Céline Mansanti

A Counterproposal to French Surrealism:

transition's American Surrealist Experimentations (Murray Godwin, Nathanael West, William Carlos Williams, and others)

American Surrealism is still mainly associated today with the visual arts (through passing figures such as Julien Levy, James Johnson Sweeney and Alfred H. Barr) or with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s – and the creation of an American surrealist group in Chicago. However, American Surrealist literary experimentations did exist in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of them appeared in *transition*, the American expatriate magazine published in Paris between 1927 and 1938. Among many other texts, *transition* famously published Joyce's *Work in Progress*, numerous pieces by Gertrude Stein, as well as the first translations into English of countless French surrealist texts. Some of these American experimentations are still remembered today (such as William Carlos Williams' *Novelette*, and Nathanael West's *Dream Life of Balso Snell*), while many others have been forgotten. Together, however, these texts shape a distinctive American response to French surrealism. It is my goal here to define the main features of this aesthetic, in order to reveal its significance within the broader framework of transatlantic modernism. In order to do so, we will examine a selection of American surrealist texts published in *transition*, as well as West's *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, published in France in 1931. Special attention will be given to Williams' *Novelette*, which has been little analyzed, even though it has been considered as "the work by Williams that was most influenced by surrealism"[1].

The first striking feature of the American surrealist texts published in *transition* is their massive use of the fantastic, sometimes verging on the grotesque. Extraordinary worlds are created. In *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, the hero climbs up the intestine of the Trojan Horse. The grotesque in the novel relies primarily on the festive, iconoclastic, scatological atmosphere created by West. Very often, the American surrealist texts in *transition* curiously rely on personifications of animals, plants and objects. In "Love in the West", by William

[1] Jacqueline Saunier-Ollier, *William Carlos Williams, l'homme et l'œuvre poétique* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1979), 299.

Closson Emory, “orchids and sweet peas wander about chatting together. Dandelions carry luggage here and there and do odd jobs.” (t13, 34). Examples of such personifications in this short story are countless. “Colored easter eggs [are seen] carrying arm loads of luggage” while “turnips and asparagus accompany them from train”. A few lines down, “A bologna sausage paces up and down in front of the night club yawning” (t13, 37). “Home Edition”, published in the same issue, in 1928, is a story by Whit Burnett opening on this sentence: “Enter, bowing, Page One, followed by Mr. Calvin Coolidge in high hat, the Average Citizen with abashed look, Crime, Coal Strikers, Chicago Riots, Missing Clue, Police in Hot Pursuit, Miss America, and other Atlantic City Beauty Contestants who play leap frog gracefully over a series of headline-hurdles up to the point of arriving gracefully, with legs crossed, on the Statue of Liberty.” (t13, 199) In the following issue, another narrative by Whit Burnett stages “A pair of ear muffs bow[ing] and do[ing] a polka” while “Two pairs of black rimmed spectacles do a hesitation waltz.” (t14, 121). In “Work on Sidetrack”, by Murray Godwin, a Pford car “gave birth to a tinfant totter, motor Number I-U, who cannounced her gladvent with a sounding hoot from her tinny horn. » (t15, 45). In 1930, Harry Crosby claimed: “I do not find it strange that a blue bird should fall in love with a playing card because the playing card in question happens to be the queen of hearts” (t19-20, 34). Five years later, Wayne Andrews imagined “innumerable headless heads of hair, billowing” before “the entry, rather ‘solemn’ to be sure, of 449 golden doorknobs” (t23, 7-8). Charles Tracy, in 1936, opened his poem “Portrait of Our House” with these two lines: “Egg-noggs agog jog. Laughing/ pegs jagg acrest to our nest” (t24, 32), while George Whitsett, in the same issue, offered this Joyce-inspired nursery rhyme: “Lice night/ And the nice before./ Lambs and cuttlefish came to my door,/ The lambs wore plumes,/ The cuttlefish said,/ And a spray of almond over their head” (t24, 38). This is a lot of examples, but it is essential to see how recurrent these personifications are.

Of course, a question that immediately comes to mind is: why would these texts be considered surrealist? The answer is given by the authors themselves, who in many cases describe them as such. Wayne Andrews remembers, I quote: “I did not meet Breton until the summer of 1934 when he won my eternal loyalty by putting his stamp of approval on my prose poem “The Evocative Treason of 449 Golden Doorknobs””. Moreover, some of the texts are explicitly called “scenarios” by their authors; for example “Love in the West” by William Closson Emory, and “Home Edition” by Whit Burnett. The reference to this genre, half-way

between literature and cinema, shows the influence of surrealism, since the surrealists were the ones who developed it in the 20s[2].

The American surrealist texts, heavily based on the creation of a fantastic world, are different from French surrealist experimentations, relying on the "merveilleux". In 1962, Breton remarked that "The fantastic almost always derives from some unimportant fiction, whereas the marvellous glimmers at the extreme end of the vital movement and entirely engages affectivity".[3] To Breton, the fantastic is mere fiction, unlike the marvellous, which springs from a poetic confrontation (an example of this could be Éluard's "The Earth is blue like an orange.") Unlike the marvellous, the fantastic doesn't radically put reality into question, since the phantasmagorias it produces are safely contained within the limits of a parallel world, whether it is a dream or a scenario.

In this respect, an important influence on these texts is *Alice in Wonderland*. Wonderland is what Alice experiences while she's asleep. Wonderland is also a fantastic world where animals, plants, and objects are personified. Across the Channel, the surrealists were actually the first to acknowledge the importance of Carroll. Between 1929 and 1952, Carroll was claimed by the Surrealist movement as one of their own. But that was not before 1929. And texts like "Love in the West" and "Home Edition" were published in *transition* as early as 1928, just after the realease of the "Alice Comedies" series (1923-1927) which launched Walt Disney's career in the animation business. When studying American surrealism, it is therefore important to take into account Anglo-American popular culture, and not just French surrealism.

If Breton lowers down the fantastic in opposition to the marvellous, it doesn't mean that American surrealist experimentations are not interesting. Personifications tend to create a playful, joyful world. Spectacular images abound, making the reader stagger with visual overdose. Sometimes the fantastic verges on the grotesque, as in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* or in "Love in the West". The grotesque in these texts tends to be Bakhtinian inasmuch as it is warm, festive, full of life, in other terms, it is more comic than it is threatening. The

[2] Most of these scenarios are now forgotten. It is probably not a coincidence if the best-remembered ones ("An Andalusian Dog" by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí and "The Shell and the Clergyman" by Antonin Artaud and Germaine Dulac) are also the ones that were shot. Among other scenarios published by *transition*, let's mention "Midnight at Two O'Clock" by Robert Desnos (Fall 19928), "The Eighth Day of the Week" by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and "The Mill" by Philippe Soupault (both published in June 1930).

[3] Translated from André Breton, preface to Pierre Mabille, *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, Paris, Éditions de Minuit, 1977 [1962], 21 and 16.

scatological body is a recurrent element of this American grotesque. We've already mentioned the situation of West's narrator, making his way up the intestine of the Trojan Horse. Godwin shares West's taste for the scatological, as in this short story published in 1927:

> The coprojectile contacted with a flask of soup for nightwork in the pocket of the foreman. (...) The bozo on guard at the entrance was lashed to the north column by a whirling lower intestine. (t4, 174)

Humour, whether scatological or not, is a recurrent feature of these experimentations: "O Beer! O Meyerbeer! O Bach! O Offenbach!" exclaims Balso Snell. The worlds created and the language used are very dynamic. Personifications contribute to the dynamism of the texts, but so do accumulations, the semi-telegraphic style of the scenarios, and the frequent use of onomatopeias such as "dynami-dr-r-r-r-ing-ng-ng-ng...", "wham" and "bam" in Murray Godwin's "Work on Sidetrack". Sequences unfold very quickly. Here's an example from *A Novelette*.

> My child has swallowed a mouse. – Tell him to swallow a cat then. Bam! This is the second paragraph of the second chapter of some writing on the influenza epidemic in the region of New York City (…).

The use of a familiar tone and of American vernacular language adds to the dynamism of the texts. "What the hell do I care about art!" exclaims John Gilson in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. Likewise, Murray Godwin dismisses highbrow visions of art: ""Art demands –" says Mr Josephson. Well, art can demand what it damned pleases, or bay at the moon; it does not matter the kink of gnatsneck to me." (t15, 119) Social criticism, and an emphasis on violence and experience also characterize these texts.

These American surrealist experimentations are not only interesting in themselves. They are also interesting because of their political and aesthetic stance against French surrealism and high expatriate modernism. Among the writers mentioned, Murray Godwin, Nathanael West and William Carlos Williams played a special role. They explicitly rebelled against French and expatriate bookish sophistication and the so-called superiority of the artist, safely shut in his ivory tower. An example of this rebellious attitude is Balso Snell's aggressiveness towards Saint Puce, one of the countless self-defined writers that he encounters in the intestine of the Trojan Horse: "I think you're morbid," he said. "Don't be morbid. Take your eyes off your navel. Take your head from under your armpit. Stop sniffing mortality. Play games. Don't

read so many books. Take cold showers. Eat more meat."[4] Against what West called "the Frenchified symbolist stuff" in a 1931 letter to Williams[5], both writers and Murray Godwin shaped what West, in the same letter, saw as an "American superrrealism" characterized by humor, dynamism, American vernacular language, an emphasis on experience and violence – considered as idiomatic to American culture, and a fascination for the physiological, and even scatological body. In passing, let's mention that 'Superrealism' was not a movement distinct from Surrealism; the word merely constituted an early translation of the French. On another side note, one might be surprised to see an unknown writer such as Murray Godwin listed along with West and Williams. However, the phrase "American superrealism" was first used by West to describe Godwin's stories in *transition*[6].

Of the three writers though, Williams was the one who pushed the theorization of American surrealism the furthest. Williams' definition of surrealism in his manifesto "How to Write", in 1936, is based on the reading of two seminal essays published in *transition*. The first one is Jung's "Psychology and Poetry", an important text first published in English in the June 1930 issue. Jung's concept of the collective unconscious allows him to see the work of art not as the result of the personal characteristics of the artist, but as a product of the heart and mind of humanity at large. This leads Williams to criticize Freud's emphasis on the biographical and psychological links between the writer and his work. In order to write "How to write", Williams relied on another essay published in 1932 in *transition*. "The Structure of the Personality" was written by Gottfried Benn, a poet and a doctor, just like Williams. According to Benn, the structure of the personality is made of strata relying on the workings of both the mind and the body. Benn underlines the importance of the physiological strata by designating them as the site of the collective unconscious. Together, both essays helped Williams to define his own relationship to surrealist writing. In particular, they allowed him to dismiss Breton's automatic writing, too much based on Freud to his taste. Instead, Williams shaped what we can call "spontaneous writing"[7]. Spontaneous writing, unlike automatic writing, is

[4] Nathanael West, *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, in *Novels and Other Writings*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch, New York, The Library of America, 1997, 13.
[5] *Novels and Other Writings*, 771.
[6] This is what he wrote to Williams: "Do you remember his dream factory stories in *transition* – what I meant by an American superrealism (?)"
[7] Unlike Dickran Tashjian and Jeffrey Peterson, I argue that Williams' experiments are not "automatic writing" but "spontaneous writing". Indeed, Williams dismisses outright the psychological work that "automatic writing" entails. For example, in this passage of a letter to James Laughlin on January 14, 1944 he writes: "To hell with them. I'm afraid the Freudian influence has been the trigger to all this. The Surrealists followed him. Everything

compatible with Williams' interest in rationality and with his conception of the poem as an object[8]. On the other end of the spectrum, spontaneous writing can be easily connected with Williams' concern for the most physiological, humble functions of the body.

The point I would like to make now is that six years before "How to Write" was published, Williams already posed a critical challenge to French surrealism with *A Novelette*, the surrealist piece he wrote in the winter of 1929-1930, and partially published in *transition* in June 1930. Although Williams does not show any particular interest in the French surrealists' signature themes (the city, night time, strolling, the Woman, mystery, chance, etc), he is eager to rethink surrealist writing according to three main lines. First, he opposes French automatic writing with an American type of spontaneous writing, much less solemn, much less conceptual, much more concrete and corporal. A case in point is Williams' straightforward question, put both to the reader and to himself: "And what is a beautiful woman?".[9] Now, we know that women's beauty is of central interest to the surrealists. But all surrealists don't treat the question the same way. At the end of *Communicating Vessels*, published in 1932 – the same year as *A Novelette*, Breton abstractly reflects on the nature of 'female beauty':

> *Female beauty* is melting yet again in the crucible of all the rare stones. It is never more moving, more inspiring, or more crazed than in this instant in which it is possible to imagine it unanimously detached from the desire to please this one or that one, these or those. Beauty with no immediate destination, with no destination known to itself [etc, etc] [10]

By contrast, Williams bluntly declares: "Look at her bare feet. You will see the effects of wearing shoes – unless she be used to going barefoot. Sometimes the toenails will be round, sometimes square and at others long." He goes on: "Let us describe the thighs of a beautiful woman. Most literature is now silent."[11]

---

must be tapped into the subconscious, the unconscious …" (quoted from Hugh Whitemeyer, ed., *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 97).

[8] This point is made by Williams in "How to Write": "But once the writing is on the paper it becomes an object. It is no longer a fluid speaking through a symbolism of ritualistic forms but definite words on a piece of paper. It has now left the region of the formative past and come up to the present. It has entered now a new field, that of intelligence."William Carlos Williams, "How to Write" (1936) in Linda Wagner, ed., *Interviews with William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1976), 98.

[9] *A Novelette*, 282 [t19-20, 283].

[10] André Breton, *Communicating Vessels*, translated by Mary Ann Caws and Geoffrey T. Harris, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1990, 144.

[11] *A Novelette*, 282 [t19-20, 283].

Another characteristic of Williams' spontaneous writing is its association with physiological relief, whether sexual or excremential. One can follow the evolution of such writing through the works compiled in *Imaginations*, and more precisely from *The Great American Novel* to *A Novelette*. In 1923, in *The Great American Novel*, the European avant-gardes of the time, expressionism and Dadaism, are seen as a release: "(…) expressionism is the release of SOMETHING."[12] *A Novelette* pushes this point one step further, since Williams makes this writing of relief his own: "Why do you write?"[13] the poet wonders. And this is the answer he gives: "For relaxation, relief. To have nothing in my head, – to freshen my eye by that till I see, smell, know and can reason and be."[14] Interestingly, the emphasis on physiological relief is made *before* Williams could read Jung's or Benn's essays, therefore stressing the importance of *A Novelette* in Williams' evolutive definition of spontaneous writing. So much so that more than ten years later, in an essay published in *View*, Williams reasserted this point:

> To me Surrealism is to disclose without trying.(...) OMIT the deductions. There's a nice word, OMIT. It looks odd. Truncated. Rather close to VOMIT. It might save the world.[15]

On the whole, American surrealism as defined by Williams contributes to shaping a lower form of modernism, by contrast with the high modernism of the European avant-gardes, and mostly aims at stimulating sensation and producing signs or objects rather than creating, adding, meaning.

A third characteristic of Williams' surrealist writing – and the last point I will develop – is the fact that, unlike the French surrealists with automatic writing, he does not consider spontaneous writing as an end in itself, but gives it a goal, that of expressing urgency. Williams' sense of urgency implicitly informs his writing, from *Kora in Hell* in 1918 to *The Descent of Winter* in 1927, as the doctor often used spontaneous writing to write despite a busy schedule. But only in *A Novelette* does Williams explicitly show the relevance of spontaneous writing by expressing his feeling of urgency through various thematic and stylistic devices, such as the use of short and noun sentences, or the creation of constant interruptions (from the ringing of the telephone to the involuntary remembering of a patient's words). A theorization of the link between urgency and spontaneous writing is already at work, although it will find full expression only 6 years later in the first lines of "How to

[12] William Carlos Williams, *The Great American Novel* (1923) in *Imaginations*, 174.
[13] *A Novelette*, 289 [t19-20, 286].
[14] *A Novelette*, 289 [t19-20, 286].
[15] William Carlos Williams, "Surrealism and the Moment", *View* 2, n°2 (May 1942): 13.

Write" which read: "One takes a piece of paper, anything, the flat of a shingle, slate, cardboard and with anything handy to the purpose begins to put down the words after the desired expression in mind."[16]

Rather than "cutting a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass"[17], as he announced in his *Contact* magazine in 1932, Williams – as well as Godwin and West – used the compass of French surrealism to cut a different, subversive American path, one less solemn, less conceptual, less symbolic and less psychological than the one taken by the French. Through their experiments, surrealism eventually appeared as a concrete, dynamic, idiomatic form of writing, relying on vernacular language and the physiological body to express its specificity. Another striking characteristic of this American surrealism – although absent from Williams' experiments – is its strong reliance on the fantastic, at work in almost all the American surrealist texts published by *transition* – as well as in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*. While complying with the "Revolution of the Word" manifesto published by *transition* in 1929, which encouraged writers to create a "fabulous world", this aesthetic of the fantastic contributes to the playful, light, "low" take on surrealism that characterizes all the American surrealist contributions to *transition*, and, by producing vivid images, echoes the development of Anglo-American popular culture – as represented by the work of Walt Disney, among others. Together, *transition*'s American surrealist experimentations offer a stimulating and seminal response to French surrealism and evidence the crucial role of the magazine in generating a specific, American literary surrealist current years before Breton's exile to the US during WW2.

[16] Williams, "How to Write", *Interviews with William Carlos Williams*, ed. Linda Wagner, New York, New Directions, 1976, 97.
[17] William Carlos Williams, "Comment by the editor", *Contact* 1, n°1 (February 1932), reprinted in New York by Kraus Reprint, 1967: 7-9.