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**American Modernism and Transatlanticism  
in the Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century:  
European Cultural Domination and American Responses**

*Céline Mansanti*

**Introduction**

Internationalism, and transatlanticism in particular, are essential characteristics of American modernism, both from an aesthetic point of view (one immediately thinks about *The Waste Land* and *The Cantos*, but the same is true of so many modernist texts mingling transatlantic cultural references and/or based on plurilingualism), and from the point of view of the conditions of its production. Many American writers chose to cross the Atlantic and exercise their profession in Europe: Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein and T.S. Eliot were among the first to emigrate, and they were followed by many other exiles, who, together, developed transatlantic intellectual networks largely based on the intense activity of a profusion of magazines. These were mostly “little” magazines, either edited from Europe (and in particular from Paris, which attracted a large American community), such as *Gargoyle*, *the transatlantic review*, *This Quarter*, *transition*, *Tambour*, *The New Review*, and *The Booster*; or with a double basis in Europe and in the United States, such as *The Little Review*, *Broom*, *Secession*, and *The Exile*; or published from the United States, such as *The Smart Set*, *Masses*, *Poetry*, *The Dial*, *Contact*, and *The New Masses*.

As Eric B. White underlines, “Even modernists such as [Alfred] Kreyborg, [Marianne] Moore and [William Carlos] Williams, who were famous for remaining in the U.S., travelled widely at various points in their careers [...]”<sup>1</sup> Those who did not travel to Europe, or did not stay extensively there, were brought into an ongoing dialogue between European and American works, writers, artists and thinkers thanks to the magazines they read, as mediators such as Ezra Pound, Eugene Jolas, T.S. Eliot, Victor Llona, Edouard Roditi, Ivan Goll, Harold Salemson and others brought together cosmopolitan selections of works, promoted their translation and encouraged cross-cultural criticism and perspectives. In such conditions, “staying at home was a conscious choice which did not necessarily imply withdrawal from the international context of the modernist movement.”<sup>2</sup> As a result, as Ickstadt and White showed,<sup>3</sup> the very notion of “homemade” modernism – a notion much used in the criticism of modernism, by contrast with European, cosmopolitan modernism – does not hold.

What is more, cross-cultural interactions went both ways. Many Americans lived in Europe and contributed to European-based magazines; but as White explains in a chapter entitled “*Others* and the Transatlantic Village,” “one third of *Others*’ contributors were expatriated Americans living abroad.”<sup>4</sup> And if Williams and Robert McAlmon, the editors of the first *Contact* (1919-1920), complained about “the level of deference shown towards ‘imported art’ by editors of domestic little magazines, and their inability to foster specialized literary debate amongst practicing writers in America,”<sup>5</sup> conversely, “[d]espite its initially hostile reaction to *Contact* and localist iterations of American modernism, *Broom* eventually embraced avant-

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<sup>1</sup> Eric B. White, *Transnational Avant-Gardes, Little Magazines and Localist Modernism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Heinz Ickstadt, “Deconstructing/ Reconstructing Order: The Faces of Transatlantic Modernism,” in: *Transatlantic Modernism*, edited by Martin Klepper and J. C. Schöpp (Heidelberg: C. Winter, 2001), 19.

<sup>3</sup> See Ickstadt, “Deconstructing/ Reconstructing Order,” 8 and White, *Transnational Avant-Gardes*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> White, 37.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 97-98.

garde circles that championed Moore, Williams and [Wallace] Stevens.”<sup>6</sup> White’s in-depth analysis of the transatlanticism of American “little” magazines even reveals that the supposed opposition between “homemade” and European modernisms has confused the debate, hiding the reality of domestic conflicts within the Americanist avant-garde: “The January 1923 issue of *Broom* has frequently been cast as an Americanist riposte to the Eliot-Pound-Yeats high modernist axis that had come to dominate *The Dial*. However, the schisms emerging from within the Americanist avant-garde proved far more important to the new generation of localists and expatriates.”<sup>7</sup>

## I American Perceptions of European Cultural Domination

If separating American “homemade” modernism from European, “cosmopolitan” modernism thus proves elusive, it would be as misleading to pretend that the transatlanticism defining American modernism was not the source of important tensions, in particular for the Americanist avant-garde. A case in point is the slogan chosen by editors Williams and Nathanael West for the second series of *Contact* magazine, published in 1932: “cutting a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass.”<sup>8</sup> Williams’s wish to protect the “American jungle” from the intrusive guidance of a “European compass” proved both unrealistic – as *Contact* did use the European compass, and in particular French surrealism, if only to try to cut a different trail, as we will see – and an interesting sign of the Americanist avant-garde’s ambivalence towards Europe. However much they wanted it, and even though their project was supported by a leading “European” modernist such as Pound, it was hard, not to say impossible, for Williams and other “localists” to avoid defining themselves outside of Europe.<sup>9</sup>

What *Contact*’s slogan suggested, in fact, was both Europe’s cultural domination over the United States, and an American frustration with this reality. Such frustration was by no means a reaction to a recent interaction between the two continents; when modernism emerged, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States had been under the cultural influence of Europe since the colonial era. However, the “burden of inferiority”<sup>10</sup> was made all the heavier at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by such influential public figures as Matthew Arnold and Henry James. Lawrence Levine well explains how “increasingly, in the closing decades of the nineteenth century, [...] the concept of culture took on hierarchical connotations,” an evolution in which English critic Arnold played a great role: “Arnold was perhaps the single most significant disseminator of such attitudes and had an enormous influence in the United States.”<sup>11</sup> While Arnold toured the country twice, in 1883-1884 and 1886, to give lectures on a variety of subjects, “[t]he Arnold important to America was not Arnold the critic, Arnold the poet, Arnold the religious thinker, but Arnold the apostle of Culture,”<sup>12</sup> so much so that a cult of Matthew Arnold grew in the United States after his death; his views on culture informed the use of adjectives such as “‘high,’ ‘low,’ ‘rude,’ ‘lesser,’ ‘higher,’ ‘lower,’ ‘beautiful,’ ‘modern,’ ‘legitimate,’ ‘vulgar,’ ‘popular,’ ‘true,’ ‘pure,’ ‘highbrow,’ ‘lowbrow,’ [which] were applied to such nouns as ‘arts’ or ‘culture’ almost *ad infinitum*.”<sup>13</sup> Levine’s analysis of Arnold’s influence in the United States is echoed by Robert W. Rydell and Rob Kroes who

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> William Carlos Williams and Nathanael West, *Contact* 1, 1 (February 1932), not paginated.

<sup>9</sup> Evidence of Pound’s support of the “localist” project can be found in Pound’s letter to Williams in 1913: “you may get something slogging by yourself that you would miss in the Vortex of London – and that we would miss” (Pound to Williams, 19 December 1913, quoted in White, 2).

<sup>10</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1951; London and New York: Penguin, 1979), 95.

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow/ Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 223.

<sup>12</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/ Lowbrow*, 223.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

see in Arnold the spokesman of “the growing awareness in Europe that the United States had become a mass society where scale and quantity surpassed quality” – an “English and European anti-American sentiment” which met with a growing success in the United States as “American intellectuals simply could not overcome feelings of cultural inferiority.”<sup>14</sup> Arnold’s negative view of American culture was supported by Henry James, who represented an equally influential voice in the public debate, even if many, within the American intelligentsia and beyond, resented his expatriation and naturalization as a British subject.<sup>15</sup> James was particularly virulent about America’s deficiencies in his 1879 essay on Hawthorne – an essay, as Susan Winnett has remarked, which is “traditionally taken to explain more generally the sense of America’s cultural poverty, which compelled James and generations of artists after him to settle, at least temporarily, in Europe.”<sup>16</sup> However, James’s essay on Hawthorne was not isolated in the American cultural landscape of the time, far from it. As Levine suggests, the notion that Americans had “*the elements of modern man with culture* quite left out” had long been shared by a majority of American intellectuals, from James Fenimore Cooper to Charles Eliot Norton.<sup>17</sup>

Such negative discourses on American culture were the backdrop for the emergence of modernism and its development in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Complaints on the intellectual state of the United States were a recurrent feature of most exile magazines, with, for example, *transition*’s editors lamenting in March 1928: “We are disappointed to find the creative vision at such a low ebb in North America. Where are the college men, the obscure amateurs, the cynics, the rebels, the gadflies? Where are the poets? Where are the weavers of legends?”<sup>18</sup> Similar laments could also be heard across the Atlantic: in Harold Stearns’s famous collection of essays *Civilization in the United States, An Enquiry by Thirty Americans* (1922), which included essays written by celebrated American intellectuals and cultural leaders such as Conrad Aiken, H. L. Mencken, Lewis Mumford, George Jean Nathan and Van Wyck Brooks; in the influential *Smart Set*, where Mencken and Nathan “routinely informed their *Smart Set* readers that America had no native drama and, except, for the lone, but towering, exceptions of Theodore Dreiser and Mark Twain, no literature;”<sup>19</sup> under the pen of Kenneth Burke, a member of the localist avant-garde who shared the same attitude, writing to Malcolm Cowley (who quoted it in a letter to Burke dated 28 January 1923): “There is [...] not a trace of that really dignified richness which makes for peasants, household gods, traditions. America has become the wonder of the world simply because America is the purest concentration point for the vices and vulgarities of the world.”<sup>20</sup>

This widespread feeling of intellectual submission was both created and mirrored back by the European view of American culture. If American literature could be attractive to young French writers such as André Malraux, Valéry Larbaud, Blaise Cendrars, Saint-John Perse and Philippe Soupault, whose admiration for American cultural artifacts showed in titles such as Soupault’s *Westwego* (1922) and *Mort de Nick Carter* (1926), much more representative of

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<sup>14</sup> Robert W. Rydell, and Rob Kroes, *Buffalo Bill in Bologna: The Americanization of the World, 1869-1922* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Levine, 223. Such was the case of Van Wyck Brooks, but a mainstream, widely circulated magazine such as *Life* (New York, 1883-1936) developed the same idea through numerous, though ambivalent, comments on James. As E. R. Hagemann noted: “*Life* insulted and praised James 270 times over 33 years in a wondrous variety of ways” (E. R. Hagemann, “Henry James and *Life*, 1883-1916,” *Western Humanities Review* 24, 3 [Summer 1970], 241).

<sup>16</sup> Susan Winnett, *Writing Back: American Expatriate Narratives of Return* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012), 22.

<sup>17</sup> Levine, 214-15.

<sup>18</sup> Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul, “A Review,” *transition* 12 (March 1928), 140.

<sup>19</sup> Sharon Hamilton, “American Manners: *The Smart Set* (1900-29); *American Parade* (1926),” in: *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: volume II: North America 1894-1960*, edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 231.

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Cowley, *The Long Voyage: Selected Letters of Malcolm Cowley, 1915-1987*, edited by Hans Bak (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 92.

the anti-American feelings that existed in the French leading intelligentsia of the time was Raymond Aron and Arnaud Dandieu's *Le Cancer américain* (1931) – even though, more than anti-Americanism, it was indifference towards American literature which prevailed; “on the whole, American literature was little visible in France before 1940.”<sup>21</sup> Until the end of the 1920s, American contemporary literature was not really taken into account in a leading magazine such as *La NRF* – the rare exceptions being an American reaction to Proust's death, a note on Thoreau's *Resistance to Civil Government*, and, most notably, a paper by Larbaud on Vachel Lindsay in April 1920. A little more interest was shown from 1928 on, with novelties such as Eugene Jolas's *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie américaine*, considerations of two novels by Hemingway, of poems by American workers, and of Stein's *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* – not much, however, compared to contributions on English and German literatures. Interestingly, in *La NRF*, as in other French magazines such as *Europe*, the criticism of the United States often came from American intellectuals themselves – namely T.S. Eliot, Gorham Munson and Waldo Frank.<sup>22</sup>

Interestingly, Henry James already explained such indifference in 1881, seeing it as the logical result of the imbalance of power between Europe and America: “No European writer is called upon to assume that terrible burden [of choosing between the Old World and the new], and it seems hard that I should be. The burden is necessarily greater for an American – for he *must* deal, more or less, even if only by implication, with Europe; whereas no European is obliged to deal in the least with America.”<sup>23</sup> Europe's cultural domination over the United States was reflected in the eurocentrism of the first great critical work on modernism, *Axel's Castle* by Edmund Wilson (1931), which discusses two European writers (Valéry and Proust) along with four English-speaking authors – among them two Americans – whose work was produced in Europe (Joyce, Yeats, Eliot, and Stein). *Axel's Castle* was by no means an isolated case in the early criticism of modernism; introduced as early as 1931, it set an enduring trend. Reflecting on the “lasting effect [of the work of critics such as Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, and Harry Levin] on the way modernism is defined and taught down to the present, both in America and Europe,” Graham Good identifies three common features: “a broad comparative perspective on literature, including works in different languages (often in translation), reference to other arts [...] and reference to non-literary thought;” “a strong emphasis on historical continuity with the nineteenth century, both artistic and intellectual;” and “the exclusion of American literature (aside from the permanent expatriates) on the assumption that it is being discussed elsewhere in a separate framework which does not accommodate Modernism so well.”<sup>24</sup> Such a perspective on modernism both reflected and fueled the power relationship between the two continents, setting a long-lasting critical definition of transatlantic modernism which is being reconsidered today, as Ickstadt emphasizes: “What, then, is transatlantic modernism? Forty years ago, such a question would have been comparatively easy to answer since it was the only modernism Anglo-American critics cared to acknowledge.”<sup>25</sup> In order to address this question, it seems necessary first to

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<sup>21</sup> Laurent Jeanpierre, “‘Modernisme’ américain et espace littéraire français,” in: *L'Espace culturel transnational*, edited by Anna Boschetti (Paris: Nouveau monde, 2010), 392. Translated by author. See as well Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Seuil, 2008 [1999]), 72: “In the 20s, the U.S. was very much dominated from the point of view of literature [...]” Translated by author.

<sup>22</sup> See T. S. Eliot, “Lettre d'Angleterre,” *La NRF* 104 (May 1922), 622, reprinted in English under the title “A Preface to Modern Literature,” *Vanity Fair* (November 23, 1923), 44: “I am not inclined to attach to our contemporaries in America as much value as they attribute to themselves. Their work is interesting – one can see why to people in America it has a supreme importance – but it is interesting as a *symptom*.” See also Gorham B. Munson, “Chronique américaine,” *Europe* 28 (15 April 1925), 496; *Europe* 39 (15 March 1926), 422-24; *Europe* 116 (15 August 1932), 621.

<sup>23</sup> Henry James, *The Complete Notebooks of Henry James*, edited by Leon Edel and Lyall H. Powers (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987 [1881]), 214.

<sup>24</sup> Graham Good, “The American Reception of European Modernism,” *Neohelicon* 14, 2 (1987), 51.

<sup>25</sup> Ickstadt, “Deconstructing/ Reconstructing Order,” 18.

acknowledge the reality (even though it is constructed) and the importance of the cultural imbalance of power between Europe and the United States, and then to study the consequences of this imbalance, and in particular the reactions it triggered in the United States.

Many reacted to the fierceness of the discourse establishing Europe's cultural superiority as a fact – a discourse that was all the more intense since many American intellectuals encouraged it, and even took part in it, by developing frustrations that manifested themselves in different – and often fierce – ways. A typical reaction was the rejection of a supposedly European style of intellectualism on the basis that it was pretentious, over-intellectual, in other words, “highbrow.” Such rejection was occasionally accompanied by patriotic, virile feelings for the United States and with homophobic statements against the European modernist poet, seen as effeminate. Theodore Roosevelt, whose regular appearance in the mainstream press (in *Scribner's* for example) ensured him a wide audience, is a case in point. As Levine notes, “[...] Roosevelt was deeply troubled by the many influential men of letters who continued to occupy a colonial status, looking to Europe for their cultural standards, dismissing their nation's culture as ‘crude and raw,’ and displaying ‘that flaccid habit of mind which its possessors style cosmopolitanism.’ In 1894 he wrote of those ‘over-civilized, over-sensitive, over-refined’ classes that ‘still retain their spirit of colonial dependence on, and exaggerated deference to, European opinion,’ and criticized their willingness to ‘throw away our birthright, and, with incredible and contemptible folly wander back to bow down before the alien gods whom our forefathers forsook.’”<sup>26</sup>

Mostly seen as an expression of European high culture, modernist avant-gardes were often considered as interchangeable from the other side of the Atlantic, and were a favorite target of mainstream magazines. As ‘The Armory Show at 100’ website shows,<sup>27</sup> many reactions to the Armory Show came in the form of satirical and parodic cartoons, in such New York-based publications as *The New York World*, *The New York American*, *The New York Evening Mail*, *The New York Evening Sun*, *The New York World*, *The New York Tribune*, *The Masses*, *The Century*, *Puck* and *Life*. Interestingly, the many parodies of modernism published in American mainstream magazines reveal – as the etymology of “parody” suggests – both a criticism of and a fascination with their objects,<sup>28</sup> mirroring the deeply ambivalent relationship that existed between middlebrow and highbrow cultures – and between American mainstream media and modernism. Modernism was often seen both as desirable and overly intellectual, as suggested, for example, by various statements by *Life* literary critic Kyle Crichton who calls *Of Time and the River*, *Sons and Lovers* and *Ulysses* “masterpieces,”<sup>29</sup> while bombastically stating that “**Anybody who wants to annihilate the intellectuals has [his] blessing.**”<sup>30</sup> **Some American modernists felt a similar ambivalence towards modernism and its perceived highbrow European origin.** In January 1928, Matthew Josephson, Kenneth Burke, William Slater Brown, Malcolm Cowley, Robert Myron Coates and Nathan Asch gathered in a Broadway hotel to write up “New York: 1928,” an eclectic manifesto denouncing both the materialism of the United States and the exiles’ pretentiousness and supposed lack of virility. Among other texts, the first two poems of the manifesto were written by William Slater Brown, the third one was by Malcolm Cowley:

### Wanton Prejudice

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<sup>26</sup> Levine, 236-37.

<sup>27</sup> “The Armory Show at 100.” <http://armory.nyhistory.org/> Accessed February 1, 2018

<sup>28</sup> See on this topic Leonard Diepeveen, *Mock Modernism: An Anthology of Parodies, Travesties, Frauds; 1910-1935* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Kyle Crichton, “Contents Noted,” *Life* (1 May 1935), 36; *Life* 101, 2593 (August 1934), 41; *Life* 101, 2594 (September 1934), 42.

<sup>30</sup> Kyle Crichton, “Contents Noted,” *Life* 101, 2592 (July 1934), 41.

I'd rather live in Oregon and pack salmon  
Than live in Nice and write like Robert McAlmon.

Fry Two!

The vulgarity of these United States  
Is something every Exile hates.  
In Paris, though, they turn the table  
And act as vulgar as they are able.

Young Mr. Androgyne the talented poet  
writes verse on the beauty of his soul  
– my body is as lovely as my verse  
big truckdriver if you like this verse of mine  
take me, big truckdriver.<sup>31</sup>

Various forms of ambivalence thus characterized American reactions to modernism – often associated with European high culture – and recurrent homophobic outbursts often were an integral part of the complex love-hate relationship many modernist and non-modernist Americans developed with Europe. The symbolic violence created by the powerful cultural domination the old continent was felt to exert over the United States resulted in powerful reactions often fraught with an ambivalence that further revealed the confusion this situation generated.

## **II American Responses to Europe's Perceived Cultural Domination**

In the second part of my essay, I would like to discuss three different positive responses to Europe's perceived cultural domination – that is to say, three different types of reactions mobilized by American modernists that with hindsight seem particularly interesting because they go beyond the mere expression of a frustration – beyond the mere mirroring back of the cultural domination many Americans felt confronted with. In other words, we will see that (a) the exhaustion of the European historical avant-gardes, (b) American appeals to resistance against European cultural domination and (c) American rewritings of European avant-gardes constituted three forms of responses that were not mutually exclusive and could also coexist with other forms of reactions – in particular more negative ones.

### **2.1 The End of the Historical Avant-Gardes**

The first type of response I would like to examine is rather indirect and has to do with the perception, at the end of the 1920s and in the early 1930s, that the European cultural model of the avant-gardes was exhausted and no longer represented an adequate response to the cultural crisis many American intellectuals – and among them many expatriates – felt that the United States was going through. By the end of the 1920s, historical avant-gardes were dying away and, to many Americans in Europe and back home, avant-gardism appeared increasingly as a mere fad. The little magazines were deeply affected by this crisis. *The Dial* and *The Little Review* both suspended publication in 1929. At the same time Eliot's *Criterion* took on a conservative, classicist turn, also present in the editorial line of new-born magazines such as Harold Salemsen's Paris-based bilingual magazine *Tambour* (1929-1930). And whereas Europe seemed to embody Spengler's "decline of the West" – increasingly so as the turn from

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<sup>31</sup> "New York: 1928," *transition* 13 (June 1928), 96.

the 1920s to the 1930s was accompanied with the rise of fascism – something new was emerging on the other side of the Atlantic: the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927 and the 1929 economic crash strengthened the shift to the left that had been gaining slow momentum over the previous decade, with the Russian revolution in 1917 and the publication of magazines such as *The Masses* or *The Liberator*. The emergence of the “Cultural Front,” as theorized by Michael Denning, was characterized by the birth on American soil of many proletarian, left-wing magazines, among them *New Masses*, founded by Mike Gold in New York as early as 1926.

A comparative study of *New Masses* and American Paris-based exile magazine *transition* evidences a significant migration of contributors from *transition* to *New Masses*. After a single contribution to *transition* in the fall of 1928, with “A Marriage of Venus,” a long poem from *The Temptation of Anthony* published the same year, Isidor Schneider became the literary editor of *New Masses* at the beginning of the 1930s, and dedicated himself to committed writing, with *Comrade: Mister* appearing in 1934, and *From the Kingdom of Necessity* in 1935. That same year, Schneider coedited *Proletarian Literature in the United States*. One of the most significant migrations is that of Kay Boyle, at the beginning of the 1930s. One of the signatories of the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto in June 1929, and one of the most prolific contributors to *transition* – with twenty texts published in the magazine, eighteen of which between April 1927 and June 1930 – Boyle collaborated on the production of *Front* in December 1930, a reorientation towards radical politics that informed the rest of her career. In 1934, she coedited *365 Days*, an anthology of short stories that represented a blow for *transition* as many former contributors to the magazine participated in it: Bob Brown, Kathleen Cannell, Charles Henri Ford, Norman Macleod, Robert McAlmon, Sydney Salt, and Parker Tyler. Other former contributors, such as Harold Salemsen and Stanley Burnshaw, later withdrew their support of *transition*’s esthetic and political principles.

Salemsen, also a signatory of the “Revolution of the Word” manifesto, reconsidered his decision in a manifesto entitled “Essentiel: 1930” and published in the April 1930 issue of *Tambour*. The “Revolution of the Idea” he defended (along with Samuel Putnam and Richard Thoma, who had both participated in *transition*) was as much a response to *transition*’s formalism as it was an appeal for a content-based literature, and, retrospectively, a prelude to his – and Putnam’s – political commitment a few years later. As for Stanley Burnshaw, his decision, after World War Two, to rewrite his poem “Darkness and Eyes,” published in the March 1928 issue of *transition*, into “Among the Trees of Light,” published in *Selected Poems and Selected Prose* in 2002, can be read as a political gesture. Burnshaw, who published his first poem in *New Masses*, “White Collar Slaves,” in August 1929, and became an editor of the magazine in January 1934, probably needed to separate himself from *transition*’s long-lasting exploration of the night-side of life – associated by some committed writers with the darkness of fascism – and embrace the light of communism. This stance was echoed by Mike Gold in 1938. When, as late as 1938, *transition* published an “Inquiry Into the Spirit and Language of Night,” Mike Gold, one of the respondents, stated, going against *transition*’s grain: “Light, more light! is the need! The night-mind is closest to the dark, bloody fog of the Fascists; the sun-mind is Communism!”<sup>32</sup> To many, the development of a new political avant-garde on American soil represented an alternative both to the perceived materialism of the United States and to the exhaustion of the European avant-gardes, more and more often associated with unintelligibility, shapelessness, passivity, and a lack of virility: almost all the signatories of the “New York: 1928” manifesto published in *transition*

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<sup>32</sup> Mike Gold, “Inquiry Into the Spirit and Language of Night,” *transition* 27 (Spring 1938), 237.



(Matthew Josephson, Malcolm Cowley, Kenneth Burke, William Slater Brown and Nathan Asch) subsequently became committed writers and critics.<sup>33</sup>

Although the emergence of a political avant-garde in the United States at the end of the 1920s did not put an end to the cultural domination by Europe that many Americans felt the victims of, it did represent an evolution within the history of modernism and within the balance of power between the two continents. Along with the political tensions that rose in Europe and the economic crisis back home, it contributed to the return (in more than one sense) of many exiles. The sense that a new step had been reached, away from what appeared now, and more than ever, as clichés about Europe's superiority, emerges from Thomas Wolfe's 1936 ironic comment: "France was the only place where there was any freedom left". Let us examine this statement: – It is a familiar one, and has been uttered to me by various people at many various times during the past fifteen years. – In the 1920's the Malcolm Cowleys, the Allen Tates, the Bunny Wilsons, the Harry Crosbys, etc., of the Left Bank were uttering it very often. [...] Now I think their love for freedom has somewhat abated. The Malcolm Cowleys and the Bunny Wilsons want the Revolution, the World Union of the Soviets, etc. [...] and the Allen Tates, etc want a form of high-toned fascism which bears the high-toned name of Southern Agrarianism."<sup>34</sup> In a study devoted to Abstract Expressionism, Serge Guilbaut showed that the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century opened on a displacement of modern art from Paris to New York, whereas the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was generally marked by the feeling, on both sides of the Atlantic, that European art prevailed over American cultural productions. The return of many exiles to the United States and, in many cases, to an exciting political avant-garde at the end of the 1920s appears more generally to mark a step forward in the bridging of the cultural power gap between the two continents.

## 2.2 American Appeals to Resistance

A second type of response to Europe's perceived cultural domination developed much earlier in the history of modernism – probably as soon as it emerged – and was inspired by even earlier appeals to resistance. For those who resented America's "cultural humility," Whitman was an obvious reference.<sup>35</sup> But, as Levine underlined, in the intellectual fight that opposed him to Arnold – whom he called "one of the dudes of literature" – "Whitman was in the minority."<sup>36</sup> Whitman's enthusiastic belief in America's ability to produce an indigenous culture based on a reversal of traditional hierarchies was shared by many American modernists who identified with his iconoclastic gesture of valuing the "new" and the "low." As early as 1916 and 1917, as Ickstadt has shown, the New York-based *Soil Magazine* published articles by Charles Chaplin and on vaudeville entertainer Bert Williams, and exclaimed in a Whitmanesque tone: "There is an American Art. Young, robust, energetic, naive, immature, daring and big spirited. Active in every conceivable field... We are developing a new culture here. Its elements are gathering from all over the earth... Traditions are being merged, blood is being mixed. Something new, something is happening here..."<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Robert Coates, one of the signatories, was also a radical sympathizer but did not publicize his stance as overtly as the others. See Mathilde Roza, *Following Strangers: The Life and Literary Works of Robert M. Coates* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011).

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Wolfe, *The Notebooks of Thomas Wolfe*, volume II, edited by Richard S. Kennedy and Paschal Reeves (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1970), 836.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase "cultural humility" was used by Randolph Bourne in an article comparing the relationship to culture in the United States and in Europe (but he did not share Whitman's democratic views on culture). Bearing the title "Our Cultural Humility," it was published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in October 1914. The fact that such phrase was used by a Young American who held a rather conservative, hierarchical view of culture shows that the reaction to Europe's perceived cultural domination exceeded the limits of the modernist group.

<sup>36</sup> Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow*, 223.

<sup>37</sup> Ickstadt, "Deconstructing/ Reconstructing Order," 21.

Malcolm Cowley – who became associated with the Dadaist movement during his trip to Europe between 1921 and 1923 – was among the loudest voices to lament America’s inferiority complex and assert the value of the United States. On various occasions, he regretted that “[e]verywhere, in every department of culture, Europe offered the models to imitate – in painting, composing, philosophy, folk music, folk drinking, the drama, sex, politics, national consciousness – indeed some doubted that [the U.S.] was even a nation.”<sup>38</sup> Cowley’s stay in Europe both thrilled him and helped him see the beauties of his own culture: as he put it in a letter to John Farrar on October 28, 1922, “the chief advantage of two years in France is to give you a taste for America.”<sup>39</sup> In his reply to Burke’s January 28, 1923 letter, he made his point clearer:

America is just as God-damned good as Europe – worse in some ways, better in others, just as appreciative, fresher material, inclined to stay at peace instead of marching into the Ruhr. I’m not ashamed to take off my coat anywhere and tell these cunt-lapping Europeans that I’m an American citizen. Wave Old Glory! Peace! Normalcy ... America shares an inferiority complex with Germany. Not about machinery or living standards, but about Art. [...] The only excuse for living two years in France is to remove this complex, and to discover, for example, that Tzara, who resembles you like two drops of water, talks a shade less intelligently than you. To discover that the Dada crowd has more fun than the Secession crowd because the former, strangely, has more American pep. That people who read both Suares and Waldo Frank from a sense of duty bracket them together but think that Frank is superior. THE ONLY SALVATION FOR AMERICAN LITERATURE IS TO BORROW A LITTLE PUNCH AND CONFIDENCE FROM AMERICAN BUSINESS.<sup>40</sup>

Cowley’s proud reliance on America’s perceived indigenous characteristics – even though these were much decried, like business – linked him to Whitman and separated him from other members of his Lost Generation. Indeed, as one critic put it, the vast majority of “the ‘Lost Generation’ [...] turned their backs upon the America of the middle class, the *Saturday Evening Post*, the Saturday night movie, the small town and the Sunday band concert [...]”<sup>41</sup>

The forms of modernism proposed by American localists were usually less severed from mainstream culture than European high modernism was – and/or was perceived to be. Magazines such as *Esquire*, for example, found an audience in the United States that they would probably not have found in Europe.<sup>42</sup> But less mainstream magazines such as William Carlos Williams and Nathanael West’s *Contact* also combined “high” and “low.” The editorial line of *Contact* was based on the idea that the spirit of American writing was “contact with a vulgar world,”<sup>43</sup> and the contributions to *Contact*’s first issue gave life to the notion of an indigenous American avant-garde based on popular culture. The first issue, published in February 1932, featured contributions by Ben Hecht and S.J. Perelman who, just

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<sup>38</sup> Cowley, *Exile’s Return*, 94.

<sup>39</sup> Cowley, *The Long Voyage*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>41</sup> Clarence Hugh Holman, *The Loneliness at the Core, Studies in Thomas Wolfe* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1975), 149.

<sup>42</sup> “In a 1933 letter to Hemingway, Gingrich [one of the founders of *Esquire*] explained that *Esquire* ‘is aimed at guys who never heard of the *Dial*, or the *Broom* or the *Seven Arts* or the *Little Review*’. [...] The modernists represented in its pages [Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Pound, Cummings] suggested a specifically masculine artistic ideal, distinct from the modernism known by readers of ‘little magazines’ and small presses” (Faye Hammill, and Karen Leick, “Modernism and the Quality Magazines: *Vanity Fair* (1914-36); *American Mercury* (1924-81); *New Yorker* (1925-); *Esquire* (1933-).” In *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines: volume II: North America 1894-1960*, edited by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 194-95.

<sup>43</sup> William Carlos Williams, “Comment,” *Contact* 1, 3 (October 1932), 131.

like West himself, were scriptwriters writing for little magazines and earning their livings in Hollywood. Charles Reznikoff, a leading Objectivist writer, Diego Rivera, the great exponent of mural painting, as well as West and Williams themselves, also contributed to *Contact*'s first issue. Reznikoff's supposedly historical testimonies made by slaves and southern whites were full of an everyday violence that contrasted with the writer's matter-of-fact style. Diego Rivera's essay on "Mickey Mouse and American Art" offered clear-cut, positive statements on popular culture. *Contact* also promoted experimental ways of writing popular culture, publishing, for example, S.J. Perelman's collage scenario taking place in a movie production office. In almost all contributions, "contact with a vulgar world" was also established through a recurring conception of violence as a truly American theme and writing form, thanks to the use of a vernacular and "virile"<sup>44</sup> language, in opposition to what was considered as the "effeminate" style of many exiles. Violence was even theorized as America's 'idiomatic' expression in Nathanael West's famous essay "Some Notes on Violence" published in the last issue of the magazine.

Williams and West's effort to shape a specifically American type of modernism, away from European modernism, was most visible in the slogan they chose for this second series of *Contact* magazine. "Cutting a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" clearly established *Contact*'s will to do without Europe – even though it implicitly underlined the ongoing dominating status of the Old Continent. It also placed Williams and West's creation in step with Whitman's vision for America, as "Cutting a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass" echoed Whitman's vision of the relationship between the United States and Europe, expressed for example in the first sentence of "The Prairies and Great Plains in Poetry":

Grand as the thought that doubtless the child is already born who will see a hundred millions of people, the most prosperous and advanc'd of the world, inhabiting these Prairies, the great Plains, and the valley of the Mississippi, I could not help thinking it would be grander still to see all those inimitable American areas fused in the alembic of a perfect poem, or other esthetic work, entirely western, fresh and limitless – altogether our own, without a trace or taste of Europe's soil, reminiscence, technical letter or spirit.<sup>45</sup>

From Whitman to *Contact* and beyond, the attitude of American intellectuals toward Europe – whether they were attracted to it or rejected it – covered a political question involving the relationship between high culture and low culture, the intellectual elite and the common citizen.

### 2.3 American Rewritings of European Avant-Gardes

However, rejecting Europe in a manifesto-like slogan did not mean actually getting rid of European domination or even influence. Rather than "cutting a trail through the American jungle without the use of a European compass," Williams used the compass of French surrealism to follow a different path. *transition*, the Paris-based exile magazine published between 1927 and 1938, in which Williams had published several fragments of his *Novelette* in June 1930, unmistakably was an inspiration for *Contact*. In a letter to Williams dated 1931 and suggesting names of contributors for *Contact*, West wrote about Murray Godwin: "Do you remember his dream factory stories in *transition* – what I meant by an American

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<sup>44</sup> William Carlos Williams, "The Advance Guard Magazine," *Contact* 1, 1 (February 1932), 86.

<sup>45</sup> Walt Whitman, "The Prairies and Great Plains in Poetry," in: *Specimen Days in America*, edited by Ernest Rhys (London: Walter Scott, 1887), 230.

superrealism (?).<sup>46</sup> Creating an American form of surrealism – superrealism was an early translation of *surréalisme* that survived until the early 1930s, as Jonathan Veitch showed – was a project that both Williams and West realized, in particular with *A Novelette* and *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* respectively. The American rewriting of European avant-gardes may represent a third and particularly interesting type of response to European domination, as, in this case, the language of the dominant culture was used to create new American languages. Whereas Ickstadt, asking the relevant question “How, then, did American modernists adapt the languages of the European avant-gardes to the specific conditions of their own cultural experience?” decided to “look at three areas of transatlantic contact and adaptation: futurism, Dada, and the 'descent' into the 'primitive,’”<sup>47</sup> I would like to examine another important field: that of surrealism.

Even though American Surrealism is still mainly associated today with the visual arts and with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s,<sup>48</sup> American Surrealist literary experimentations did exist in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of them appeared in *transition*. Some of these American experimentations are still remembered today (William Carlos Williams’s 1932 *Novelette*, Nathanael West’s 1931 *Dream Life of Balso Snell*), while others have been forgotten (such as pieces by Wayne Andrews, William Closson Emory, Whit Burnett, Leigh Hoffman, George Whitsett, Charles Tracy, Harry Crosby and Murray Godwin). Together, however, these texts shape a distinctive American response to French surrealism. In the rest of this essay, I will try to define the main features of this aesthetic, as well as to consider 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 two film excerpts included by Bruce Posner on the “American surrealism” DVD of his collection of early American avant-garde films released in 2005. I will also make references to West’s *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, published in France in 1931.

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 starting from its anus. 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 Closson Emory, published in the summer 1928 issue of *transition*, “orchids and sweet peas wander about chatting together. Dandelions carry luggage here and there and do odd jobs.”<sup>49</sup> Hundred Dollar Bill, the heroine of the story, “motions to dining room across lobby where porkchops, oysters, lobsters and beef-steaks are seen dining together.”<sup>50</sup> Later, “Oysters, Idaho Potato, orchids and sweet peas run madly about doing nothing.”<sup>51</sup> Examples of such personifications in this short story are countless. “Colored easter eggs 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.”<sup>52</sup> “Home Edition,” published in the same 1928 issue, is a story by Whit Burnett – who three years later was to become the editor of *Story*, the successful magazine devoted to the short story. “Home Edition” opens on this sentence:

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<sup>46</sup> Nathanael West, *Novels and Other Writings*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch (New York: The Library of America, 1997), 770.

<sup>47</sup> Ickstadt, “Deconstructing/ Reconstructing Order,” 24.

<sup>48</sup> See Céline Mansanti and Anne Reynes-Delobel, “Americanizing Surrealism: Cultural Challenges in the Magnetic Fields,” introduction to *Early American Surrealisms*, *Miranda* 14 (2017), <https://miranda.revues.org/9754>.

<sup>49</sup> William Closson Emory, “Love in the West,” *transition* 13 (Summer 1928), 34.

<sup>50</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

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.<sup>53</sup>

In the following issue, another narrative by Whit Burnett stages “[a] pair of ear muffs bow[ing] and do[ing] a polka” while “[t]wo pairs of black rimmed spectacles do a hesitation waltz.”<sup>54</sup> In “From Work on Sidetrack,” by Murray Godwin, a Pford car “gave birth to a tinfaunt totter, motor Number I-U, who cavanaughed her gladvent with a sounding hoot from her tinny horn.”<sup>55</sup> The same year, 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.”<sup>56</sup> He also wrote, in the same text: “a giraffe is gorging himself on sunflowers a Parisian doll is washing herself in a blue fingerbowl while I insist on their electrocution on the grounds of indecency.”<sup>57</sup> Five years later, Wayne Andrews imagined “innumerable headless heads of hair, billowing” before “the entry, rather ‘solemn’ to be sure, of 449 golden doorknobs.”<sup>58</sup> 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.”<sup>59</sup> 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.”<sup>60</sup> Put together, all these quotes give an idea of the surrealist use of personifications in these texts.

Given the important difference between these texts and the classical texts of French surrealism, a question immediately comes to mind: why would these texts be considered as surrealist? The answer is given by the authors themselves, who in many cases describe them as such. In his preface to *The Surrealist Parade*, written the year of his death in 1987, Wayne Andrews wrote: “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’.”<sup>61</sup> Some of the texts are explicitly called “scenarios” by their authors. This is the case for “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, points to the influence of surrealism. Indeed, while the “scenario” genre was invented by Cendrars, Romain and Albert-Birot around 1915, the surrealists were the ones who developed it in the 1920s.<sup>62</sup>

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 spirit “would like to distinguish with certainty the true marvelous

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<sup>53</sup> Whit Burnett, “Home Edition,” *transition* 13 (Summer 1928), 199.

<sup>54</sup> Whit Burnett, “Balls, or Simple Error,” *transition* 14 (Fall 1928), 121.

<sup>55</sup> Murray Godwin, “From Work on Sidetrack,” *transition* 15 (February 1929), 45.

<sup>56</sup> Harry Crosby, “Dreams 1928-1929,” *transition* 18 (November 1929), 34.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Wayne Andrews, “The Evocative Treason of 449 Golden Doorknobs,” *transition* 23 (1934-5), 7-8.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Tracy, “Portrait of Our House,” *transition* 24 (June 1936), 32.

<sup>60</sup> George Whitsett, “Dancing Rope,” *transition* 24 (June 1936), 38.

<sup>61</sup> Wayne Andrews, *The Surrealist Parade* (New York: New Directions, 1990), ix.

<sup>62</sup> Most of these scenarios are now forgotten. It is probably not a coincidence that the best-remembered ones (“Un chien andalou” by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí and “La Coquille et le clergyman” by Antonin Artaud and Germaine Dulac) are also the ones that were subsequently filmed. Among other scenarios published by *transition*, worth mentioning are “Midnight at Two O’Clock” by Robert Desnos (Fall 1928), “The Eighth Day of the Week” by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes and “The Mill” by Philippe Soupault (both published in June 1930).

from the fantastic, the strange, the illusive sparkling.”<sup>63</sup> He went on to add: “The fantastic almost always derives from some unimportant fiction, whereas the marvelous glimmers at the extreme end of the vital movement and entirely engages affectivity.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, the marvelous emerges from reality, whereas the fantastic opposes reality. Whereas the fantastic relies on visual shock, the marvelous comes primarily from language: “the earth is blue like an orange” for example. American surrealist phantasmagorias are usually safely contained within the limits of a parallel world, whether it is a dream or a scenario. Reality itself is not radically put into question.

In this respect, an importance influence on these texts is Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Wonderland is what Alice experiences while she is 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 “Alice Comedies” series (1923-1927) which launched Walt Disney’s career in the animation business. It was also in the twenties that “Carroll’s work was discovered and appropriated by high literary artists, critics and theorists such as William Empson, Virginia Woolf, and Edmund Wilson.”<sup>65</sup> Alice thus represented one of the fruitful contact points between Anglo-American culture – and in particular Anglo-American popular culture – and French surrealism; one of the cultural bases from which adaptation could develop.

Even though Breton devalues the fantastic in opposition to the marvelous, it obviously does not mean that American surrealist experimentations are not interesting. Personifications tend to create a playful, essentially joyful world. Spectacular images abound, making the reader stagger with visual overload. Sometimes the fantastic verges on the grotesque, in *The Dream Life of Balso Snell* and 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 words, it is more comic than it is threatening. The scatological body is a recurrent element of this American grotesque. We have already mentioned the situation of West’s narrator, making his way up the intestine of the Trojan Horse. Murray 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.<sup>66</sup>

Humor, 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 onomatopoeias such as “dynami-dr-r-r-r-ing-ng-ng-ng...,” “wham” and “bam” in Murray Godwin’s “From Work on Sidetrack.” Sequences unfold very quickly, in “From Work on Sidetrack,” “Home Edition,” *The Dream Life of Balso Snell*, as well as in Williams’s *Novelette*, as the following example shows:

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<sup>63</sup> André Breton, preface to *Le Miroir du merveilleux*, edited by Pierre Mabille (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1977 [1962]), 21. Translated by author.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 16. Translated by author.

<sup>65</sup> Carolyn Sigler, introduction to *Alternative Alices, Visions and Revisions of Lewis Carroll's Alice Books, An Anthology*, edited by Carolyn Sigler (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), xvi.

<sup>66</sup> Murray Godwin, “From Work on Sidetrack,” *transition* 4 (July 1927), 174.

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 [...].

This is another example from “From Work on Sidetrack”:

From red to amber to green the light on the traffic-tower changed, releasing the Woodward stream, against the redray straining, panting in preparation at the neuteramber, slow sirenwhining, clutchretching, agoni-gear-forward-gnashing on the green, once hue-o’-Hope, go-color now. When I dream of Old Erin, I’m dreaming of go. Let’s<sup>67</sup>

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.”<sup>68</sup> Social criticism, and an emphasis on violence and experience also characterize these texts.

This shows that 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 expatriate high modernism. Murray Godwin, Nathanael West and William Carlos Williams rebelled against 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.’”<sup>69</sup> Against what West called “the Frenchified symbolist stuff”<sup>70</sup> in a 1931 letter to Williams, both writers shaped an “American superrealism”<sup>71</sup> characterized by the recurrent use of the fantastic, a deep interest in the playful grotesque, humor, dynamism, social criticism, American vernacular language, an emphasis on experience and violence, and a fascination for the physiological, and even scatological body.

Williams was the one who pushed the theorization of American surrealism the furthest. His definition of surrealism in “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,” published in 1930. Jung’s concept of the collective unconscious allows him to dismiss Breton’s automatic writing, which he uses nevertheless as a counterpoint to define what he calls “spontaneous writing.” Unlike automatic writing, “spontaneous writing” leaves space for rationality and is compatible with Williams’s conception of the poem as an object. In order to write “How to write,” Williams relied on another essay published in *transition*. “The Structure of the Personality,” by Gottfried Benn, also a medical doctor, was published in 1932. According to Benn, the structure of the personality is not only based on the workings of the mind but also on the functioning of the body. Williams used this idea to connect spontaneous writing with the most physiological, humble functions of the body. As a consequence, Williams’s surrealist writing, as exemplified in *A Novelette*, written in the winter of 1929-1930, is much less

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>68</sup> Murray Godwin, “Enfilade,” *transition* 15 (February 1929), 119.

<sup>69</sup> West, *Novels and Other Writings*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 771.

<sup>71</sup> This phrase was used by West in the same 1931 letter to Williams, to define Godwin’s “dream factory stories” published in *transition*.

solemn, much less conceptual, much more concrete and corporal than French surrealist writing. Spontaneous writing is associated with physiological relief, whether sexual or excremental, and explicitly opposes the symbolic, allegorical patterns of many French surrealist texts. On the whole, American surrealism 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 meaning.

This specificity of American surrealism is important to consider when tackling Bruce Posner's DVD collection released in 2005. "Unseen cinema: Early American Avant-Garde Film, 1894-1941" is a collection of seven DVDs intended to show that an early American film avant-garde did exist before Maya Deren. It brings together American modernist films as diverse and essential as Léger's and Murphy's *Ballet mécanique*, Scheeler's *Manhatta*, Florey's *The Love of Zero*, Nykino's and Kazan's *Pie in the Sky* and Cornell's *Thimble Theater*. On its release, the collection received enthusiastic critical acclaim from magazines such as *Cineaste* and *modernism/modernity*. However, both were disappointed with the "American Surrealism" disc, "the only one," as the reviewer of *modernism/modernity* rightly argues, "to name explicitly an avant-garde movement, and thus the disc most likely to court controversy."<sup>72</sup> In particular, both critics question the inclusion of "the visual fanfares"<sup>73</sup> extracted from Douglas Fairbanks' *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919) and James Cruze's *Beggar on Horseback* (1925). These selections, according to one of them, "don't summon the hallucinatory violence of the surrealist sensibility [...] nor do they deploy the power of surrealist incongruity."<sup>74</sup> My contention is that, on the contrary, these two film extracts fully belong on this DVD, as they are representative of an American surrealist aesthetic also at work in the pages of *transition*.

The first short extract we will discuss (37'10-38'37) is from *Beggar on Horseback*, a 1925 film by James Cruze that has since been lost, like most films by this director. Two elements seem particularly relevant. One is the fantastic and grotesque atmosphere of the excerpt, relying on the Bakhtinian carnivalesque (all the guests are half brides and grooms, and the traditional wedding theme is jazzified) and on the animalization of musicians disguised as frogs (which echoes the personifications of animals in *transition*'s surrealist texts). The second interesting element is the inscription of the fantastic within the well-established structure of the dream or in this case the nightmare. We find the same structure not only in most surrealist texts in *transition*, but also in the second extract from Victor Fleming's first movie, *When the Clouds Roll By* (1919). The film opens on Douglas Fairbanks dining on onion, lobster, Welsh rarebit and pie (29'28-30'02). This heavy meal triggers a nightmare (33'31-35'31) including a very impressive gymnastics sequence that is still remembered as a feat in the Fairbanks's repertoire.<sup>75</sup> The dynamism resulting from Fairbanks' acting and from the use of slow and fast motion recalls the textual dynamism of many surrealist texts in *transition*. Moreover, the fantastic, the comic, the grotesque, and the personification of food echo both the extract from *Beggar on Horseback* and *transition* surrealism. These films are very different from what we acknowledge as canonical surrealist films, such as *Un chien andalou* (1928) and *La Coquille et le clergyman* (1929); and unlike *Un chien andalou* and *La Coquille et le clergyman*, they are now almost forgotten. However, they were released earlier, at a time when a French surrealist like Robert Desnos dreamed of a surrealist cinema, and saw in *When the Clouds Roll By*, in a 1923 article for the *Paris-Journal*, an interesting attempt to

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<sup>72</sup> Justus Nieland, "Archives of Modernist Cinephilia," *Modernism/modernity* 14, 2 (2007), 352.

<sup>73</sup> Paul Arthur, "Unseen No More? The Avant-Garde on DVD," *Cineaste* 32, 1 (Winter 2006), 9.

<sup>74</sup> Nieland, 353.

<sup>75</sup> The most visually stunning of these events – the sequence in which Fairbanks climbs up the wall and across the ceiling – was so memorable that Fred Astaire and the director Stanley Donen reused the idea over thirty years later for the celebrated "dancing on the ceiling" sequence in *Royal Wedding* (1951).



represent a dream on the screen.<sup>76</sup> Such an example calls into question the supposed one-sidedness of cultural adaptation and suggests the possibility of cross-fertilizations. More broadly speaking, these American surrealist proposals, both literary and cinematographic, point to the existence of a real, rich, self-sufficient American surrealist avant-garde based on original aesthetics and interesting political assumptions. By linking together *Alice in Wonderland*, French surrealism, Gottfried Benn, Carl Jung, James Joyce, Walt Disney and the Hollywoodian comedies of the 1920s, American surrealism speaks for the transatlantic, interdisciplinary dialogue of high modernism and popular culture.

## Conclusion

Looking at transatlantic modernism from the perspective of the cultural domination exerted by Europe over the United States in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and even earlier) allows a better understanding of the diversity and the nature of the American proposals and discourses that emerged and circulated in response. Cultural domination created a tension that triggered a wide range of responses, from aggressive patriotism and homophobic innuendos to the support by some American intellectuals of the discourse suggesting cultural deficiencies in the American society, and the development of various counter-discourses expressing the cultural strength and specificity of the United States – while integrating and transforming the cultural influences coming from the other side of the Atlantic. More research needs to be done on the mechanisms of this domination and on the many ways American intellectuals responded as individuals and within the networks they belonged to. In *Exile's Return*, Malcolm Cowley proved optimistic about the impact of exile on the American intelligentsia: “They had merely to travel, compare, evaluate and honestly record what they saw. In the midst of this process the burden of inferiority somehow disappeared – it was not so much dropped as it leaked away like sand from a bag carried on the shoulder – suddenly it was gone and nobody noticed the difference.”<sup>77</sup> The retrospective narrative of return Cowley developed after spending only two years in Europe might have led him to erase the complexity and the length of the process he was describing and offer instead a fairy tale whose blurry and radical terms (“somehow,” “leaked away like sand from a bag carried on the shoulder,” “suddenly,” “nobody”) call for more investigation.

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<sup>76</sup> Robert Desnos, “Le Rêve et le cinéma,” *Paris-Journal* (27 April 1923), in: *Cinéma*, edited by André Tchernia (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 104.

<sup>77</sup> Cowley, *Exile's Return*, 106.

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