

Surrealism and 'Poetic Politics'
Review of Katharine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism,
and the Marvelous in Everyday Life*
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The question of political engagement was at the center of the surrealist movement and the debates surrounding it. In the aftermath of World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre famously accused the surrealists of “quietism.” For Sartre, the surrealists stood on “the margins of the revolution.”¹ They were, in his view, bourgeois intellectuals whose aesthetic practices would neither reach the working class nor effect change. “The [Communist Party] is not willing even for a moment to consider automatic writing, induced sleep, and objective chance, except in so far as they may contribute to the disintegration of the bourgeois class,” writes Sartre in “What is Literature?” (158-59). Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, saw the revolutionary potential of new avant-garde praxes, considering the possibility of a “poetic politics” in surrealist experimentation. “[W]here are the conditions for revolution?” Benjamin asks. “In the changing of attitudes or of external circumstances?”²

Katharine Conley’s remarkable critical biography, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life*, presents a new interpretation of the question of engagement. Reading the history of surrealism through the figure of the poet Robert Desnos, Conley suggests that surrealist practices provide the blueprint for a committed life. “[S]urrealism was more than just a literary or artistic movement,” Conley writes. “It was a way of life. Surrealism was a way of walking down the streets of Paris and seeing the marvelous in the everyday.”³ While “Desnosian surrealism” put into practice the techniques and principles laid out in the early manifestoes, it also brought out the populist and political dimensions of the movement. Like *Automatic Woman* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Conley’s earlier work on the representation of women in surrealism, *Robert Desnos* provides an alternative history of the movement. Situated at the crossroads of history and literature, Conley’s study both resuscitates the figure of Desnos in the history of

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surrealism and refigures the movement as a whole.

Tracing out Desnos' life and work, Conley's work focuses on three pivotal moments: the period of 1924 to 1930, when Desnos was an official member of the surrealist group; the period of 1931-1939, when his work in radio gave him a growing public presence in France; and the World War II era, when Desnos was a member of the civilian arm of the French Resistance. This trajectory reveals the development of an increasingly engaged figure whose surrealist practices figured in ever more expansive ways. Conley's rich cultural and literary history treats the politics of the surrealist group, particularly the rift between Desnos and the surrealists in 1929, Desnos' work in radio and print media, and the influence of his two major love affairs. Of particular importance are the close readings of Desnos' poems and clandestine writings and the larger analyses of the relationship between poetry, poetic forms and politics. A carefully researched work, this study draws on archival sources, interviews, and primary texts.

The most radical aspect of Conley's work lies in its reevaluation of the history of surrealism. While most literary and cultural studies of surrealism center around the figure of André Breton, the "pope" of surrealism and the author of the first two manifestoes, Conley argues that Robert Desnos is a more appropriate figure from which to understand the movement. "It is my contention here that Desnos was the person who shaped the very definition of surrealism, who inspired Bretonian surrealism, and through whom, consequently, the movement should be read" (3). According to Conley, Desnos was "surrealism's purest practitioner" (19). His ability to practice psychic automatism and to fall into dream states shaped the burgeoning movement in the early 1920s, and he "lived" surrealism throughout his life—experimenting with poetic forms, interpreting and exploring dreams and unconscious life, and rejecting all forms of authority, from communism to fascism. In his resistance to collectivism and conformity, Conley argues, his break from the surrealists was, ironically, his most "surrealist" gesture.

The figure of Desnos that comes forth in this work is a complex one: poetic, populist and political. The populist Desnos emerged at the time of his break with the official surrealist group. Fulfilling Breton's vision of Desnos as the "prophet" of surrealism, Desnos both promoted and popularized the movement.⁴ In his *Third Manifesto of Surrealism*, published in 1930, Desnos brought surrealism into the public domain: "For surrealists there is only one reality, complete, open to everyone. Surrealism has fallen into the public domain."⁵ Drawing on the avant-garde practice of bridging "high" and "low" culture, Desnos increasingly integrated the material of everyday reality into his life and work. Employing the metaphor of circulation,

Conley outlines two directions in which Desnos' work flowed. While he often incorporated common cultural images in his poetry, he wrote journalistic essays, children's poems, popular songs and jingles for the radio, thus both drawing on quotidian images and putting them back into circulation. In this way, Conley claims, Desnos lived surrealism: "[F]or Desnos the marvelous is part and parcel of everyday life and ... everyday life is essentially marvelous..." (7).

While the poet was a vocal anti-fascist in the 1930s, the political Desnos took full form in the period of the Nazi Occupation of France. Like his fellow surrealists Louis Aragon and Paul Eluard, Desnos was active in the French Resistance. Conley's work outlines Desnos' Resistance activity, from his participation in the underground cell, "Agir," to his contributions to the clandestine press. "[E]ven though Desnos situated himself in relation to Bretonian surrealism," Conley writes, "with his own move into political surrealism during the Occupation of France by the Nazis, he moved the principles of Bretonian surrealism into a more highly engaged domain" (6). As Conley points out, Desnos' activity was not without complexity. In order to earn a living, he contributed to *Aujourd'hui*, a collaborationist newspaper, and he wrote allegorical poems that "walked the tightrope of Vichy censorship" (167). Arrested for "acts of resistance" in 1944, Desnos was deported and eventually sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau. There, he continued to be "an agent of the marvelous" (194), providing hope to fellow prisoners by interpreting their dreams and telling fortunes. When Desnos died in Theresienstadt in April 1945, he left behind a voluminous poetic oeuvre that has become a part of French national consciousness. Putting forth six readings of the "Dernier poème," Desnos' fictional "last poem," Conley's work concludes with a reflection on French cultural memory and mythmaking.

Conley's critical biography brings out the ways in which Desnos' Resistance activity provides the realization of Benjamin's notion of a "poetic politics." Like a number of his fellow surrealists, Desnos sought to change both attitudes and circumstances through his work and writings. His poetic legacy is a testament to his value as a poet and to the value of the surrealist movement as a whole. *Robert Desnos, Surrealism and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* is an important work that makes us rethink the history of surrealism and its socio-political significance. With its thorough historiography and detailed literary analyses, this book will make an invaluable contribution to the fields of cultural history, literature and literary criticism. It is of interest to scholars and the general public alike.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre, *What is Literature?* and *Other Essays*, Intro. Steven Ungar (Cambridge, MA:

Harvard University Press, 1988), 159. "What is Literature" was originally published as "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?" in *Situations II* (Paris: Gallimard, 1948).

2 Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 190.

3 Katharine Conley, *Robert Desnos, Surrealism, and the Marvelous in Everyday Life* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 6.

4 If Breton was the "pope" of surrealism, then Desnos was its "prophet." As Conley points out, because of Desnos' facility with automatic states, Breton claimed in 1924 that "*surrealism* is the order of the day and Desnos is its prophet." André Breton, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1988), 473. Quoted in Conley, 3.

5 Desnos, *Oeuvres*, ed. Marie-Claire Dumas (Paris: Gallimard-Quarto, 1999), 487. Quoted in Conley, 4.