relatively simple: beginning at 6 a.m. on May Day, 1950, a

small Wisconsin mill town (population 1400) was "occupied" for a day by members of the

American Legion posing as Soviet invaders to "impress upon the American people the ultimate

every-day living objectives of the red tide" (Fried 69). Yet the media circus surrounding this

Midwestern coup speaks to the public image of the Midwest during the Cold War. For twelve

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[33] I am not arguing that the idea of the Midwest as a forgettable, agrarian space of simple, decent people began or
ended in the 1950s; such a notion begins far earlier and it endures to this day. For instance, George H. Scheetz notes
that the pejorative meaning of "playing in Peoria" Illinois as spending time in a "dull, banal, provincial" place has its
origins in the vaudeville era (57-58). Moreover, as recently as 1986, geographer Cotton Mather argued that the
Midwest was perceived as " 'standard American'—lacking the presumptions of the East, the traditions of the South,
the flamboyance of Texas, the lure of the Golden West" (193). Indeed, this image of the Midwest endures to the
present moment, embodied, for instance, in the use of the phrase "flyover country" when referring to the Midwest.
        What I am noting, however, is the surge in the "Cult of the Midwest" that occurred in the 1950s as
substantiated by the cultural phenomena of the "Day Under Communism" and *The Music Man*.

hours—and years thereafter in the public consciousness— Mosinee, Wisconsin served as a synecdoche of all that was decent and vulnerable in American culture.

As Richard M. Fried recounts, the "Day Under Communism" (as its organizers called it) was one part political theater and one part farce. The night before the invasion, Legionnaires posing as members of Communist party cells gathered—before the eyes of the media—at the Legion Hall to lionize Lenin and Stalin and to declare "We count the hours when the poor and downtrodden workers will rise and overthrow the whole rotten regime of the United States" (Fried 72). The next morning, the Reds—under the moniker "The Council of People's Commissars"—deposed Mosinee's mayor, "executed" its police chief, stormed its churches, and shut down the *Mosinee Times* (replacing it with the *Red Star*, a pink-tinted party newspaper that offered up tributes to Stalin). The faux Soviets set up blockades and demanded to see the papers (identification documents as well as the permits for all entry, exit, rations, gasoline, and cameras) of all citizenry. The grocery stores enforced stark rationing, and the restaurants served only potato soup, black bread, and coffee. Private property was dissolved, land confiscated, the *Constitution* invalidated, the paper mill nationalized.

Ultimately, the Soviet takeover ended at nightfall as Mosineeans came together in the town's "Red Square" to throw the Communist propaganda into an enormous bonfire. Yet the repercussions of the "Day Under Communism" lasted far longer than the 12 hours of the actual event. Indeed, even before the takeover occurred, it was covered in over 1200 newspapers and played on all radio networks. The "Day Under Communism" itself drew worldwide attention, with on-location coverage by the three national television networks, *Life*, *Reader's Digest*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* (as well as virtually every other major American

newspaper; indeed, the *Philadelphia Inquirer* sent its United Nations correspondent) and even the Soviet TASS news agency (Fried 67-86).

The "Day Under Communism"—with its melodramatic executions and takeovers—is certainly telling of the place the Red Scare held in the American imagination. Yet it is equally telling of the place the Midwest held in the American consciousness, a place summed up in the *American Legion Magazine*'s analysis of the event: "It can't happen here? It *did* happen." ("It Happened One Day…" 32).

The 1950 "Day Under Communism" thus reveals a popular perception of the Midwest as a decent and vulnerable "heartland." At the other end of the decade—but equally nostalgic in its romantic portrayal of the Midwest—sits Meredith Willson's wildly successful Broadway hit *The Music Man*. Opening in December 1957 and running through April 1961—an amazing 1375 performances—Meredith Willson's musical was a romantic paean to the Midwest.[34] The setting was the wholesome but fictional River City, Iowa, a place of hard-working, honest, and simple people. These gullible and charitable "River Citizens" (as their lovable mayor refers to them) are easy marks for the scams of Professor Harold Hill. Hill is a confidence man who comes to town to convince River City that, thanks to the newly-arrived game of pool, the town is on the road to moral decay. These moral degradations seem remarkably innocuous: cigarettes, beer, gambling, dancing. Indeed, these "jungle animal instinct[s]" begin, Hill warns, with "knickerbockers below the knee" and the arrival of words like "swell" into everyday conversation. Hill convinces the town that a marching band will "keep the young ones moral after school," and that he should sell

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[34] Indeed, this romanticized view of the Midwest is made clear by the play's evocation of Grant Wood's painting "American Gothic," itself an icon of the Midwest. Witness these stage directions during "Iowa Stubborn":
(The 2 WORKMEN leave Billiard Parlor carrying pool table packing case frame to center, as FARMER & WIFE who have entered meet down center. THEY turn inside frame for short pose as Grant Wood's "American Gothic.") (Willson 28).
For an extended discussion of the myth surrounding Wood's painting, see Cantor "American Classic" 33-37.

them the band instruments and uniforms (Willson 32-39). While their simplicity makes the River Citizens prey for Hill, their moral uprightness, in turn, saves the day. Hill falls in love with the local librarian, Marian Paroo, and is reformed. Moreover, though he is exposed as a fraud and apprehended, Hill is forgiven by the kind River Citizens.

And though Hill is the main character of *The Music Man*, River City—functioning as synecdoche for that Midwest—is truly its star. Indeed, River City is morally upstanding, charitable, and delightfully agrarian:

> We can stand touchin' noses
>
> For a week at a time
>
> And never see eye-to-eye.
>
> But we'll give you our shirt
>
> And a back to go with it
>
> If your crops should happen to die. (Willson 26-28)

But this simplicity comes at a cost, as the Midwest is far from cosmopolitan; Hill's home, as he admits, is "Not Louisiana, Paris, France, New York, or Rome, but-- /Gary, Indiana." (Willson 122-123).   What is more, the musical number "Iowa Stubborn" ends with the townspeople's exhortation that:

> You really ought to give Iowa—
>
> Hawkeye Iowa
>
> Dubuque, Des

Moines, Davenport, Marshalltown,

Mason City, Keokuk, Ames,

Clear Lake—

Ought to give Iowa a try!

The imperative that "[y]ou really ought to give Iowa … a try!", coupled with a catalog of

obscure (if not unknown) Iowan towns, suggests that the audience has *not* given Iowa a try, that

it remains a place both uncomplicated and undiscovered.

The success of *The Music Man*—underscored by its 4-year, 1375-show run—shows just

how popular and attractive this romantic idealization of the Midwest was. *Time*, for instance,

reviewed *The Music Man* with fulsome praise: "In a fat Broadway season whose successes deal

so clinically with such subjects as marital frustration, alcoholism, dope addiction, juvenile

delinquency and abortion, *The Music Man* is a monument to golden unpretentiousness and

wholesome fun" ("Pied Piper" 46). As this sentence suggests, the Midwest had become a

counterpoint to all that was difficult in 1950s America.

The success of *The Music Man* and the shock of Mosinee's "Day Under Communism"

reveal the importance of the Midwest as a locus of American virtue and moral stability. Yet in

Bly's eyes, the very belief in an inherent Midwestern "golden unpretentiousness and wholesome

fun" that *Time* magazine had cited in its review of *The Music Man* helped create and perpetuate

what Bly had called "Americans' fantastic capacity for aggression and self-delusion" (*American

Poetry* 16).

Thus, a crucial component of Bly's attempt to "penetrate that husk around the American

psyche" was the unmooring of the image of a stable, boring, moral, and agrarian Midwest

("Leaping Up" 9). At first blush, *Silence in the Snowy Fields* is rife with tropes that could have come right out of the "Cult of the Midwest": rural emptiness; slow rivers; fields of grain; small towns; idle townspeople. Indeed, the first strophe of "Summer, 1960, Minnesota" bears this out, with its "hot muddy water flowing" and "sturdy alfalfa fields," as do these opening lines from "Driving Toward the Lac Qui Parle River":

> I am driving; it is dusk; Minnesota.
>
> The stubble field catches the last growth of sun.
>
> The soybeans are breathing on all sides.
>
> Old men are sitting before their houses on carseats
>
> In the small towns. I am happy,
>
> The moon rising above the turkey sheds. (20)

Yet Bly's insistence upon a "leaping poetry" that oscillates between the known and the unknown breaks these idyllic scenes time and again. His poems suddenly rupture the simple, romantic Midwest with a wholly uncanny language and imagery. For instance, in one poem "the lawns in tiny towns, and the doors of Catholic churches" sit amidst "gold wings without birds" and "wells of cold water / Without walls standing eighty feet up in the air" (52). In yet another poem, Bly invokes a nostalgic "Saturday afternoon in the football season" in which "[c]rowds are gathered, / Warmed by the sun and the pure air" only to puncture this autumnal scene with a "dream of moles with golden wings" (53).

The Surrealist shattering of such romanticized images of the Midwest was part of Bly's larger project in *Silence in the Snowy Fields*: to break the Cold War dichotomy of a safe

76

"heartland" and a volatile globe full of "rising peoples." Having translated into English the work

of Neruda and Vallejo—poets who brought Surrealism to South America—Bly was intimately

familiar with the geopolitics of Third World producers and First World consumers. In Bly's

translation of Neruda's "United Fruit Company," for instance, the Chilean poet describes a

southern hemisphere parceled out by American corporations and split up into nations

"rechristened…as the Banana Republics." The poem then describes the export of these "Banana

Republics":

> …Among the bloodthirsty flies
>
> the Fruit Company lands its ships,
>
> taking off the coffee and the fruit;
>
> the treasure of our submerged
>
> territories flows as though
>
> on plates into the ships. (Bly, *Neruda and Vallejo* 87)

In *Silence in the Snowy Fields*, Bly transforms Neruda's "Banana Republic" of fruit and coffee

into the American "heartland" of wheat, corn, and alfalfa. Indeed, the parallel between Neruda's

Third World and Bly's Midwest becomes clear when comparing the final lines of Neruda's

"United Fruit Company" to those of Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota." Neruda concludes the

poem:

> Meanwhile Indians are falling
>
> into the sugared chasms

77

of the harbors, wrapped

for burial in the mist of the dawn :

a body rolls, a thing

that has no name, a fallen cipher

a cluster of dead fruit

thrown down on the dump. (87)

In looking at these lines, it is hard to ignore the similarities to the closing strophe of "Summer, 1960, Minnesota":

Yet, we are falling,

Falling into the open mouths of darkness,

Into the Congo as if into a river,

Or as wheat into open mills.

Neruda's "Indians" who are "falling… / into the sugared chasms / of the harbors" become the "we" in Bly's poem who are "[f]alling into the open mouths of darkness"; the "cluster of dead fruit / thrown down on the dump" become the "wheat into open mills." Through Bly's embrace of Spanish language Surrealism, the Midwest *becomes* the Third World.

V.

James Wright shared Robert Bly's politics, his poetics, and his ability to transform the Midwest into a landscape informed by Spanish Surrealism. A conventional view of Wright's

work holds that his political engagement truly began in response to the Vietnam Conflict.[35]

Nevertheless, I believe the Spanish Civil War—and the work of its Surrealist poets—played a far

larger role in Wright's work than Vietnam, and *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963) is a far more

political work than it would first appear. Indeed, Wright shares Bly's project of joining the

Midwest to "the lands of the rising peoples." In *The Branch Will Not Break*, Wright tranforms

the Ohio River Valley into Franco's Spain. His work provides a strange twist to Mosinee's "Day

Under Communism": in *The Branch Will Not Break*, Wright presents a Midwest that has been

invaded not by Soviet Communism but by Spanish Surrealism.

The intertwining of Bly's and Wright's aesthetics and ideologies was built out of a

decades-long friendship between the men and their wives that began in the late 1950s (J. Breslin

176-182). Yet the relationship had a hierarchy: Wright saw Bly as a man who had saved him

poetically. Despite the critical successes of *The Green Wall* (1957)—the winning manuscript of

the 1957 Yale Younger Poets Prize—and *Saint Judas* (1959), Wright had reached a poetic crisis

after the publication of his second volume.[36] Though his work was widely praised, its technical

proficiency and traditional poetic form exhausted and bored him. "My stuff stinks," he wrote

Theodore Roethke in 1958, "because it is *competent*" (qtd. in J. Breslin 189). Indeed, in a 1972

interview, Wright admitted that, by the late 1950s, "I felt that, for myself, a certain kind of poetry

had come to an end, and I thought that I would stop writing poetry completely…" (Andre 3).

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[35] This view takes its basis in part from Wright's "A Mad Fight Song for William S. Carpenter, 1966," which condemns the West Pointer who called infamously for his troops to be napalmed rather than surrender. Wright composed the poem for Walter Lowenfels's *Where is Vietnam?* (1967). While this poem has the clear political context of the Vietnam War, my argument is that Wright's political engagement took shape far earlier in his career.

[36] In addition to the Yale Younger Poets Prize, Wright's early-career critical successes included *Poetry* magazine's 1955 Eunice Titejens Memorial Award; a *Kenyon Review* Fellowship for 1958/59; and wide publication in such established journals as the *New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Kenyon Review, Sewanee*, and *Hudson Review*.

Bly's magazine *The Fifties* offered Wright new possibilities. Upon reading the first issue in 1958, Wright was so inspired that he sent Bly a sixteen-page letter. At the time, Wright, a native of Martins Ferry, Ohio, was teaching at the University of Minnesota; his post in Minneapolis made it very convenient, therefore, to receive Bly's invitation, upon the receipt of Wright's letter, to come to his farm in Rochester. At that moment, Wright's poetic career was at a standstill. "I truly believed that I had said what I had to say as clearly and directly as I could, and that I had no more to do with this art," he later recalled (Stitt 48).

The meeting with Bly proved transformative for Wright. "Robert Bly suggested to me that there is a kind of poetry that can be written," Wright later noted. "It led me into some areas of thought, and of rhythm also, that I hadn't tried to work out before" (Stitt 48). It also led him to an entirely new reading list; whereas Wright had looked to Frost and Edward Arlington Robinson as poetic models, Bly introduced him to a previously unknown set of poets to draw upon: the Surrealists of Spain and Latin America, a group far removed from the Anglo-American tradition in which Wright had been steeped.[37] Reading these poets was transformative: Wright proclaimed Vallejo "one of the greatest modern poets in any language with which I am familiar" ("A Note on César Vallejo" 9); Neruda, in turn, he compared to Shakespeare ("I Come to Speak for Your Dead Mouths" 191-192).

In Bly, Wright had found a model and mentor who enabled him to break through—in Richard Howard's words—the "rhythmic docility" of his first two books and into an entirely new poetic style (Howard, *Alone* 664). This new aesthetic emerged almost immediately, with Wright's proclamation in the second issue of *The Fifties* that he had renounced "nineteenth

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[37] It is true that Wright's reading was not exclusively Anglo-American, as he had thoroughly studied German poets Theodor Storm and Georg Trakl while at the University of Vienna on a Fulbright scholarship in 1952-53.

century poetry;" a renunciation made explicit by the two new poems Wright published in the same issue (Howard, *Alone* 663-673).

These new poems—"In the Hard Sun" and "In Fear of Harvests"—ultimately were collected in *The Branch Will Not Break* four years later.[38] Widely perceived as Wright's breakthrough work, the volume shows surrealistic flights and opaque metaphors derived from his Spanish-language influences:

> …the brown bees drag their high garlands,
>
> Heavily,
>
> Toward hives of snow. (*Branch Will Not Break*13)

> …And the moon walks,
>
> Hunting for hidden dolphins… (*Branch* 38)

> A splayed starling
>
> Follows me down a stairway
>
> Of white sand. (*Branch* 47)

Wright's affinity for Spanish language poets such as Neruda and Vallejo and his embrace of the Midwest produced a body of work that was, like Bly's, a hybrid of Spanish-language Surrealism and Midwestern regionalism. Indeed, Wright was fiercely loyal to his home state. "It's a strange place, Ohio," he asserted:

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[38] "In the Hard Sun" is an early draft of what became "Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium" in *The Branch Will Not Break* (12).

It's both northern and southern; it's eastern and western; all kinds of people live

there. It's literally covered with good small colleges; and yet, the people who live

in Ohio seem very uneducated, in many ways brutal. I like Ohioans very much.

("Something To Be Said" 137)

In speaking to Wright's combination of regionalism and Surrealism, Paul Breslin has

argued that James Wright's poems thrive in "the opposition of Ohio and the collective

unconscious" (*Psycho-Political Muse* 172), and Wright's most famous poem, "Autumn Begins in

Martin's Ferry, Ohio," certainly supports Breslin's contention:

> In the Shreve High football stadium,
>
> I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,
>
> And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,
>
> And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,
>
> Dreaming of heroes.
>
> All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.
>
> Their women cluck like starved pullets,
>
> Dying for love.
>
> Therefore,
>
> Their sons grow suicidally beautiful

At the beginning of October,

And gallop terribly against each other's bodies. (*Branch* 15)

"Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio" is one of Wright's most anthologized and studied poems, and it reveals Bly's strong influence. Where Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota" ruptured a pastoral Midwestern tableau with "open mouths of darkness," here Wright's poem undermines the "Cult of the Midwest" (small-town high school football in the Ohio River Valley) through the arrival of the "suicidally beautiful" creatures in its closing lines. Indeed, much of *The Branch Will Not Break* seems almost indistinguishable from Bly's work, and this is especially true if one looks only to the three most anthologized poems in *The Branch Will Not Break*: "Autumn Begins…,""A Blessing,"" and "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota." These three poems have garnered the lion's share of the critical attention paid to *The Branch Will Not Break*, if not to Wright's entire oeuvre.[39]

I wish, however, to focus instead on three often-overlooked poems that appear consecutively in the collection: "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959," "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," and "The Undermining of the Defense Economy." Taken together—as Wright intended them to be[40]—they link American Surrealism to a critique of American Cold War policy. In particular, the triptych speaks to the oppression that Cold War alliances allowed in the larger

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[39] Paul Breslin, for instance, devotes four full pages to "Autumn Begins…" and "Lying in a Hammock…" in his brief chapter on Wright in *The Psycho-political Muse* 167-171. Meanwhile, "Lying in a Hammock…" has, for instance, received no fewer than three separate articles in *The Explicator* (Stitt and Graziano 162-166). Finally, Jed Rasula offers a statistical accounting of James Wright's anthologization, placing "A Blessing," "Lying in a Hammock…," and "Autumn Begins in Martin's Ferry, Ohio" among the "top 100" poems in anthologies of postwar poetry (as well as Wright's poem "Saint Judas," from Wright's 1959 collection of the same name). See Rasula, *American Poetry Wax Museum* 178, 508-9.

[40] In a 1975 interview with Peter Stitt, Wright asserts that he ordered every collection deliberately, with an eye towards the overall coherence of the book. "Did I mention to you Robert Frost's remark—it is a very Horatian remark—" he asked Stitt "that if you have a book of twenty-four poems, the book itself should be the twenty fifth? And I have tried that every time, every time" (Stitt 52).

fight against Soviet influence. The triad further suggests the ways that an undermining of the Cult of the Midwest is a necessary component of this poetic critique. And while these poems reveal certain political and stylistic affinities with Bly's work, they also reveal the unique interplay of Cold War critique and Spanish Surrealism in *The Branch Will Not Break*.

The trilogy begins in Spain and ends in the Midwest. As the poems shift from the foreign to the domestic, they also shift from memorializing two Spanish poets—Antonio Machado and Miguel Hernández, who died in the Spanish Civil War—to describing a Midwestern landscape. Yet as these poems swing from the explicitly international to the quietly local, they become increasingly opaque in their imagery and more Surrealist in their tropes. Indeed, Wright's triptych begins with a straightforward description of Eisenhower's arrival in Spain in 1959, it evolves into a fusion of the Midwest and revolutionary Spain, and it ultimately ends with an image of Midwestern "little boys" who are "delicate boxes of dust." Using Surrealism—and what is more, a Surrealism that is strongly influenced by the Spanish poets he elegizes— Wright undermines the traditional Midwestern tropes of agrarian landscapes and simple people, ultimately suggesting the links between American foreign policy and the "heartland" upon which that foreign policy was built.

"Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959" begins with a bitterly ironic tone:

> The American hero must triumph over
> The forces of darkness.
> He has flown through the very light of heaven
> And come down in the slow dusk
> Of Spain.(30)

This first strophe reveals Wright's caustic view of American Cold War policy. Indeed, these lines take the good-versus-evil pageantry of Mosinee, Wisconsin's "Day Under Communism" to its extreme: President Eisenhower is an "American hero" who passes through "heaven" to arrive in a "dusk[y]" country, thus drawing upon the Cold War cliché of American heroes bringing light into a dark backwaters of the globe; indeed, this trope was as evident in the popular television show *Gilligan's Island* as it was in Kennedy's 1961 speech urging "the expansion of freedom" to "the lands of the rising peoples."[41]

Wright's poem continues by presenting a savage critique of the links between Eisenhower and Franco before concluding with the ominous image of American warplanes circling the Spanish countryside:

> Franco stands in a shining circle of police.
>
> His arms open in welcome.
>
> He promises all dark things
>
> Will be hunted down.
>
> State police yawn in the prisons.
>
> Antonio Machado follows the moon
>
> Down a road of white dust,
>
> To a cave of silent children
>
> Under the Pyrenees.

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[41] For a further discussion of the relationship between Cold War ideology and television—and *Gilligan's Island* in particular—see Cantor *Gilligan Unbound* 3-34.

Wine darkens in stone jars in villages.

Wine sleeps in the mouths of old men, it is a dark red color.

Smiles glitter in Madrid.

Eisenhower has touched hands with Franco, embracing

In a glare of photographers.

Clean new bombers from America muffle their engines

And glide down now.

Their wings shine in the searchlights

Of bare fields,

In Spain. (30)

This poem has often been read through its series of imagistic dichotomies and, in particular, through the opposition of light and darkness.[42] In such a reading, the "glare of photographers" in which Franco and Eisenhower embrace and the "searchlights" that "shine" upon the bombers provide a counterpoint to the "dark red color" of the wine in the "cave of silent children"; this opposition, in turn, amplifies the struggle between the forces of empire (represented by Franco and Eisenhower) and the forces of resistance (the "dark things" that "must be hunted down," the silent children, the old men).

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[42] For examples of such readings of "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959," see Paul Breslin, *Psycho-Political Muse* 132-134 and James Breslin 198-199.
      I should add that the poem's epigraph, "…we die of cold, and not of *darkness*" (taken from a poem by the Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno y Jugo; italics added for emphasis) adds a great deal of support to these readings.

While these observations are important in understanding the poem, I believe it necessary to add two additional points about "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959." The first of these is metonymic: whereas "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959" is often read as a single poem, far more is revealed when we view it instead as part of a trilogy that also includes "In Memory of a Spanish Poet" and "The Undermining of the Defense Economy." The second point is that, if we do indeed view the three poems as an unfolding tapestry, we see the poet emerge as a figure of resistance, part of a line that extends from Spain to Ohio, from Antonio Machado to Miguel Hernández to Wright himself.

In "Eisenhower's Visit to Franco, 1959," Machado emerges in line 11 as the hero, placed in metonymic opposition to the state police of line 10 (as well the figures for whom the state police are synecdoche: Spain and the United States). Furthermore, if Paul Breslin's and James Breslin's readings of the poem are correct—as I believe they are—the poet is linked with symbols of a heroic darkness; whereas Eisenhower and Franco are illuminated by the light of flashbulbs, Machado "follows the moon" to a "cave" in the countryside.

This portrayal of the heroic poet-rebel continues in "In Memory of a Spanish Poet," the poem that follows "Eisenhower's Visit…" We immediately learn from the poem's epigraph who is being memorialized: Miguel Hernández, a Surrealist who was jailed by Franco's forces during the Spanish Civil War and who ultimately died of tuberculosis while in prison.[43]

In the first stanza, we see Hernández as simultaneously the poem's victim and its champion, at once vulnerable and resistant:

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[43] The poem's epigraph is an attributed line from one of Hernández's poems: "Take leave of the sun, and of the wheat, for me." I realize that describing Hernández as a "Surrealist" is generous, in that he is often understood to be a member of the "Generation of '27" that celebrated the influence of the Spanish Baroque poet Luis de Gongora; Hernández was, however, deeply influenced by the Surrealist poets as well, and it is not wrong to classify him as such. I am deeply indebted to Gustavo Pellón for his clarification of this point.

I see you strangling

Under the black ripples of whitewashed walls.

Your hands turn yellow in the ruins of the sun.

I dream of your slow voice, flying,

Planting the dark waters of the spirit

With lutes and seeds. (31)

Though "strangling" and jaundiced in Franco's prison cell, Hernández lives on through the "voice" of his poetry (his "lutes"). Furthermore, the poem sets up a parallel between Hernández the rebel-Surrealist of Spain and Wright the rebel-Surrealist of the Midwest. Indeed, the poem leaps from the "whitewashed walls" of Franco's jail to Wright's Ohio:

Here, in the American Midwest,

Those seeds fly out of the field and across the strange heaven of my skull.

They scatter out of their wings a quiet farewell,

A greeting to my country.

Now twilight gathers,

A long sundown.

Silos creep away toward the west. (31)

The "seeds" of Hernández's poems—and indeed, of Spanish Surrealism as a whole—appear in Wright's mind (metonymically, his "skull"). Thus, Spanish Surrealism becomes not only an aesthetic choice, but also a political one. To adopt the idioms and bizarre tropes of Hernández and Machado, their "wings" and "skulls," is to adopt their opposition to fascism as well. The poem's ending strophe drives this home: the Midwest is covered in "twilight," just like the "darkness" surrounding Machado and his fellow republicans. In short, Spain has come to the Midwest.

This geographic displacement—and its political implications—continues in the trilogy's final poem:

The Undermining of the Defense Economy

Stairway, face, window,

Mottled animals

Running over the public buildings.

Maple and elm.

In the autumn

Of early evening,

A pumpkin

Lies on its side,

Turning yellow as the face

Of a discharged general.

It's no use complaining, the economy

Is going to hell with all these radical

Changes,

Girls the color of butterflies

That can't be sold.

Only after nightfall,

Little boys lie still, awake,

Wondering, wondering,

Delicate little boxes of dust. (32)

"The Undermining of the Defense Economy" is a deeply ambivalent poem. On the one hand, it presents an autumn landscape reminiscent of Meredith Willson's River City. At the same time, the poem departs from Shortridge's "Cult of the Midwest" as it brings opaque Surrealist tropes to the nameless town: what can it mean, after all, to be a girl "the color of butterflies / That can't be sold"? Or to be a little boy who is a "[d]elicate little box of dust"?

Nevertheless, these apparent contradictions—when seen in the context of "Eisenhower's Visit…" and "In Memory of a Spanish Poet"—yield a singular effect: they place Machado and Hernández against a Midwestern landscape. At the same time, the American heartland becomes profoundly uncanny, its clichéd little boys and girls and small towns rendered suddenly unfamiliar and unsettling.

"The Undermining of the Defense Economy" works in many ways like Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota." The poem begins with a stereotypical Midwestern scene, complete with tidy municipal buildings and stately elms and maples. As in Bly's poem where the "confusion of swallows" breaks the reverie of endless alfalfa fields, the Midwestern nostalgia of this poem is

ruptured by a jarring simile: here an autumnal pumpkin—yet another totem of uncomplicated

small-town life—is the color of a "discharged general['s]" face. The poem's simple portrait of a

simple Midwest suddenly unravels as the bizarre metaphorical flights of Spanish Surrealism are

brought into the familiar American heartland: little girls colored like "butterflies / That can't be

sold" and little boys who are "[d]elicate little boxes of dust."

Whereas the Communist Takeover of Mosinee presented a typical Midwestern town

invaded by mock Soviets, a poem like "The Undermining of the Defense Economy" shows a

typical Midwestern town invaded by Spanish Surrealists. And while its metaphors may be

opaque, the poem's politics are clear: to undermine the defense economy is to become a

Surrealist. In this conclusion to his poetic triptych, Wright makes his poetic lineage explicit:

Machado and Hernández were rebel-poets who fought the fascist Franco during the Spanish

Civil War; Wright, in turn, becomes their heir, a rebel-poet fighting Eisenhower during the

American Cold War.

In this chapter, I have attempted to show how Robert Bly and James Wright used Spanish

Surrealism to link the "lands of the rising peoples" to the American Midwest. In doing so, I

believe they sought to refute the Cold War "golden age of poetry and power" Frost had

prophesized in his "Dedication" poem. In the next chapter, I shall examine how W.S. Merwin

used French Surrealism to critique the Vietnam War.

Chapter Two

"Again again with its pointless sound": Merwin, Lowell, Vietnam

I.

In the fall of 1960, America was infatuated with a sharp, good-looking Boston Catholic. Brilliant, charismatic, and well-spoken, he was also well-bred, hailing from a wealthy Massachusetts family whose prominence both aided and dogged him.   He seemed somehow much younger than his 43 years, and yet by 1960 he had already accomplished so much in life that his potential seemed limitless. In his energy and vision, he had given an entire generation hope for the future.

His name, of course, was Robert Lowell.

You can be forgiven for confusing him with John Fitzgerald Kennedy, the nation's 35th president. Both were Harvard men, both were Pulitzer Prize winners (Kennedy for *Profiles in Courage*, Lowell for *Lord Weary's Castle*), both were philanderers. Both men had proved how politics and literature could be inextricably linked, how they could be, at once, both cosmopolitan *and* American.

 Indeed, the Robert Lowell of the early 1960s was a poet on the make, living in the sweet spot between his most famous collections, *Life Studies* (1959) and *For the Union Dead* (1964). By mid-decade, Irvin Ehrenpreis had already begun referring to the era as "The Age of Lowell"

(69) and the *New Yorker* was suggesting that Lowell had miraculously "combine[d] the roles of *poète maudit* and *chef d'ecole*" ("Briefly Noted" 179).[44]

In its examination of Cold War poetics and politics, this chapter continues the arc of the previous chapter, situating the emergent American Surrealism against the predominant poet of the age. Whereas Chapter One argued for the place of James Wright and Robert Bly in an era defined by Robert Frost, this chapter examines W.S. Merwin in the "Age of Lowell." Comparing the anti-Vietnam poems Merwin and Lowell published in their respective 1967 collections *Near the Ocean* and *The Lice,* I argue that Merwin established American Surrealism as the pre-eminent poetic mode of political dissent in the Vietnam era; in doing so, Merwin took the Surrealist aesthetic formed in France under the shadow of World War I and placed it squarely in American verse at the height of the Cold War. Merwin's *The Lice*, I argue, is the pivotal work in the history of American Surrealism. It uses Surrealism to critique the American war in Vietnam in the same way that Miguel Hernández criticized Franco or Pablo Neruda criticized the United Fruit Company: with invective and rage. On the other hand, *The Lice* is a hermetic text that gives rise to the enigmatic, curious, often-mocked Surrealist poems of the 1970s.[45]

The year he published *Near The Ocean*—1967— Lowell was quite literally at the forefront of the antiwar movement, linking arms with such figures as Noam Chomsky, Benjamin Spock, and Norman Mailer at the March on the Pentagon.[46] Indeed, Lowell was later lionized in

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[44]Indeed, at mid-decade, Ehrenpreis was so optimistic about the influence and stature of Lowell that he asserted "one can prophesy that his next book will establish his name as that normally thought of for 'the' American poet" (92).

[45] Miller Williams also makes a "two book" argument about *The Lice*. Williams' contention, however, lies in his belief that there are two different tones to the collection rather than two aesthetic and political modes. See Williams 32-33.

[46] Lowell would ultimately recount The March on Washington in two poems, both titled "The March"; they are both sections of the longer poem "October and November" (*The Notebook 1967-68* 27).

Mailer's *Armies of the Night* for his participation in the march. Yet despite Lowell's status as the poetic luminary of the antiwar movement, his collection of poems savagely critical of the Johnson administration was received not as the powerful *cri de coeur* of the age. [47] In the words of one critic, it was "the disappointment of the season"; this same critic went on in his assessment to admit "I'm not sure it's a book" (Philbrick 34). While it would be impossible to present every critic's reaction, a select few reviews from both high-brow and middlebrow sources are very telling: the *New Yorker* called it "an interim work in every respect" ("Briefly Noted" 180); *The Hudson Review* savaged it as "pretentious" (Carruth 429); *The Nation* called it "a rather meager" collection, one that verged towards mere "doggerel" (Zweig "A Murderous Solvent" 536); *The Yale Review* mused that *Near the Ocean* suggested that Lowell was in a "fallow period" (Martz 595).

Instead, the great anti-war collection of 1967 came from W. S. Merwin, a poet who had been quietly and purposefully off-stage during Lowell's anti-war grandstanding. Merwin's *The Lice* was embraced as a powerful indictment of American policy in Southeast Asia. Laurence Lieberman, writing in *The Yale Review*, embraced *The Lice* as a Vietnam-era jeremiad:

> If there is any book today that has perfectly captured the peculiar spiritual agony
> of our time, the agony of a generation which knows itself to be the last, and has
> transformed that agony into great art, it is W. S. Merwin's *The Lice*. To read these
> poems is an act of self-purification. Every poem in this book pronounces a

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[47]   I must note that *Near the Ocean* is not, in its totality, an anti-war volume. It also includes translations from the classical age and the Renaissance, as well as a tribute to Theodore Roethke. Nevertheless, the heart of the volume is the set of first-person poems written in the wake of Lowell's confrontation with the Johnson White House in 1965, a chain of events I shall describe later in this chapter.

judgment against modern man—the gravest sentence the poetic imagination can

conceive for man's withered and wasted conscience… (Liebermann 597)

Robert Hass, writing in *The Nation*, shared Lieberman's enthusiasm for *The Lice* as a poetic

indictment of American violence and oppression:

[Merwin] has written, from a peculiar depth, American poems of fear, timidity

and helplessness in the face of violence and death… one has the strange sense that

Merwin with a new freedom has begun to write about the concentration camps of

the free world. (254)

This incongruity between the two antiwar volumes' reception, between the breakout success of

The Lice and the surprising impotence of *Near the Ocean*, is a pivotal moment in the twenty-five

year history of American Surrealism.[48] In one fell swoop, *The Lice* delivered Surrealism into the

center of American arts and letters by way of the Vietnam War.

And while *The Lice* uses Vietnam to draw upon Surrealism's past as an aesthetic

response to the Great War, Merwin's collection looks to the future as well. Through the

volume's immense success, Merwin exposed a younger generation of politically aware American

poets to the Surrealist aesthetic. These poets—James Tate, Larry Levis, Charles Wright, Bill

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[48] I must acknowledge that not all reviewers shared Hass's and Lieberman's awe or their belief that *The Lice* was a cry against American actions in Vietnam. Louis Simpson argued in *Harpers* that the poems in the volume showed "a weird simplicity" (237). Louise Bogan, writing in the *New Yorker*, found the volume "opaque because of Merwin's adherence to the non-logical" (63). Samuel French Morse, writing in the *Virginia Quarterly Review*, found the collection elusive, in that its "ideas as such never quite declare themselves openly" (510). All of these reviews are ultimately correct in that they point to the opacity of *The Lice*. The success of the volume, as I argue in this chapter, lies in its synthesis of the opaque with the political, or, perhaps more pointedly, in its synthesis of American Surrealist aesthetics with anti-Vietnam politics.

Knott, Russell Edson , Mark Strand, Greg Orr, Peter Everwine, Charles Simic, and so many

others—would go on to become the second growth American Surrealists of the 1970s.[49] These

were the poets who typified the "one-of-the-guys Surrealism" aesthetic mode mocked in histories

of American postwar poetry.[50] This, therefore, is the second major accomplishment of *The Lice*:

it made Surrealism so popular among the young poets of the 1970s that Paul Zweig would

proclaim in 1973 that "surrealism is the language our poets speak" (329) while Robert Pinsky

would publish *The Situation of Poetry* (1976) to rail against these young Turks with their "thick,

rich handful[s] of words" (163).

The relationship between American Surrealists and critique of American policy in

Vietnam has been acknowledged by other critics, perhaps most notably Paul Breslin.[51] Indeed,

Breslin has argued that the American Surrealists (among whose number he places Merwin)

evolved out of the rise and fall of the New Left. "The New Contemporary Poem" (as he calls

American Surrealist writing) was a poetic articulation of those principles incubating among

thinkers like Herbert Marcuse and N.O. Brown during the 1960s. The conflict in Vietnam

provided a catalyst for a poetry that turned to the Surreal as a revolutionary act, though Breslin's

characterization of this shift is far less charitable:

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[49] It is true that Charles Simic is Serbian and that Mark Strand is Canadian. Nevertheless, the bulk of their careers have been spent in the United States.

[50] The phrase "one-of-the-guys-Surrealism" comes from Pinsky's *Situation of Poetry* (163), and it is indicative of the ways American Surrealist poets have been frequently ridiculed in anthologies and literary histories. Dana Gioia, for instance, argues that "[f]ew literary movements produced so many dreadful poems so quickly as Seventies surrealism" (75). Vernon Shetley, in turn, blasts the work of these writers for their "preciosity" (169). Robert von Hallberg, meanwhile, dismisses the work of these writers for their "most easily recognized and widely employed" aesthetic with "epigones too many to name" (17).

[51] For other studies of the relationship between American Surrealist poetry and the Vietnam War, see Bibby 158-178, Metres 344-349, Chattarji 52-58, and Walsh 235-237.

The sentimental reasoning behind this self-exculpation went something like this:

White Americans and western Europeans, from whom I am descended, have

imposed their will on other peoples in terrible ways. What they have done to

others is analogous to what they have done to their own instincts, justifying such

oppression and repression by appeals to reason and law. It is the ego that has

done this; away with it, therefore, and with reason and law, which are its

instruments. If I side with the instincts and the unconscious, I declass myself, and

my guilt falls away. ("How to Read the New Contemporary Poem" 365-66)

Breslin concludes his attack on "The New Contemporary Poem" by regretfully noting that "[t]he ascendancy of the new poetry"— American Surrealism—"represents a giving up on the outside world, a retreat from psycho-politics into a solipsistic religion of the unconscious" (366). [52]

Though dismissive of American Surrealist writing, Breslin offers a useful perspective on the contemporaneous publications of the anti-war collections *Near the Ocean* and *The Lice*, as well as the radically different critical responses to them. If Breslin is correct, Merwin's *The Lice* was the opening salvo in the emergence of a poetics of the New Left. Seen through Breslin's lens, *Near the Ocean* can be read as a swan song for the poetics of the Old Left.

II.

By any estimation, Robert Lowell's poetic trajectory defined the era: he emerged from the "tranquilized Fifties" by breaking from traditional form and embracing a more open, more conversational poetic style; he shifted to a more personal poetics; he established, in many ways,

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[52]I should note that Breslin's distinctions between first- and second-generation Surrealists are not as distinctly drawn as mine. He makes no generational divide between, for instance, Robert Bly and James Tate (357).

the practice of teaching creative writing at the university level (*Life Studies and For the Union Dead* 85). Indeed, his experience exemplified the professional and aesthetic arcs of any number of other poets of his generation: Adrienne Rich, John Berryman, James Dickey, Randall Jarrell, Theodore Roethke, and, indeed, James Wright and Robert Bly.

Yet while Robert Lowell may have been a radical poet, he did not necessarily embrace radical poetics. Though he may have broken from traditional form, he never broke from sense. To illustrate this distinction between politics and poetics, it is useful perhaps, to examine some of the most celebrated lines of one of Lowell's most celebrated poems:

> The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,
>
> giant finned cars nose forward like fish;
>
> A savage servility
>
> slides by on grease. (*Life Studies…* 70)

In this final strophe of Lowell's "For the Union Dead"— an occasional poem written for the Boston Arts Festival of 1960 and delivered before a crowd of thousands at the Boston Public Garden [53] –the simile "giant finned cars nose forward like fish" seems to come right out of the American Surrealist movement; the simile has remained among Lowell's most often-quoted.[54]

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[53] Four years after Lowell's delivery of "For the Union Dead" at the Boston Public Garden, the poem became the title poem of his famed 1964 collection.

[54] While it would be impossible to provide an exhaustive list of the many places Lowell's simile has appeared, a few choice examples point to the breadth of its appeal beyond literary and academic circles. A 1995 article in Australia's *Sydney Morning Herald*, for instance, pointed to these lines and argued that they describe the American automobile "devastatingly" and "almost seems to anticipate consumer-crusader Ralph Nader" (John Wright 9). A 1979 article in the *Washington Post Magazine* uses these lines to anticipate what would later come to be called "road rage" (Chaplin 6). Montréal's premier Anglophone newspaper, meanwhile, highlights Lowell's simile in a 1996 article about Boston in the newspaper's travel section (Abley J2).

Like the images of Robert Bly and James Wright, Lowell's metaphorical leap from "cars" to "fish" is abrupt and uncanny, jarring and fantastical. It appears to be precisely the kind of "inward" poetry Bly calls for in his polemic *Leaping Poetry*; in Bly's phrase, Lowell's simile "puts together … words that have different natures—like strange animals in a wood" (*Leaping Poetry* 1).[55]

At first glance, Lowell's metaphorical leap from cars to fish recalls perhaps most directly the final stanza of Wright's celebrated poem, "Autumn Comes to Martin's Ferry, Ohio":

> Therefore,
>
> Their sons grow suicidally beautiful
>
> At the beginning of October,
>
> And gallop terribly against each other's bodies. (*Branch* 15)

Lowell's and Wright's final stanzas seem to be making similar gestures. In their meditations on a public space and the people who define it, both Lowell and Wright end their poems in a sudden and unexpected metaphorical leap from the mundane (cars, high school athletes) to the bestial (fish that "nose forward," "gallop[ing]"horses). Furthermore, both poems are in open form; though Lowell and Wright's early careers were marked by formal verse, both poets had made the leap to a freer verse and a more open form by the late 1950s.[56] Nevertheless, the differences between "For the Union Dead" and "Autumn Comes to Martin's Ferry, Ohio" are far more

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[55]I must acknowledge that I am not the only person to note the apparent surrealism of these lines. Thomas Travisiano, for instance, insists the poem is "surrealistic" in its "dream textures" and "curious doublings and transformations" (253-258).

[56]For a fuller accounting of this phenomenon, see James Breslin 1-22.

instructive than their similarities. Indeed, these disparities help illuminate the ways Robert Lowell's poetry clashed ideologically, aesthetically, and politically with that of the American Surrealists.

The most obvious departure occurs in content. While both poems meditate on the connection between a geographical locus and the people who give rise to it, significant differences emerge in those public spaces. Lowell's poem rises out of the Boston Common, the great central space of one of America's cultural centers; Wright's poem, meanwhile, meditates on a far more pedestrian space—a football field—in the seemingly unremarkable town of Martin's Ferry, Ohio.

Furthermore, when we look at the characters of the poems, we see even greater disparities. Lowell's poem focuses both upon a monument— the massive bas-relief created by Augustus Saint-Gaudens of Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his 54th Regiment—*and* the monumental: the Civil War, the city of Boston, a historical past that is nobler than the debased present. Wright's poem, in turn, focuses on the unnamed residents of a virtually unknown town in the Ohio River Valley; in contrast to Colonel Shaw and his doomed 54th Regiment, Wright's characters are merely "Polacks," "Negroes," and a "night watchman," "fathers," "sons," and "women."

Like so much of American Surrealist poetry--Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota" again comes to mind—Wright's poem begins squarely in nearly clichéd Midwestern particulars but, by the poem's conclusion, breaks into the uncanny. Let us look at the poem in its entirety:

> In the Shreve High football stadium,
>
> I think of Polacks nursing long beers in Tiltonsville,

And gray faces of Negroes in the blast furnace at Benwood,

And the ruptured night watchman of Wheeling Steel,

Dreaming of heroes.

All the proud fathers are ashamed to go home.

Their women cluck like starved pullets,

Dying for love.

Therefore,

Their sons grow suicidally beautiful

At the beginning of October,

And gallop terribly against each other's bodies.

In the first stanza, Wright indulges in specific but clichéd notions of Midwestern life: it is not just Ohio, but Martins Ferry and Tiltonsville and Benwood; it is not just a steel mill, but Wheeling Steel. Add these particulars to the other touchstones of American myth on display in the poem—high school football, and anonymous blue collar workers—and "Autumn Begins in Martins Ferry, Ohio" seems to be an archetypical middle American poem, equal parts *Leaves of Grass* and *Spoon River Anthology*.

Thus, when we arrive at the last strophe and the admission that the sons of these unhappy men "gallop terribly against each other's bodies," the poem offers the same rejection of the mimetic mode we saw in poems like his "The Undermining of the Defense Economy" or Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota."

The strophe's initial word "therefore" suggests in some way that this poem's three strophes work together. Is the poem a sort of syllogism? If so, it is a poor one: the set of Midwestern clichés in the first stanza followed by the set of domestic clichés in the second strophe simply do not yield a conclusion that "therefore" the young men of Martin's Ferry, Ohio grow "suicidally beautiful" and "gallop terribly" at one another liked doomed horses. The Surrealist image of the final strophe simply does not work: the young football players who "gallop terribly" are metaphorically arresting, but they perform irrationally.

It is for *precisely* this reason that the stunning, unsettling trope of Wright's final strophe stands in stark contrast to the stunning, unsettling trope in Lowell's final strophe. As I shall argue, Lowell's "giant finned cars [that] nudge forward like fish" works squarely within the established metaphorical system of "For the Union Dead." For as we shall see, "For the Union Dead" is a poem that, no matter how jarring its final simile, follows a scrupulously logical and rational set of tropes.

At his Boston Arts Festival reading in that spring of 1960, Lowell dryly noted in his prefatory remarks that "We've emerged from the monumental age" (qtd. in Rudman 132). Nevertheless, even if delivered in an age no longer monumental, "For the Union Dead" is a poem of monuments, starting with the memorial to Union Colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his doomed 54th Regiment.[57] The monument, designed by the famed Beaux Arts sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens (as well as the eminent architect Stanford White), looms above the Boston Common at the intersection of Beacon and Park Streets. The statue was unveiled in 1897 with a famous

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[57] Shaw was a young Boston Brahmin who led a regiment of free Northern African-American volunteers in the failed 1863 assault on Fort Wagner in South Carolina. He and twelve of his men were killed in the attack, and Shaw was refused the proper military burial accorded to his rank because the men in his regiment were black. For a very thorough recounting of Shaw's biography and subsequent lionization in verse, see Axelrod, "Colonel Shaw in American Poetry" 523-37.

tribute by William James in which James paid tribute to Shaw and his men as the "warm-blooded champions of a better day for man" (James 40).

The poem is thus a meditation upon at least three touchstones of a "monumental age." First and foremost, the poem celebrates Shaw and his soldiers, who are memorialized in Saint-Gaudens' tribute. The poem's second monument is thus Saint-Gaudens; an artist with both scrupulous craftsmanship and a grand vision for public art, Saint-Gaudens is arguably a stand-in for Lowell himself. Finally, the poem's third monument is William James, among the greatest New England intellectuals of the nineteenth century.

Scholars have offered many interpretations of the ways Lowell's poem chronicles a fallen Boston that struggles in the shadow of its heroic past.[58] Yet no matter whether this degeneration is cultural or historical, "For the Union Dead" begins with a decay that is clearly physical:

> The old South Boston Aquarium stands
>
> in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.
>
> The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.
>
> The airy tanks are dry.

Lowell then shifts from the public to the personal, meditating upon his memories of boyhood spent there:

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[58] Helen Vendler, for instance, argues that the poem elegizes the fallen Brahmins whose grip upon Boston power has been eclipsed by an emergent Irish-American political machine (*The Given and the Made* 13-17). Michael Thurston, in turn, contends that Lowell's poem indicts a Boston that, under the mayorship of John Collins, was beset by 50's-era urban renewal projects and suburban flight (97-8). John Schneiderman suggests that Lowell's poem is his attempt to situate Calvinist New England against the backdrop of an atomic age, desperately trying to understand how the Puritans' "elect-preterite relationship" would survive in an age of nuclear holocaust (71-76).

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;

My hand tingled

To burst the bubbles

Drifting from the noses of the cowed compliant fish.

Juxtaposed against this memory of placing his nose against the Aquarium's glass is the more recent memory (from March of 1959) of placing his hand "against the new barbed and galvanized // fence upon the Boston Common" and seeing bulldozers tearing up the ground to create a parking lot while, in the background, the Statehouse is girded by a web of "orange, Puritan pumpkin colored" I-beams.

In Lowell's poem, this figurative march of progress—the static, stately Boston Common torn up for an underground garage as the Massachusetts Statehouse undergoes renovation—is pitted against the literal march of Colonel Robert Shaw and his 54th Regiment. The girded but fallen (at least in Lowell's perspective) Statehouse faces Saint-Gaudens' relief of Shaw and his African-American troops. Indeed, the monument must be "propped by a plank splint" against the "earthquake" caused by the construction at the Statehouse and the excavation of the parking garage.

Thus begins a long meditation on Shaw's regiment and its sacrifice ("Two months after marching through Boston,/ half the regiment was dead"), as well as the role of the men's memorial—and their memory—in the history of Boston. The poem moves from Shaw's march to the monument's 1897 unveiling when "William James could almost hear the Negroes breathe" and ultimately to the present, in which the monument "sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat."

Shaw's 54th Regiment and its monument thus become the poem's organizing metaphor in

Lowell's meditation upon the incompatibility of the past and present. Indeed, Shaw is frozen in

time upon Saint-Gaudens' relief. His features are permanent ("He has an angry wrenlike

vigilance,/ a greyhound's gentle tautness") and he is forever fixed within a single historical

moment, unable to move forward ("when he leads his black soldiers to death, / he cannot bend

his back").

Lowell, too, is unable to move forward.[59] He presents a Boston—and, indeed, a New

England—that is nostalgic, forever looking at its heroic past: its celebrated Colonel Shaw who,

in the grand tradition of New England progressivism and upper-class *noblesse oblige*, led a

regiment of African-American troops in the Civil War; its picturesque "thousand small town

New England greens"; finally, its grand urban center of Boston and Boston's grand urban park,

the Boston Common.

The poem is ambitious and powerful, touching upon grand themes—race, history, war,

modernity. Nevertheless, these themes are pulled together by a strictly logical, thoroughly

explicable metaphorical structure. Let us look to the poem's concluding strophes:

Shaw's father wanted no monument

except the ditch,

where his son's body was thrown

[59] The links between Lowell and Shaw are arguably even more powerful than the links between Lowell and Saint-Gaudens. Like Lowell, Shaw was from a prominent Boston family; though not Brahmins, the Shaws were Bostonians of leisure, and the family lived largely upon an inheritance. Indeed, Shaw had even, in the old aristocratic tradition, made a Grand Tour throughout Europe during in his teens. Furthermore, as Stephen Axelrod notes, Shaw and Lowell were distant relations by marriage: Shaw's sister Josephine was in fact the wife of Charles Russell Lowell. For further elaboration of the relationship between Shaw and the Boston Brahmins, see Axelrod, "Colonel Shaw in American Poetry" 525; Thurston, "Robert Lowell's Monumental Vision" 101-103.

and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.

There are no statues of the last war here;

on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph

shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"

that survived the blast. Space is nearer.

When I crouch to my television set,

the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw

is riding on his bubble,

he waits

for the blessèd break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,

giant finned cars nose forward like fish;

A savage servility

slides by on grease.

An examination of the poem's concluding tropes reveals the taut metaphorical structure of "For the Union Dead." For instance, the "ditch" of line 55 has an ambiguity that lends itself to both the figurative and literal struggles of the poem. On the one hand, the "ditch" refers to the "ditch" of line 51, the one in which Shaw's father wished him to remain in anonymity for his refusal to yield to the strictures of racial segregation. At the same time, the "ditch" recalls the great subterranean hole made as the earthmovers and bulldozers create the parking garage in the poem's opening lines. The trope of the ditch thus presents the noble past (Shaw) as incompatible with the debased present (the excavation in the Boston Common) and the doomed future (a Boston where parking spaces will "luxuriate like civic / sandpiles"). "The ditch is nearer," indeed.

Whereas the monument to Colonel Shaw and his soldiers stands above the Boston Common, Lowell notes that "there are no statues of the last war here." This last war, World War II, comes to us instead debased by business: "on Boylston Street"—the great commercial thoroughfare—we see, quite understandably, a "commercial" photo that "shows Hiroshima boiling // over a Mosler safe." The advertisement in question, for Mosler Safe Company, refers to the several Mosler safes in Hiroshima's Mitsui Bank that emerged unscathed from the nuclear attack of August 6, 1945 (Meyers).

This advertisement for the Mosler safe abruptly shifts the poem away from the noble past of fallen heroes, monuments, and grand public spaces. Instead, as the poem moves away from the stately Boston Common and onto the crassly commercial Boylston Street, it moves into the America of the late 1950s, beset by the Cold War, the injustices faced by the nascent Civil Rights movement, and a culture atomized by emergent technologies. In contrast to the distant past of the Civil War, in the present "[s]pace is nearer." This line, referencing the Space Race of

107

the current Cold War, connects the image of "Hiroshima boiling" in the advertisement to the "space" that separates Lowell from the public sphere as he sits in his private home "crouch[ing] to my television set."

When he looks into that television screen, however, he sees "the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons." Thematically, this line is linked to the poem's central meditation on Shaw, the noble past, and a sullied present. Though Shaw and his regiment struggled against slavery on behalf of the Union in 1860, black schoolchildren nevertheless still struggle against racism a century later.

Metaphorically, however, this line links *all* the poem's images and narratives that have appeared thus far. These "faces…ris[ing] like balloons" recall the "bubbles / Drifting from the noses of the cowed compliant fish" of line 7. At the same time, they summon the "bubble" Colonel Shaw is riding on in line 62 as he waits for the "blessèd break." The terminal positions of "bubble" and "break" in their respective phrases of that penultimate strophe suggest, in turn, the breaking bubbles of "Hiroshima boiling" in line 56.

Thus, when we at last arrive at the poem's final simile in which "giant finned cars nose forward like fish," we encounter an image that draws upon the previous simile of "faces … ris[ing] like balloons" and goes one step further, resolving all the many tensions—thematic, metaphorical, and narrative—that have come before. Whereas the "drained faces of Negro[es] suggest the faces of the 54th Regiment, the image of these faces "rising like balloons" calls upon Colonel Shaw's "bubble," the bubbles of "Hiroshima boiling" and the bubbles drifting above the fish in the old Aquarium. The final simile of the poem thus builds upon all of these layers of metaphor, narrative, and image, and crystallizes, in a single couplet, the poem's central tension. Alas, "[t]he Aquarium"—that image of the same lustrous past that yielded Colonel Shaw, an

unmolested Boston Common, William James, and the Civil War—"is gone." And

"Everywhere"—throughout not only Boston, but indeed throughout the debased present— those

"giant finned cars nose forward like fish." In a single line, the simile resolves the poem's

tensions by bringing together its two poles—a crass but democratic modernity and an elite but

graceful past.

My exhaustive reading of "For the Union Dead" is intended to make a single point: that

the poem's final simile of "giant cars nos[ing] forward like fish" works squarely within a series

of metaphorical structures; though it may be surreal, it is not Surrealist.

All of this, in turn, is to point out that Lowell's "giant cars nos[ing] forward like fish" are

nothing like Wright's football players who "gallop terribly against each other's bodies."

Lowell's "fish" work within an elaborate network of tropes; the horses of Wright's simile are

prefigured nowhere in the poem.[60] Wright's horses do *not* neatly resolve a series of oppositions

the poem has established in the way that Lowell's "giant cars nos[ing] forward like fish" do, nor

do they operate within a unified metaphorical framework. Wright's "sons" as horses who "gallop

terribly" break the series of Midwestern clichés upon which the poem has been built; they make

the poem less familiar, less comprehensible, and ultimately more uncanny.

Thus, the final metaphor in "Autumn Comes to Martin's Ferry, Ohio" disturbs order

while the final metaphor in "For the Union Dead" *sustains* order. Lowell's allegiance to the

New Critical reliance upon paradox is clear.[61] The car/fish simile—no matter how uncanny it

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[60]Though the word "horses" does not appear in the final line of "Autumn Comes to Martin's Ferry, Ohio," Wright's metaphor implies through the verb "gallop" that the "sons" of Martin's Ferry are horses.

[61] See, for instance, Brooks' famous assertions that "the language of poetry is the language of paradox" and "paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry" (*Well Wrought Urn* 2).

may be—resolves the fundamental crises of the poem: the disjunction between a primal, heroic past and a crass present. While the conventional view is that poems of *Life Studies* show a profound break with Lowell's earlier work, a poem like "For the Union Dead" reveals just how the New Critical principles that had defined his early career remain nevertheless embedded in his poetry.[62] Though Lowell may have gone through a powerful mid-career transformation that freed him from the rigid poetics of his early years, his transformation does not ultimately take him far from these poetics whereas Wright, in the same year, seems to leave them behind.

III.

The differences between Wright and Lowell are profound. W.S. Merwin is a closer analog for Lowell, and the points of divergence between Merwin and Lowell will prove more illustrative of the differences in aesthetics and politics in the "Age of Lowell." Like Lowell, Merwin enjoyed an urbane cosmopolitanism in his early years. Born in New York in 1927, Merwin attended Princeton, where he studied with R.P. Blackmur. Upon finishing at Princeton, Merwin then headed to Europe. After time in Portugal (where he worked as a tutor in the home of Princess Braganza), France, and mainland Spain, he moved to the island of Majorca in 1950 and worked as a tutor to the son of Robert Graves. By 1951, he had moved to London, where he spent the next three years producing scripts and translating French and Spanish works for the British Broadcasting Corporation. In 1954, he used an inheritance to purchase a farmhouse in the south of France, where he spent several years learning agriculture and admiring the wisdom of his "peasant neighbors" (Merwin "The Wake of the Blackfish" 303). Though he returned to

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[62]The view that *Life Studies* provides a powerful rupture with Lowell's previous work is commonplace. For an exemplary articulation of this view appears, see James E. B. Breslin 110-142.

the United States in 1956, his career has been characterized by a remarkable internationalism. His many translations range from the satires of Persius to *The Poem of the Cid* to *The Song of Roland* to the short lyrics of Jean Follain. During the 1960s, he moved to France and Mexico before settling in Haiku, Hawaii (Howard, *Alone with America* 416-419; "W.S. Merwin").

Merwin's elite pedigree, privilege, and Ivy League education thus provide a useful counterpoint to Robert Lowell. Merwin's aesthetic and political departures from Lowell, therefore, become all the more notable.

An example of such a departure appears in a poem from Merwin's collection *The Moving Target* (1963). Contemporaneous with Lowell's "For the Union Dead," Merwin's "Another Year Come" reveals a similar mid-century unease:

I have nothing new to ask of you,

Future, heaven of the poor.

I am still wearing the same things.

I am still begging the same question

By the same light,

Eating the same stone,

And the hands of the clock still knock without entering. (*Moving Target* 37)

While the poem's theme—an apprehension of the future—recalls the central theme of "For the Union Dead," the differences between the two poems are stark. In contrast to the lengthy,

complex, and chattily meditative "For the Union Dead," Merwin's poem is spare, spanning a mere seven lines. Whereas Lowell himself is clearly the speaker of "For the Union Dead," the speaker of "Another Year Come" is a cipher. Is it Merwin himself? A dramatic persona? Some disembodied "speaker"? Whatever the answer, the text of the poem gives us no clues.

Finally—and most important—the poems fundamentally diverge in their use of trope. "For the Union Dead" draws upon the vast network of ambiguity, paradox, and metaphorical complexity detailed above. "Another Year Come," in turn, is built upon nonsequitur, opacity, and image. It is clear that Merwin's poem is about uncertainty: in a state of deprivation and confusion, the speaker addresses the future, looking for answers as the clock ominously "knock[s]" in the poem's final line. What is unclear, however, is virtually everything else. How is the future "the heaven of the poor"? What is the question the speaker continues to beg? What does it mean to "eat … stone"? Into what room would "the hands of the clock" enter?

"Another Year Come" thus stands in stark contrast to "For the Union Dead." Brief and enigmatic, it remains hermetic and yet unsettling. Merwin's poem "Invocation"—also from *The Moving Target*—illustrates this characteristic perhaps even more effectively.

> The day hanging by its feet with a hole
>
> In its voice
>
> And the light running into the sand
>
> Here I am once again with my dry mouth
>
> At the fountain of thistles
>
> Preparing to sing (*Moving Target* 33)

Inasmuch as this poem can be explained, the first strophe describes a scene and the second strophe describes the actions of the speaker, presumably in response to that scene. In the first strophe, "the day" hangs suspended "by its feet." Though mysterious, this image compares the day to the carcass of an animal after the hunt. Such an interpretation is further supported by the "hole" in the day's throat and "the light running into the sand." These lines conjure the image of blood running out of the body of a slaughtered beast.

In the second strophe, the speaker of the poem emerges—albeit puzzlingly—at "the fountain of thistles / Preparing to sing." Whereas in a poem like Lowell's "For the Union Dead," each succeeding strophe clarifies and elaborates upon what has come before, here the second strophe only creates further questions. What "day" is this? Why should the day be strung up? What is a "fountain of thistles"? Is singing at "the fountain of thistles" an appropriate response to the day's "hanging"? Or are the two statements laid next to one another as a sort of pastiche?

"Another Year Come" and "Invocation" thus display the hallmarks of the Surrealist style of Bly and Wright: uncanny images, abrupt shifts, surreal incongruities. Yet Merwin's arrival at this style is thoroughly odd, given that he had so much more in common with the well-heeled, New Critical posterboy Lowell than he did with the Midwestern, middle-class Bly and Wright.

Indeed, the trajectories, poetic and otherwise, of Merwin and Lowell reveal a remarkable similarity. Like Lowell, Merwin's poetic career began in the symbolist mode, following the New Critical principles that codified the late works of T.S. Eliot. Like the poetry of Lowell's early career, Merwin's first collection *A Mask for Janus* (selected by W.H. Auden as the winning manuscript of the Yale Younger Poets Award and published in 1952) displays all the trademark

characteristics of the New Critical precepts: an allegiance to received poetic forms, irony, nuance, myth, paradox, and allusion. Note, for instance, a short lyric from *A Mask for Janus:*

Suspicor Speculum

To Sisyphus

Seeing, where the rock falls blind, this figure

At whispers swaying the drained countenance,

As might a shadow stand, I have stayed an hour

To no sound but his persistent sibilance,

Aghast, as should the populous dreaming head

See evils colder than the brain yet burn,

Or swift and tomorrow the enormous dead

Scatter their pose and, Sisyphus, return.

Patience betrays and the time speaks nothing. Come,

Pursed in the indigent small dark confess:

Is mine this shade that to all hours the same

Lurches and fails, marine and garrulous—

A vain myth in the winter of his sense,

Capable neither of song nor silence? (*A Mask for Janus* 38)

A Shakespearean sonnet dedicated to a figure from Greek myth, "Suspicor Speculum" is an object lesson in New Critical precepts: its allusions require a knowledge of the classics (without knowledge of the myth of Sisyphus, the significance of the "rock" in the first line is

114

lost); its syntax is complicated (the subject of the first sentence, for instance, doesn't appear until the third line); its diction is elevated ("Lurches and fails, marine and garrulous"); it relies upon paradox ("seeing…blind"); it demands an understanding of received poetic form (notably, that the Shakespearean sonnet is a form traditionally arising from erotic desire, a heritage that adds to the poem's ambiguity).

Thus Merwin and Lowell shared in their early careers a loyalty to the New Critical concepts of how a poem should work and how it should be constructed. As James Breslin has argued, these early beliefs were a result of the "literary hegemony of the fifties" in which the High Modernism of the teens and 1920s had been codified by the New Criticism (59). What this further allowed Merwin and Lowell to share was the experience that Breslin contends is the central event of American poetry at midcentury: the abandonment of New Critical modes and the embrace of more open form and a less self-consciously literary style (James Breslin 1-22).

Indeed, the two men's "breakthrough" books appeared within a year of one another: Lowell's *Life Studies* in 1959, Merwin's *The Drunk in the Furnace* in 1960. Both works revealed a movement away from received forms and meter and towards a more open, idiosyncratic, conversational free-verse. What's more, both collections displayed a shift towards more personal subject matter: Lowell's *Life Studies* chronicles family life and psychological crisis; the final poems of Merwin's *Drunk in the Furnace*, like "Uncle Hess" and "Grandfather in the Old Men's Home," turn towards the particulars of Merwin's life and family.

Thus, until approximately 1960, the two men's poetic beliefs showed remarkable parallels.[63] Similarly, the two men's political beliefs were also largely in accord: namely, a profound allegiance to the principles of pacifism, a profound suspicion of American foreign

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[63]Admittedly, Lowell, born in 1917, was ten years the senior of Merwin.

policy, and an abiding fear of the nuclear bomb. Compare, for instance, Lowell's fearful lines from "For the Union Dead" about "Hiroshima boiling" with Merwin's prose about his years in the atomic "madhouse" of Cold War America:

> Living in downtown Manhattan, the reverberations of the Cuban missile crisis seemed to become part of the neglected architecture itself. On the street corners and in the bars I heard the usual louts and loud-mouths declaring that "we should have dropped the bomb on [the Soviets] long ago"…I began to be pursued by the thought that if, in all this madhouse, someone were to ask me what I thought would be a good way to live, I would not have a very clear answer. ("Wake of the Blackfish" 302-3)

Where Merwin and Lowell differed, however, was in their expression of those political beliefs. Merwin's early career was marked by a wariness of public acts and public pronouncements, taking great care to make a distinction between his works as a public poet and his acts as a private citizen. Perhaps the clearest articulation of Merwin's reluctance to link poetry and politics appears in his 1962 review of the Angolan poet Agostinho Neto, in which he argues that the greatest risk of linking art to politics is the specter of an inevitable shift from producing public poetry to producing mere propaganda ("To Name the Wrong" 176).

Wary of becoming like Neto, Merwin remained discreet about his politics throughout the 1960s. During these years, the closest Merwin came to any sort of grand public gestures of his political beliefs came through a series of articles and book reviews he wrote, published principally in left-liberal *Nation*, reporting on causes ranging from the activities of anti-nuclear

protesters to pacifism to civil liberties to ecology. Nevertheless, these writings, though implicitly sympathetic in their coverage, remained explicitly impartial. Merwin was writing as a journalist, not a poet. [64]

It wasn't until well after the publication of *The Lice* that Merwin, in his role as a public poet, began making grand political gestures in the style of Lowell. Perhaps the first significant act occurred in 1970 at the State University of New York at Buffalo, prior to a poetry reading. Upon learning that, under New York state law, he would not be paid by the University until he signed a document attesting to his support of the US Constitution and the Constitution of New York, Merwin refused. His noncompliance with the policy thus resulted in the forfeiture of his payment. Before the reading (which he ultimately gave for free), Merwin made one of the most politically telling public statements of his career up to that point:

> It is not really surprising to me that such a situation should obtain at a time when
> the laws of the United States, as currently interpreted, apparently condone the
> continuation of an undeclared, racist war conducted against small countries—
> heaven knows how many of them at this moment—halfway around the world, and
> when the laws of the State of New York permit police entry without warning, and
> the holding, month after month, without trial, of the Panthers in New York City.
> (*Regions of Memory* 270)

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[64] For examples of Merwin's reporting of the anti-nuclear pacifist movement, see "Letter from Aldermaston" 408-410 and "Act of Conscience" 463-479. For a useful example of his early ecological writings, see "Ecology, or the Art of Survival" 361-2 and "A New Right Arm" 3-16.

After an artistic career that had gone nearly two decades without blurring the lines between public figure and political activist, Merwin abruptly broke his silence: he was opposed to the war in Southeast Asia, suspicious of state power, and sympathetic to the Black Panther Party. After twenty years of reticence, Merwin's politics were finally on record. More important, perhaps, the separation he had maintained between public poet and citizen activist was now over.

Merwin's political caution provides an interesting point of contrast to Lowell. While Merwin's and Lowell's political allegiances were fundamentally in accord (notably in their pacifism), the expression of those politics—poetically and otherwise—was radically different. Whereas Merwin had until mid-career kept his poetics distinct from his politics, Lowell had expressed his political views far earlier in his career and far, far more publicly. Lowell had been a highly visible (and deliberately public) conscientious objector during World War II, long before his poetry career had taken hold. Indeed, he had sent President Roosevelt a "Declaration of Personal Responsibility" refusing the draft; this letter was made public through the national press, after Lowell had circulated it widely, and it was an embarrassment to both the war effort and the Roosevelt administration.

Throughout Lowell's career, he remained a poet keenly—and very conspicuously— attuned to American policy, both domestic and international. Moreover, despite his frequent dissent from American policy, he was often willing to serve as a public emissary of American arts and letters. Like Frost, Lowell had served as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. Furthermore, just as Frost had represented the United States on diplomatic junkets to England, South America, and the Soviet Union, so too Lowell served as an emissary of the State

Department (Mariani 315-16). Though the tenor of his politics has been widely debated, Lowell's political activities during the 1960s were largely liberal and pacifist. [65]

From the very beginning of the Kennedy administration, Lowell made his admiration clear. When he met Kennedy at the inaugural ball in 1961 (the same day that Frost had read on the Capitol steps), the president gave Lowell, as he later noted, "the kind of compliment that indicated [Kennedy had] really read *Life Studies*." At the end of the evening, Lowell signed the Kennedy guest-book "Robert Lowell, happy that at long last the Goths have left the White House" (Mariani 293-94).

Lowell's criticism of "the Goths" had appeared in print far earlier than the inaugural guest book, however. Lowell's sonnet "Inauguration Day, 1953" from *Life Studies* was a searing critique of Eisenhower the man and –in Lowell's view—the national malaise that allowed him to rise to the presidency: indeed, though "the Republic summons Ike," as the penultimate line tells us, the last line informs us that same republic has "the mausoleum in her heart" (*Life Studies* 7).

Kennedy's ascendance to the presidency overlapped very neatly with Lowell's ascendance to the role of unofficial national poet. Indeed, both were Bostonians who had ushered out the old order: Kennedy had ended the eight-year reign of Eisenhower, bringing youthful vigor and idealism into the White House; Lowell, in *Life Studies*, had broken the hegemony of formal verse and ushered in a new free-verse Confessional mode. Indeed, years later, Lowell would reflect

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[65]Two fascinating reconsiderations of Lowell's politics are Hilene Flanzbaum's "Surviving the Sixties: Robert Lowell and the Marketplace" and Steven Gould Axelrod's "Robert Lowell and the Cold War." Flanzbaum argues Lowell's politics were pragmatically linked to his poetics. She contends that he used his antiwar activities in the 1940s to launch his poetic career; he used his antiwar activities during the 1960s, meanwhile, to solidify his fame. Axelrod, in turn, argues that Lowell's politics are far from consistent. He contends that though Lowell is widely remembered as a pacifist, his politics vacillated from "right to left and occasionally back and forth again" (339), pointing to Lowell's fascinations with communism, anti-communism, Fascism, imperialism, and anti-imperialism. For additional useful studies of Lowell's relationship to the Democratic party and the New Left, see von Hallberg 148-174 and Williamson's *Pity the Monsters.*

that he and other artists so identified with Kennedy because, he argued, Kennedy was himself a kind of artist (Alvarez 39-40).

It is an understatement to say that the Kennedy assassination was a turning point in Lowell's life. In terms of his personal life, the assassination ushered in a manic episode, his eighth. Politically, Lowell's allegiance to the White House was severed. With the charismatic, artistic, sophisticated Kennedy gone, Lowell grew increasingly disenchanted with the direction of American politics—the rise of Barry Goldwater and the crisis of democracy that the Civil Rights Movement exposed chief among them. However, his greatest contempt arose from Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the American war in Vietnam.

In 1965, Lowell had grown so upset that he engaged the White House directly and publicly. Lowell was invited to a salon-like cultural festival at the White House; the event was a holdover from the arts-friendly traditions of the Kennedy administration. A coming-together of artists and writers, the Johnson administration's White House Arts Festival also listed Saul Bellow, John Hersey, and Edmund Wilson among its attendees (Mariani 333-35).

After initially agreeing to attend, Lowell later retracted his acceptance over his objection to the Johnson administration's policies in Vietnam. His formal retraction, addressed directly to Johnson himself, laments that the United States is "in danger of becoming an explosive and suddenly chauvinistic nation" (Shepard A1-2).[66] Lowell further fanned the flames by sending his letter directly to the *New York Times*, and on June 3, it made front-page news. Moreover, Lowell's letter sparked an informal rebellion, as a number of artists—including such luminaries

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[66] I should note that this was not the first time Robert Lowell used the media to air his political views. As Stephen Axelrod recounts, Lowell made 110 copies of his 1943 letter to Franklin Delano Roosevelt explaining his refusal to serve in the military. He mailed copies of this letter to the press, as well as friends and family, and news of his defiance made the pages of *The Boston Globe*, *The New York Times*, and *Time* (Axelrod, "Robert Lowell and the Cold War" 341).

as Hannah Arendt, Mark Rothko, Bernard Malamud, Lillian Hellman, Larry Rivers, and William Styron—very publicly endorsed Lowell's act; indeed, on June 4, the *New York Times* featured the embarrassing headline "Twenty Writers and Artists Endorse Poet's Rebuff of President" (Shepard A2).

In the end, Johnson became so enraged by the chain of events that he ordered a blackout of his own White House Arts Festival. Thus, Lowell, as the provocateur of this event, had transformed himself: already the nation's most prominent poet, he was, with this very public dismissal of Johnson, the nation's most prominent poetic dissident as well. Whereas he had been a diplomatic emissary and national luminary—serving as the Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress or attending an international arts festival at the behest of the State Department—he was now a very visible critic of American foreign policy.

After the controversy of the 1965 White House Arts Festival, Lowell began writing a series of anti-war poems that were ultimately published two years later in *Near the Ocean*.[67] In its politics, *Near the Ocean* was a scathing indictment of American foreign policy. In its poetics, the book was a return to the "formal" poetry of Lowell's earlier career, building a series of anti-war poems in tetrameter couplets. Let us look, for instance, at the volume's opening poem, "Waking Early Sunday Morning." From the very title—and its very conscious invocation of Wallace Stevens' celebrated poem "Sunday Morning"—it is clear that Lowell is very aware of himself working in "The Age of Lowell"; that is to say, Lowell has very deliberately placed himself in the line of major American poets, tracing his lineage back to Stevens.[68]

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[67] Initially, *Near the Ocean* was to be published on October 21, 1966. However, after an advance review of the book in the September 1, 1966 issue of *Kirkus* called the collection Lowell's "slightest," the publication date was then pushed back to January 16, 1967 so that Lowell could make changes to the volume. For various versions of this history, see Greenspun and Pelle 934; Kitching 55; Carruth 429.

[68] Indeed, Alan Williamson argues for the emergence of what he calls the "bardic or prophetic" Lowell in *Near the Ocean* (*Pity the Monsters* 10). Whether Lowell, as Williamson contends, is a prophet or simply a poet becoming

Like Stevens' poem, Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning" concerns itself—or, as I shall suggest, *appears* to concern itself—with matters of the spirit. The poem swerves away from Stevens' meditation upon faith in the modern age, however, and transforms into a searing condemnation of Johnson. It does so, however, with an allegiance to the New Critical tenets: a network of consistent metaphors and symbols, nuance, irony, and subtlety, to say nothing of received poetic form.

"Waking Early Sunday Morning" begins with the image of a fish (itself a symbol of Christ), a "chinook / salmon jumping and falling back / nosing up" a fish ladder (15). The poem then moves through a series of images from the natural world: a fieldmouse; a termite; the sea. Shortly thereafter, the poem's meditation shifts abruptly from the natural world to the spiritual world:

> O that the spirit could remain
>
> tinged but untarnished by its strain!
>
> Better dressed and stacking birch,
>
> or lost with the Faithful at Church—
>
> anywhere, but somewhere else!
>
> And now the new electric bells,
>
> clearly chiming, "Faith of our fathers,"
>
> and now the congregation gathers. (18)

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acutely aware of his place in the canon of American poetry, it is clear that Lowell is self-consciously placing himself next to Stevens. See *Pity the Monsters* 1-12.

The poem then moves to what seems to be a longing for spiritual union with God:

> When will we see Him face to face?
>
> Each day, He shines through darker glass.
>
> In this small town where everything
>
> is known, I see His vanishing
>
> emblems, His white spire and flag-
>
> pole sticking out above the fog,
>
> like old white china doorknobs, sad,
>
> slight, useless things to calm the mad. (19)

Like Stevens's "Sunday Morning," Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning" appears to be the chronicle of a poet's consciousness casting about in a world divested of traditional Christianity. The "He" of these lines—God? Christ? The Holy Spirit?— grows ever more distant and ever more insignificant, "shin[ing] through" a glass that grows "darker" by the day. Indeed, His "emblems" are vanishing, and the only symbols remaining are the "white spire and flag- / pole" feebly visible through the fog like "slight, useless things."

Given the poem's very obvious Stevensian mold, it is a natural assumption that the "He" in these lines is indeed God. However, this "He" emerges as a bellicose, militaristic "Goliath in full armor" before Lowell ultimately reveals Him as none other than Lyndon Johnson:

> O to break loose. All life's grandeur
>
> is something with a girl in summer…

123

elated as the President

Girdled by his establishment

This Sunday morning, free to chaff

His own thoughts with his bear-cuffed staff,

Swimming nude, unbuttoned, sick

Of his ghost-written rhetoric! (23)

Suddenly, we become aware that the seemingly divine "He" of the earlier lines is Johnson. In the space of an 8-line stanza, Lowell's 1965 affront to Johnson returns in verse. Indeed, Alan Williamson points out how, in these lines, Lowell portrays Johnson as not just misdirected in his policy but downright Caligulan in his behavior, noting the links between the illicit "girl in summer" and the image of the naked president, floating in a pool and surrounded by his coterie of glad-handing aides (*Pity the Monsters* 102).

More important than the poem's swipe at Johnson, however, is its swipe at the nation-state. For just as we are suddenly aware that the "He" is Johnson, so too are we aware that the "vanishing emblems" and "slight, useless things" of the earlier stanza are not symbols of a fading Christianity but a failing America; indeed, the "white spire" and the "flagpole" of the earlier stanza take on a new significance, no longer suggesting a church but instead the Capitol. This realization is driven home in the following stanza as we see a world divested of gods but rich in wars:

No weekends for the gods now. Wars

flicker, earth licks its open sores,

124

fresh breakage, fresh promotions, chance

assassinations, no advance.

Only man thinning out his kind

sounds through the Sabbath noon, the blind

swipe of the pruner and his knife

busy about the tree of life… (23)

These lines are direct in their cynicism with their certainty that "man thinning out his own kind"

is the only sound audible on a Sunday. And with the invocation of Johnson and the "white spire"

of the US Capitol, the role of the United States in this "fresh breakage" of the earth becomes

undeniable. [69]

Yet for all its anti-establishment sentiment, "Waking Early Sunday Morning" remains

quite conservative in its poetics. The most obvious example of this is the poem's form; indeed,

there is nothing revolutionary about rhymed tetrameter couplets. Furthermore, the poem displays

an unswerving allegiance to the New Critical precept of irony; the fact that "He" is not God but,

in fact, Johnson is a poetic gesture straight out of the textbooks and readers written by Brooks

and Warren. This irony, in turn, leads to yet another New Critical imperative: ambiguity. If "He"

is God, then the "white spire" is a church; if "He" is Johnson, then the "white spire" is the U.S.

Capitol. Nevertheless, there is nothing ambiguous about "Waking Early Sunday Morning"; it is a

conservative, traditional poem with a radical political ideology.

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[69] Indeed, Alan Williamson recalls how, as Lowell read at Sanders Theater in Cambridge, a reporter stood up and asked "You speak in your poem of 'man thinning out his kind.' Do you regard the…United States of America as the agent of this thinning out?" Lowell's response was terse: "Don't you?" See Mariani 340.

This opposition becomes all the more evident when "Waking Early Sunday Morning" is cast against Merwin's poem "The Asians Dying." One of the most celebrated poems in *The Lice*, "The Asians Dying" reveals the marriage of a radical politics and a radical poetics. At the same time, it reveals the marriage of an unambiguous political ideology and a completely hermetic poetic style.

The Asians Dying

When the forests have been destroyed their darkness remains

The ash the great walker follows the possessors

Forever

Nothing they will come to is real

Not for long

Over the watercourses

Like ducks in the time of the ducks

The ghosts of the villages trail in the sky

Making a new twilight

Rain falls into the open eyes of the dead

Again again with its pointless sound

When the moon finds them they are the color of everything

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed

The dead go away like bruises

The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands

Pain the horizon

Remains

Overhead the seasons rock

They are paper bells

Calling to nothing living

The possessors move everywhere under Death their star

Like columns of smoke they advance into the shadows

Like thin flames with no light

They with no past

And fire their only future (63)

Even without the poem's title, the sentiments of "The Asians Dying" would be clear. This is a poem of destroyed forests, "ghosts of villages," "the open eyes of the dead," blood, fire, "poisoned villages," and "possessors." To illuminate "The Asians Dying," let us look to an article that appeared in late 1967, roughly the same moment *The Lice* was published:

VIETNAM: Bulldozers Bury the Dead

The stink of bloated, rotting corpses filled the heavy tropical air around Loc Ninh

for a time last week. Some of the people of the little rubber-plantation village

returned to see if their homes or shops were still there.

Five battalions of the U.S. 1st Infantry Division moved into triple-layer jungle

around the plantation near the Cambodian border looking for survivors from the

three-regiment 9th Viet Cong division which had been thrown back with heavy

losses in the siege of Loc Ninh which started October 26.

Bodies were counted and bulldozed into mass graves... ("The World: VIETNAM"

f4)

"Bulldozers Bury the Enemy Dead," published in November of 1967, did not appear in a

radical pamphlet or an anti-war tract. It appeared in no less mainstream a publication than the

Los Angeles Times. Merwin's poem was not a direct response to the report; it could not have

been, given that the publication of the poem occurred in the August 13, 1966, edition of the *New

Yorker*, thus predating the event chronicled in "Bulldozers…" by more than a year. Yet the

similarities between the poem and the moment chronicled in the *Los Angeles Times* are

remarkable. In Merwin's poem, "the forests" have been "destroyed"; in the *Los Angeles Times*

article, the rubber plantation has been leveled. In Merwin's poem, "[r]ain falls into the open eyes

of the dead"; in the *Times* article, "bloated, rotting corpses" fall into mass graves. In Merwin's

poem, "[t]he possessors move everywhere"; in the *Times* article, the battalions of the 1st Infantry

move through the jungle searching for survivors. This point-by-point comparison, elementary

though it may be, is meant to suggest that in many ways "The Asians Dying" is a realist poem. It presents a landscape remarkably similar to the one described in "Bulldozers Bury the Dead."

Despite its realism, however, "The Asians Dying" is very much a *Sur*realist poem. Though it may suggest the corpses of Loc Ninh chronicled in the *Los Angeles Times*, the poem simultaneously conjures up an irrational landscape where, for instance, "seasons" are "paper bells." Indeed, the poem is a series of rhetorical and imagistic dead ends.

Furthermore, the poem's embrace of open form refuses to yield meaning. Merwin's lack of punctuation frustrates attempts at logic while opening up multiple fields of meaning. Let us look for instance at the penultimate strophe:

The nights disappear like bruises but nothing is healed

The dead go away like bruises

The blood vanishes into the poisoned farmlands

Pain the horizon

Remains

Overhead the seasons rock

They are paper bells

Calling to nothing living

The first three lines of the strophe work like self-contained syntactical units. Were a period to be placed at the end of each of those lines, a reader could understand them working as declarative sentences following a conventional subject-verb-object structure. Yet by the time we reach the fourth line, we are plunged into mystery:

Pain the horizon

Remains

Overhead the seasons rock

Are we to read the word "pain" as a noun? In other words, is "pain" itself "the horizon"? Or are

we to read "pain" as an imperative verb (as in, say, "pain me no more")? Similarly, is "remains"

a noun or a verb? Is it that "the horizon remains overhead"? Is it that "the horizon remains"

while, independently of that statement, "the seasons rock"? Or is this merely a set of nouns

placed in a paratactic catalog: pain; the horizon; remains?

The absence of punctuation, conventional syntax, and traditional form thus creates

difficulty. Lowell's "Waking Early Sunday Morning" is difficult, of course. The difference is

that Lowell's poem relies on ambiguity while Merwin's poem relies upon opacity, contradiction,

and a set of eerie, uncanny images. Put another way, Lowell's poem forces us to ask "is the 'He'

of this poem God or is the 'He' of the poem Lyndon Johnson?" Merwin's poem, in turn, forces

us to ask, "Is 'Pain the horizon / Remains' syntactic or paratactic? And how do seasons 'rock'?"

Criticism of "The Asians Dying" has generally fallen into two camps. One school argues

that the poem is overtly and transparently political; William H. Rueckert, for instance, makes

such an argument, calling the poem "Merwin's most explicit anti-Vietnam War poem" (Nelson

and Folsom 63).[70] The other school of Merwin scholars focuses on the poem's opacity and

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[70] I should note that a number of scholars criticize "The Asians Dying" for its apolitical stance or, alternately, for its complicity in the American military effort in Vietnam. Michael Bibby, for instance, takes great issue with whether or not "The Asians Dying" is indeed an authentic anti-Vietnam War poem or if it, in fact, contributes to the American imperialism of the Vietnam War. Bibby argues that since it does not actually name Vietnam, the poem relegates the Vietnamese to obscurity and namelessness, "reproduc[ing] the ethnocentric paradigms central to colonialist discourses and, ultimately, to the ideology of the US intervention in Vietnam." See Bibby166-67, 171.

elliptical rhetoric; Cary Nelson, for instance, points to the poem's constant proclamations and

negations, seeing it as "a tapestry of recognition and forgetfulness" (Nelson and Folsom 99);

René Dietrich notes that in the poem "what is left to be seen is that what can no longer be seen"

(330); Brian McHale notes that it reveals a "poetry of and about erasure" (279).

The success of the poem—and, indeed, of *The Lice* as a whole—lies in the fact that both

schools are simultaneously correct. Yes, the poem's politics are overt. Its aesthetics, however,

are uncanny, unsettling, and mysterious. The importance of "The Asians Dying" is that it brings

together these two strands; it is a literary work that is simultaneously political and hermetic in a

way that neither Merwin's Surrealist predecessors Bly and Wright nor his activist

contemporaries had been able to achieve.

The wealth of criticism devoted to "The Asians Dying" would suggest that it is the most

significant poem in *The Lice*. Whether or not that is true, "The Asians Dying" is certainly one of

the most *understandable* poems in the collection. Indeed, as Michael Bibby has chronicled, "The

Asians Dying" is one of the most frequently anthologized poems addressing the Vietnam War

(176-77).

The focus on a poem like "The Asians Dying" comes at the cost of the collection's other

poems. Indeed, far less critical attention has been paid to a poem such as "Some Last Questions,"

also from *The Lice*.

Some Last Questions

Majorie Perloff, in turn, calls into question the perceived radicalism of "The Asians Dying," pointing to—among many other things—its publication in the establishment periodical *The New Yorker* "on a glossy page between those gorgeous ads for fur coats and diamonds and resorts in St. Croix" (Nelson and Folsom 130).

What is the head

A. Ash

What are the eyes

A. The wells have fallen in and have

  Inhabitants

What are the feet

A. Thumbs left after the auction

No what are the feet

A. Under them the impossible road is moving

  Down which the broken necked mice push

  Balls of blood with their noses

What is the tongue

A. The black coat that fell off the wall

  With sleeves trying to say something

What are the hands

A. Paid

No what are the hands

A. Climbing back down the museum wall

  To their ancestors the extinct shrews that will

  Have left a message

Who is the silence

A. As though it had a right to more

Who are the compatriots

A. They make the stars of bone (6)

"Some Last Questions" is an interesting contrast to "The Asians Dying." The latter, though opaque in its metaphors, was relatively clear in its purpose. In contrast, "Some Last Questions" is a poem that seems to have no overt political goal and little interest in clarity. A series of strange queries and even stranger answers, the poem constantly frustrates any attempt at explication. Though the questions at first seem to be anatomic (head, feet, tongue, hands), they soon shift to the existential (silence) and then the socio-political (compatriots). The answers, meanwhile, begin with the elemental (ash) proceed to the phenomenological (eyes as "wells that have fallen in and have/ [i]nhabitants") to the absurd (the tongue as "the black coat that fell off the wall"). Even the rhetoric proves difficult to understand: initially the answers come as short declarations (A. Ash"), soon turning to koan-like riddles ("A. Thumbs left after the auction") to free-floating, indeterminate clauses ("A. As though it had a right to more").

And while "Some Last Questions" comes from the same poet and, indeed, the same volume as "The Asians Dying", the poem complicates the view that *The Lice* is primarily, as Barrett Watten suggests, "an agonized poetry of witness to the war and the failures of American polity" (177-78).

The unfortunate consequence of this inconsistency is that "Some Last Questions"—and many other poems in *The Lice*-- has received considerably less critical attention than "The Asians Dying."[71] "Some Last Questions" has no references – explicit or otherwise – to "Asians"

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[71]The exception to this critical negligence is William H. Rueckert, who sees the "Some Last Questions" as a "Bachelardian intimate immensity …[that] finally merges man back into what all living matter on earth came from – the cosmos itself" (Nelson 53). While Rueckert's interpretation of the poem is compelling, it tries very hard to create a logic (that the poem goes from the anatomic to the social) in a poem that, at every level, very consciously defies logic. See Nelson 51-55.

or "villages" or "the open eyes of the dead". Instead, what appears are a series of inscrutable

images and opaque metaphors. Let us focus on lines 15-20 as an example:

What are the hands

   A. Paid

No what are the hands

   A. Climbing back down the museum wall

     To their ancestors the extinct shrews that will

     Have left a message

These lines reveal the poem's constant tensions among rhetoric, logic, rationality, and

image. The question "What are the hands" (from an unspecified speaker, to an unspecified

auditor) yields the mysterious response "Paid." The next response in this exchange, "No what

are the hands," suggests that the response "Paid" did not answer the question "What are the

hands." The first line of the response to this question ("Climbing back down the museum wall")

does not reveal what "the hands" are; it reveals *where* "the hands" are. The exchange thus

swerves away from logic a second time, before being further compounded by the apposite that

"the hands" are progressing towards "their ancestors the extinct shrews." What could it possibly

mean that "extinct shrews" are the "ancestors" of hands? Furthermore, what sort of "message"

could the "extinct shrews" possibly have left? This is a broken trope. "Extinct shrews" as the

"ancestors" of hands is an interpretive dead-end, albeit an imaginative and rewarding one.

These lines reveal an absurd, dazzling set of incoherent images. And while this "peculiar

grammar of emblems," as Jarold Ramsey has called it, is shared with "The Asians Dying", the

similarities between the two poems end there (Nelson and Folsom 20). "Some Last Questions" is *not* a poem about Southeast Asia or the horrors of war or American foreign policy. It is, instead, nothing more –and nothing less— than a powerful, uncanny lyric.

Here, in Merwin's *The Lice*, is the central shift in American Surrealism. While *The Lice* shows a debt to the politically charged poetry of Bly and Wright through poems like "The Asians Dying," nevertheless the American Surrealism of *The Lice* pushes forward and becomes something altogether bizarre, as in "Some Last Questions." Yes, *The Lice* reveals a politically aware poetry in which "rain falls into the eyes of the dead," as in "The Asians Dying." But it is also an inscrutable poetry in which"broken necked mice push] / Balls of blood with their noses" and the hands are "paid."

Despite this ambivalence of politics and clarity working at cross-purposes, Merwin's *The Lice* made American Surrealism the pre-eminent style of poetry critical of American foreign policy.[72] The emergence of American Surrealism as the poetic idiom of the anti-War movement was driven home in an episode in1971 when Merwin merged the political ideology of Bly with the polished public presence of Lowell.

Merwin, upon winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, refused the award. His written response in the *New York Review of Books* leaves no room for ambiguity:

> I am pleased to know of the judges' regard for my work, and I want to
> thank them for their wish to make their opinion public.

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[72] I should note that Michael Bibby takes issue with whether or not American Surrealism truly became the pre-eminent mode of anti-Vietnam poetry or if other modes of poetic protest have been silenced through the process of anthologization and thus "expunge[d]…from cultural memory" (171).

But after years of the news from Southeast Asia, and the commentary

from Washington, I am too conscious of being an American to accept public

congratulation with good grace, or to welcome it except as an occasion for

expressing openly a shame which many Americans feel, day after day, helplessly

and in silence. (*Regions of Memory* 272)

Rather than accept the award money, Merwin asked that it be donated to two parties: a man

named Alan Blanchard of Berkeley who had been blinded by the police; secondly, the Draft

Resistance.

What emerged, then, was a very public row between Merwin and W. H. Auden in the

pages of *The New York Review of Books*. Auden had been on the Pulitzer selection committee;

ironically, it was also Auden who had "discovered" Merwin by selecting *A Mask for Janus* for

the Yale Younger Poets Award in 1954. Auden responded to Merwin's refusal to accept the

award by noting that the Pulitzer selection committee had no governmental authority and neither

gave nor received the endorsement of the White House. Merwin's act, Auden argued, was

therefore hollow and misguided. Indeed, Auden went so far as to argue that Merwin's act was

tantamount to a "publicity stunt." Finally, he suggests that, if Merwin were indeed so concerned

with the ineffectiveness of poems to affect policy, the logical conclusion would be simply not to

write at all (Auden "Saying No").

Merwin's reply to Auden's critique was both respectful and severe. He defended his

attempt "to direct what public attention there might be …toward what seems to me the most

important [situation] in … the country in which I was born" (Merwin "Reply"). Merwin refutes

Auden's assertion that his refusal was a publicity stunt, contending that, had that been his

intention, he would have "done things differently." Finally, in response to Auden's most audacious swipe—the suggestion that were Merwin truly interested in changing public policy, he wouldn't be writing poems at all—Merwin suggests that Auden must look at the relationship of poems to policy as not only ideological but also emotional:

> As for what Mr. Auden terms the "logical conclusion" of my position (i.e., not
>
> publishing at all) I've thought of that, too, logically or not—haven't we all? But
>
> the logic of many kinds of mourning would be to die. And yet we mourn, at times,
>
> and still hope to go on living. I'm sorry if he was troubled by it, but what I did was
>
> an act of mourning, and I can't regret the form of it. ("Reply")

In this act, Merwin offered a fitting conclusion to the decade of American Surrealism ushered in by Bly and Wright. In his very public refusal to accept the Pulitzer and then his very public row with Auden, Merwin brought together the political gestures of Robert Bly and the media-savvy showmanship of Robert Lowell: Merwin's donation of his award monies brings to mind Bly's donation of his proceeds from the 1967 National Book Award to anti-war organizations (indeed, both donated to the Draft Resistance); Merwin's very public dispute with Auden, in turn, recalls Lowell's well-publicized clashes with both the Roosevelt and Johnson administrations.

Ultimately, Merwin emerged from the age of *The Lice* as he had entered it: quietly writing poems that were critically acclaimed, and doing his best to stay out of the spotlight. What he left, however, was the notion that a line like "mice pushing balls of blood with their noses" could be political, and that it could, in fact, decry American Cold War policy in Vietnam. It was

this link between politics and Surrealist poetry, made manifest in *The Lice*, that a younger

generation of writers—the so-called Second growth Surrealists—learned from as they wrote in

the turbulent years of the early 1970s.

  The Lice had made Surrealism into the pre-eminent poetic mode in the movement against

the Vietnam War. But what would happen to Surrealism once that war ended? Chapter Three

will attempt to answer that question.

Chapter Three

Levitating Friends, Grave-Robbing Nails, and the Heyday of American Surrealism

I.

In a 1978 interview, James Tate –the preeminent Surrealist of the late seventies—notes

that in American poetry "There seems to be something emerging … Nobody's quite put a finger

on it yet" (*Route as Briefed* 51). In fact, there were two "somethings" emerging in American

poetry that would become obvious by the 1980s: postconfessionalist realism and Language

poetry.[73]

American poetry, of course, has always been marked by dichotomies: "raw" versus

"cooked," "open" versus "closed," "mainstream" versus "anti-academic," and so forth. Yet the

split between postconfessionalism and Language poetry was so marked and so vitriolic that, by

the mid-eighties, these strains were engaged in what Bob Perelman has called all-out Reagan-era

"poetry wars," pitting "narrative, totality, the subject, presence, depth [and] affect" against

"fragmentation, simulacra, schizophrenia, surface, pastiche [and] parataxis" (Perelman 63).

This chapter seeks to argue that James Tate and his contemporaries—young poets who

looked to Bly, Wright, and Merwin as influences and whom Robert Pinsky savaged in *The

Situation of Poetry* (1976)—marked a momentary fusion of these two impulses. The competing

forces of the 1980s, I shall argue, found a brief harmony in a poem such as Tate's "The Power of

Youth" from 1976:

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[73] Many refer to this as L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry, as per the title of the magazine founded by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews in 1978. For the purposes of this essay, I shall refer to this movement simply by the term "Language poetry."

I picture myself as a hummingbird

or as a nail robbing a grave.

I drink wind from the skull by candlelight.

I can catch rabbits

or fish between my teeth.

My friend levitates and people

throw cups of hot coffee

in their own faces.

Only black magic left in the Vatican.

I know his name. (*Viper Jazz* 40)

"The Power of Youth" is a poem of negations, uncertainties, and arbitrary metaphors, where a hummingbird and "a nail robbing a grave" are somehow equivalent to each other, a world of levitating friends and skulls of wind. In Perelman's dichotomy, it is a poem of schizophrenia and pastiche, where one image is discarded for another. Yet at the same time, "The Power of Youth" is a poem of narrative and subject, a poetic "I" trying to define himself. This tension—between absurdist language games and postconfessional self-expression—marks the Second Growth surrealists and suggests the ways they momentarily reconcile the two impulses that would break out in the "poetry wars" of the 1980s.[74]

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[74] The term "Second Growth Surrealist" was coined by Zweig to indicate those poets a generation younger than Bly and Wright. See "The New Surrealism" 316.

While the list of Second Growth surrealists is long, its principal figures included James

Tate, Charles Wright, Charles Simic, Louise Glück, Mark Strand, Russell Edson, Gregory Orr,

Frank Stanford, and Larry Levis. [75] These poets were a generation younger than Robert Bly and

James Wright, and though they shared the earlier generation's allegiance to stark, surprising

imagery, they did not necessarily share Bly's and Wright's political motivations for using those

images; indeed, the Vietnam War had given way to the Paris Peace Accords, the New Frontier

ultimately to the Silent Majority.

Yet these Second Growth poets—despite their grave-robbing nails and their levitating

friends--were not simply indulging in the excesses of what Tom Wolfe famously called "The Me

Decade." Indeed, these Second Growth Surrealists managed to do something very important: to

reconcile, however briefly, the divergent strains within American poetry before that poetry was

ripped apart again during the "poetry wars" of the 1980s. In Perelman's terms, the Second

Growth Surrealists linked "narrative" *with* "fragmentation," "totality" *with* "simulacra," "the

subject" *with* "schizophrenia," "depth and affect" *with* "pastiche and parataxis."

To understand what Second Growth Surrealism accomplished during the 1970s, it is first

necessary to see the conflict of the 1980s. Let us consider two autobiographical works from

1980, a poem by Sharon Olds and a section of a poem by Lyn Hejinian. First the Olds poem,

"Primitives":

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[75] For the purposes of this chapter, I define this "second growth" generation as those poets who published first books of poetry between the years 1965 and 1975. Paul Breslin adds Peter Everwine, Richard Schramm, and Greg Kuzma to this list of second growth poets; for Breslin's distinction between the generation of Bly and the generation of Tate, see Paul Breslin, *Psycho-Political Muse* 118-119.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that this list is almost exclusively male. For a discussion of the relationship between gender and American Surrealism, see Gioia 75.

I have heard about the civilized,

the marriages run on talk, elegant and

honest, rational. But you and I are

savages. You come in with a bag,

hold it out to me in silence.

I know Moo Shu Pork when I smell it

and understand the message: I have

pleased you greatly last night. We sit

quietly, side by side, to eat,

the long pancakes dangling and spilling,

fragrant sauce dripping out,

and glance at each other askance, wordless,

the corners of our eyes clear as spear points

laid along the sill to show

a friend sits with a friend here. (Olds 34)

Now a section of the Hejinian poem, from her book-length sequence *My Life* (1980):

A pause, a rose,   A moment yellow, just as four years later, when my

something on paper   father returned home from the war, the moment of

                         greeting him, as he stood at the bottom of the stairs.

                         younger, thinner than when he had left, was pur-

                         ple—though moments are no longer so colored.

142

> Somewhere, in the background, rooms share a pat-
>
> tern of small roses. Pretty is as pretty does. In cer-
>
> tain families, the meaning of necessity is at one with the sentiment of
>
> prenecessity. The better things were gathered in a pen. The windows were
>
> narrowed by white gauze curtains which were never loosened. Here I refer
>
> to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes… (5-6)

The Olds poem represents the first half of Perelman's dichotomy. With its clear subjects (a distinct "I" posed against a distinct "you"), its clean metaphors (the speaker and the "you" are "savages", their eyes "spear points"), and straightforward syntax, "Primitives" is an example of what Jed Rasula has called "the soft lyric," a poetic idiom marked by three components: "free verse, first-person singular, sedated epiphany" (*American Poetry Wax Museum* 406). Vernon Shetley, in turn, has called it the "practically unchallenged" mainstream poem of the early 1980s, "a loosely organized free verse 'voice' poem" (135). In more neutral terms, it represents what Jahan Ramazani has called the "postconfessional" mode that traces back to the Confessionalism of Robert Lowell and his circle (*lxi*).[76]

The Hejinian poem, in turn, represents the other side of Perelman's dichotomy. A representative of Language Poetry, it is a clear rejection of what Charles Bernstein has called "official verse culture," the postconfessional mode with its "neutral and univocal tone in the guise of voice or persona, grammar-book syntax [and] received conceits" (*Content's Dream*

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[76] For a discussion of Confessionalism's persistence (and particularly its opposition to Surrealism), see Gioia 74. For a discussion of the many forms postconfessional poetry took in the 1980s and later, see Sontag and Graham, particularly 3-8. For a discussion of 1980s realism, see Williamson, "Cynicism" particularly 117-119.

245).[77] When "A pause, a rose, something on paper" does lean toward autobiography, the details of that autobiography remain occluded: the memory of the father returning from the war is first "yellow" then "purple"; statements like "pretty is as pretty does" and asides like "Here I refer to irrelevance, that rigidity which never intrudes" break up the comprehension of whatever narrative is being told. Its form is open: while not split up into lines, it is a poem where "phrasal units are reborn" perpetually, as Marjorie Perloff has argued: the consonant endings of "pause" and "rose," the beginnings of "pause" and "paper." It is, in the end, a poem not about a singular autobiographical life, but a life "lived by words, phrases, clauses and sentences," constantly closing and opening meaning (*Dance of the Intellect* 224-25).

While the roots of Language Poetry are diverse—Pound, Stein, Zukofsky, Olson, and others—an undeniable influence is the work of John Ashbery. Language Poetry's motifs--multiple discourses, blurred genres, complicated and disunified syntax—can be seen throughout Ashbery's oeuvre and perhaps most importantly in his 1972 collection *Three Poems*.[78]

This chapter argues for the unique historical moment of the Second Growth Surrealists—coming after Ashbery and Lowell and before Language Poetry and postconfessionalism. For in the Second Generation Surrealists, we see *both* the indeterminacy that was to characterize Language Poetry—such as the writing of Hejinian,—*and* the narrative, subject-centered writing that was to characterize the postconfessionalism of poets like Olds.

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[77] By "official verse culture," Bernstein singles out "the poetry publishing and reviewing practices of *The New York Times*, *The Nation*, *The American Poetry Review*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, *Poetry* (Chicago), *Antaeus*, *Parnassus,* Atheneum Press, all the major trade publishers, the poetry series of almost all of the major university presses" as well as "the ideologically motivated selection of the vast majority of poets teaching in university, writing and literature programs and of poets taught in such programs as well as the interlocking accreditation of these selections through prizes and awards judged by these same individuals" (*Content's Dream* 247-8).

[78] For a discussion of John Ashbery's influence upon Language Poetry, see Nicholls 155-168 and Lolorado 750-74.

II.

Though I have chosen to focus this chapter on the run-up to the "poetry wars" of the

1980s, it is worth noting that rivalries between poetic schools are nothing new in contemporary

American poetry. The most famous of these is the so-called "Anthology Wars" of the late 1950s

that pitted *New Poets of England and America,* an anthology edited by Donald Hall, Robert

Pack, and Louis Simpson, against Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry*. Hall's anthology

showcased poems that were largely formalist and explicable under the interpretive modes of

New Criticism—Richard Wilbur and early Robert Lowell, among others. Allen's anthology,

meanwhile, was devoted to "anti-academic" poetry of the Beats, the New York School, and the

Black Mountain poets.

I believe a similar rift occurred in the early 1970s, between the emerging Ashbery and the

fading Lowell. As Majorie Perloff has argued in *The Poetics of Indeterminacy*, American poetry

has seen a long-standing rivalry between two traditions: the tradition of Eliot and the tradition of

Pound and Williams.[79] This latter tradition, which she terms "The Other Tradition," follows a

line that begins with Rimbaud and goes through Pound, Stein, and Williams in the Modern

period and to John Ashbery and John Cage in the contemporary period. Perloff argues that this

"Other Tradition" is essentially *meontic* (the imitation of "what is not there") rather than *mimetic*

(the imitation of "what is there") (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 31).[80] In the meontic mode, "totality

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[79] For a fuller discussion of this distinction, see Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* 32-44.

[80] Here Perloff draws upon a distinction between the mimetic and meontic modes of art initially made by Thomas McFarland. The mimetic mode, McFarland argued, looks to Aristotle as its "godfather." The goal of mimetic art is to reflect reality as a mirror held up to nature. Prime examples of this mode include, in visual art, the portraits of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres and the Venetian cityscapes of Canaletto; in literature, examples of mimetic works include Robert Southey's "The Cataract of Leodore" and the novels of James T. Farrell.
    The meontic mode, meanwhile, looks to Charles Baudelaire as one of its godfathers. Meontic art, argued McFarland, rejects realistic representation and seeks to work wholly within the realm of the imagination. Indeed, McFarland held up as central to mimetic art Baudelaire's claim that "Nature is ugly, and I prefer the monsters of my imagination to the trivial positivity" of art that copies nature. Useful examples of the meontic mode include, in

145

is absent" and in its stead is "an open field of narrative possibilities" (*Poetics of Indeterminacy* 10-11). The 1970s, I believe, saw these two traditions—and in particular the two directions offered by the late Lowell and mid-career Ashbery--knock up against one another and reach a temporary truce in the writings of the Second Growth Surrealists.

The early 1970s marked a crossroads—politically, ideologically, and poetically—in the United States. Jerome McGann has argued for a profound poetic "difference between pre-and post-1973 American poetry," splitting the poetry world into "innovators and traditionalists" ("Contemporary Poetry, Alternate Routes" 627). While I shall return to the dichotomies of American poetry circa 1973, it is worth acknowledging the many social, economic, political, and cultural changes of the era.[81] The most significant of these events was the end of the Vietnam War and the return of the POWs. The Paris Peace Accords of 1973 thus presented a rising generation of American Surrealists with a fundamental problem: what happens to an anti-war poetry after that war ends?

Coming out of the politically engaged tradition of Bly, Wright, and Merwin, the Second Growth Surrealists had two directions before them: the mimetic impulse best seen in the late works of Robert Lowell –particularly his 1973 trilogy *The Dolphin*, *History*, and *For Lizzie and*

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visual art, the works of Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky. In literature, the poetry of John Ashbery is, argued McFarland, an ideal model. See McFarland 284-288.

[81] David Harvey and Andreas Killen share McGann's assessment that a cultural sea-change occurred in 1973. Harvey points to a number of factors causing this change: in economics, the shift from Fordism-Keynesianism to flexible accumulation; in architecture, the shift from master planning to pastiche; in philosophy, a revived American pragmatism fused with post-Marxism and poststructuralism; in popular culture, the emergence of television as the pre-eminent medium and the surge of museums (thus creating a nostalgic "heritage culture"); in high art, the rise of playfully self-conscious artists like Cindy Sherman and Don DeLillo. See Harvey, particularly 6-7; 41; 54-60; 61-63; 66-98; 141-172.

Killen adds to this list a set of uniquely American events occurring in 1973: the Watergate scandal and the ensuing cover-up; the OPEC crisis and the threat of inflation; the emergence of a new cinema upon the breakdown of the studio system; the arrival of new sexual mores; the collapse of the New Left; the emergence of a Nixonian "silent majority" in Sun Belt suburbs; finally, the landmark Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade*. See Killen, particularly 1-11; 135-162; 177-204; 217-273.

Harriet— and the meontic impulse seen in the writings of an emergent John Ashbery, particularly in his 1970 collection *The Double Dream of Spring* and his 1972 collection *Three Poems*. The Second Growth Surrealists, I believe, found a middle ground between these two modes, writing a cautiously indeterminate poetry that carefully negotiated subject with surface, narrative with fragmentation.

Lowell's three collections of 1973 were an attempt to rewrite, recategorize, and clean up the sprawling *Notebook* of 1967-68 by splitting it into distinct collections. Yet despite this editing, the three collections were a far cry from the ascendant Lowell of the mid-1960s. At his height—the years between *Life Studies* (1959) and *For the Union Dead* (1964)—Lowell was a celebrated figure: he had already won the Pulitzer Prize, a Guggenheim Fellowship, an appointment as Poetry Consultant to the Library of Congress and the National Book Award; as I have argued in Chapter 2, it is during these years that Lowell moved into the role of unofficial national poet following the death of Robert Frost. These also were the years when Lowell experienced his great breakthrough: no longer was he writing the New Critical-inspired, decorously formal work of *Lord Weary's Castle*; instead, he shifted to something more personal in subject matter and far looser in poetic form.

The central example of this development, as James Longenbach points out, is "Skunk Hour," published at the end of *Life Studies*. In formal terms, the poem is a set of eight six-line stanzas in a fairly loose free-verse, governed neither by syllabics nor accents. While end-rhymes *do* occur, they occur occasionally and their pattern is erratic. In the first stanza, for instance, the second and fifth and sixth lines have inexact end-rhymes ("cottage", "village" and "dotage"):

Nautilus Island's hermit

heiress still lives through winter in her Spartan cottage;

her sheep still graze above the sea.

Her son's a bishop. Her farmer

is first selectman in our village.

She's in her dotage. (*Life Studies* 89-90)

Meanwhile, in the fourth stanza, the first line rhymes with the sixth ("fairy" and "marry"), the

second line rhymes exactly with the fourth ("fall" and "all"), and the third and fifth lines provide

an off-rhyme ("work" and "cork"):

And now our fairy

decorator brightens his shop for fall;

his fishnet's filled with orange cork,

orange, his cobbler's bench and awl;

there is no money in his work,

he'd rather marry.

In terms of its subject matter, the poem begins in a picturesque New England tourist town

and ends with the image of a skunk sticking her head into a pail of sour cream:

I stand on top

of our back steps and breathe the rich air—

a mother skunk with her column of kittens swills the garbage pail.

> She jabs her wedge-head in a cup
>
> of sour cream, drops her ostrich tail,
>
> and will not scare.

Longenbach has interpreted this image as the poem's—and the poet's—"preference for dirty scavengers over fussy traffickers in ornament" (8). By this, Longenbach means that Lowell has fully rejected highly formalized verse and traditionally impersonal subject matter for a more "open" poetic form and a more personal subject matter. To put it another way, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket" from *Lord Weary's Castle* has given way to "Memories of West Street and Lepke" in *Life Studies*.

Indeed, the Lowell of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* was a poet who showed the possibilities inherent in linking the personal to the historical (and thereby paved the way for other poets like Sylvia Plath and John Berryman). The Lowell of the 1970s, however, showed the errors and excesses of such a poetry. He had gone from what Calvin Bedient has called the "special wild genius" of his mid-career to "resulting hit-and-miss accuracy, the slickness, and the slapdash, indifferent writing" (140). Take, for example, this poem from *The Dolphin*:

> Flight

> If I cannot love myself, can you?
> I am better company depressed …
> I bring myself here, almost my best friend,
> a writer still free to work at home all week,

reading revisions to his gulping wife.

Born twenty years later, I might have been prepared

to alternate with the cooking, and wash the baby –

I am a vacation-father … no plum—

flown in to New York … I see the rising prospect,

the scaffold glitters, the concrete walls are white,

flying like Feininger's skyscraper yachts,

geometrical romance in the river mouth,

conical foolscap dancing in the sky …

the runway growing wintry and distinct. (*The Dolphin* 73)

In Longenbach's terms, "Flight" shows what happens when the "fussy trafficker" yields entirely to the "dirty scavenger"; put another way, "Flight" shows a poet who has become overly informal at the expense of ornament. The poem's formal qualities are few, especially for a poet who once wrote a formally stunning poem like "Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket": the lines here are governed neither by syllabics nor stresses, and beyond the fact that it contains 14 lines, nothing else in the poem suggests the rhetorical strategies or subject matter of the sonnet. Indeed, the subject matter is almost wholly personal, the tone conversational; what few metaphors the poem has are not especially imaginative (large buildings are like the "skyscraper yachts" photographed by *Life*'s Andreas Feininger, for instance); indeed, the first two lines could be mistaken for something written by Lowell's "fireside" contemporary, Rod McKuen. In short, "Flight" is a poem of transparency: almost nothing is left to interpret. The "loosely organized, free verse 'voice' poem" of the 1980s that Shetley decries has the Robert Lowell of the 1970s as its precedent.

Ashbery's *Three Poems*, in turn, provides a complete contrast: where Lowell's work is "closed" in the loose sonnet, Ashbery's work is "open," a sprawling work occasionally in free verse and occasionally in prose. Where the interpretive possibilities of Lowell's work are fixed, the interpretive possibilities of Ashbery's are virtually infinite. Indeed, where Lowell's poem seeks to convey a poet's personal crisis, Ashbery's *Three Poems* provoke a reader's interpretive crisis.

Three Poems is not the first work in Ashbery's oeuvre to cause such difficulty, though according to many critics, it marked the height of opacity in his work.[82] From even his first volume, *Some Trees*—winner of the Yale Younger Poets Series in 1956—Ashbery's work has placed a premium on opacity, play, multiplicity of discourse, plurality of voice, ambiguity, and nonsequitur. The poem "An Outing" from Ashbery's 1970 collection *The Double Dream of Spring* is a useful example. It begins, seemingly, as a conversation between two people:

> "These things … that you are going to have—
> Are you paid specially for them?"

> "Yes"

> "And when it is over, do you insist,
> Do you insist that the visitor leave the room?"
> "My activity is as random as the wind.
> Why should I insist? The visitor is free to go,

---

[82] For a discussion of Ashbery's decline in difficulty *after* the 1970s, see Ross 361-380.

Or to stay, as he chooses." (*Double Dream of Spring* 70)

Though the "things" done in the first line are unclear, the poem seems relatively straightforward. The third stanza, however, introduces a third voice into the discourse, and the following stanzas further obfuscate the dramatic situation:

> Are you folks just going out for a walk
>
> And if you are would you check the time
>
> On your way back? It's too late to do anything today.
>
> I would just take a pratfall if I stepped outside that door.

> "I don't know whether I should apply or nothing"
>
> "I think you shd make yr decision."

> So it was by chance we found ourselves
>
> Gumshod on the pebbled path, Denmark O Denmark
>
> Flat, rounded eyes, Denmark Denmark
>
> Gray parchment landscape, Denmark O Denmark
>
> Unmanageable sky, Denmark that cannot shift
>
> The faucet drips, the minutes apply, Denmark.

What began as a simple conversation becomes impenetrable, a flurry of voices and discourses and styles. For instance, the voice that arrives in the third stanza is not set off by quotation

marks. Is it therefore that of the "speaker" of the poem? The poet himself? Meanwhile, the voices in the fourth stanza ("I don't know whether I should apply or nothing" / "I think you shd make yr decision") only confuse things further: they are neither a continuation of the first two stanzas' conversation nor do they answer the request made in the third stanza to "check the time;" furthermore, the shift to the shorthand ("shd", "yr") is stylistically at odds with the otherwise standard typography of the poem. Finally, the last stanza employs a highly "poetic" rhetoric and set of repetitions ("Denmark O Denmark"), yet pits it against quirky paradoxes ("Flat, rounded eyes") and arcane diction ("Gumshod").

The poem ends with questions, not answers: who are these speakers? is it indeed the poet's "voice" we hear in the third stanza? if so, is the "we" of the poem's final stanza composed of the speaker and the other conversationalists? and what, ultimately, does any of it have to do with Denmark? "An Outing" is thus a poem that refuses to add up to any single organic whole; it is, instead, a series of fragments—truncated conversations, conflicting lexicons, elegant repetitions, shifting subjects.

Three Poems, in turn, takes this fragmentary, disjunctive writing and expands it into what is, by Ashbery's own admission, a study in "reading without comprehension" (*Three Poems* 13). The first of these disjunctions is the title itself: *Three Poems* is, in fact, largely prose, a sprawling work that occasionally gives way to verse. Through this arbitrary mix of verse and prose, David Herd has argued, Ashbery's central accomplishment in *Three Poems* is an "unreadable" text via "coils of syntax, [a] mix of idioms, [and] shifting perspectives" (Herd 127).

Like "An Outing," *Three Poems* is a text that is constantly creating and negating meaning. Often its subject—inasmuch as *Three Poems* has a subject—is the collapse of

understanding despite the abundance of language. "The system was breaking down" begins the

final poem, and indeed, systems of meaning are constantly breaking down:

"What was it we said to each other? We must have spoken to each other many times, but of these

only the trace of the words remains" Ashbery asks, some thirty-odd pages into a poem (*Three*

Poems 53, 32). Just when a poem is approaching meaning, it breaks down into nonsensical

catalogs ("clover, alfalfa, colza, buckwheat and cowpeas"), denials ("And yet it wasn't the

same"), and abrupt declarations ("You private person.") (*Three Poems* 36, 29, 18). I take an early

passage of the first poem "The New Spirit" as emblematic:

> This is your eyes noting the passing of telephone poles and the tops of
>
> trees. A permanent medium in which we are lost, since becoming robs it
>
> of its potential. Nothing is to be learned, only avoided, nor can the truth of
>
> this be avoided, but it lingers on like microorganisms in the crevices. In
>
> you I fall apart, and outwardly am a single fragment, a puzzle to itself.
>
> (*Three Poems* 13)

As this passage suggests, the act of reading *Three Poems* becomes the equivalent of driving past

"telephone poles and the tops of trees": words become an ambient blur. The relationship between

language and meaning is twisted like a Moebius strip and rendered into what Richard Howard

has called "a poetics of continuity and encirclement" ("John Ashbery" 40). In *Three Poems*,

abstractions, negations, and repetitions accrete and dissolve into a state where, indeed, "[n]othing

is to be learned, only avoided."

Thus, in the face of the many historical and cultural crises of 1973, a poetic crisis also emerged: the utter transparency of late Lowell was pitted against the utter occlusion of mid-career Ashbery. It is not coincidental that the Second Growth Surrealists came to prominence at just this point.

IV.

While it would be impossible to trot out every American Surrealist of the 1970s, four poets in particular reveal both the breadth of the movement and, at the same time, its central aesthetic concerns and tendencies: Charles Simic and his 1974 collection *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk*; James Tate and his 1976 collection *Viper Jazz*; Charles Wright and his 1975 collection *Bloodlines*; finally, Larry Levis and his 1977 collection *The Afterlife*. In this selection, I have tried to cover a spectrum of American Surrealists: Tate and Simic are the central figures of 1970s Surrealism;[83] Wright and Levis, meanwhile, are figures who shed American Surrealism in the 1980s for a more "postconfessional style." Though wide in range—from James Tate to Larry Levis—what remains constant, I believe, is the careful balance between narrative and disjunction, between clarity and opacity, between a poetry that expresses the self and a poetry that negates the self.

No figure is more central to second generation Surrealism than James Tate. In 1967, Tate burst onto the poetic scene as the youngest winner of the prestigious Yale Younger Poet Award with *The Lost Pilot*. In the following five years, Tate produced three more collections – *The Oblivion Ha-Ha* (1970), *Hints to Pilgrims* (1971), and *Absences* (1972), a trilogy Joshua Clover has called "the defining sequence of American Surrealism" (55). By the time Tate published

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[83] Despite the flourishing of American Surrealism seen in the 1970s, Tate and Charles Simic are the pre-eminent anthology favorites of that period. See Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum* 509-510.

Viper Jazz in 1976, he had transformed fully from a precocious, precious 22-year-old poet to—in Claudia Keelan's words— "the High Priest of American Surrealism" (93).

Anthony Caleshu has argued that Tate succeeds by writing a poetry where "a character yearns to express himself completely, to communicate effectively, but fails" (50). In this regard, Tate seems thoroughly postmodern. Indeed, the relationship between Tate and postmodern poets—notably Jorie Graham—has been explored before.[84] I wish, however, to examine Tate as a mediator between the mimetic and the meontic, between the Lowell mode and the Ashbery mode, via the Surrealist image.[85]

Though the critical reception of *The Lost Pilot* was extremely positive, rare were discussions in 1967 of Tate's Surrealist influences; instead, nearly every review focused on the title poem, a plain-spoken elegy for his father, a pilot who disappeared during World War II.[86] The following lines are representative of the poem's clarity and its sentimentality:

> …If I could cajole
>
> you to come back for an evening,
>
> down from your compulsive
>
> orbiting, I would touch you,
>
> read your face as Dallas,

---

[84] These discussions have largely, however, dwelled on Tate's later work, particularly his collection *Worshipful Company of Fletchers* (1995). See Harms 81-88 and Ramke 100-107.

[85] For an exploration of the relationship between Tate and Ashbery, see Hart 6-10.

[86] See, for instance, Fitts ix; Pritchard 304; Martz 599.

your hoodlum gunner, now

with the blistered eyes, reads

his Braille editions. I would

touch your face as a disinterested

scholar touches an original page. (*Lost Pilot* 26)

In contrast with Tate's later work, "The Lost Pilot" is a poem with direct similes ("I would /

touch your face as a disinterested // scholar touches an original page"), hypotactic phrasing, and

a clear emotional drive. In an interview years later, Tate himself acknowledged the "real-life"

circumstances behind the poem:

> …I passed the age of my father when his plane was shot down (and never found)
>
> over Stettin, April, whenever it was, 9th of 1944. At twenty-two, I was passing
>
> him on the clock. We talked about my father so much when I was a child, my
>
> mother and all her family that we lived with my first seven years, that I didn't
>
> really think he was dead. And then when I did realize it, I really didn't want to
>
> think about him for a while. Or else his name got sacred and I refused to speak of
>
> it for the pain it caused. (*Route as Briefed* 44)

Here Tate seems downright romantic; in Wordsworth's famous formulation, it is the

"spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings"—namely, Tate's "pain"—that motivates the poem.

Indeed, the Tate of *The Lost Pilot* was—as Clover has rightly pointed out—a poet of "straightforward similes," "traditional romanticism" and "familiar Oedipal drama," a description that suggests the line of Lowell and his circle (Clover 54). Yet with the publication of *Absences*, *Hints to Pilgrims*, and *The Oblivion Ha-Ha*, the ensuing years saw him shift towards an absurdity reminiscent of Ashbery. Take, for instance, these lines from Tate's collection *Absences* (1972):

> No, we are not in the movies.
>
> I cannot promise you
>
> The red wreaths of promise
>
>
> Two rooms watching each other. (*Absences* 23)

Here we see the parataxis, disjunction, and incongruity that marked Ashbery's *Three Poems*—the jump from the declaration "No, we are not in the movies" to the absurdist "red wreaths of promise" to its paratactic counterpart "two rooms watching each other." These lines are a far cry from the earnest, plaintive writing of "The Lost Pilot," and it would not be until his 1976 collection *Viper Jazz* that Tate would reconcile these two impulses. The collection's first poem, "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)" is a useful example. It begins in a plain-spoken mode:

> I don't know about the cold.
>
> I am sad without hands.
>
> I can't speak for the wind

which chips away at me. (*Viper Jazz* 11)

These lines are simple and straightforward. They follow a roughly six-syllable pattern yielding

three stresses each. A series of declarative sentences, the lines begin paratactically before

shifting to hypotaxis ("which chips away at me"). In terms of their subject matter, the poem

features a familiar speaker: a singular "I" in some sort of crisis.

The only real question is how to interpret the second line: is being "without hands"

literal? Or is being "without hands" a metaphor for helplessness? If we look to the fourth line for

an answer, we see that language is being used metaphorically here: wind "chip[s] away" at

someone with its bitter cold; it does not physically "chip" someone's body.

Yet just when we seem certain that the poem's language is comfortably metaphorical—

and therefore mimetic, enriching some literal reality—a sudden turn occurs:

When pulling a potato, I see only the blue haze.

When riding in an escalator, I expect something orthopedic to

happen.

Sinking in quicksand, I'm a wild appaloosa.

I fly into a rage at the sight of a double-decker bus,

I want to eat my way through the Congo,

I'm a double agent who tortures himself

and still will not speak.

159

All at once, the poem seems to come unmoored. Take, for instance, the line "When pulling a potato, I see only the blue haze." Formally, the line abandons the loose prosody established in the first four lines, expanding to 14 syllables and 5 stresses (indeed, the entire poem abandons the rhythms we had comfortably settled into: the lines here oscillate between 16 and 5 syllables, their stresses between three and seven). More importantly, what "blue haze" does one see "when pulling a potato"? And why does Tate precede "blue haze" with the definite article, as if there is some sort of specific blue haze? Indeed, the poem seems to abandon its mimetic impulse; whereas its language seemed to be underscoring or amplifying some sort of real experience, it now begins to obscure experience. Flashy nonsequiturs multiply via parataxis ("I fly into a rage at the sight of a double-decker bus, / I want to eat my way through the Congo / I'm a double agent who tortures himself"), and the recognizable dramatic situation of the poem's beginning— the self in crisis—unravels into a series of absurd declarations.

Just when the poem seems to become an utterly hermetic series of quirky ciphers, it returns to its first movement:

> I am sad without hands,
>
> I'm very sad without sleeves or pockets.
>
> Winter is coming to this city,
>
> I can't speak for the wind
>
> which chips away at me.

Whereas the declaration "I am sad without hands" seemed metaphorical in the poem's second line—reflecting some state of helplessness, perhaps— it now reflects the "I" of the poem no

160

more than the "wild appaloosa" or the "double-agent who tortures himself." In other words, the seemingly earnest speaker who opens the poem in a state of crisis—much like the mournful speaker in "The Lost Pilot"—is gradually "chip[ped] away" over the course of the poem by a series of Surrealist images and nonsequiturs. The poetic "I" of the poem is exposed as unstable; in this regard "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)" is in the line of Perloff's "Other Tradition." Yet this speaker is wholly unlike that of Ashbery's "An Outing," a work in which the self becomes simply part of the pastiche, one of the poem's many surfaces; indeed, what *is* clear in this otherwise opaque poem is a crisis of selfhood.

The many reconciliations Tate achieved in *Viper Jazz*--between mimesis and meonsis, between confessional crisis and disjunctive pastiche, between clarity and opacity—are evident in "Sensitive Ears":

> It's a tiny noise
>
> like that of eyeliner being applied
>
> like a twenty-year-old smell coming back
>
> to haunt you in a dream
>
> it's the new house
>
> it must be the old house
>
> only this time it enters
>
> through the ears
>
> what a strange odor!
>
> like an entire New Year's Eve Party
>
> shoved down a laundry chute

like waking up from an automobile accident

twenty years older!

and I keep sleeping in the basement

to get away from it

I'm in the treetops

listening to it circle

and I hear a mule puff its last sigh

I can't shut off this wheezing

there's a noise crouched under that leaf

I'm a flea with a thousand microphones

for eyes. (*Viper Jazz* 13)

Like much of Tate's poetry, "Sensitive Ears" feels like an absurd joke rushing through a series of punchlines. This speed is intensified by the poem's lack of punctuation, as well as its constant second-guessing and frantic cycle of breathless assertion and revision.

On some level, "Sensitive Ears" is about the subjective crisis of perception: there's a "tiny noise" that keeps bothering the speaker. This "tiny noise" can only be accessed metaphorically, and yet these metaphors are not quite right: the noise is simultaneously "like that of eyeliner being applied" and "like a twenty-year-old smell," "like an entire New Year's Eve Party / shoved down a laundry chute" and "like waking up from an automobile accident." Indeed, the noise haunts the speaker ("I'm in the treetops / listening to it circle") just as the lack of appropriate metaphor haunts the poem. The poem ends not with definite resolution but infinite

reception: "a thousand microphones" picking up sound in every direction. It is not a "tiny noise" that we are left with; it is a thousand tiny noises.

"Sensitive Ears" hints at the fundamental tension in American Surrealism, the uneasy relationship between slippery surfaces and fixed poetic subjects. It is a poem of a stable poetic "I" interacting with the external world, a poem of interiority and crisis. And yet meaning—whether the source of the "tiny noise" or the referent for any of the poem's metaphors—becomes virtually infinite.

Second only to Tate in the taxonomy of 1970s Surrealism, Charles Simic was the model for the entire generation of Second Growth surrealists, as Matthew Flamm argues, thanks to his inventiveness with image and voice (Flamm 165). An immigrant from postwar Yugoslavia, Simic brought a dark, uncanny tradition of Serbian poetry—and that of Vasko Popa in particular—to the American Surrealist idiom, tinged with images of the violence, abandonment, and exile Simic experienced in his childhood.

From his earliest works, Simic produced a poetry of discordant images, that which Pinsky discredited as simply "enigmatic" and "fey" (Pinsky 3): a fork as "a bird's foot / Worn around the cannibal's neck" (*Selected Early Poems* 34); a thumb as the "loose tooth of a horse" (*Selected Early Poems* 32). At other points, he is a poet of abrupt, disjointed assertions, explaining that "[t]he dead love eggs" (*Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk* 47) and that "Great are the Hittites/ Their ears have mice and mice have holes" (*Selected Early Poems* 44). Finally, like Tate, he is a poet who uses Surrealist imagery simply to have a little fun:

>Then the broom was ready
>
>To leave the monastery.

> The dust welcomed it—
>
> That great pornographer
>
> Immediately wanted to
>
> Look under its skirt. (*Return to a Place* 22)

Bizarre and uncanny, these images also suggest the sophomoric humor of Second Growth surrealism: the lascivious dust that wants to look up the "skirt" of a broom.

Yet Simic is also a poet who invokes the personal, writing about parents, love affairs, the destroyed landscapes of his native Yugoslavia, and, ultimately, the self:

> What is the subject of the sentence?
>
> The subject is your beloved Charles Simic. (*Return to a Place* 40)

> Here I'll pour one shot for me,
>
> One for this snowy night.
>
> If I get through my 33rd year,
>
> I'll live forever. (*Return to a Place* 42)

> Here I followed behind
>
> Dragging my body (*Return to a Place* 31)

By the time of his 1974 collection *Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk,* Simic brings these two tensions together. Despite the smug jokes and cheeky nonsequiturs, he pits the ineffable against the personal, and he creates personal meaning only to unravel it. No poem illustrates this

164

more effectively than "The Story." Though the title gestures toward narrative, the poem refuses

to yield whatever that "story" is:

The Story

About a fly

Which is not

A fly

About its swift

Powerful wings

Which do not exist… (*Return to a Place* 17)

The poem's opening lines gesture towards metaphor: the fly is "not / A fly"; our assumption as

readers is that this language is therefore some sort of trope, a word whose meaning shifts to

represent something else. Yet as the poem continues and chronicles "its eyes," "its eggs," "[I]ts

bite which / Is painful…", the reliability of these lines as metaphor becomes ever more unstable.

Finally, the poem concludes:

I drank

Its corpse

In a glass of milk

165

And caught

Its shadow

On the flypaper of my tongue.

As the poem ends with the image of speechlessness—a tongue as nothing more than flypaper, we realize "The Story" is about the *failure* of a story, language's inability to describe. We are thus presented with a speaker who cannot speak, yet has just told us "The Story."

Recent criticism views Charles Wright as a clear-spoken poet, writing an accessible verse that is "exacting, bold, and serious" (Baker 136) and whose careful poems are "pensive meditations on the human predicament" (Dolan 113). Certainly, Wright's recent work would suggest this assessment. Take, for instance, the final strophe of a poem Wright published in 2011:

Watch where you're walking,

There's always something bigger behind you,

and something bigger ahead.

Twisty the way, and twisty the place you're going to.

A rock here, a rock there, wind in the trees,

bright shards of green glass

The bat swoops over, listening for food.

It's starting to rain and I got to go home.

<div align="center">Be good,</div>

See that my grave is kept clean.

<div align="right">("So Long, It's Been Good to Know You" 70)</div>

However, it is necessary to remember that this poem's plainspoken clarity is not indicative of Wright's entire career. Indeed, Wright was far less accessible during the 1970s, writing a hermetic, opaque, image-driven poetry similar to that of his contemporaries, Tate and Simic. Witness these lines from "Synopsis" in his collection *Hard Freight* (1973):

> The white crow of belief
>
> The finger of speechlessness
>
> The eggshell of solitude (60)

Or these, from "Tongues," another poem in *Hard Freight*:

> Heart's coal; hinge to the dark door;
>
> Tongue that flicks from this blue hill: sunset:
>
> Snail's track and calf's cover;
>
> The last wipe of expectancy. (53)

As these selections suggest, Wright was a central member of the Second Growth Surrealists. Indeed, Wright's Surrealist aesthetic was so prominent that he was singled out by Pinsky in *The Situation of Poetry* for a poetry that was merely"[m]annerism" relying upon the "slick gestures" of Surrealism (Pinsky 115).

Wright's collection *Bloodlines* (1976) is perhaps the best example of this "mannerism." Reviewing the collection shortly after its publication, Peter Stitt views the book with confusion. Stitt sees *Bloodlines* as a book of "family history, personal history, even the history of the region of the country in which [Wright] grew up" ("The Inward Journey" 91). Yet Stitt's fundamental problem is that "ordinarily, one would expect such material to be presented with careful, loving attention." He confesses that "although I have read *Bloodlines* several times with care, I remain unable to break into the world of the poems, unable to identify with the speaker" (92).

Other critics have been equally ambivalent about the work. While James McCorkle recognizes that the poems of *Bloodlines* are "experiments in the autobiographical moment … in geographical, historical, familial and generational terms," he also acknowledges that autobiographical memory is pitted dialectically against "renewal" (183-4). And though Bonnie Costello ultimately sees the work as a "pastoral romance of the body" (413), she recognizes that *Bloodlines* is nevertheless a work of "surfaces, memories, emblems" (427).

Ultimately, these critics are pointing to the same tension in *Bloodlines.* Yes, the poems *do* draw from the personal, the domestic, and the geographical; in this regard, they reflect the project of Lowell. But the poems also make the personal, the domestic, and the geographical unrecognizable through the hermetic imagery of American Surrealism; in this regard, they reflect the project of Ashbery and Perloff's "Other Tradition." In other words, these are poems of a very careful indeterminacy, pitting the Romantic project—the self and its relation to memory and landscape—against a series of surfaces and juxtapositions and hermetic images.

Nowhere is this tension more clear than in the "Tattoos" sequence in *Bloodlines*. A series of twenty poems, "Tattoos" simultaneously reflects autobiography and obfuscates it. Indeed, these counter-acting tensions are apparent even in the sequence's formal qualities. Each of the

poems consists of three stanzas of five lines. Despite this uniformity, the lines in each stanza have no guiding formal principle; neither syllabic nor accentual nor accentual-syllabic patterns unify the lines.[87] Thus the poems present both closed strophic form and open stichic form.

Helen Vendler has tried to make sense of this ambivalent form by arguing that the three-stanza structure of "Tattoos" is one of "presentation, complication, conclusion" ("Transcendent I" 4). Yet Vendler also recognizes that each of the poems in the "Tattoos" sequence "implies a world of meaning ranging from solutions to revolutions" ("Transcendent I" 3). It is this "world of meaning"—this range of interpretation—that I believe is in the Ashbery mode, while the syllogistic cleanliness of "presentation, complication, conclusion" is in the Lowell mode. Let us look at this poem as an example:

2.

The pin oak has found new meat,

The linkworm a bone to pick.

Lolling its head, slicking its blue tongue,

The nightflower blooms on its one stem;

The crabgrass hones down its knives:

Between us again there is nothing. And since

The darkness is only light

---

[87] Though the lines of the "Tattoos" sequence—like the whole of Wright's work—follow free verse principles, Wright *does* count syllables carefully during his composition of poems, in part to avoid the accidental establishment of any set metrical pattern. See C. Wright, *Halflife* 84-86. For a discussion of Wright's "loose syllabic prosody," see Cushman 226-229.

That has not yet reached us,

You slip it on like a glove.

Duck soup, you say. *This is duck soup*.

And so it is.

        Along the far bank

Of Blood Creek, I watch you turn

In that light, and turn, and turn,

Feeling it change on your changing hands,

Feeling it take. Feeling it.

           1972 (*Bloodlines* 20)

Like all the poems in "Tattoos," this poem has only a number for its title and a date after its conclusion. These numbers and dates suggest that the twenty poems are some type of journal or chronicle. Yet unlike the way a journal conventionally works—starting in the past and moving to the present—these poems skip around chronologically: the first five poems, for instance, start in the present (1973), then skip to the recent past (1972), then to the distant past (1951), then forward to 1968, then all the way back to 1946.

Temporally, then, the poems undermine expectation: just when it seems the sequence is moving backwards into the past—from 1973 to 1951, say—it suddenly jumps forward in time to 1968. So too a poem like "The pin oak has found new meat" seems to undermine its reader's understanding, skipping back and forth between comprehensibility and opacity, between mimetic

and meontic modes. The first stanza seems pastoral: it invokes the "pin oak," the "linkworm," the "nightflower," and the "crabgrass" of the natural world. In the second stanza, we are suddenly aware that the poem is about two people, an "us." This in and of itself is not off-putting; many poems begin by invoking the natural world and then shifting to the interpersonal.[88] But what does it mean when the "you" of the poem "slip[s] it on like a glove"? Presumably, the antecedent for "it" is the "light" of line 7. But even so, what does it mean to "slip on" light?

This leads us to the most enigmatic line of the poem: "*Duck soup*, you say. *This is duck soup*." What exactly does that mean? Is this dissonance in the style of Ashbery, inserting a reference to popular culture (the famous Marx Brothers film of 1933) as a form of pastiche?

A 1976 interview with Wright actually decodes this line for us: "My father's favorite expression," Wright explains, "when I didn't understand something was that it was duck soup, incredibly simple" (*Halflife* 70). Yet we need not wait until an interview with Wright to begin to understand what this line means. For like all the poems in "Tattoos," "The pin oak has found new meat" actually has an end-note that explicates the poem: "Death of my father" (*Bloodlines* 39). Indeed, these notes come as something of a surprise, appearing *after* all the poems have been read. Suddenly, the interpretive possibilities of these poems change profoundly, as Wright gives them actual referents, whether places ("4. Venice, Italy."), experiences ("5. Automobile wreck; hospital; Baltimore, Maryland.") or ideas ("10. Visions of heaven."). For instance, poem 12 begins

Oval oval oval push pull push pull

Words unroll from our fingers

---

[88] Wordsworth's "Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" is perhaps the most obvious example of such a poem. See Wordsworth and Coleridge 111-116.

and ends

> Sure sleights of hand,
>
> The news that arrives from nowhere:
>
> Angel, omega, silence, silence …

Such a poem might seem, at first blush, to be an Ashberian language game, or some sort of Beckett-like repetition. But with the end-note, the poem is suddenly revealed—and explained— as "Handwriting class; Palmer Method; words as 'things'; Kingsport Tennessee" (*Bloodlines* 39). With a real-life situation suddenly the referent for the poem, its odd staccatoed chants ("Oval oval oval push pull push pull"), strange images ("Words unroll from our fingers") and absurd metaphors ("Sure sleights of hand, / The news that arrives from nowhere") begin to cluster around a fixed meaning rather than a set of endless interpretive possibilities.

Though resistant to their inclusion,[89] Wright himself acknowledges what these notes accomplish:

> I also wanted it to be very clear that each one of these was an actual situation, that
> it had not been made up but had actually happened … The reason I put [the notes]
> at the end of the poem instead of at the bottom or under the title of each one was
> that I also wanted the reader to go all the way through and try to figure out what

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[89] When asked about the endnotes to "Tattoos," Wright admits "I would have given anything not to have used the notes" (*Halflife* 67).

was going on and then when he came to the notes say, "Yeah they really are real

things. Let me go back and read it with that in mind." (*Halflife* 67)

Here Wright points to the dissonance he has intended in the sequence, between "try[ing] to figure

out what was going on" and returning to the poem and re-reading it once its referent is suddenly

clear.

Peter Stitt believes these notes to the sequence "are necessary, for the poems can scarcely

be comprehended without them" ("Inward Journey" 92). Stitt's assumption here is that the

sequence's goal is, in fact, comprehension. Yes, the work is one of memory and biography and

geography—and therefore displays an allegiance to the tradition of Lowell. Yet it also –as

Wright notes—a work "of length, juxtaposition, complexity, and layering. Especially

juxtaposition and layering" (*Quarternotes* 105). In this admission, Wright suggests that

transparency is not necessarily the goal of "Tattoos" and thereby suggests an allegiance to the

world of Ashbery's *Three Poems*, where "[n]othing is to be learned, only avoided."

While recent criticism has often overlooked Charles Wright's Surrealist years, the

Surrealist phase of Larry Levis's poetic career has been all but forgotten. D.W. Fenza, writing of

Levis after his death in 1996, summarizes him as a poet who "addressed the big, chronic themes

of poetry (mortality, vanity, loss, transcendence, oppression)" (11); David Kirby, in turn,

eulogizes Levis as a poet who wrote lush tableaux of "near-total hopelessness" (418). It's true

that Levis' writing in the 1980s and 1990s was marked by long, discursive meditations. Take,for

instance, this strophe from *The Widening Spell of the Leaves* (1991):

Even when we finally had to burn them, the gray, stately

Trunks of malagas, the tough, already yellowing limbs

Of muscats--acres of them in those years, hacked, stacked

In piles, then doused with kerosene--even their fires

Flaring all night in what were suddenly bare fields--

Looked older than the city dressed in its distant light. (13)

Nostalgic, wistful, and—above all—clear, lines like these are often the focus of literary criticism concerning Levis. Nevertheless, it is important to remember Levis's writing was not always so contemplative. Indeed, as the following excerpts from his volume *The Afterlife* (1977) suggest, Levis's writing during the 1970s revealed a deep debt to the uncanny images and metaphorical leaps of Second Growth surrealism:

We'll turn slowly, flowers

In the mouths of drowned cattle. (42)

You loved the blackboards,

Where the equations died of perfection,

And the parables were burned herons (32)

…as if I lived in a house

wallpapered with the cries of birds

I cannot identify. (11)

Levis, in fact, acknowledged the profound influence of the "marvelous American surrealists… Bly, Simic, Tate" upon his writing in the 1970s (*Gazer Within* 95-96). In particular, the 12-poem sequence "The Rain's Witness" that concludes *The Afterlife* reveals the inherent tensions American Surrealism incorporates—between clarity and opacity, self-revelation and hermeticism. In a certain sense, "The Rain's Witness" combines Charles Wright's sequence "Tattoos" and James Tate's "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)". Like "Tattoos," it takes autobiographical experience—a single episode between a speaker (presumably Levis) and his brother—and simultaneously explains and obfuscates it. Like "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)," "The Rain's Witness" undermines the reliability of language, obscuring the line between the literal and the metaphorical, just as it obscures the poetic self.

The sequence's first poem is, in fact, straightforward prose:

> One morning with a 12 gauge my brother shot
>
> what he said was a linnet. He did this at close range
>
> where it sang on a flowering almond branch. Any-
>
> one could have done the same and shrugged it off,
>
> but my brother joked about it for days, describing
>
> how nothing remained of it, how he watched for
>
> feathers and counted only two gold ones which he
>
> slipped behind his ear. He grew uneasy and care-
>
> less; nothing remained. He wore loud ties and two
>
> tone shoes. He sold shoes, he sold soap. Nothing

remained. He drove on the roads with a little hole

in the air behind him. (*Afterlife* 47)

What is remarkable about this first poem is its mimetic flatness. It seeks to tell a narrative—the

shooting of the linnet—but then dismisses that narrative: "Any- / one could have done the same."

The poem's language is almost unpoetic, with simple syntax and direct description ("He grew

uneasy and care- / less… He wore loud ties and two / tone shoes. He sold shoes, he sold soap").

What little poetic device there is—repetition—is one of negation: "nothing remained… Nothing

remained." Until the last line ("with a little hole in the air behind him"), the poem is virtually

free of metaphor. Indeed, the poem seems little more than a chronicle.

As the sequence goes on, it builds the linnet episode, slowly adding Tate-like

nonsequiturs:

3.

As my brother walks through an intersection the

noise from hundreds of thin wings, linnet wings,

becomes his silence. He shouts in his loud clothes

all day. God grows balder. (*Afterlife* 49)

In an otherwise straightforward prose narrative, the declaration "God grows balder" emerges like

"the blue haze" of Tate's "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)": it makes language more opaque

and meaning less stable. Just as the impenetrable "blue haze" suddenly changes the way we have

interpreted Tate's line "I am sad without hands," so "God grows balder" changes the way we

176

have interpreted the preceding sentences. "Loud clothes" are perhaps actually "loud" (in the sense of "unquiet") rather than "loud" in the sense of "mismatched"; "noise…becom[ing] silence" is perhaps a paradox rather than a description of growing accustomed to the hum of "hundreds of linnet wings."

As it continues, the poetic sequence gives way to a succession of Surrealist images ("In Illinois one bridge is made entirely / of dead linnets" [46]), absurdist similes ("Your family stands over your bed / like Auks of estrangement" [55]) and disjunctions ("When we are the night and the rain, / the leper on his crutch will spit once" [54]). The clear narrative and a stable "I" of the sequence's first poem is irrevocably undermined, culminating in the confession in the eleventh poem that "You have no brother. / You never had a brother … it never happened" (59). By the final poem, language, too, has run its course:

> This is a good page.
>
> It is blank,
>
> and getting blanker… (60)

Ultimately, the poetic sequence that began in a mimetic mode—a biographical experience, rendered in clear language—has become utterly unstable: the experience never occurred; the language has exhausted itself into a state where a "good page" is a "blank" one.

Ultimately, American Surrealism faded away as the 1970s drew to a close and American verse broke into the "poetry wars" of the 1980s. As I have tried to show in this chapter, the unique historical moment of Second Growth American Surrealism—coming after Lowell and

177

Ashbery and before the poetry wars—allowed it to achieve a momentary truce between the

forces of clarity and indeterminacy, transparency and opacity, the personal and the impersonal.

Conclusion

The Death (and Life?) of American Surrealism

I will conclude by accounting for the apparent disappearance of American Surrealism in the 1980s, by way of summing up both its importance in its time and its continuing significance. I will offer three possible scenarios for its disappearance, and I will furthermore suggest what its loss has cost in terms of a fuller literary history of the modern and contemporary period.

In a certain sense, the disappearance of American Surrealism has an entirely plausible explanation: the three major practitioners of the movement—James Wright, Robert Bly, and W. S. Merwin—no longer were involved. Wright died in 1980, while Bly and Merwin moved on to other political, social, and aesthetic concerns; as the "Big Three" of American Surrealism disappeared, the movement collapsed. The second possibility for the disappearance of American Surrealism is that, as the Cold War gave way to the Culture Wars, it became less desirable to identify as an American Surrealist, even if one were writing in an American Surrealist style. A third and final possibility is that American Surrealism never truly disappeared, but it did take on a different shape in the form of the "Elliptical" poetry Stephen Burt discovered in the late 1990s.

The most notable change in American Surrealism occurred as Robert Bly's career turned profoundly during the 1980s. Though he was still writing poems, he became far more famous for his work as a figurehead of the Men's Movement. Over the course of the 1970s and 1980s, Bly had furthered his interest in literature and politics and Jungian psychology, and slowly shifted towards the New Age community, focusing on the crisis in masculinity. In particular, Bly focused on the mythopoetic and the masculine, as well as the function of initiation rites in

manhood.[90] Poetry readings gave way to the conference circuit, and ultimately his book *Iron John: A Book About Men* (1990) gained an audience that his poems never did. The book spent 62 weeks on the *New York Times* best seller list, and spawned an entire generation of "earnest, heartfelt, even sentimental books about what it means to be a man" from "white, middle-class, middle-aged men, M.D.'s and Ph.D.'s, storytellers and drumbeaters, camp counselors and boys' school teachers, members of 'Hairy-Chested Men's Groups' and former gang members, fire walkers and holistic healers" (Schweder). In the mythopoetic movement that mixed "celebrity and mass therapy," Bly found far greater and more impassioned following than he had experienced among his audience of poetry readers (Morrow 52).

W.S. Merwin's poetic trajectory also changed during the 1980s. Like Bly, Merwin found a new readership and a different set of concerns, shifting away from American Surrealist aesthetics. Where Bly had become linked to the Men's Movement, Merwin became increasingly linked to the environmentalist movement during this decade through his volumes *Finding the Islands* (1982), *Opening the Hand* (1983), and *Rain in the Trees* (1988). Brian Scijag, for instance, argues that "Merwin's environmentalist treatment of nature" first truly emerged in these volumes, noting his "satiric treatments of destructive corporate power and generic consumers" (178). It is not by coincidence, Scijag points out, that this environmentalist turn occurred following Merwin's permanent move to a rain forest in Hawaii where he "learned firsthand about the environmental degradation of a unique, self-contained ecosystem" (178).

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[90] A brief excerpt from a 1982 interview with Bly gives a sense of how profoundly his career had shifted by the 1980s:

> Recently I taught a conference for men only at the Lama Community in New Mexico. About forty men came, and we were together ten days. Each morning I talked about certain fairy tales relating to men's growth, and about the Greek gods that embody what the Greeks considered different kinds of male energy. We spent the afternoons being quiet or walking and doing body movement or dance, and then we'd all come together again in the late afternoon. Often the younger males would begin to talk and within five minutes they would be weeping. (Thompson 33)

Merwin's subsequent work in more recent decades have positioned him as an environmental writer with abundant eco-critical readings of his work.[91]

Perhaps the most significant blow to American Surrealism occurred with the death of James Wright in 1980. His importance to American Surrealism cannot be overstated, as evidenced by the numerous elegies and homages to Wright that sprung forth among them.[92] Take, for example, Larry Levis's elegy for Wright, the second section of his long poem "The Sleeping Lioness":

2

for James Wright

Today, hearing the empty clang of a rope against

A flagpole, the children in school, the slow squeal of swings

In the playground, a day of rain & gusts

Of wind, I noticed the overleaf of his book—

How someone had tried hard to make

The illustration look like snow that had fallen in the shape

Of a horse; it looked, instead, like someone wrapped in bandages.

Someone alone & wrapped in bandages who could not see out,

Who would never be permitted to see out

As a gust of rain swept over the swimming pool, over

---

[91] For further examples of eco-critical readings of Merwin, see for instance Costello "On Poetry & the Idea of Nature," Felstiner 54-58, and Bryson 101-116.

[92] See, for instance, "Elegy: For James Wright" by Gregory Orr (64), "The Canada Goose" by Robert Bly (Henricksen 75), and "James" by W.S. Merwin (Henricksen 5).

The thin walls of my apartment, twenty years ago.

If I look in the window I can see the book open on the counter;

I am reading it there; I am alone.

Everyone else in the world is in bed with someone else.

If they sleep, they sleep with a lock of the other's hair

In their lips, but the world is one short,

An odd number, & so God has given me a book of poems.

And suddenly the boy sitting there isn't funny anymore.

And in that moment the one

Wrapped in bandages wants only to look out once,

Even at a gust of rain blemishing the pool,

Even at a scuffed shoe passing.

Poor shoe, poor rain, poor sprawl of stucco & plywood.

And death, poorest of cousins, back turned

In all the photographs,

Wanting his mouth for a souvenir. (*Widening Spell* 14-15)

In these lines, we see so many of the hallmarks of American Surrealism. In the spirit of

Breton's dictum that the greatest image is "the one that is arbitrary to the highest degree, the one

that takes the longest time to translate into practical language" (Breton 38), the poem is full of

bizarre nonsequiturs ("death, poorest of cousins") and superfluous images ("If they sleep, they

sleep with a lock of the other's hair/In their lips"). Moreover, Levis's poem positions itself

squarely within the American Surrealist tradition by embracing the open form of postwar poetry, with its loose sentences, lack of sustained meter, and inconsistent rhythms and line lengths.

While the aesthetic choices of "The Sleeping Lioness" reveal the Surrealist strain that began in France and came to Levis through James Wright's poetry from the 1950s, the poem's content reveals Levis's debt to Wright more fully. The dedication provides the most obvious link to Wright, but a close reading of the poem shows the connection between Levis and Wright as one of reader and author. The lines describe a younger version of the speaker reading a book of poems; this volume of poems gives the speaker comfort in his profound solitude where the "world is one short." Whereas "Everyone else in the world is in bed with someone else," our speaker has only the volume of poems to serve as a partner.

Given that Levis's poems seldom (if ever) make the distinction between "poet" and "speaker" that occurs in, say, Eliot's "The Love Song of Alfred Prufrock," it seems a reasonable assumption that the speaker in these lines is a young Levis and the poet whose book Levis is reading is James Wright. Such a reading of these lines is supported by looking to the cover of James Wright's famous volume *The Branch Will Not Break* (1963):
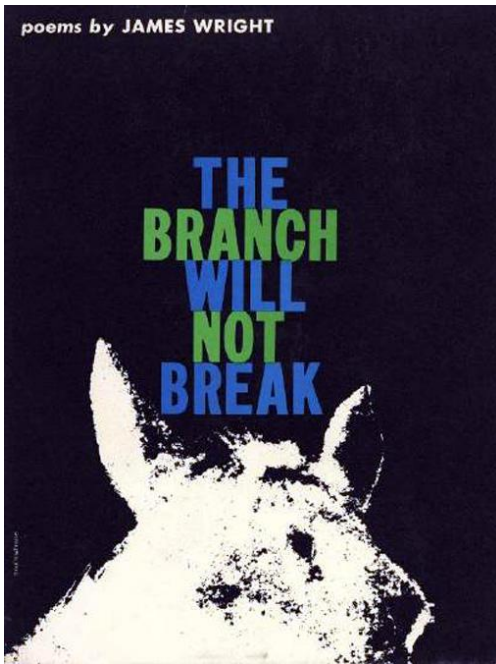
Fig 1. Cover illustration, *The Branch Will Not Break* (artist unknown)

Surely, this cover is the "overleaf" referenced in Levis's poem. The lower half of the cover –beneath the title—reveals the top of a horse's head, white against a black background. It seems almost certainly that this is the "overleaf" upon which "someone had tried hard to make / The illustration look like snow that had fallen in the shape / Of a horse." As Levis's poem suggests, *The Branch Will Not Break* was profoundly influential upon a generation of young poets who went on, in the 1970s, to become the heirs of American Surrealism. Perhaps in the death of James Wright, these poets had lost a father figure, and their work shifted because of this loss.

Indeed, the young poet in Levis's poem who has suddenly found that "everyone else in the world is in bed with someone else" suggests a world where a young American Surrealist has no one to love and, perhaps more importantly, to be loved by. Certainly this was true of the American literary criticism as the 1980s dawned and the importance of the Cold War faded as

the Culture Wars heated up; sadly, an understanding of American Surrealism was one of the first casualties. While the Surrealist influence of Wright, Bly, and Merwin existed well into the poetry of the 1980s and beyond, contemporary criticism chose to ignore American poetry's debt to Surrealism in favor of newer lenses of literary scholarship such as feminist criticism and postmodernist theory.

This shift can be illustrated by using James Wright's famous poem "A Blessing" from *The Branch Will Not Break* and demonstrating how Wright's American Surrealist influence was absorbed into the work of a feminist poet from the 1980s.

A Blessing

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,

Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.

And the eyes of those two Indian ponies

Darken with kindness.

They have come gladly out of the willows

To welcome my friend and me.

We step over the barbed wire into the pasture

Where they have been grazing all day, alone.

They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness

That we have come.

They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.

There is no loneliness like theirs.

At home once more,

They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.

I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,

For she has walked over to me

And nuzzled my left hand.

She is black and white,

Her mane falls wild on her forehead,

And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear

That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize

That if I stepped out of my body I would break

Into blossom. (57)

"A Blessing" is one of Wright's most anthologized poems, and it is easy to understand

why. [93] Unlike some of the more complicated poems from *The Branch Will Not Break*--

"Goodbye to the Poetry of Calcium," say, or "The Undermining of the Defense Economy"—"A

Blessing" is appropriate for the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* or an "introduction to poetry"

course.[94] The poem is seemingly straightforward: it situates the dramatic poem in a Midwestern

locale (Rochester, Minnesota); it is conversational in style; it is narrative in structure; it is open

in form. While devoted readers of Wright will understand the larger significance of its

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[93] Jed Rasula notes, moreover, that "A Blessing" is one of the hundred most-anthologized poems of the contemporary period (as of 1996, when he researched the poems most responsible for the "hegemon[ic]" canon that determines how postwar American poetry is remembered and understood). See *The American Poetry Wax Museum* 164-176.

[94] Indeed, the poem appears in the current edition of the *Norton Anthology of Poetry* (Ferguson 1750).

Midwestern setting or its use of open form, the poem is accessible for even the most casual reader of American poetry.

A great deal of critical criticism has focused upon the poem's famous final lines. Brian Green views them through a neo-Romantic lens as "a sentence that startingly fuses the mimetic with the metaphoric" (166). Christian Wiman, in turn, finds them sentimental to the point of "mawkishness" (166-7). David Pink sees them as "transcendent," an attempt by the poet to "transgress" by "cross[ing] boundaries of difference, ownership, authorship, and time" (44). And while critical views may diverge, it is undeniable that the poem's final sentence provides an imagistic jolt that is at once jarring and uncanny. What does it mean, after all, for a man to "Suddenly…break/ Into blossom"? "A Blessing" – at least two generations removed from Breton's idea of Surrealist art as "dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly" ("Second Manifesto of Surrealism" 125) -- serves as a prime example of the American Surrealist poem: in open form, it takes an American setting, provides an identifiable narrative, deftly walks a line between the recognizable and the uncanny, and ends with a stark and jarring image.

With this set of core characteristics in mind, let us look at another poem from 1980, in its entirety:

The children were around my feet like dogs,

milling, nipping, wetting, slavering,

feed sieving from their chops like plankton.

I slid on their messes, I found their silky bodies

asleep in corners, paws fallen

north, south, east, west,

little sexes gleaming.

Ankle-deep in their smell, their noise,

their crisis, their noses cold and black

or going soft with fever, I waded, I slogged.

Crowding around my toes like tits,

they taught me to walk carefully,

to hold still to be sucked.

I worked my feet in them like mud

for the pleasure.

And suddenly there is a head at my breastbone

as if one of the litter had climbed

onto the branch of a dwarf tree

which overnight grew to here

bearing you up, daughter, with your dark

newborn eyes. You sit in the boughs,

blossoms breaking like porcelain cups around you. (Olds 48)

It is impossible to look at the final strophe of this poem without acknowledging its debt to

James Wright's "A Blessing." Though the first four strophes chronicle all the difficulties of

parenthood (children are "like dogs" with their behavior and hygiene, "their noise, their sickness"), the final strophe is transformative: the speaker's daughter is "at my breastbone" staring up with "dark newborn eyes." The daughter's "sudden" presence abruptly invalidates all the speaker's grievances about parenthood, and the violence of this realization is driven home with a jarring image: "You sit in the boughs / blossoms breaking like porcelain cups around you."

The criticism previously levied at Wright's final lines could be easily applied here: the lines are "startling" in their effort "to fuse the mimetic with the metaphoric"; they are sentimental and even "mawkish"; above all, they are "transcendent" in their attempt to "cross boundaries of difference, ownership, authorship, and time" between parent and child. Both poems use the same alliterative *b*'s in their closing lines, and indeed, the *exact same diction* with "blossom" and "break" in the final line. Can we possibly believe that this poet—who composed the poem sometime during the 1970s, given its publication in book form in 1980— had never read James Wright's "A Blessing"?

In the same volume, the poet offered lines suggest a linkage to Merwin, Wright and Bly, and arguably Neruda or even Breton or Tzara:

> I am taking the word love away from the big eaters
>
> And placing it here in the mouth of the dead woman
>
> Like the head of a cockfight rooster, to be sucked back to life. (Olds 32)

> The inhabitants of my body began to
>
> get up in the dark, pack, and move. (Olds 23)

189

The poet of all these passages is Sharon Olds, and all the selections come from *Satan Says* (1980). Though the relationship between the above poems and the American Surrealist tradition seems clear, this kinship was not acknowledged in 1980 and remains unacknowledged to this day. The contemporary reviews focused instead on the poems' content rather than their aesthetics, and the subject matter is what has defined Olds's career from this first volume forward. Sara Plath, writing in the spring of 1980, described Satan Says as "perpetually balanced at the edge of hyperbolic violence" (26), while Rochelle Ratner described it as a book characterized by "hate and love of parent, woman suddenly out on her own, the frightened wife and mother" (728). Joyce Peseroff saw the book as a chronicle of "personal survival in terms of the primal, female relationships of Daughter, Mother and Lover" (21).

Thus, in 1980 Olds was defined by *what* she wrote about rather than *how* she wrote about it. In other words, her status as a female writer writing provocatively about female identity trumped any use of Surrealist style. It was as if, suddenly, the influence of James Wright—and American Surrealism—had disappeared, not just from any discussion of Sharon Olds's poetry, but indeed, from the historical memory of contemporary American poetry.

Certainly, writers take on other projects as their careers develop and mature. Yet at this same moment that Bly's and Merwin's careers were turning, several other phenomena were occurring. First of all, histories of the mid-century American poetry that were being published in the 1980s and 1990s, such as those by Shetley and Von Hallberg, were focusing on the 1950s and 1980s, and largely ignoring work that didn't fit the trajectory from the explosion of "schools" in the 1950s to the arrival of Language poetry in the 1980s. The work of the Surrealist

writers of the 1970s did not fit this narrative, and I would argue the place of the American

Surrealists in cultural memory has suffered because of it.

Indeed, the significance of the arrival of Language poetry cannot be understated. As a

poetic embodiment of deconstructionist theory, it has yielded a wellspring of contemporary

poetry criticism. And while American Surrealism often worked in similar modes—blending a

political consciousness with poetic indeterminacy—the critical tendency has been to champion

the Language poets as the first practitioners of such ideas, as this dissertation's Introduction has

demonstrated in looking at Bob Perelman's discussion of Frost's "The Gift Outright."

In turn, as the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s heated up, the anti-imperial poems of

Bly and Merwin became fodder for postcolonial and new historicist readings that savaged the

work. Michael Bibby, for instance, argued that argued *The Lice* "reproduce[s] the ethnocentric

paradigms central to colonialist discourses and, ultimately, to the ideology of the US intervention

in Vietnam" (Bibby 166). Even Merwin's great anti-war poem "The Asians Dying" was

skewered for not giving Asians a voice and thus serving to "expunge this history [of Vietnamese

suffering] from cultural memory" (Bibby 171). Indeed, Bibby ultimately concludes that "The

preference given to antiwar poems by Merwin and Bly in the teaching anthology canon silences

the many voices in American poetry raised against U.S. intervention in Vietnam" (172). While it

is hard to say how much influence scholarship like Bibby's had, the 1980s were a good time to

be writing Language poetry and a bad time to be a Surrealist: to write Language poetry allowed

for critical embrace; to write American Surrealist poetry meant the possibility of being accused

of neo-imperialism.

A final possibility for the fate of American Surrealism comes via Stephen Burt's

controversial essay "The Elliptical Poets" (1999). In that essay, Burt coined the term "Elliptical

poets" to identify a large group of poets who were writing in the 1980s and 1990s—the heyday

of Language poetry—but were not Language poets. Unlike the mostly male and exclusively

white American Surrealists, this group was heterogeneous and broad. Burt suggested a

membership that numbered in the dozens, and included poets like Karen Volkman, Killarney

Clary, Forrest Gander, Alice Fulton (353), Joshua Clover, Brenda Shaughnessy, David Berman,

Matthea Harvey (354), Mark Levine, Thylias Moss, Lucie Brock-Broido, and Susan Wheeler

(347-349). These so-called "Elliptical poets" were early to mid-career poets who "found their

real styles after 1986" (353).[95] I would suggest that these Elliptical poets are, quite possibly, the

true heirs of the American Surrealists, writing jarring and uncanny poems in an age defined by

Language Poetry.

In defining the Elliptical school, Burt identifies a series of characteristics recall many of

the qualities of the Second Growth Surrealists:

> Elliptical poets are always hinting, punning, or swerving away from a never-
>
> quite-unfolded backstory; they are easier to process in parts than in wholes. They
>
> believe provisionally in identities (in one—or at least one—"I" per poem), but
>
> they suspect the I's they invoke: they admire disjunction and confrontation, but
>
> they know how a little can go a long way. Ellipticists seek the authority of the
>
> rebellious; they want to challenge their readers, violate decorum, surprise or
>
> explode assumptions about what belongs in a poem or what matters in life, and to
>
> do so while meeting traditional lyric goals. Their favorite attitudes are desperately
>
> extravagant or tough-guy terse, or defiantly childish: they don't believe in, or
>
> seek, a judicious tone. (346)

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[95] In an update to his famous essay, Burt notes that "Most Ellipticals are (as of 2009) between 40 and 60" (353). As such, they were younger poets in the 1980s and 1990s.

How different is Burt's description, ultimately, from the ways the Surrealists of the 1970s were described? Pinsky noted the second growth Surrealists' youth, their "slick" mannerisms (115), their use of "enigmatic" writing (3) that often turned into "thick, rich handful[s] of words" (163). Zweig, in turn, spoke to the second growth Surrealists' "[c]arefully composed dream poems, incoherent torrents of language, obscure humor, jiving anti-rhetoric, nonsense, fantasy landscapes, images, obscure abstraction"("New Surrealism" 316). Burt's description of the Ellipticals seems to incorporate both of Zweig's and Pinsky's observations about the second growth Surrealists.

In practical terms, it is useful to return to James Tate's "Poem (I Can't Speak for the Wind)" and compare it to "Work Song," the opening poem of Mark Levine's *Debt* (1992). Tate's poem, as discussed in Chapter 3, reveals a series of quirky ciphers embedded inside a longer lyrical meditation:

> Sinking in quicksand, I'm a wild appaloosa.
>
> I fly into a rage at the sight of a double-decker bus,
>
> I want to eat my way through the Congo,
>
> I'm a double agent who tortures himself
>
> and still will not speak. (*Viper Jazz* 11)

The similarities between these lines and the closing lines of Levine's poem are remarkable:

> My name is Henri. I am Toulouse. I am scraps
>
> of bleached parchment, I am the standing militia,

a quill, the Red Cross, I am the feather

in my cap, the Hebrew Testament, I am the World Court.

An electric fan blows

beneath my black robe. I am dignity itself.

I am an ice machine.

I am an alp.

I stuff myself in the refrigerator

wrapped in newsprint. With salt in my heart

I stay good for days. (18)

Both poems are in loosely structured free verse and use the device of anaphora as well as the

syntactic structure of simple declarative sentences. Furthermore, both poems feature an unstable

"I" that is any number of bizarre possibilities (a "wild appaloosa," a "double agent who tortures

himself," "an alp," "the World Court"). And while the similarities between two poems cannot

alone suggest a kinship between two movements, the overlap between these poems certainly

suggests that Levine had read and absorbed James Tate in much the same way that Tate had

absorbed poets like James Wright, Robert Bly, and W.S. Merwin.

Burt's Elliptical poets give hope that perhaps American Surrealism has not died. Yet even

if parts of American Surrealism live on in a new generation, what has been lost is the primacy of

the image. Robert Bly's and James Wright's poems of the 1950s and 1960s looked back to the

circles of Spanish writers that sprung up in Madrid in the years prior to the Spanish Civil War;

these Spanish poets, in turn, looked to the Paris of the early 1920s where the circle of Breton

194

looked to the "light of the image" as a means of political action (Breton 37). This Bretonian

"light of the image"—and its political ramifications—was certainly apparent in "the balls of

blood" that broken-necked mice "push with their noses" in Merwin's *The Lice* (6).

While the Elliptical poets may perhaps carry on Breton's hope that poetry will fire a

pistol into a crowd, their target is the dominance of Language poetry. During the Cold War,

Bly's "moles with golden wings" (*Silence* 53), Wright's "delicate little boxes of dust" (*Branch*

32), and Merwin's "thumbs left after the auction" (*Lice* 6) were targeting the imperial reach of

American foreign policy. The Surrealist image, born in 1919 in Paris, was the vehicle for that

critique.

While Surrealism's American iteration may or may not have disappeared around 1980, a

reader can be certain that Merwin's "The Asians Dying" or Wright's "The Undermining of the

Defense Economy" or Bly's "Summer, 1960, Minnesota" was a direct link to the "debacle of the

intellect" Breton and Éluard first celebrated in the 1920s (Breton *Notes* 53). To forget about

American Surrealism is to limit our understanding of midcentury American poetry's European

heritage and, furthermore, to restrict our understanding of the many poets who arrived in the

years after 1980. As this conclusion's reading of Sharon Olds suggests, a fuller understanding of

contemporary American poetry can be achieved only once the contributions of the American

Surrealists are taken more seriously.

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