

*From Dada to Infra-noir: Dada, Surrealism, and  
Romania*

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## “The gold snake / coiled in the sun”: George Hitchcock and Kayak Magazine

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# “The gold snake / coiled in the sun”: George Hitchcock and *Kayak* Magazine

Brooks Lampe

Who shall distinguish the sun  
from the gold bee of artifice?

—George Hitchcock, “The Death of Prophecy”

Although George Hitchcock is a minor figure in American literary history, he is one of its most genuinely unique characters and played a vital role in shaping American poetic surrealism. Largely because of Hitchcock’s efforts, *Kayak*, which ran from 1964-1984 under his editorship, became for many poets the prototype of the small press magazine. Joseph Bednarik writes that “[t]aken in its proper historical perspective, *kayak* was the vanguard of modern independent presses and George Hitchcock a most daring and perceptive editor” (28). It gathered poets, Philip Levine writes, who were “wild enough to be truly American” but were “underground” because American poetry’s “official organs . . . were too sterile to allow them life anywhere else” (xiv).

*Kayak* sprang into being during a period of intense interest in surrealism in American poetry. Surrealism’s expansion to the United States had been somewhat limited until after the Second World War. A few writers like Charles Henri Ford and Philip Lamantia aligned themselves with the movement, and Breton and the surrealist expatriates led a flurry of activity in New York during World War II.<sup>1</sup> As Andrew Joron notes, the efforts of these writers and artists became the “background radiation” for a surrealist renaissance in the States during the 1950s and 60s. During these decades a broad range of writers came into contact with surrealism through travel and the increased availability of translated works. This exposure, combined with “the mystical, apocalyptic, and psychedelic tendencies of 1960s counterculture . . . mingled with political currents, adding momentum to the surrealist surge in America” (380). By the 1970s Hitchcock could claim that

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<sup>1</sup> The history of American surrealism in this period is recounted in Dickran Tashjian’s *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-garde, 1920-1950*.

there was such a thing as an “American Surrealism” that retained “all the well-known devices of the Surrealists – but utilize[d] them with American material, American consciousness, and elements of our American experience” (“Interview” 154). Poets were inspired by the surrealists’ approach to writing as expressing the unconscious, and they adopted techniques like radical juxtaposition, semantic incongruity, and automatic writing, often with considerable success. Beat poets, such as Gregory Corso and Bob Kaufman, incorporated the anarchistic energies of automatism in their improvisational methods and visionary ethos; New York poets, such as John Ashbery and Frank O’Hara, extended surrealism’s interest in spontaneous encounters and surprising juxtaposition as a touchstone for experiencing the American metropolis. Others, however, gathered surrealist devices willy-nilly from among a plethora of modernist tactics. From the vantage of these poets, surrealism was ostensibly a set of tools for expanding and varying poetic creation, not a point of view directly challenging the cultural and literary status quo. What was often lost was a trust in the spontaneous and irrational production of automatic writing as an effective means for transforming the modern condition.<sup>2</sup> Breton had promoted the techniques of surrealism as part of a larger vision by which the “systematic derangement of all the senses” dissolves commonly perceived contradictions (*Manifestoes* 263). For many, a robust sense of surrealist *dépaysement* could not comfortably exist alongside the desire to explain and resolve the disjointedness of modern experience.

Arguably the most pervasive and convoluted iteration of surrealism evolved around the “deep image” movement in the 1960s. Combining imagism and Black Mountain poetics with surrealist juxtaposition, deep image poetry leaned heavily on Jungian archetypal psychology and emphasized writerly intuition. In deep image poetry, everyday experience and observation is sharply contrasted with emotional and psychological imagery in a manner meant to intensify and unify the apparent gap between external and internal experience. While most deep image poets saw surrealism as useful exploring the unconscious, most downplayed surrealism’s political directness and the rawness of content generated by automatic writing. For Bly, deep image poetry extracted the most important aspects of surrealism and redirected surrealism’s political dialectic toward collective consciousness. Even though the connection between surrealism and deep image writing was tenuous – Andrew Joron explains that “[t]he deep imagists tended to rely on the ‘intensification of intuition’ (citing Jung) rather than on the *intensification of contradiction*” (389, original emphasis) – the distinction became ambiguous. The figureheads of the deep image community came to be perceived as surrealism’s American heirs because of their work as translators of

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<sup>2</sup> Gerald Mead explains in *The Surrealist Image* how Breton “insists on the self-sufficiency of language, on the capacity of language to evoke only itself rather than referring to something outside itself” (29).

surrealist poets from Europe and Latin America and their incorporation of surrealist concepts into their statements on deep image writing.<sup>3</sup> A terminological link developed between the deep image and surrealism, creating a vague equivalence that entangled surrealism with the deep image's aesthetic and socio-political orientation.<sup>4</sup> This proved problematic not only because of the theoretical differences between the two poetic models, but also because the deep image was enmeshed in a system of values that many found troubling.<sup>5</sup>

*Kayak* was situated in this milieu, representing, according to Joron, "[t]he most sustained, and most visible, interaction between deep-image and surrealist poetry" (389). From this vantage, *Kayak* and Hitchcock's writing take on increased significance, constituting a productive tension between Hitchcock's surrealism and the deep image. By bringing Hitchcock's poetry alongside an analysis of the magazine, I hope to identify the manner in which Hitchcock's poetry engages with his editorial role in the *Kayak* community and to consider the implication of the magazine's iteration of American surrealism. Hitchcock's work, I argue, both as a poet and as the editor of *Kayak*, disrupts the deep image's teleology of closure and comes nearer to surrealism's vision of consciousness.

### Hitchcock's Poetry

Born in 1914, Hitchcock majored in English, became a journalist in the Bay Area in the 1930s, and served as a waiter on a Marines passenger ship in World War II. He then returned to California to organize labor unions for dairy farms and teach philosophy at California Labor School (*One Man* 301). Suspected for involvement in socialist gatherings, he was questioned in 1958 by the Un-American Activities

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<sup>3</sup> Rothenberg's *Poems from the Floating World* published poems by Breton and Neruda, as well as American surrealists Philip Lamantia and Michael Benedikt, and the inaugural issue opens with an epigraph of Reverdy's theory of surrealist juxtaposition. Bly's *The Sixties* featured translations of poets such as Neruda and Lorca, but an entire issue was also dedicated to French poetry, in which generous space is given to surrealists and the symbolists who preceded them. Kelly's *Trobar* featured poems by Lamantia and Benedikt. In all these cases, young deep image writers appear alongside surrealists from current and previous generations, indicating an alliance and allegiance.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, William Young labels deep image poetry part of the Midwest's "wilderness surrealism" (188), Dan Friedman labels a cohort of the deep image poets "neosurrealists" (123), and Paul Zweig includes the deep image poets (as well as "most of the *Kayak* poets") in his frequently referenced treatise on "the new surrealism" in 1973 (274-75).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Altieri, for example, recognized that "Bly comes dangerously close to the most naive Romantic and Symbolist restatements of Christian theology" (85), and Paul Breslin argues that the deep image is characterized by its intense privacy of meaning, a "shallow psychology" that ultimately leads to the proposition that poets "[withdraw] into the 'vast otherness' [that] represents a giving up on the outside world, a retreat from psycho-politics to a solipsistic religion of the unconscious" (129).

Committee. His testimony was nationally broadcast, and his uncooperative and humorous answers to the committee have become a notorious part of his reputation. He spent the 1950s in the theatrical arts, writing eight plays and acting in over forty leading roles (Bednarik 28). In 1958 he was invited by Roy Miller to be an associate editor of the new *San Francisco Review*, and although the *Review* failed, it introduced Hitchcock to editing and publishing (“Hitchcock on *kayak*” 288). In 1964 he founded *Kayak*, which he ran for the next twenty years.

During his time producing *Kayak* he published over ten poetry collections, inspired most immediately by his exposure to the surrealists earlier in his life. He read poets in the surrealist tradition in his twenties, especially Neruda, Garcia Lorca, Breton, and Soupault, and the impression stuck (*One Man* 291). While he promoted in *Kayak* an interest in all “the various branches of contemporary Romanticism,” he saw surrealism as “the quintessentially modern guise of the Romantic movement” (“Hitchcock on *kayak*” 290). In an interview with *Durak*, where he describes his writing method as derived from automatism, he says, “The real task in my poetry is to discover the extent and geography of my own subconscious” (155).

The prominent feature of Hitchcock’s writing is his aggressive mixing of semantic categories, reflecting surrealism’s poetics of convergence.<sup>6</sup> The world in his writing is a diverse, heterogeneous cosmos where contrasting concepts juxtapose and intersect. Joron observes that his style “embodies an aspect of Surrealism that treats the past – especially the recent past – as a storehouse for of the unconscious, where all that is half-submerged, caught in the act of (material or memorial) disappearance, seems pregnant with unrealized meaning” (390). Hitchcock seems to transgress the psychological and cultural boundary between nature and society. He can be considered a poet of both urban and pastoral contexts, but in a good deal of his work, these two categories of experience are dynamically conjoined. His juxtapositions promote garish intersections of the natural and artificial, where uncanny congregations of plants, animals, and natural elements are superimposed with industrial machinery, domestic and commercial objects, and other commodified paraphernalia. “How My Light is Spent,” for instance, begins:

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

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<sup>6</sup> Willard Bohn, in “Where Dream Becomes Reality” connects the surrealist technique of mixing dissimilar semantic categories with the surrealist game *l’un dans l’autre*. Both illustrate “the idea that any object can be contained in any other object” and underscore the movement’s interest in the convergence of apparent opposites (50).

In "An Exorcism," the natural and social intersect and enmesh in an apocalyptic drama where an army of squid "mount our verandahs / invoices in their tentacles / their breath sweetened with sen-sen." These deep sea rioters are dressed in the regalia of fashion and class privilege, donning "moustaches," "a plethora of cuffs," and "prefabricated flowers" (1). In this mode of aggressive heterogeneity, preceding connotations of terms and categories are overwritten with novel associations. Recognizably surrealist, the illogical attraction of these juxtapositions elevates the objects even as renders their significance ambiguous, creating a sense of derangement. Within this heterogeneity remains a tension between nature and society. In "The Song of What Remains," Hitchcock describes "petals of newsprint which die beneath the tread of dark ferris-wheels" and "[t]he plastic legs of old television consoles dozing in twilight at the edge of glaciers" – images that simultaneously lament and celebrate the modern world (70). Paradoxically both utopian and dystopian, such images indicate the ambiguity and dispassion of Hitchcock's poetics.

Hitchcock's surrealism has a flamboyance suggestive of his experience in theater. He confesses that acting helped him become a better surrealist by "[overhauling his] personality" and changing his "preconceptions of art forms," giving him "a great deal more faith in what you might call the instinctual, subconscious or non-rational elements in art" ("Interview" 163). Hagen testifies that his social persona reflected theatrical mannerism: "[H]e wears berets and ascots, carries colorful hand-carved canes, and can (and will) portray a series of comically exaggerated emotions through facial expressions, like a silent-film star" (12). Levine says that he could be found wearing "anything from a foundry-worker's coveralls to a purple tuxedo" – a kind of "post-Hemingway baroque" taste in fashion (*xvii*).

His fondness for the dramatic is observable in the showmanship of his metaphors: "Geologists / in white gowns / investigate my / knees for signs / of immaturity" (*Wounded* 6). His images can be especially ostentatious:

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

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

The fern nods in the foyer. Mrs. Browning  
moulds in her morocco box. The mah-jong tiles,  
wrapped in a felt bag in the closet, emit

the odor of camphor. Astronauts rise and fall  
with the regularity of tennis balls. (15)

The title of his third collection, *The Rococo Eye*, alludes to this strain of sensory overload. Replete with various forms of amplification, these traits suggest the poetic equivalent of theatrical performance, where symbolic or gestural miming is often raised to hyperbolic proportions: "One nation, said Mr. Lincoln, and added some / heart-felt apothegms. Geranium petals fall / like blood on the pavement" (15). Such theatrical gestures often make their way into his poems, pushing the images toward an intensity that accompanies the derangement and convulsive beauty of surrealism.<sup>7</sup>

Although it is accurate to say that Hitchcock's poetry centers on surrealism, his work also reverberates with the semantic and psychological tension of the deep image. Hitchcock admired and worked with many poets associated with the deep image movement and invested his literary and publishing prospects in their work. He recounts, "In the early sixties I was certainly influenced . . . by Robert Bly and his rediscovery of what was then popularly referred to as 'the deep image' of European and Latin American surrealist poetry" (*One Man* 290-91). Besides making it a predominant aesthetic of *Kayak*, his own work is distinctly shaped by sensitivity to archetypal awareness. The influence is most noticeable in his poetry collection *Ship of Bells* (1969). "A Hot Day With Little Result" and "Before the Storm" are sensitive and subtle imitations of the deep image lyric structure. In the first poem, Hitchcock's persona "rest[s] in the shade of a covered bridge," observing the landscape, such as a stream and a farmer at work, then dives inward by means of expressive symbolism: "I sit in the shade and think / of that great tortoise who carries / the Bay of Naples on his back" (*Ship* 24). In "Afternoon in the Canyon," lush nature imagery leads to the conclusion that "I must fill my pockets with bright stones" (35). "Before the Storm" likewise describes a series of observations of the natural landscape before bursting into an epiphanic gesticulation denoting the speaker's interior response to the world's beauty: "Gulfs! Abysses! Caverns! / And in the distance / dark violets" (*Wounded* 30).

According to Hitchcock, "a certain empathy toward nature" is one of the prerequisites of a successful writer ("Interview" 162-63), a trait he developed during his childhood growing up in the Pacific Northwest. He remembers "going on specimen-collecting trips with his grandfather, climbing mountains, walking from one of Oregon's spacious counties to another, camping out for weeks at a time, and carrying his grandfather's heavy equipment for pressing the botanical specimens they gathered" (Hagen 9). Many poems show Hitchcock in quiet attentiveness to nature, giving it direct and unaffected treatment. In "May All

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<sup>7</sup> Bohn elucidates how Breton's description of convulsive beauty at the end of *Nadja* emphasizes the qualities of "strain" and "shock," comparable to a train struggling to move out of the station (48).

Earth be Clothed in Light," "the waves lie still, they / glitter with pieces of light" and "a heron on one leg, / its plumage white in the green banks / of mint" (*Wounded* 49). These simple encounters are filled with mystery. In "Records," he recounts holding still "for / 28 / minutes / while a / butterfly / folded its / trembling / wings / and rested / on my knee" (*Wounded* 113). The sentiment of such moments is strikingly sincere compared to his surreal flamboyance. It evidences a sense of the "inner life," the integrated self that penetrates through experience and perceives the world as mysteriously interconnected.

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

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

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

What are the implications of the deployment of this convergence of styles synthesized across Hitchcock's dramatic structure and of its effect on lyric subjectivity and psychology? His poem "Dawn" suggests some of the consequences of this convergence of styles. (The poem is currently available in its entirety at <http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/dawn-0>.) The three-stanza poem follows a deep image template, moving from concentrated attention on the external world, constituted by imagistic description, to a profound experience of an inner world, signaled by symbolic figuration. The poem begins with a picturesque landscape: clouds, stones, and "the bones / of an old harrow thrown on its side / in the ditch" (*Wounded* 86). In the final stanza, by contrast, the images are archetypal and symbolic: the speaker perceives "the ship / of death stand[ing] motionless on / frozen waves" and can clairvoyantly "hear / the silence" coming from rocks. Yet the poem differs significantly from deep image convention in the strange imagery of the middle stanza:

Now the sun appears.  
It is a fish wrapped in straw.  
Its scales fall on the sleeping

town with its eyeless granaries  
and necklace of boxcars. Soon  
the blue wind will flatten the roads  
with a metallic palm, the glitter  
of granite will blind the eyes. (*Wounded* 86)

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

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

Hitchcock tends to favor this surrealist mode of perception, seen in the second stanza, over the deep image's "abstract image" as the device for shifting from outer to inner experience – a maneuver that deep image poems typically perform. Jonathan Holden coins the term "abstract image" to explain how the deep image combines "two kinds of epistemological convention" by making an image that has both the concrete quality of sensory description and the emotional range of generalization (63). Sensory stimulus is viewed through the speaker's emotions or psyche, consolidating and intensifying lyric focus. Associational expansiveness, especially in terms of emotions, is the main effect. But the images in the middle stanza of "Dawn" neither faithfully describe the reality of the circumstances nor psychologically connect the speaker to the scene. Of course they convey some mimetic and expressive information, but this function is secondary. Predominantly, the reader is alienated by the imagistic obscurity of these lines.

In "Dawn," then, Hitchcock interjects a surrealist mode of perception into a deep image dramatic form, frustrating the text's development and continuity. As a result, "Dawn" does not achieve the same degree of closure and resonance typically implied in a deep image poem. The dialog between the conscious and

unconscious here is more problematic than the uncomplicated "leap" Bly was professing.<sup>8</sup> For Hitchcock, the transition between the two areas of consciousness is the region of *dépaysement*. Rather than a luminous, mysterious "leap," the process for Hitchcock entails the influence of irrational aspects of consciousness.

One could argue that the poem critiques the fanciful mode of the middle stanza, associated with the sun and daytime, and affirms the integrated perspective achieved by the calm stasis of nighttime and dusk, a common archetype in deep image writing. Surrealist derangement, in this sense, would pose a threat to the inner life and must be opposed. The problem with this reading, though, is that the distortions of the middle stanza are a direct effect of natural cycles – the orbit of the earth, the effect of the sun on the atmosphere – and not a product, as seen in Bly and Wright, of the social self. For Hitchcock, the world in some (natural) conditions cannot be faithfully apprehended. Even for a healthy observer in full control of his faculties, aspects of reality remain unclear and disjointed. This limitation on perception demonstrates the problem with affirming the "leap" as reliable and immune to subjectivity. When "the sun appears," the mind is prone to hallucinations. In this sense, the uncontrollable and irrational elements of consciousness are intrinsic to the encounter between the self and the world.

Hitchcock's surrealist modifications are executed in other ways as well. One of his more frequent techniques is the anti-climax or (one might call it) "false leap," where a surreal image replaces or arbitrates the anticipated epiphany at the poem's end. In "The Death of Prophecy," Hitchcock ends with an aureate and reflexive image: "Who shall distinguish the sun / from the gold bee of artifice?" (63). The question comes after a deep image context has been mapped out – the poem begins, "The moon passes its zenith / its secret guarded by devout / archers . . ." and moves with visionary energies through emotive, abstract images: "O mountain with eyes of green malachite, / the moon is enmeshed in the folds of your breasts!" The section preceding the final image, too, seems to prepare us, with its serenity, for a climatic leap:

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

The closing lines, however, directly cast doubt on the viability of segregating self and world, and question the degree of artifice at work in his presentation of the

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<sup>8</sup> In a series of articles that were later published as a book, *Leaping Poetry*, Bly explains that a "leap" is a shift "from the conscious to the unconscious and back again" (1). Poetry should aspire to "leap" through rapid and far-reaching association, a technique he credits especially to Spanish surrealism. An essential condition of the leap is that it correlates external and internal consciousness by moving between a material image and an emotional or psychological ideas, not merely between two objects or ideas ("Surprise" 18).

natural world. The semantic terms of the image ("sun," "gold bee") are pleasingly evocative, but if "artifice" is a "gold bee," it may indeed be difficult to discern the real sun from the fake. This notion undercuts the reliability of the preceding images and the sense of lyric continuity they create. Like "Dawn," the poem does not conclude that archetypal awareness has final descriptive authority, but rather, that it must be qualified by a problematic epistemology and the poet's propensity to distort and embellish. But if Hitchcock understands the limits of perceiving the world, he also embraces the liberating implications of these limits. Poetry, the "gold be of artifice," gains its power *through* masquerading as the sun. He embraces the power of images *as artifice* and holds this recognition over and against the deep image's claims of transparent authenticity.

In the concluding lines of "Rites of Passage," he subsumes the mysticism of deep image writing into his surrealist vision with another auspicious twist. Having prepared himself through various rituals, the speaker is attuned to see beyond external phenomenon, into a unseen world:

I fall silent  
I wrap myself in the nightwind  
stars sprout like young barley  
in the dark fieldson the fifth day I grow weak with fasting  
on the sixth day I hear sledrunners creak in the snow  
on the seventh day gates will be thrown back  
and I shall speak to the gold snake  
coiled in the sun. (*Turns* 48)

It is interesting to observe that, having arrived at the peak archetypal awareness, reality is revealed as *image* – an image at once suggestive and hermetically sealed, a snake "coiled in the sun." Its paradoxical nature reverses the typical function of deep image epiphany as revelation, exposing its teleology of mysticism, where (in the final analysis) meditation usually culminates in ponderous obscurities. From the vantage point of surrealism, on the other hand, the image's uninterpretable and autotelic quality is indicative of the marvelous.<sup>9</sup> Hitchcock's theatrical surrealism capitalizes on the creation of such images, which are compelling as much, if not more, for their *irrealism* as for their cursory verisimilitude. Here, at the brink of the deep image move toward resolution, underscoring this mysticism

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<sup>9</sup> The unknowability of the marvelous is suggested by Péret, whom Rosemont quotes in the glossary of *What is Surrealism?*: "No doubt I should define what I mean by 'the poetic marvelous.' But I shall do nothing of the sort! It has a luminous quality which cannot stand the competition of the sun; it dispels shadows and the sun dulls its brightness'" (369). His metaphoric language is little better than Breton's own statement, "Let us speak plainly: The marvellous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvellous is beautiful" (*What* 125). Its autotelic quality is suggested by Breton's indication that the marvelous is the opposite of "the contingent" (341).

seems appropriate, even perhaps more successful. In its own way, too, it is more honest.

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

### Kayak Magazine

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

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

The magazine as a material object and its means of production also underscores the analogy. Hitchcock crafted the publication in meticulous fashion and remained in full control as the editor, printer, and illustrator for the entirety of its twenty-year existence. This was a deliberate strategy Hitchcock formed in response to his experience with the *San Francisco Review*, which failed because of multiple editors, elaborate printing logistics and poor financial planning. Hitchcock states that the *Review* was “ambitiously conceived”; between the

letterpress printing being based in England and a three-person board sharing editorial powers, the periodical encountered debilitating setbacks. After a few years it went into debt and closed. From this experience, he ascertained that “the number-one law of little magazine publishing” is to have “either financial subvention from a patron or the discovery of some way to beat the printer’s bills” (“Hitchcock on *kayak*” 288). He elected the latter approach by printing *Kayak* in his basement on “an offset press from the Pacific Steamship Line that had been used to print menus” (Grimes). He often printed the magazine on paper he had acquired from factories and other unusual sources (Marcus 21). In one case, he appropriated target-range paper “rejected as substandard by the U.S. Defense Department” (Hitchcock, “Editor’s Note”). Staple-bound, printed in letterpress, and assembled by hand, each copy is a kayak-like object produced on a small scale. This independent and artisan model provided occasions for building a community of artists. He held “collating parties” quarterly at his house to assemble the issues; Bay Area poets would mingle during the assembly process. As Morton Marcus recounts, Hitchcock would have participants rotate through each of five tasks, facilitating social interaction. Marcus testifies to meeting and becoming lifelong friends with several poets through these meetings (“George Hitchcock” 20). “In this conviviality, a whole generation kayaked,” Laura Beausoleil writes (8).

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

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

some laws  
that will surely be broken. (3)

But Hitchcock's visual arrangement, recalling Dada's criticism of mechanistic technology, evokes an image of decline and fragmentation, turning the poem's voice more apprehensive and hysterical than authoritative, as if the final stanza is a plea for help rather than a silencing pronouncement: "Are benign spirits out there, / wishing us well? / If so, I have not heard them" (3). What would otherwise be a poem of dark prophecy is partially absorbed into the magazine's larger aesthetic of disjointed agony. Such visual arrangements in the pages of *Kayak* offer a juxtaposition of two contiguous interpretations of the modern world, the very tension of which I see as the magazine's unique contribution to the development of surrealist aesthetics.

In terms of poetry selection, Hitchcock consciously embraced the responsibility of guiding the magazine's surrealist orientation: "An editor who is not prepared to be an autocrat in matters of literary taste, who is not ready to face with a smile the raucous cries of 'Elitism!' would be better off somewhere else" ("Hitchcock on *kayak*" 289). The point of *Kayak*, he says, was to promote poetry with qualities he "admired and felt to be gravely under-represented by the then existing poetry journals" (290). He excluded writing reflecting his "irrational hates":

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

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

Certainly Robert Bly's *The Sixties* was hospitable to surrealism, but I felt that it was published spasmodically at best and that was what was needed was a journal published with great regularity and frequently

enough so that various dialogs could be launched in its pages and relevantly discussed soon after. (294)

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

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

The names of magazine’s top contributors suggest an ambitious attempt to conjoin parallel but competing aesthetic approaches: Haines, Charles Simic, Lou Lipsitz, Louis Z. Hammer, John Taglibue, H. R. Hays, and Bly. While Bly and Haines are firmly grounded in deep image psychology, the others represent a range of derivative versions of deep image and surrealist models. What unites these poets is their focus on the disjointedness of modern experience and an interest in re-appropriating contemporary civilization for a universal, humanizing vision. Some of these poets, such as Haines and Bly, pursue these ideas by moving

oneself (insofar as possible) away from the dissonance of society. Others look for mechanisms of redemption amid the detritus of acculturated consciousness. The latter approach borrows surrealism's outlook by presuming experience in its totality – littered as it is with fragmentary and artificial objects – can be transmuted through an associational praxis. There is a balancing effect in the apposition of these approaches. The surrealist poets loosen and disrupt the normalizing effects of the deep image, while the deep image poets retain a stronger grounding in the natural landscape. This provides a productive means of broadening and diversifying a poetic milieu that has been criticized at times for narrowness. Perhaps the best testimony to the productivity of the union is that some of the poets incubated by *Kayak* in their early careers went on to flesh out their own surrealist and deep image-inspired styles. Charles Simic, whom Joron calls “[o]ne of the poets who has most successfully synthesized imagism and Surrealism” (391), is perhaps the best example of this, and his unique vision in its own way underscores Hitchcock's preference for the bizarre and mysterious.

But the conjunction was not always amicable, and Hitchcock's experiment eventually created confrontation. Hitchcock in his own writing and the poems he published embraced the spontaneity of surrealism but at the same time made little effort to craft an immediate and authentic voice. This went against the “antiliterary stance” of poets at this time, who, Breslin argues, rebelled against the 1950s academic retrenchment of traditional forms and sought instead “a rough, ‘unpoetic’ authenticity, a return to the existential freshness of the world” (59). The deep image poets epitomize this skepticism of artifice, claiming a sincere, generic persona as fundamental to their archetypal model of poetic consciousness. At the core of *Kayak*, on the other hand, is a contingency of poets who subscribe to a combination of authorial immediacy and performative distance, a blend of natural and unnatural images, a fusion of spontaneity and measured control. Just as Hitchcock seems to enjoy the excesses of a decorative style, so too the poets he published indulge in autotelic images and ironic distance. Vern Rutsala echoes this sentiment in his article about the magazine, representative of the *Kayak* approach:

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

From Hitchcock's perspective as a performer and dilettante, the dichotomy between "authentic" and "artificial" must have seemed strange, since acting was for him the natural and artistic mode of expression. Levine insightfully attests that transparency and pretense were seamlessly joined in his personality: "I believe we all learned the age-old conflict between art and life was nonsense: in George's case nothing was more obvious than that art was his life and his life was an art" (xxi). Indeed, Levine detects no distinction between Hitchcock's persona and his "real" self: "no pose, no effort to charm" (xviii).

Yet, while Hitchcock's embrace of artifice is quite conspicuous, most of the poets involved in the magazine maintained an ambivalent attitude. His predisposition toward artifice led some to an uneasiness with what was perceived as contrived emotion and formulaic technique in "the [K]ayak poem" – a term Bly coins in a negative context ("First Ten" 48). The "kayak poem" became a term of debate, with writers decrying it variously as "domesticated surrealism" and "sloppy surrealism." A definitive moment came in 1967 when Hitchcock asked Bly to write a review of the magazine. Not one to turn down an opportunity for invective, Bly's essay, "The First Ten Issues of Kayak," printed in issue 12, is bluntly negative. He states that the magazine's poetry is "on the whole clogged and bad" and that Hitchcock "[a]s an editor...is too permissive":

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

He outlines various technical evidence to show how predictable the imagery of *Kayak* had become, but his larger concern is that *Kayak* substitutes technique for authenticity:

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

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

He states bluntly that a poet writing this kind of poem "has mistaken a way of living for a style" (48). Importantly, he blames the formulaic style on "sociability." In his estimation, since *Kayak* poets aim for "a greater simplicity of style" and

because “cluttered complexity and rhetorical flourish are the natural expression of an over-socialized life,” socializing is antithetical to poetic success. Solitude – which he says is the preferred condition for poetic creativity – corresponds to simplicity, which is “a natural expression of solitude.” Thus, for poets to improve they should “stop their usual sociability” (48). This includes insulating oneself even from countercultural networks: “Poets in artistic colonies or hippie colonies are better off, but still are within a sociable world” (48). Nothing short of rigorous asceticism will suffice, as, against the “colony” model, he upholds the example of a haikuist, Basho, and a Buddhist monk, Kuya. His final statement is particularly ostentatious: “If an American poet wants to write of a chill and foggy field, he has to stay out there, and get cold and wet himself. Two hours of solitude seem about right for every line of poetry” (49).

The numerous responses to the article Hitchcock printed in the next few issues inveigh against what was perceived as Bly’s hypocrisy and naivety. Bert Myers states that the article is really “an evaluation of his own first book, and of the American poetry he has advocated through publication in the *The Fifties* and *The Sixties*.” Accordingly, “[o]ne could say [*Kayak* poems] resemble certain foreign poems in translation, or some of *Silence on the Snowy Fields*, and that Robert Bly provided the models” (13). Haines supports Bly’s basic points, but does not think his work stands up his own guidelines: “Physician, heal thyself” (Letter 19). More substantive, though, are responses that identify the underlying assumptions in Bly’s logic. Meyers rejects Bly’s retreat into the unconscious as premised on an incorrect assessment of the modern condition: “What inner mind does Bly mean? . . . The American inner mind isn’t tranquil, and I get the impression from Bly’s insistence on asserting his own taste as a general rule that he currently prefers oriental models because they provide an escape from chaos.” Reciprocally, he sees Bly’s pastoral retreat as a Romantic illusion:

Bly reminds me of Wordsworth – faith in nature, human nature, universal nature, a Utopia called Id where all men are equal and good. All we have to do is open its doors, speak its language, and the vile enchantments of our culture will disappear. Maybe. But imitating Basho’s serene contemplations isn’t the only way to achieve this. (14)

Echoing this skepticism toward wilderness escapism, Marcus questions Bly’s assumptions, arguing that specificity in an image is a virtue, not a flaw: “they [*Kayak* poets] use specific referents which anchor the poem to reality and make the surreal or fantastic image more meaningful” (20). For Marcus, *Kayak*’s synthesis of imagism and surrealism improves and sharpens the effect: “[T]he imagery of the poems is generally kept clear and uncluttered, thus avoiding the crammed-attic feeling of early surrealism. In fact, the kayak poem to me is exemplified by the short lyric whose imagery is vivid, although surrealistic.” He refutes the notion that simplification is superior to complexity or that pain is prior to pleasure: “There are not only guilt and suffering in this world, but joy and rapture as well.

We can reach our inner selves that way, too: we can empty the mind by overloading it" (20).<sup>10</sup>

Psychological "overload" and the poetics of convergence it entails is perhaps the *Kayak* community's most incisive answer to Bly's pastoral version of surrealism. While *Kayak* poets specialize in the individual as an alienated wanderer searching for meaning, the struggle is carried out in the midst of civilization, where political and social variables are in operation. Hammer, Lipsitz, Tate, and Simic are examples of *Kayak* poets who offer a derivative deep image model, significantly expanding its vocabulary, relocating its landscape, and reconfiguring its psychology. They share a perspective in which commercial and ideological forces have reduced individual agency and suppressed archetypal consciousness beneath a barrage of modern simulacra. In "Evening & Nighttime Blues," Lipsitz evokes the stifling atmosphere of the post-industrial cityscape: a polluted river is "like our lives, / shallow, muddy and full of shit," and loiterers outside a bar indicate a shiftless ennui: "A part of everything / is unemployed." Nevertheless, the self looks for meaning. When "it is late" and the city is dark, "the heart may venture out, / trying to find its way." Abruptly, however, this potentially redeeming moment is cut short

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

The premature terminus to the man's desire no doubt evokes the oppressive and frustrating unpredictability of the modern world; yet, the convulsive nature of the man's instinct ("like a man slightly drunk / who suddenly recalls / something urgent he'd forgotten") and the chance encounter with *light* (at once threatening and revealing) point to the presence of the marvelous in a crowded and incongruous world. In addition, Hitchcock favored work that reflected his own playful self-awareness and flamboyance. In grandiose fashion, Lipsitz declares that man is "the creature who dreams surrealistically / of women's hair overcoming the sea / while snoozing on the roach-eaten mattress of history" (14), and Hammer describes the poet as "[a] man whose head is a battery / Whose dream is a current / That shocks the anemones" and who "has scorched his eyes" as he beholds a marvelous vision of "white harbors" and "[t]he dance . . . burning / In the navel of the skies" (46). Similar visions of extravagant surreality are abundant in *Kayak*. In these arrangements, the spontaneous and arbitrary image is

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<sup>10</sup> Hitchcock never himself interjected in this debate, maintaining admirable neutrality, although he would admit later that he "certainly didn't think *kayak* had any greater weakness for 'formula surrealism' than Robert did himself" ("Light Poles" 298-98).

an instrument not of mystic restoration to spiritual equilibrium but of seeing human experience as replete with unpredictable convergences that propel one toward greater sensitivity to the world.

Undoubtedly, many *Kayak* poets aimed for deep image's transparency and saw surrealist posturing as faked or contrived. Surrealist techniques foreground the artificial aspects of the writing process, so it comes as no surprise that *Kayak* poems, which often try to join surrealist techniques to forms that accentuate emotional and expansive content, sometimes seemed calculating. Read as a deep image poem, for instance, James Tate's "Nakedness" would seem to abuse deep image motifs, almost satirically:

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

If authenticity and resonance is the goal, Tate has botched the images and undermined lyric voice through trite phraseology, such as "I am unprepared when. . . ." These peculiarities undermine sincerity of voice and break the impression of transparent mediation of experience. But Tate is not attempting to surmount the world in a sweeping symbolic gesture; rather, he reflects Hitchcock's sense of artifice and indulges in the illusion the poem makes possible. Bly's narrow perspective discredits this aspect of the "kayak poem," insinuating that the wildness of surrealism must be tamed and directed toward his pre-established metaphysical vision. Since sincerity is the self-proclaimed standard of the deep image, misinterpreting surrealist verse for deep image writing exacerbates its seeming pretentiousness.

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

At this watershed moment for surrealism in American poetry, Hitchcock experimented and combined deep image and surrealist sensibilities in a way that preserved surrealism's distinctiveness. Perhaps Hitchcock's contribution can be summarized as fostering experimentation and exploration in what otherwise was

a narrowly-defined movement. These explorations were productive because they often recognized the social self as one of the layers of the collective unconscious in need of excavation. Additionally, Hitchcock through *Kayak* transmitted a more accurate representation of the surrealist vision of poetic production, emphasizing convergence over revelation and the unresolved over the resolved. Aided by his proclivity for acting, he was able to see past the deep image's claims at authenticity and to appreciate the poetic artifice of both deep image and surrealist writing. In this sense, the two styles are contiguous, and in their apposition Hitchcock engendered an environment that permitted an open investigation of the irrational image as a mediator of modern experience.

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