A COMPARISON OF FRENCH AND SPANISH SURREALIST POETICS:
A COGNITIVE SEMIOTIC APPROACH INTO BRETON, ÉLUARD, ALEIXANDRE
AND LORCA

by

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Abstract

by

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In this MA thesis, I offer a comparative study of French and Spanish surrealist poetry. I examine four poets: two French, André Breton and Paul Éluard; and two Spanish, Vicente Aleixandre and Federico García Lorca. One goal of this thesis is to begin inquiry into understanding the relationship between the French and Spanish modes of surrealism. Much of the textual analysis of these poems utilizes methodologies from cognitive semiotics. I have included a detailed discussion of these methods, as well as some discussion of how this methodology may be preferable to other approaches that handle poetic imagery. In addition to close textual analyses of poems by each poet, I have also provided a basic literary/philosophical background for Surrealism, which includes a discussion of a few Enlightenment philosophers’ conceptions of the language and art as well as an overview of some foundational surrealist texts by Breton.
2. A note on translations

All of the Spanish texts used in this work have been translated by me unless otherwise noted. My goal in translation was to make the lines read as literal as possible. I have also modified most of the translations of French poetry, which I have noted in the citations. The purpose of the modifications is, again, to make the translations more literal. In all cases, except for the excerpts from Breton’s essays, I have also printed the original texts.

3. Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Per Aage Brandt, Florin Berindeanu, Antonio Candau, and Danimal.
4. Introduction: Goals and Overview of Content

This thesis has two goals. The first and foremost is to discuss the poetics of two related literary movements that occurred after the First World War: the French surrealists and the Spanish Generación de '27. This aim is situated within the domain of comparative literature; by examining the relationship among a few poets from each movement, specifically André Breton, Paul Éluard, Federico García Lorca, and Vicente Aleixandre. I believe that critical discourse is particularly important for the two movements since each was marked by a high degree of experimentation in verse structure and in semantic content, often rendering the poetry exceedingly difficult.

The second aim of this thesis pertains to methodology: I hope to develop the use of cognitive poetics in semiotic analysis. I will use semiotic and structuralist tools to analyze and compare the texts, but I believe that adding a cognitive dimension can help improve the system by grounding language in cognition. If semiotics, as set forth by Saussure, has human language as the foundation of all sign systems, then a cognitive semiotics seeks to add another layer beneath language: the level of human cognition. This is not a radical claim meant to undermine nearly a century of semiotic inquiry by substituting language with yet another “more basic” subsystem. I will be using the cognitive discourse only as a supplement that may add insight into our literary objects and as grounding for the linguistic sign. Again, the primary goal of this paper is to understand two literary movements that produced particularly opaque poetry; I am simply using the methodologies which I believe will help gain us insight.
In the first section I will discuss the kind of descriptive poetics I will use as well as some of the tenets of structuralist approaches to literature. The second section will be a discussion of a cognitive method of analyzing meaning in language, known as blending. Specifically, I will discuss the semiotic approach to blending, which I will utilize several times in my analysis of surrealist poetics. In the third section I will discuss some of the developments in the history of philosophy that helped establish the conditions for surrealism. This will largely be a discussion of a few eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers, and their theories relating poetry, language, and reality. The fourth and fifth sections will be the core of the paper, where I will address the poetics of the two French and two Spanish surrealists. I will conclude with a few final comparisons between the two schools, as well as some directions for future research into these topics.

Before proceeding, I find it necessary to make a quick historical note about the names of the two movements, and how I will refer to each in this thesis. It is generally understood that the Spanish *Generación de ’27* was partially influenced by the French surrealists who formally initiated their group with the *Surrealist Manifesto* in 1924.¹ Because of this, many of the *Generación de ’27* are called surrealists, especially Federico García Lorca and Vicente Aleixandre—the two Spanish poets I will address. This is somewhat problematic since surrealism can be defined in two ways, one that would exclude Lorca and Aleixandre, and one that would include them. The definition of surrealism that would exclude the two poets is the strict historical definition which only counts surrealists as those that signed one of André Breton’s surrealist manifestoes. This almost certainly excludes Lorca, who went as far as to actively dissociate with two

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¹ Ilie, for one, notes this influence, in his book *The Surrealist Mode in Spanish Literature*. See the Chapter 12: “French and Spanish Surrealist Modes.”
Spaniards who expatriated themselves to Paris to partake in the Surrealist movement, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. The second definition—the broader, more popular of the two—almost certainly includes both Lorca and Aleixandre. This definition sees basically any art that is marked with a certain degree of irrationality or experimentalism as surreal. Lorca and Aleixandre were certainly great experimenters and fit this definition nicely. Though I will be using the first definition as a historical point throughout the essay, I will generally refer to both movements as French and Spanish surrealism, since this tends to be a popularly accepted description, and because it is simpler than constantly writing out “the French surrealists and the Spanish Generación de ’27.

5. Poetics, Semiotics, and Structuralism

There is a distinct and sure feeling that one gets better at reading literature throughout the course of one’s life. I have often said something like, “I read that book in high school, but I wasn’t ready for it and I should read it again.” When I say that I am sure that if I were to read it again I would “understand” more of the book; it would be more enjoyable, the plot development would be clearer, and I would gain a better sense of the work as an artistic whole. Somehow Dante’s Inferno would be more coherent, more profound, more beautiful, etc., if I would just sit down and read the exact same words a second time. There is development of some kind.

What is going on here exactly? What kinds of things do we learn that allow us to feel that we better understand a text? What do we learn from critical texts that allow us to better understand a primary text? Furthermore, how can we make judgments—approving
or disapproving—of others’ interpretations based on assumptions about their understandings? Jonathan Culler, in his book *Structuralist Poetics*, describes this as what he calls “literary competence.” I quote Culler at length on the subject:

> To read a text as literature is not to make one’s mind a *tabula rasa* and approach it without preconceptions; one must bring to it an implicit understanding of the operations of literary discourse which tells one what to look for.

> Anyone lacking this knowledge…would, for example, be quite baffled if presented with a poem. His knowledge of the language would enable him to understand phrases and sentences, but he would not know, quite literally, what to *make* of this strange concatenation of phrases. He would be unable to read it *as* literature… because he lacks the complex literary competence which enables others to proceed.²

This makes, I believe, enough intuitive sense, but it begs a difficult question: What is this literary competence made of? Exactly what kinds of things are learned that allow one to understand a text more thoroughly? This is, of course, an enormous question. I believe that answering fully is practically impossible, but at the same time I do believe that a major part of literary criticism is an attempt to make explicit the kinds of intuitive learning that take place over the course of a lifetime of reading literature.

Culler, though he remains somewhat vague about literary competence throughout the book, gives us some insight into how we might account for literary knowledge: “One develops a set of questions which experience shows to be appropriate and productive and criteria for determining whether they are, in a given case, productive…”³ These questions allow one to extrapolate from work to work, so that the more one reads, the more effective one becomes at accounting for the system of literature. Culler notes that these questions are usually intuitive by nature and not clearly explicable by a reader. Therefore, it is then the task of the literary critics to formulate these questions, compare them with

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² Culler pp. 114-5  
³ Ibid p. 122
others, and figure out which ones are best able to account for the widest range of literary phenomena.

Having said this, I can go a little more in depth about the goal of this thesis: to help understand what kind of questions we must ask ourselves about two particular schools of poetry so that we can make some sense of their expression. I do not seek to explain the whole of literature, but rather a small part of it: a few poets of both French surrealism and the Spanish Generación de ’27. With these ideas established, I hope that the reader will end up with a better understanding of the kind of thinking needed to understand and appreciate surrealism. If the reader is a critic, then I hope that he or she will benefit from the time I have spent puzzling over these movements so that he or she may refine my formulations and extend them to other literary movements, genres, and modes of literature (drama or prose) and other media (film, painting). In this manner, we can hope that what we are doing in literary studies actually counts as progress.

At this point it is necessary to say a few words about what I am actually trying to explain about the text. Said in terms of Jonathan Culler’s theory, I want to discuss what I want my questions to answer. This is a very general question, so I must take a step back from the notion of literary competence—which I will take up again at the end of this section—to what I believe is the goal of poetics as a field of inquiry.

The definition of poetics that fits my view most closely is given concisely by Tzvetan Todorov in his “Introduction to Poetics:”

> It is not the literary work itself that is the object of poetics: what poetics questions are the properties of that particular discourse that is literary discourse. Each work is therefore regarded only as the manifestation of an abstract and general structure, of which it is but one of the possible realizations. Whereby this science is no longer concerned with actual
literature, but with a possible literature, in other words, with that abstract property that constitutes the singularity of literary phenomenon: literariness (French: littérarité).  

This definition requires some context to understand. First, what does Todorov mean when he says “the properties of that particular discourse that is literary discourse”? He wants to separate the literary discourse from all other discourses which one could use to analyze a particular text. For example, one can view a literary production as the result of a psychological condition, but this would not be to concern oneself with, as Todorov says, the literariness of the work. He notes that so long as the goal of research is directed at understanding what is particular to literature, one may give all kinds of analyses of a work using methodologies from many discourses: linguistics, sociology, psychoanalysis, feminism, etc. Since the ultimate object of inquiry is literature, then there is a unity among all these studies which is “constituted… by their unique object: literature.”  

My approach, for example, will use semiotic and cognitive scientific methodologies, but my aim is not to give a theory of semiotics or a theory of human cognition, it is to give a theory of a particular movement in poetry. He notes, for example, that a study in linguistics proper, with language as its central goal, may use examples from literary texts, but its goal is to account for language, not for literature.

Aside from this question of “discourses” that arises in Todorov’s definition, there is another point which needs some clarification. He states that poetics is a science that “is no longer concerned with actual literature, but with a possible literature.” It may seem paradoxical to have a theory of literature that has nothing to do with actual literature, but

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4 Todorov p. 6-7
5 Todorov p. 8
we can resolve it easily if we look a bit into Todorov’s structuralist background.⁶ A basic understanding of semiotic theory also forms a large part of my argumentation about surrealist poetics, so this overview will serve a double purpose.

In order to resolve this problem of “poetics without literature” we have to start with the father of modern semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure, whose lectures are compiled in the book *Course in General Linguistics*. Saussure sought to unify an enormous heterogeneous mass of linguistic research—a task that involved a great number of postulates that helped advance linguistic study.⁷ One of the most influential arguments that Saussure makes is that we must acknowledge a distinction between *langue*—the general, abstract system of language—and between *parole*—speech, or an individual act of using *langue*. He argues that human language is fundamentally social; it is a function of a collectivity. Following this, he states that “[the] executive side of it [language] plays no part, for execution is never carried out by the collectivity: it is always individual, and the individual is always master of it. This is what we shall designate by the term *speech [parole]*.”⁸ So if we cannot define language as the product of one speaker, what do we understand as language? Saussure gives the following formulation:

> If we could collect the totality of word patterns stored in all those individuals, we should have the social bond which constitutes their language. It is a fund accumulated by members of the community… a *grammatical system* existing in every brain, or more exactly, in the brains of a group of individuals; for the language is never complete in any single individual, but exists perfectly only in the collectivity.⁹

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⁶ Semiology, semiotics, and structuralism are all highly synonymous. One may refer to Chapter One of Culler’s structuralist poetics for detailed discussion of the relationship. Here I will quote a simple explanation of the interchangeability of the terms’ use: “If then I choose to speak of ‘structuralism’ rather than ‘semiology’ it is not because I am distinguishing one theory from another so much as because ‘structuralism designates the work of a restricted group of French theorists and practitioners whereas ‘semiology’ might refer to any work which studies signs” (Culler 6). I should also note here that Todorov was not French, but carried out most of his academic career in Paris.

⁷ Culler p. 4

⁸ Saussure p. 13

⁹ Saussure p. 13
The words “grammatical system” here are of the utmost importance because a system does not consist of determined elements, but rather of the relations between the interactions and relations between given terms. An individual does not possess a language, since language is distributed over all of the speakers of that particular language. Using this point we can make an analogy that allows us to make sense of Todorov’s claim that poetics has nothing to do with actual literature. A given piece of literature would constitute an individual utterance and is analogous to the parole of language. Poetics seeks to account for the system, the langue, that emerges when we collect and compare different pieces of literature.¹⁰

Saussure notes two advantages gained in making a distinction between unit (parole) and system (langue), both of which have important implications for my structuralist-oriented approach to literature. The first is that it allows us to distinguish between the social and the individual.¹¹ This is important for literature since a writer’s identity is not wholly defined by their movements. For example, many writers signed Breton’s surrealist manifestoes and wrote using at least some common techniques, but each maintains their identity beyond simply being a “surrealist.” Furthermore, Lorca who, as I will argue, differed greatly from the French surrealists, can still be seen as a part of their community because he did at times employ what we could call surrealist techniques. In sum, Saussure’s point about langue and parole allows us to view a writer both as a unique subject, with his own style, and as a member of a genre or movement.

The second conclusion that Saussure draws from the langue-parole difference is that we can “distinguish what is essential from what is ancillary and more or less

¹⁰ The adaptation of this kind linguistic theory to the study of cultural practices was initiated by Claude Lèvi-Strauss in the 1950s, when he applied it to anthropology.
¹¹ Saussure, p.13-14
Accidental.”¹² Literary genres and movements, like languages, are never pure. They are instead assemblages with only general tendencies. For example, the English language is historically composed of older languages such as German, French, Latin, Greek, etc., but it nevertheless has its own identity and its own behavior which is distinct from all of these languages. English, like French and German¹³, exhibits Subject-Verb-Object syntax, but unlike either of these it uses the helping verb “to do” in the formulation of “yes-no” questions, negation, and emphatic statements. These kinds of characterizations of English are only possible at the level of the structure, and not at the level of individual utterance. This level, of the utterance, has practically no relation to a German or French (each language is mutually unintelligible). Following this model, we will be able to distinguish what is essential for characterizing surrealist poetry and what was inherited from other movements such as romanticism, symbolism, Parnassianism, etc.¹⁴

To sum up this overview of how semiotic theory can be applied to literature, I quote a very concise summary of these concepts from Culler:

The notion that linguistics might be useful in studying other cultural phenomena is based on two fundamental insights: first, that social and cultural phenomena are not simply material objects or events but objects or events with meaning, and hence signs; and second, that they do not have essences but are defined by a network of relations, both internal and external.¹⁵

¹² Saussure, p.14
¹³ German is SVO at least in standard independent clauses.
¹⁴ One minor point in which Saussure differs from our current approach is that Saussure sees that certain elements in parole are incidental. In poetry, theoretically speaking, nothing is incidental. A defense of this idea will be discussed in the section on Luis de Góngora and Vicente Aleixandre.
¹⁵ Culler p. 4
6. Cognitive Semiotic Blending
This section will explain the cognitive semiotic blending model proposed by Brandt and Brandt (2005a, 2005b) which I will use throughout my discussion of surrealist poetics. Since the model is somewhat complex, I have reserved a separate section for it. This will also allow me to help contextualize the model by discussing some of the developments in cognitive linguistics over the past twenty-five years that have led to the creation of the cognitive semiotic blend.

One of the major developments in the field of cognitive semantics in the last 30 years is the notion of a mental space, and it is also the basis for subsequent theories of blending. A mental space is essentially a temporary mental representation of a state of affairs. They were theorized by Gilles Fauconnier in two of his books: Mental Spaces (1994) and Mappings in Thought and Language (1997). Fauconnier notes that mental spaces were developed as a reaction to mainstream theories of meaning in the philosophy of language, which had difficulty in reconciling semantic conflicts in sentences. Since mental spaces are only partial representations of the world, which do not have to be held as true in all cases, they can easily account for counterfactual situations, such as “The girl, who is frowning in the picture, is really very happy.” One mental space, which contains the speaker’s beliefs about the “real” world contains a girl who is usually happy, while in another space, prompted by the photograph, there is a girl who appears sad.

This notion, of discrete, contained representations of information became the basis for Turner and Fauconnier’s theory of conceptual integration, or blending, which they outline in great detail in their 2002 volume The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind’s Hidden Complexities. The main argument of this book was an explanation of how

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16For a discussion of their theoretical ontological status, see the preface to either book.
the blending of two mental spaces could yield a blended space that had emergent meaning of its own; this is to say, the blended space becomes more than simply the sum of its individual parts.

One example of a blend given in *The Way We Think* is the notion of “trashcan basketball.” In this example, there are two mental spaces, one that contains our frame for basketball, and another our frame for trashcans and throwing trash away.\(^{17}\) Certain aspects of each frame, though not all, are selected and integrated in a third mental space. In this blended space, a piece of crumpled paper is a basketball, the waste paper basket is a basketball hoop, and the person throwing paper away is a shooter shooting the ball (Figure 1).

![Diagram of Trashcan Basketball](image)

**Figure 1:** Trashcan Basketball

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\(^{17}\) Frames are essentially our knowledge revolving around a particular concept. For example, our coffee shop frame might include a buyer, a seller, coffee, leaving a tip, places to sit, etc. We can utilize different aspects of a frame implicitly, once the frame is evoked. For example, take the following sentence “I walked into the coffee shop, ordered a coffee, laid down a 5 dollar bill, grabbed a newspaper, and walked out.” We were not told about a cashier, nor if the customer actually received the coffee. It is our frame of coffee shops that helps us implicitly fill in this information.
An important aspect of this blending space is that it has emergent properties of its own, that is to say, properties not found in either the basketball or trashcan frame. Turner and Fauconnier note that manually placing a piece of paper in trashcan is acceptable in the trashcan frame, and manually placing the basketball in the basket is fine for basketball, but doing so in trashcan basketball would be simply uninteresting and run counter to the play aspect of the game.\textsuperscript{18}

Brandt and Brandt’s 2005 article entitled “Making sense of a blend: a cognitive-semiotic approach to metaphor” attempts to improve upon the model proposed by Fauconnier and Turner. Their model is somewhat complicated and we will need to spend some time discussing it from the ground up, especially since a great deal of my discussion of surrealist poetics will depend on the use of this model.

One of the first points that Brandt and Brandt (from here on, BB) make in their critique of blending theory is that Fauconnier and Turner never make a clear distinction between blends that are concepts, such as trashcan basketball, and blends that operate as expressive \textit{signs} used in communicating states of affairs in the world.\textsuperscript{19} The former perhaps belongs to the realm of backstage, unconscious cognition, but the latter blends are part of our on-line, semiotic experience, and hence must be treated somewhat differently. Following this, BB argue that the analysis of any communicative blend, such as those expressed in all kinds of discourse from conversation to poetry, must give credence to the fact that the blend is used in a particular communicative event in the world. BB account for this by positing a “semiotic base space” from which all other mental spaces are created. This space contains, as the argument goes, at least three levels

\textsuperscript{18} Turner and Fauconnier, pp. 307-6
\textsuperscript{19} Brandt and Brandt, p. 51
of organization, which they represent as containing one another as concentric circles (Figure 2). The first level contains the general world of experience, which they call the phenomenological life world, or pheno-world. Within this all-encompassing world, there is a particular situation—in the case of the blend they analyze, a situation wherein a man is talking to a woman who has just undergone surgery. Contained within this, finally, is the interaction of the two interlocutors, containing their specific utterances: the authors refer to this level as that of semiosis. The utterance they use for their analysis “This surgeon is a butcher!” which is taken from a Grady, Oakley, and Coulson paper (1999) that analyzes the same phrase in terms of blending theory and conceptual metaphor theory.20

![Semiotic Base Space Diagram](image)

**Figure 2:** The semiotic Base Space

Before I begin my summary of this paper, it is important to note the context for this utterance, since context is the most important addition of BB’s theory to Turner and Fauconnier’s model. I quote from Brandt and Brandt 2005:

> The speaker was a woman who had just undergone surgery and was recovering in the hospital. The post-surgery patient was not happy with the scar which had a more dramatic appearance than she had expected. She showed the scar to her visitor and told him she had not been warned it would look like this. Emphasizing her dismay she said “This surgeon is a butcher!” The addressee took this utterance to mean that she felt the surgeon

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20 For more information on conceptual metaphor theory, see Lakoff and Johnson *Metaphors We Live By* (2003)
should have been more careful with the stitches, since she would now have to live the rest of her life with a noticeable scar, visible to anyone who saw her in the nude. Since the addressee was in the habit of enjoying this privilege, he inferred that she wanted him to reassure her his viewing pleasure would not be diminished and proceeded to comfort her by expressing his affection.  

This specific act of communication, which is uttered in the semiotic base space, prompts for the construction of two more spaces: the reference space and the presentation space (Fig 3).

![Figure 3: Base Space, Presentation Space, Reference Space](image)

The reference space is, as BB note, a deictic space, which contains the representation of the thing referred to by the discourse: in their example, a particular surgeon. If the reference space is what is signified in the blend, the presentation is how the surgeon is signified (making it akin to the signifier), and it reflects the way in which the interlocutor feels about the particular referent. The referent is presented in a particular way, a particular light. So in this case, a surgeon is presented as a generic butcher, which is made possible by the predicative structure of the sentence, produced by the linking verb to be.

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21Brandt & Brandt 2005 p. 8
22This how is an evaluative. This is to say, it is not a question of how is it possible that one refers to something but rather how one feels about what one is referring to.
This is an important clarification of the Turner-Fauconnier blending model, which only labels the two input spaces as *Input One* and *Input Two*. BB note that in Turner and Fauconnier 2002 there are occasional references to “focus inputs” and to “topic spaces” and that “perhaps this provisional nomenclature is motivated by a similar semiotic intuition, although it is not explicitly discussed.”23 This clarification helps us understand the nature of expressive blends, which do not take two equally weighted concepts and simply merge them, but it rather describes a referent, which is in a sense passive, with an active, transforming presentation. In an earlier formulation of this model, Per Aage Brandt employs different semiotic terms for the description of these two spaces based on the terminology of Louis Hjemslev: the reference space is described as the *content* of a sign, and the presentation space is described as the *expression*. These terms help reinforce the non-trivial difference between the two input spaces, since they can be understood as actually opposite halves of the classic Saussurean sign which consists of a signifier (expression) and signified (content).

It is not merely enough, however, to have two mental images (a surgeon, a butcher) for a blend to occur. The two images must relate to one another in a particular way. Fauconnier and Turner argue that each input space contains a specific domain of knowledge (in our case, knowledge about surgeons in one space, and knowledge about butchers in the other). But BB note that this is problematic, since there is essentially an unlimited number of things we may know about any given subject. Grady, Oakley, and Coulson note many of the possible “mismatches” that help construct the meaning of the blend, such as the surgeon treating the human body like a piece of meat, the surgeon using a cleaver instead of a scalpel, and the surgeon operating in a butcher’s shop instead.

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23Brandt & Brandt 2005a, p. 16
of an operating room. But why is it that we select these particular parts of each respective frame? Why do we not choose to compare, for example, their salaries? As a way to account for the fact that we only select certain features from each frame for the blended space, BB propose a relevance schema which guides the process.

For this blend, BB argue that there is a force-dynamic schema that helps define the involved roles. To summarize very briefly, this schema contains an agent harming a patient. The equivocation of the body for a piece of meat implies harm: the human body is subject of ethical considerations, where the piece of meat—at least for the purposes of the blend—is not. When we consider these relations, we do not even need to call upon most of our encyclopedic knowledge of surgeons and butchers. We only need to know that both enact changes upon bodies, whether human or animal. The unsanitary conditions of a butcher’s shop and the cleaver do not necessarily need to enter into the blend (though BB note that we can add them in for a more dramatic effect, making the experience of the blend richer). This model, with the inclusion of a relevance maker for the blend, is also much more cognitively plausible since we do not have to start with an unwieldy list of all that we know about surgeons and butchers in order to create our blend. Rather, a schema guides our search for relevant information, and only the minimal relevant amount is selected for the blended space.

Lastly, BB add one more small modification of the Turner & Fauconnier blending model. This is the addition of a meaning space where the emergent meaning is

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25 See Talmy 2003, chapter 7, for a full discussion of force dynamic semantics.
26 Brandt & Brandt 2005 p. 26-27
27 Ibid. p. 25
28 Ibid. p. 26
understood as relevant to the situation at hand. The original blended space, as BB note, is a virtual space that contains the blended image of a surgeon and a butcher, but this itself must be understood as having a situational and illocutionary meaning for the situation at hand. BB note that “This surgeon is a butcher” might be said about another surgeon by a surgeon supervisor. In this case, the same ethical schema would be implied, but the illocutionary and perlocutionary forces\textsuperscript{29} would be quite different: it would imply something like “we should fire this person” as opposed to “that person has harmed me and I need reassurance.”

Now that I have contextualized and explicated some of the major points of the cognitive semiotic blending model, we can move on to the core of this thesis, which will begin with a discussion of some Enlightenment developments that were important for surrealism.

7. **Enlightenment Semiotics (Wellbery overview)**

Before addressing the surrealist poets, a discussion of the some Enlightenment philosophy will help characterize some of the ideas expressed in the surrealists’ poetry, especially the French surrealists. This may seem counterintuitive, since the Enlightenment was essentially about ordering and understanding of reality, whereas surrealism, as Anna Balakian notes, is about dismantling and disordering established knowledge since the surrealist believed that “reason [had] betrayed the Mind” and that

\textsuperscript{29}In speech act theory, as outlined by J.L. Austin, perlocutionary force is the intended change in the psychological states that a speaker intends for an interlocutor. In our example, the perlocutionary force would be something like trying to evoke a sympathetic response from the addressee.
“the mind must find ways of freeing itself of reason.” Nevertheless, Enlightenment philosophy developed our conception of the sign and of reality in a way that I believe was necessary for Surrealism. This section will serve as a defense of this position. I will also take up some of these ideas again in the conclusion of my section French surrealism once I have discussed their poetics.

My discussion of the Enlightenment, which follows an argument in David Wellbery’s book *Lessing's Laocoon: Aesthetics and Semiotics in the Age of Reason*, will demonstrate two important and related developments in aesthetics and semiotics that occurred throughout the course of the eighteenth century. The first development is a belief that an increase in a culture’s rational knowledge can be justified as progression towards a metaphysical goal. In the case of Enlightenment philosophers, it was justified as unification with God. The surrealists did not want to unite with God, but they are still heavily dependent on the idea that knowledge (through art) progresses towards an ideal fueled by a moral imperative. The second development is that the discourse about art moved from a public sphere—where the focus was the *thing represented*—to a personal, psychological sphere—focused on how a subject (consciousness) *interacts* with an object. In other words, an interest in semiosis is formed, which gives the sign more power than just mere nomenclature; it gives it the power to make up reality for the perceiving mind. Signs are no longer simply names for things in reality but rather they are *constitutive of reality*. This understanding of the sign opens up the potential for art to affect mental reality, which, as I will discuss in a following section, is an idea that the Surrealists would adopt to a new extreme.

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30 Balakian p. 13
Wellbery begins his discussion with Christian Wolff, not because Wolff was a revolutionary thinker *per se*, but because he systematized the ideas of Leibniz, Locke, and Descartes in a way that was highly influential for the rest of the 18th Century aestheticians. Wolff argued that the notion of the soul was at the seat of what we would today refer to as cognition. Wellbery explains as follows:

A soul, in fact, is a power of representing and all mental activities... have their source in—are modifications of—the soul’s representational activity... The subject, the soul, has as its immediate objects not the things of the world but representations; the function of representing gives unity to the entire psychological sphere... Furthermore, the [psychological] sphere is the more real one and therefore it is at this level that investigations of the most various sorts situate themselves.

Grounding ontology in the psychological sphere is not, as Wellbery notes, a novel idea—since this idea is found essentially in the doctrines of Leibniz, Locke, and Descartes. What is interesting is the way in which Wolff classifies representations within this sphere. The most interesting distinction that Wolff makes is between a “clear” (*klar*) representation and a “distinct” (*deutlich*) representation. The first kind of representation that can be an object of aesthetic inquiry is a clear one, which is the “simple acknowledgement” of an object’s presence. It is akin to the primordial act of naming, and only sees the object as a simple whole. A representation, beyond being just clear, may also be distinct as well, which is to say that one can break it down into component parts, and perceive its individual constitutive elements. A key point to note, especially for my discussion of poetry, is that to have a distinct representation of an object is not just a matter of understanding the parts which make up the whole; it also has linguistic implications. Whereas a clear representation can only be named, a clear *and* distinct

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31 Wellbery p. 5
32 Ibid. p. 9
33 Ibid. p. 6
34 Ibid. p. 12
object allows for enumeration as well as an exactitude that facilitates communication with an interlocutor.\textsuperscript{35} Representations which are clear and distinct are axiologically superior to those that are simply clear, since it is by dint of their enumerative quality that “[k]nowledge moves forward as an ever more penetrating, ever more refined analysis, finally arriving at that point where the object is known as a collocation of irresolvable notions, logical simples themselves \textit{immediately} clear and distinct.”\textsuperscript{36}

I have emphasized the word \textit{immediately} because it has special implications for the semiotics involved in the apprehension of concepts. Not only does this imply the most common denotation of “immediate,” so that the understanding of these “irresolvable, logical simples” occurs without time, but more importantly it also denotes that these “logical simples” are understood without \textit{arbitrary semiotic mediation}. Enlightenment philosophers understood that the linguistic signs we use to represent objects are indeed arbitrary.\textsuperscript{37} This arbitrariness is indicative of mankind’s imperfect status: man does not have firsthand knowledge of the world. An arbitrary name for an object gives it status as a clear representation, but it “glosses over” its distinct features. The name stands for the object as a whole but does not provide in depth knowledge of that object. For example, I am able to utter “quantum mechanics” and know that it is something in this world (it is not unclear because I am sure that it is in fact something), but my ability to speak these words does not guarantee the capacity to describe the principles of this complex science. As man’s knowledge is perfected through intuition (a typical Enlightenment belief stemming from Descartes), so language progresses as well. Wellbery quotes Johann Gottfried Herder on the subject: “By virtue of the \textit{ars characteristica combinatoria}

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid. p. 15
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid. p. 16
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. Wellbery also notes that this arbitrariness is not exactly Saussurean. See pp. 17-20.
symbolic cognition is converted as it were into an intuitive cognition.”

Through the normalization and perfection of symbolic cognition—cognition pertaining to the manipulation of arbitrary signs—language is converted into an intuitive cognition free of arbitrariness. Intuitive cognition is desirable because it is the faculty which perceives nature, and nature is desirable since these German philosophers generally followed Berkeley’s view that “nature is in fact a system of arbitrary signs instituted by God, a language so efficient and so transparent that all men can read it without difficulty.”

Since this language was instantiated by God, the pursuit of knowledge for the Enlightenment was a way of understanding divinity. Wellbery gives us a very useful diagram that represents his view of Enlightenment semiotics (Figure 4):

![Figure 4: Wellbery's Diagram of Enlightenment Semiotics](image)

Before continuing on with Wellbery’s argument, I want to make a few points on how this diagram is interesting for Surrealist poetics. One idea here is that Wolff and other

38 Ibid. p. 40
39 Ibid. 30
Enlightenment philosophers, especially Mendelssohn, who I will discuss below, believed in a progression of knowledge through the perfection of representations towards an ideal. Of course, these thinkers were situated within a religious context, and believed that this progression of knowledge was heading towards a limit of divine knowledge. This is, of course, something that the Surrealists were quite opposed to. Nevertheless, these Enlightenment philosophers established a metaphysics that allows for language and art to change the fabric of our reality, and more importantly, improve upon it. Further on I will discuss the *Surrealist Manifesto* and an essay by Breton, which both very clearly express this transformative, revolutionary capacity of art. Lastly, Wellbery expresses through the above diagram an Enlightenment belief that will become extremely important for the romanticism of the following century. This is the idea that divine knowledge is not only gained, but *recovered*. The introduction of this nostalgic aspect of knowledge will also become important for the surrealists, who, like the romantics, wanted to recover a lost world, albeit it to a different degree.

To continue with our discussion of eighteenth century semiotic developments, we take up Moses Mendelssohn, who offered several important advancements on existing ideas. The major change from the theory of Wolff to that of Mendelssohn, as Wellbery notes, is that Wolff’s understanding of the sign did not place any interest in the *process* of representation. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, saw that our mental interaction with an object (semiosis) is what is of critical importance. Wolff, as Wellbery notes, was not concerned at all with how the *process* of representation affects the *resulting* representation in the mind: representations were rather just a mental double of a real
Mendelssohn, on the other hand, sees much more clearly that the representation is different from the object, and has different properties. This is partially evidenced by the following statement from Mendelssohn: “The essence of the fine arts and letters consists in an *artistic sensate-perfect representation*, or in a *sensate perfection represented through art*.” Note that art does not consist in a beautiful object, but solely in a perfected representation of that object. This is a critical idea not just for our discussion of surrealism but for modern art in general, since it understands that art is not about the inherent beauty of the object at hand, but rather about the clarity of the representation produced in semiosis. This notion allows for ugly or disfigured objects to be considered beautiful, so long as the representations they produce are in accordance with an idealized notion of the truth of the object, its accordance with divine reality. The transition away from art as physical, as evidenced and disseminated by the influential summaries of Wolff, continues on its path towards the psychological, as beauty is abstracted from the physical world.

This transition also allows for another aesthetician, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, to make the argument that language is the ideal form of art, because the plastic forms bear too many traces of the actual objects they represent. These traces of reality (such as the shapes and colors found in paintings) deny the aesthetic distance needed to appreciate something *as art*: the physical aspects of objects, which no longer pertain to their aesthetic value, are reserved solely for pragmatic interests. Since language only consists of pure abstractions of objects, it guarantees the aesthetic perception of those objects.

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40 Ibid. p. 10
41 Quoted from Wellbery p.63
42 Ibid. p. 68
This emphasis on the abstracted aspect of physical objects, as opposed to the objects themselves, will become extremely important for the surrealists, especially the French, who often will share this distrust in the physical appearance of objects. This distrust is rooted in the surrealist ideal of a true level of reality, which is necessarily chaotic. Within this chaos it becomes impossible to distinguish one object from another, so physical appearances only serve to belie this unity. These ideas will be discussed in much greater detail in the following section, which will examine the poetics of two French surrealists, Paul Éluard and André Breton.

8. French Surrealism

8.1. Preliminaries: Breton’s Writings and the Foundation of Surrealist Thought

The surrealist world is split into two, following Freud’s formulation of the human psyche. One is a conscious world in which we normally operate from day to day. This world, however, remains hidden, repressed by modern man’s rationality. The program of surrealist art is to reach down into this level as a way of bettering the world.\(^\text{43}\) I quote from the First Surrealist Manifesto of 1924:

> On the evidence of [Freud’s] discoveries a current of opinion is at last developing which will enable the explorer of the human mind to extend his investigations, since he will be empowered to deal with more than merely summary realities. [...] If the depths of our minds conceal *strange forces capable of augmenting or conquering those on the surface*, it is in our greatest interest to capture them...\(^\text{44}\) (emphasis added)

Our current world, according to the surrealists, is controlled by conventions that reflect restrictions on the human mind, the true power of which is restricted by modern rational

\(^{43}\) “A better world” is a vague phrase, but the surrealists were vague about this notion themselves.
\(^{44}\) Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* p.10
thought. In the first pages of the manifesto, from which I have already quoted, Breton makes the argument that we have been living in a logical realm that is only “the most summary of realities,” and furthermore that this realm forbids “any kind of search for truth which is not in conformance with accepted practices.” Freud is the champion of the powers of irrational imagination, which is on the verge of becoming powerful again, so long as we accept Breton’s challenge to escape rational thought.

Marcel Raymond argues that despite the desired newness of these “discoveries” made by Freud and the yet untapped world which they imply, these ideas of Breton are not entirely novel. His argument is that Breton is expressing nostalgia for an older, purer world, which is in essence not much different from the nostalgia expressed by the romantics of the previous century. Furthermore, Raymond argues that despite the authors’ attempts to create art in completely new ways that would utilize these long suppressed powers, like the famous automatic writing experiments of Breton and Soupalt, the results were still under the influence of a cultural progression:

The first romantics and their readers believed that the relation expressed by the image should be motivated; gradually the area of the circle was extended, and the poets began to seek their equivalence at the end of the world; less and less applicable to the object, the image ceased to illumine anything whatsoever in the tangible world; ever less reasonable and useful, ever more independent and alien, it ended by assuming the aspect of an intrinsic creation, a “revelation.”

Though I tend to agree with Raymond’s conjecture that these ideas did not creep up out of nowhere, we must still ask ourselves what the difference is between the romantic nostalgia and the surreal nostalgia, especially since we can intuit many differences in their poetic expression.

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45 Ibid.
46 Raymond, p. 291
47 See M. Polizzotti’s introduction to Selections by André Breton about these experiments
48 Raymond, p. 288
For the romantics, this nostalgia was epitomized for the longing to return to a state where man was free from society. We can summarize this sentiment in the words of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: “Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains.” The surrealists on the other hand, were skeptical of the very fabric of reality, not just society. The romantic idealization of the beauty of the wilderness is not far enough removed from the “realm of logic” from which Breton believed he and the other surrealists were escaping.⁴⁹ For example, traditional art as a whole was no longer of any interest to Breton:

As I passed by in front of all those religious compositions and pastoral allegories, I could not help losing the sense of the part I was playing. The enchantments that the street outside had to offer me were a thousand times more real […] I do not necessarily mean that no emotion can be aroused by a painting of “Leda,” or that no heart-rending sun can set behind a scene of “Roman Palaces…” […] I simply mean that genius has nothing to gain by following these beaten tracks and circuitous paths.⁵⁰

These classical forms are reflections of our conscious life from which Breton wants the human race to escape. He talks about a return to “essential primitivism” with which the works of art in a museum cannot compete.⁵¹ He is not interested in the self-contained system of art because it only signifies more figments of the conscious mind. It is no longer interesting that a man bound to a tree and pierced with arrows is St. Sebastian, because the signs in the painting do not escape the conscious world as they travel from a represented image to a name in the Catholic canon of saints. These “paths” are predefined and hence ignore the power of each unique subjectivity, a subjectivity that should be free to determine the meaning of an artwork for itself. This is why Breton “loses” his participation in the perception of the work of art, because he has already been told how to interpret the painting’s semiotics. A painting can only cause an emotional reaction when

⁴⁹ Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism* p.10
⁵⁰ Breton, *What is Surrealism*, p. 12
⁵¹ Ibid. p. 13
the onlooker is forced to use his or her subjective subconscious in order to interpret the symbols contained therein.

Breton discusses the new utility of a painting which is, in a sense, the true purpose of art:

> It makes no difference whether there remains a perceptible difference between beings that are evoked and beings which are present, since I dismiss such differences out of hand at every moment of my life. This is why it is impossible for me to envisage a picture as being other than a window, in which my first interest is to know what it looks out on…  

The first sentence in this passage shows the importance of the Enlightenment’s development of the sign, which understood that what is important in the perception of art is not the artifact, but rather the representation. This representation is distinct from the reality of the physical object because it is produced by an active reconfiguration of a set of perceptions. What separates Breton’s ideas from those of the Enlightenment aestheticians, however, is the idea that a good painting should give access to another world rather than improving knowledge about our world by making clear objects more and more distinct. What this window looks out on is not, of course, something like “the Spirit of Catholicism,” but rather to the primordial chaos of the universe where the human spirit is free. Creating such images is not only characteristic of a particular style of art, but it is the style of art, the only one that now has any merit: "In order to respond to the necessity, upon which all serious minds now agree, for a total revision of real values, the plastic work of art will either refer to a purely internal model or will cease to exist."  

We can assume from this statement that the traditional work of art is no longer valid because it does not refer to this “purely internal model,” as I demonstrated above with the St. Sebastian example. Following this hope for a subconscious, internally

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52 Ibid. p. 11
53 Ibid. p14
oriented model of art, Breton gives to painters—and artists in general, I believe—a new reason to create art: “to prevent the domination by the symbol of the thing signified.” The symbol is an object of the conscious world, and cannot be of interest because it does not give, like good art should, access to the more powerful world that is hidden somewhere in our subconscious. This transport value of the sign has an interesting relationship to the Enlightenment notion of the sign discussed previously. The Enlightenment sign—especially the Wolffian sign whose goal was to standardize and homologize syntax and language—was meant to organize reality and make it communally transparent with the ultimate goal of aligning man’s cognition with divine cognition (see Figure 4). Even the later view of signification and representation, that of aestheticians such as Mendelssohn, though it pertains to art and is more interested in creativity, nevertheless argues that a proper progression of semiosis is one that explains the transcendental structure of reality. Both these Enlightenment notions stand in near perfect opposition to the radical subjectivization of semiosis desired by Breton, the kind of semiosis that allows the utilization of the subconscious mental capacities, those which are believed to be the “truest” of all. They were true because they dismantled all of the false and restrictive constructions implemented by society throughout the course of history; the surrealist believed in an essential chaos, rather than an essential order, a notion which I will discuss in more detail later.

Following this, surrealist philosophy offers two types of semiosis: a traditional but false one, which runs around on “circuitous paths” and is essentially constructive, and a true one, which grants access to the pure, freely chaotic world that is hidden away. This “second type” of semiosis also has interesting implications for the Saussurean notion that

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54 Ibid. p.15
a linguistic expression (parole) is the expression of a particular community’s linguistic conventions (langue). The surrealist poet finds yet another way to separate himself from the communal, even to a higher degree than the romantic poet since the surrealist attempts to reject the deontic force carried by linguistic convention. Man is not even perfect in the wilderness, because he carries his language with him, a language which contains its own restrictive history. The “true” interpretation of a linguistic signifier becomes so subjective that it defies participation in the inherently communal nature of language. In the next section I will take up some of the surrealists’ attempts to accomplish this paradoxical instantiation of language (parole) without (langue).

8.2. Poetics of French Surrealism

8.2.1. Sublime women and Surreal Nostalgia in André Breton

The surrealists took an interest in what they termed *le hasard objectif*, or objective chance, which was, in a sense, the objective world manifesting itself. It is for this *hasard objectif* that Breton would want to leave the art museum and walk out into the street, where random events were much more likely to occur. I quote again from the surrealist manifesto: “Everything is valid when it comes to obtaining the desired suddenness from certain associations… It is even permissible to entitle POEM what we get from the most random assemblage possible (observe if you will, the syntax) of headlines and scraps of headlines cut out of the newspaper.” At this point, Breton gives us a poem that has been
supposedly created following these methods. As this poem is very long, I have included another one of these poems here that is representative of the style:55

The Mystery Corset

My beautiful readers, from having to see stars before your eyes
Splendid maps, with lighting effects, Venice

Back the furniture in my room was solidly anchored to the walls and I had myself strapped in to write: I’ve found my sea legs

we belong to a kind of sentimental
Touring Club

A CASTLE IN THE PLACE OF A HEAD
it's also the Charity Bazaar

Games fun for all ages; Poetic games, etc.

I hold Paris like—in order to show you the future—your open hand

a tightly bound waist

By creating a poem that is supposedly made of just scraps of random paper, Breton hoped to minimize the role of the artist in the creation of the work by letting the laws of chance run free. Of course, the individual sentences and words had to have been written by someone at sometime, but their expression as a whole is no longer dependent on a speaker who is trying to make some kind of practical point; the randomness of the

composition ensures its own arbitrariness and hence its beauty and truthfulness. The address at the beginning of the poem, “My beautiful readers” (*Mes belles letrices*), is no longer a human voice, but rather the voice speaking out of chaos. Of course this poem does not strike us as totally random, since it does begin with an address, as well as it seems to be centered on some kind of adventure to a mysterious, otherworldly bazaar.\(^56\) Nevertheless the intention was to create an artifact that was a pure instantiation of the true randomness of reality.

Balakian goes as far as saying that the French Surrealists saw a “new mysticism” in this chaos. She argues that they saw humanity as a force that organized reality in arbitrary, incorrect, and unnecessary ways that stood in contrast to a divine reality that is free from all restriction: “Providence which is generally revered as the manifestation of the mystical order of things, gives way to the worship of *hasard*, or chance, the mystical manifestation of the inconceivable but existent *disorder* of things.”\(^57\) A poem, then, only has the capacity to signify this hidden reality when there is no convention behind its creation because only this allows the reader to come into contact with the divine disorder that produced the work.

Another technique used by Breton to invoke disorder is through the use of chaotic lists. A famous example of this is Breton’s “Free union” (“*L’union libre*”) in which he compares a rather comprehensive list of his wife’s body parts to a list of strange objects and ideas. I quote the beginning of the poem:\(^58\)

| Ma femme à la chevelure de feu de bois | My wife with hair of wood fire |
| Aux pensées d’éclairs de chaleur       | with thoughts of heat lightning |

\(^56\) To give some credit to the full randomness of this collage technique, the poem found in the *Surrealist Manifesto* is markedly less coherent.

\(^57\) Balakian, *Literary Origins of Surrealism*, p. 11.

\(^58\) From M. Polizotti, *André Breton: Selections*. Trans. modified.
In this poem we have a long list of associations that would traditionally give us a clear image of Breton’s wife, but we are left with practically no image whatsoever after the long, confusing list. This can be demonstrated nicely using the cognitive semiotic blending model that I have discussed.

In traditional poetry, the comparisons are made that help clarify and hyperbolize the beauty of a woman by comparing her or her parts to objects of value and beauty. For example, in a famous sonnet by Góngora, which I will discuss in more detail in the next section, he states that a woman’s hair shines more beautifully than gold. We know that gold is beautiful, so hair that is more beautiful than gold is necessarily very beautiful. But in this poem we are not so sure what to make of all these comparisons. Individually, some sense of them can be made, like the second line for example: “with thoughts of heat lightning.” If we construct a blend to help us understand this model, we can start by situating the woman as making up the reference space, and more specifically for this
example, her thoughts. We understand this as the reference because the thoughts that belong to the woman are being referred to deictically as a specific woman. Being attributed to this woman are presentations of general images (stars, fire, nests) etc. that “lend” their properties to her description. In this case we have heat lightning attributed to the woman’s thoughts. The blended image is nicely surrealistic: we can imagine either lightning shooting out from the head of the woman or perhaps a thunderstorm going on inside of her head.

But what is the purpose of this blend? Why would the poet want to describe his wife in this particular way? There are at least two possible relevance schemas in the construction of this blend, which are closely related. The first one is a force dynamic schema of the removal of a barrier. In this schema, an object in motion is unable to pass a barrier until some other force removes the barrier (Figure 5)

![Removal of Barrier Schema](image)

In this schema, Force X tries to move forward, but cannot until Force Y removes Barrier Z. In terms of the poem, we can interpret this as some general barrier (possibly of

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59 Force dynamic schemas are basically structures underlying the semantics of sentences where our basic conceptualizations of force are called into play. For example, “The tree stood tall despite the strong wind”. In this sentence the tree’s force is understood as greater than the wind’s. For a detailed explication of these semantics, and how they relate to our cognitive system in general, see L. Talmy’s *Toward a Cognitive Semantics*, Chapter 7 “Force Dynamics in Language and Cognition.” The entirety of the text can be found on Talmy’s website: [http://linguistics.buffalo.edu/people/faculty/talmy/talmyweb/TCS.html](http://linguistics.buffalo.edu/people/faculty/talmy/talmyweb/TCS.html). See especially p. 426, which discusses the removal of barriers by a helper.
knowledge or truth) being removed by the force of the woman’s powerful thoughts. Lightning illuminates, which can remove a barrier of darkness, giving sight to the reader—this is nice for the surrealist motif of “looking out” onto new things. Also, lightning is a powerful natural force that can destroy and break down constructions, which again is useful for the surrealist framework, since they believed they were trying to break down the establishments of modern society. This is just one analysis of what the line could mean, but it is nevertheless an account of a possible interpretation, and allows for us to make the image meaningful in that it praises the woman for her powerful and illuminating mind. This also fits in nicely with the “singing the praises of a woman” genre which the poem parodies. We can graphically describe the blend for this line in Figure 6.
Figure 6: "Thoughts like heat lightning" Blend

Since the image is somewhat unconventional it is difficult to decide on any one interpretation, but this uncertainty—the uncertainty of an individual line—is not necessarily what makes the poem chaotic. What is chaotic is that through the concatenation of all these strange images, the relevance of each image becomes destabilized, since we must constantly use different schemas to interpret each image. Some of the images are so strange that it becomes extremely difficult to locate a schema or a logic that could help us make sense of how they might serve as praise for a woman, such as the following: “My wife with shoulders of champagne / And of a fountain with dolphin-heads beneath the ice” ("Ma femme aux épaules de champagne / Et de fontaine à têtes de dauphins sous la glace"). The intention is then to overwhelm our drive to
rationalize each image with a justification, so that even typical images like “my wife with
the waist of an hourglass” are called into question: we cannot help but wonder if he is
describing the shape of the woman, which would be the normal relevance, or if he is
somehow trying to bring other aspects of an hourglass into the blended space, such as
time or sand. Breton tries to give a sublime image of his wife through the enumeration of
these strange properties rather than describe in detail her physical aspects.

We can understand this as a play on Kant’s distinction between the beautiful and the
sublime. A short quotation from Kant’s Third Critique can help us clarify this:

There are, however, also important and striking differences between the two [the
beautiful and the sublime]. The beautiful in nature is a question of the form of object, and
this consists in limitation, whereas the sublime is to be found in an object even devoid of
form, so far as it immediately involves, or else by its presence provokes a representation
of limitlessness, yet with a superadded thought of its totality.\(^60\)

For an object to be beautiful it must have a delimited form, since limitation is necessary
for beauty. The traditional genre of poems that discusses the form of a woman’s body
presumably gives an image of her that is complete. Breton, as a surrealist who rejects the
appearance of forms, attempts to give a sublime vision of his wife, since it both provokes
limitlessness—due to the chaotic nature of the comparisons—while still giving a
“superadded thought of its totality” since Breton describes a rather exhaustive list of a
woman’s anatomy.

This sublimation through the beauty of a woman exhibits a romantic tendency in
Breton’s poetry, romantic since it rejects traditional forms of beauty, and because it
shows that the desired pure chaos can be achieved through feminine beauty. Breton’s
poem “They tell me...” (“On me dit...”), however, is perhaps a clearer example of this

\(^{60}\) Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §23
romanticism since it expresses not only the purity of women and exotic landscapes, but also the general nostalgia that is so often an integral part of romantic poetic expression.\textsuperscript{61}

\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
On me dit que là-bas les plages sont noires
\hline
De la lave allée à la mer
\hline
Er se déroulent au pied d’un immense pic fumant de neige
\hline
Sous un second soleil de serins sauvages
\hline
Quel est donc ce pays lointain
\hline
Qui semble tirer toute sa lumiére de ta vie
\hline
Il tremble bien réel à la pointe de te cils
\hline
Doux à ta carnation comme un linge immatériel
\hline
Frais sorti la malle entr’ouverte des âges
\hline
Derrière toi
\hline
Lançant ses derniers feux sombres entre tes jambes
\hline
Le sol du paradis perdu
\hline
Glace de ténèbres miroir d’amour
\hline
Et plus bas vers tes bras qui s’ouvrent
\hline
A la preuve par la printemps
\hline
D’APRES
\hline
De l’inexistence du mal
\hline
Tout le pommier en fleur de la mer
\hline
\end{tabular}

\begin{tabular}{|l|}
\hline
They tell me that the beaches are dark there
\hline
With lava gone to the sea
\hline
And that they unfurl at the foot of a great summit smoking with snow
\hline
Under a second sun of wild canaries
\hline
What is then this distant country
\hline
Which seems to take all its light from your life
\hline
It trembles real at the tip of your lashes
\hline
Sweet like an immaterial linen to your carnation
\hline
Freshly pulled from the half open trunk of ages
\hline
Behind you
\hline
Casting its last somber fires between your legs
\hline
The earth of a lost paradise
\hline
Glass of darkness mirror of love
\hline
And lower toward your arms opening
\hline
To the proof by spring
\hline
OF AFTERWARDS
\hline
Of evil’s not existing
\hline
All the apple tree flowering of the sea
\hline
\end{tabular}

In this poem we do not have the sublimation of a beautiful woman, but feminine beauty does have the power to grant visions of a strange paradisiacal world. Here the poet just barely catches a glimpse of this exotic “distant country” on the lashes of his lover, which is a place where evil does not exist. All of this is a highly romantic expression of beauty as natural, wild, feminine, expansive, and distant. To see the romantic aspect of this poem, we might compare it to Wordsworth’s “It is a beauteous evening…” where the ignorant beauty of a young girl presented in a serene setting is praised as highly divine:

IT is a beauteous evening, calm and free,
   The holy time is quiet as a Nun
   Breathless with adoration; the broad sun
   Is sinking down in its tranquillity;
   The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the Sea:
   Listen! the mighty Being is awake,

\textsuperscript{61} Trans. modified from Mary Anne Caws, \textit{The Poetics of a Surrealist Passage and Beyond}, pp. 30-1
And doth with his eternal motion make
A sound like thunder--everlastingly.
Dear Child! dear Girl! that walkest with me here,
If thou appear untouched by solemn thought,
Thy nature is not therefore less divine:
Thou liest in Abraham's bosom all the year;
And worship'st at the Temple's inner shrine,
God being with thee when we know it not.

In both poems we are given an expansive landscape matched with the sense that the beauty of a woman is somehow tied up in it or gives rise to it, and is furthermore divine; divine for Wordsworth in the traditional sense, divine for Breton in the sense of Balakian’s “new mysticism:” the chaotic disorder of objective reality.

It is in this attempted representation of chaos (the images given in Breton’s “They tell me…”) that we do indeed find differences from the romantic expression that we could describe as uniquely surreal. For example, the geographical and organic bodies described in Breton’s world stand in opposition to our conventions of these bodies: the beaches are black, volcanoes spew out snow, and the blooms of apple trees are not flowers but rather consist of a different element altogether, the water of the sea. All of these images are essentially negations of conventional descriptions of nature, which by law of Breton’s manifesto are no longer of interest to art since it is not just society that has corrupted pure reality, but also the conventional language used to describe nature. I believe it would be difficult to find an example in romantic poetry where beauty is expressed as nature in opposition to itself, since nature is the ultimate, idealized beauty.

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62 The observation that the apple trees bloom into another element is taken from Caws’ article “Poetics of a Surrealist Passage,” p. 36
8.2.2. Paul Éluard’s Distrust of Appearance

To give another example of these romantic tendencies in a French poet, I will discuss three short poems by Paul Éluard, one of the many artists who signed on to Breton’s Manifesto of Surrealism in 1924. Éluard style’s is markedly more subtle than Breton’s and tends to be more conceptual than fantastical—we find neither long extravagant lists nor exotic landscapes. Because of this the romanticism is markedly more subtle; nevertheless, we still see a longing for a pure reality that is prior not just to society, but also to nature.

One clear example of this longing for reality before the corruption of perception comes from a poem entitled “Nudity of the truth” (“Nudité de la vérité.”)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Le désespoir n’a pas d’ailes</th>
<th>Despair has no wings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>L’amour non plus,</td>
<td>Nor does love,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pas de visage,</td>
<td>No face,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ne parlent pas.</td>
<td>They don’t speak,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je ne bouge pas,</td>
<td>I don’t move,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je ne les regarde pas,</td>
<td>I don’t look at them,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Je ne leur parle pas,</td>
<td>I don’t speak to them,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mais je suis bien aussi vivant que mon amour et que mon désespoir</td>
<td>But I’m just as much alive as my love and my despair</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Jonathan Strauss notes that in this poem Éluard makes a statement against the metaphorization of the abstract, and in doing so implies the hope for a general abstraction of the physical world.  The first line of the poem, the negation of despair having wings, is practically a platitude: despair does not have the ability to overcome distances or to help one overcome difficulties. This can be represented simply enough with the cognitive semiotic blend: despair is the reference space while wings are the way in which it is described and so our frame for wings is the presentation space. The virtual blend could be

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63 Éluard, p. 118-9
64 Strauss, p. 14
a sort of free standing pair of wings, attached to nothing, which are symbolic of despair. The relevance for this blend is a schema of overcoming an obstructing barrier. It is similar to the force dynamic schema we used to represent the lightning-thoughts of Breton’s wife, but in this case the helping force does not act to remove the barrier; it rather assists the protagonist in surpassing a barrier that remains fixed (Figure 7).

![Figure 7: Force Directly Aiding a Protagonist Schema](image)

In this schema, Force Y acts directly on the Protagonist X in order to overcome Barrier Z. By the negation of this, the poet states that despair does *not* have the power to assist one in overcoming barriers. We can represent this in the following blend—note that the virtual space is negated, which gives rise to a negative meaning space:
As stated, this verse seems little more than a cliché until we see that even love is denied wings, and even a face (*visage*). To continue with the cliché, we might expect something like “despair doesn’t have wings, but love will make you soar,” but this expectation is not met. What we do find is a negation of the possibility of giving form to emotions and concepts, the negation of prosopopeia. Strauss notes the effect of denying these emotions a physical appearance:

If, however, the metaphors here initially twist the purely intelligible towards the visible, they subsequently sublimate the visible into the intelligible, since love is precisely that which does not have wings or mask… The nudity of the truth named in the poem’s title would thus be something like the intellectualization of the physical world, its abstraction…

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65 Strauss p. 6
Seen as such, the truth for Éluard, as expressed in this poem, must necessarily be absent of a physicalized form: tropes that give form to abstractions misrepresent their purity. Just as in Breton’s “They tell me…”, Éluard has a certain disdain for natural images of all kinds since they create false dichotomies; preferable is the primordial chaos where one thing cannot be differentiated from another—without forms, Éluard unifies himself, his love, and his despair. Just as in Breton’s “They tell me…”, where beaches are black, ash is snow, and the sun is a swarm of canaries, the physical forms of things only serve to trick the conscious mind into believing that forms are not also their opposites.

Éluard’s poem “The mirror of a moment” (“Le miroir d’un moment”) very clearly expresses this distaste for the physical aspect of objects.66

| Il dissipe le jour,                                      | It dispels the day,                                      |
| Il montre aux hommes les images déliées de l’apparence,  | It shows us images released from their appearance,       |
| Il enlève aux hommes la possibilité de se distraire.     | It deprives man of the possibility of distraction.       |
| Il est dur comme la pierre,                             | It is hard like stone,                                   |
| La pierre informe,                                      | Formless stone,                                          |
| La pierre du mouvement et de la vue,                    | Stone of movement and sight,                             |
| Et son éclat est tel que toutes les armures, tous les    | And its brightness shows that all armors, all masks are |
| masques en sont faussés,                                | false.                                                   |
| Ce que la main a pris dédaigne même de prendre la      | What’s in the hand disdains to take the form of the hand,|
| forme de la main,                                       | What’s been understood exists no more,                   |
| Ce qui a été compris n’existe plus,                      | The bird is confused with the wind,                      |
| L’oiseau s’est confondu avec le vent,                    | The sky with its truth,                                  |
| Le ciel avec sa vérité,                                 | Man with his reality.                                    |
| L’homme avec sa réalité                                 |                                                            |

Éluard expresses in very direct language that appearances are false, and only when we see beneath these “armors” can we reach the surrealistically preferable obfuscations described in the last three lines. The visual signifier misrepresents the essential, non-visual signified, which, unlike its semiotic counterpart, is free and unrestricted by

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66 From Éluard, Capital of Pain, pp. 228-9. Trans. modified
appearance. Also interesting to note is that time is even problematic in this poem, since we are told that only the moment grants us access to truth. Perhaps this is because in order for time to exist, we must experience events as being separate from one another, which ruins the possibility of seeing the underlying reality where everything is one and the same.

Finally, to give a quick example of the nostalgia expressed for purity, I quote the last stanza of Éluard’s “Giorgio de Chirico”:

![Table]

| Le souvenir de ceux qui parlaient sans savoir Maîtres de ma faiblesse et je suis à leur place Avec des yeux d’amour et des mains trop fidèles Pour dépeupler un monde dont je suis absent | The memory of those who spoke without knowledge Masters of my weakness and I am in their place With eyes of love and hands too faithful To empty a world where I am absent |

In this stanza, the poet claims that he is mastered by those who were able to speak without savoir (which can be translated to either the gerund “knowing” or the noun “knowledge”). The well intentioned “eyes of love” see what the hands—too faithful to the sensuous world, perhaps—are no longer able to express.

### 8.3. Conclusions for Éluard and Breton

As a conclusion for this section I would like to discuss some points of relation to the ideas expressed in the previous section about the Enlightenment aestheticians and their conceptions of art, reality, and perception. For one, the Enlightenment aestheticians I discussed believed that the aim of art was to recover divine cognition in its ability to clarify and understand the natural world by making clear objects more and more distinct. These distinctions constituted a better understanding of nature, which implied a better

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67 From *Capital of Pain*, Éluard pp. 100-1. Trans. modified
understanding of God himself. The French surrealists believed that they were accomplishing the opposite; instead of rendering each and every individual object more and more distinct, they were trying to show that these distinctions were essentially false and denied mankind access to an ideal reality. Like the romantics, the surrealists believed that the structures imposed on man by society were problematic, but the surrealists took this idea one step further in their belief that the reality which we see is also an imposition on a hidden mystic chaos. Their program was not just to dismantle society, but to dismantle nature as well.

The belief that poetry had the power to help mankind progress towards a metaphysical goal is certainly common to both the surrealists and the Enlightenment aestheticians. Furthermore, this progression was not exactly a “moving forward” into some unknown future; it was a recovery of knowledge that had been lost. In this sense—if we can accept the anachronism—both groups exhibited a certain romanticism in their nostalgia for lost knowledge.

However, this being said, the most important development from the Enlightenment utilized by the French surrealists is still the idea that aesthetics is based on psychological representations, and not the physical aspect. I have not undergone the task of trying to find a chain of influences from Lessing to Breton and Éluard. Nevertheless, I feel that Lessing’s belief that poetry was the highest art form, in that it did not bear any traces of reality, is a precursor to the surrealist idea that the perceptions of objects do not necessarily constitute the object’s truth: remember Éluard’s “Mirror of a moment” which shows us a preference for “images released from their appearance.”
9. Spanish Surrealism

9.1. Preliminaries: An Early Attempt at Defining Poetic Irrationalism

In his 1977 book, *Irracionalismo poético, el símbolo*, Carlos Bousoño attempts to come to terms with the novelty of the Spanish Generación de ’27 poets. Though his work is focused on Spanish poets, I believe that Bousoño is trying to describe what would normally be called surrealist imagery, but he rather terms it *irrational*—perhaps to avoid concessions to the French neologism *surréalisme*. Whatever the case may be, Bousoño’s theory is useful as a starting point for our discussion of the Spanish Generación de ’27 poets.

In *El irracionalismo poético*, Bousoño seeks to define the difference between the entire history of poetic images and those that became so popular at the beginning of the twentieth century—an ambitious program indeed. In the first chapter he establishes some basic types of irrational images in poetry and organizes them in a kind of taxonomy. These images stand in opposition to the predominant logical images of traditional poetry.

The most important distinction he makes is between logical irrealism (*irrealismo lógico*) and irrational irrealism (*irrealismo irracional*). The former refers to many traditional images like “hands of snow,” “hair of gold,” or “teeth like pearls;” they are unreal because no one has hands literally made of snow or hair of gold, but they are logical because the two images share a common physical property (i.e. both hair and gold can have the same color). Bousoño represents these kinds of images with the following schema.\(^\text{68}\)

\[^{68}\text{Bousoño. P.32}\]
A. Hair
B. Yellow, gold color
C. Gold

The model is not to be read alphabetically, but rather from the outside in: A and C are the terms expressed in a text, and B is the mediating similarity that allows for them to be joined in the mind. Though Bousoño does not describe it as such, what he is creating is essentially a model of cognition: he is explaining the way in which two signs are processed and related to a given end. In this type of cognition, as he argues, we can only be emotionally affected by the poem once we understand the logical connection between the two images, which is in this case the color shared by both objects. Logical irrealism—which this kind of construction exemplifies—is then defined by emotions arising out of logical thought.

Bousoño argues that in modern poetry these “logically irreal” images have been largely replaced by “irrationally irreal” images. An example of irrational irrealism that Bousoño gives is “while the thighs sing” (“mientras los muslos cantan”) quoted from the poem “Youth” (“Juventud”) in Vicente Aleixandre’s Destruction or Love (La destrucción o el amor). It is of course unreal, because there is no such thing as “singing thighs,” but it is also irrational because, as he argues, there is no logical connection between singing and thighs—it lacks a physical property that our rational mind could use to merge the two images. Bousoño argues that the way in which we understand this image is through irrational, more emotionally charged intermediaries. The logic is somewhat strange, but nevertheless makes intuitive sense: since we cannot find a physical, logical intermediary, we must, as he writes, “close our eyes” and try to “feel” the connection between the two images.

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69 Ibid.
on a free, associative level, which results in an emotional understanding of the image.\textsuperscript{70}

Instead of just three letters—the norm for traditional images—we now must use five:

\begin{itemize}
  \item A. Image of Thighs
  \item B. Emotions associated with thighs sex, rapture, pleasure
  \item C. The concept of sex, rapture, pleasure
  \item D. Emotions associated with singing: sex, rapture, pleasure
  \item E. Image Singing\textsuperscript{71}
\end{itemize}

B and D are intermediaries, attained by a kind of associative, non-intellectual mediation. After having vaguely thought of the concepts, we can connect the thighs and the singing rationally through our concepts of these emotions. The advantage of the modern “irrational irrealism” over the traditional “logical irrealism” is that the irrational images have a greater emotive capacity since they grant access to a lower, freer level of cognition. Bousoño, as mentioned, believed that the logical irreal images (hair of gold) can only cause an emotional response once the logical connection (color) has been established by the reader; for irrational irreal images, emotion gives rise to logical thought. His position is not as radical as Breton’s, who, as we have mentioned, practically rejects all traditional art, but there is nevertheless a great concordance between the two positions. Both believe that surreal/irrational art gives access to a different, hidden system of cognition that cannot be accessed well (in the case of Bousoño) or at all (in the case of Breton) by traditional art forms.\textsuperscript{72}

These ideas, though not necessarily incorrect, lack definition in many ways. For example, Bousoño hints at why we might want to connect thighs and singing (it gives us, apparently, the emotion of sex and rapture), but on the other hand he does not explain why we find traditional images interesting at all. We reach the center term for traditional

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., p. 34  
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{72} This is also part of my justification of why I believe Bousoño may be using \textit{irracional} as a way to not concede to French terminology.
images, the “B,” through a physical, and not emotional, association. If it is lacking emotional content, why might we enjoy it? There is an unaddressed assumption at work in Bousoño’s theory that implies we only read poetry as a means of experiencing emotion through the medium of poetry. While this is certainly a position that a critic might take, it seems a bit odd given the range of phenomena typically associated with poetry. In the next section, I want to take a different approach to Bousoño’s research into the difference between rational and irrational images in Spanish poetry.

9.2. Poetics of the Spanish Surrealism

In the following sections I will apply Brandt and Brandt’s cognitive semiotic blending model to the kinds of images treated in the last section in attempt to clarify the two images. I also hope to make a more general statement about which cognitive operations involved in the understanding of the two poems are similar, and which are different, rather than just assume, as Bousoño does, a fundamental cognitive difference. The discussion is important inasmuch as Bousoño argues that the ‘27 poets’ images constitute a revolution in poetry: his five-lettered model for irrational images represents an addition to the thought process involved in understanding a poem. This kind of argument implies that we have achieved a new way of not just producing images, but also of perceiving and understanding them. To make an argument that the surrealists have invented a new way of decoding poetic signs after millennia of sameness is a very radical statement that essentially implies a change in the utilization of our cognitive repertoire. We will use the examples already discussed above in the §6.1.: the “hair of gold” and the example from “Youth” by Aleixandre, “while the thighs sing” (“mientras los muslos cantan”).
The first thing to note about Bousoño’s analysis is that it does not recognize the importance of the broader context in which these images occur, that is, the rest of the poem. Culler notes a special characteristic of literary texts: we read them as wholes, taking each bit of information contained within the poem—text, enjambment, stanza breaks, etc.—as necessary for our interpretation. He quotes Coleridge’s argument that “a true poem is ‘one the parts of which mutually support and explain each other.” 73 I believe this can also be generalized to the analysis of art as a whole. Furthermore, it is an interesting fact about cognitive processes, since in normal modes of interpreting phenomena we tend to filter out extraneous bits of information, such as stutters, coughs, and breaths, etc. Culler notes that this notion—that a true poem must adhere to certain rules—may be problematic for some, but he nevertheless makes a compelling argument for the role that this “drive towards totality” is part of how we read a poem:

“[Even] if we deny the need for a poem to be a harmonious totality we make use of the notion in reading. […] Ideally, one should be able to account for everything in a poem and among comprehensive explanations we should prefer those which best succeed in relating items to one another rather than offer separate and unrelated explanations. And poems which succeed as fragments or as instances of incomplete totality depend for their success on the fact that our drive towards totality enables us to recognize their gaps and discontinuities….” 74

Following this general philosophy of treating a poem as a whole, I want to establish contexts for each of our phrases before we attempt an analysis. “Hair of gold” is a classic poetic stereotype, but we shall choose just one instance of it, found in Góngora’s very famous carpe diem sonnet, “Mientras por competir…”:

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73 Culler, p.171; Coleridge quoted from Biographia Literaria, chapter xiv
74 Culler p. 171
While trying to compete with your hair, burnished gold shines vainly in the sun; while with scorn across the plain your white brow looks upon a beautiful lily; 
while to each lip, as to capture, go more glances than to the morning carnation; and while with luxuriant disdain your gentle neck triumphs over bright crystal, 

enjoy neck, hair, lips, and brow, before what was in your golden age gold, lily, carnation, bright crystal, becomes not just silver or severed violet but you and the rest both turns to earth, smoke, dust, shadow and nothingness.

Below, during the section devoted to Aleixandre, I will quote the entirety of his poem “Youth” (“Juventud”).

9.2.1. Góngora’s Golden Hair

Now, as for the golden tresses, or the tresses more valuable than gold, we must think not only of the common yellowness of hair and gold, but also of why it is interesting to equate them at all. The poem is a classic expression of carpe diem—taking advantage of the “now” by enjoying the aesthetic properties of a woman before she is old and her beauty is diminished. The most typical aesthetic quality of hair is its color, while gold, on the other hand, has a more complex aesthetics because it is both visually pleasing and holds high value in an abstract system of currency. It is important to note that one of these values (visual aesthetics) has a markedly subjective character, while the other (currency value) is necessarily objective with a discrete, easily determinable value. The
visual aesthetic part of gold is the part that Bousoño notices in his analysis as it allows for the two images to merge in the mind’s eye. The part that he does not notice, however, is that the gold alters the meaning of the hair in a way that has a specific effect for the entirety of the poem. We can discuss this in terms of Brandt and Brandt’s blending model.

In this blend, the hair is described in terms of its ability to outcompete gold. This relationship, between hair and gold, is not the simple predicative structure that we had in “This surgeon is a butcher,” or the genitive “My wife with thoughts of heat lightning,” but nevertheless, the verb compete (competir) implies that the two can be compared in some way.\textsuperscript{75} We can intuitively understand that the point of this competition is to elevate the beauty of a specific woman’s hair—this deicticity of the hair indicates that it is our reference space. But the hair is not just given as hair; it is presented as hair that is more beautiful than burnished gold. The function of the burnished gold is to offer a new evaluation of hair in a way that makes it useful for argumentation. This, combined with the fact that we are dealing with general gold, not referred to deictically, indicates that the gold is our presentation space. The virtual blended space is easy enough to picture: hair that is the color of gold. Bousoño’s analysis stops here. We want to ask, however, what allows for this combination to be meaningful in some way. Even though in this well-worn case of “hair like gold” seems perfectly simple and automatic, it involves the selection of just a few traits from all the things that we know about hair and gold, namely value and color. Why, for example, do we not imagine that the hair feels like gold, smells like gold, or could be exchanged for goods like gold?

\textsuperscript{75} It is difficult to put objects with almost no relationship into a competition, for example, a lawnmower and stick of chewing gum.
This is where the relevance schema for the blend plays a role. For this particular blend, we have a schema for the evaluation and comparison of objects. Gold, as mentioned can be evaluated not just by its beauty, but also by its discrete, objectively measurable worth in a system of currency. Hair does not have a concrete, countable value like gold, but this expression tells us that it is nevertheless more valuable than the highest possible discrete value (i.e. gold). There is a kind of dialog implicit in this logic:

A. O youth! Enjoy a young woman’s yellow hair!
B. What is so nice about a woman’s hair?
C. It is prettier than gold, and you know how valuable gold is!

Already we have a slight divergence from Bousoño’s model: the basis of comparison is not that they both share a physical quality, but rather that they are both aesthetic objects. The blend is relevant to the discourse since the poem’s message is to “seize the day,” as it were, and this gives us a reason why we might value and pursue something or someone. We should also note here that this kind of thinking is not what we would typically call logical, since hair and gold are two different kinds of objects and should not be compared on the same grounds; the poet is essentially using the blend of the two objects as a means of persuasion. The blend is represented in Figure 9 below. There is of course a logic to this “logical irreal” image, but I hoped I have demonstrated that it is substantially more complex than what Bousoño has written. In the next section I hope that using this blending model, we can establish logic even for his “irrational irreal” images as well.
9.2.2. Aleixandre’s Singing Thighs

Now that we have better understood the thinking that governs this “classic” image, let us now take a look at the example from Aleixandre’s poem “Youth” (“Juventud”). Bousoño is interested in the last line, where we find two supposedly incompatible images: singing and thighs. Bousoño’s analysis, as I mentioned, argues that the connection between these two images does not have a logical intermediary like “hair of gold;” due to the lack of a physical similarity it must be that we understand the image on an emotional level, namely, on the emotions of sex, rapture, and pleasure.
I would first like to note that this is simply incorrect. Bousoño consistently only quotes the last few words of the poem “while the thighs sing,” but if we look at the rest of the poem—even just the rest of the line, in fact—we can, in fact, find a physical connection between the two images. For context, I quote the entire poem:76

| Así acaricio una mejilla dispuesta.       | Thus I caress a comely cheek.       |
| ¿Me amas? Me amas como los dulces animalitos | Do you love me? You love me like the sweet little animals |
| a su tristeza mansa inexplicable.         | love their tame, inexplicable sadness. |
| Ámame como el vestido de seda             | Love me like the silk dress           |
| a su quietud oscura de noche.             | loves its quietude of the dark night. |
| Cuerpo vacío, aire parado, vidrio que por | Empty body, stopped air, glass that cries out |
| fuera                                 | tears of impassionate cold.          |
| llora lágrimas de frío sin deseo.         | Sweet stillness, room on foot, calm, |
|                                           | that doesn’t ignore the exterior moon, but |
|                                           | feels its breasts,                     |
|                                           | dark and un kissed, without saliva or milk. |
| Dulce quietud, cuarto que en pie, templado, | Body, alone in the morning, aching, |
| no ignora la luna exterior, pero siente sus | without fever, has eyes of touched snow |
| pechos osuros no besados sin saliva ni leche. | and a rose on the lips like a stained lemon, |
|                                              | when your hands wanted to be flower almost |
|                                              | open.                                 |
| Cuerpo que solo por la mañana, dolido,     | But no. Youth, excitement, joy, heat or light, |
| sin fiebre, tiene ojos de nieve tocada      | marble floor where the flesh is thrown down, |
| y una rosa en los labios como limón teñido, | body, opal room that almost feels an eyelid, |
| cuando sus manos quisieran ser flores casi | some lips closed while the thighs sing! |
| entreabiertas.                            |                                       |
| Pero no. ¡Juventud, ilusión, dicha, calor o |                                       |
| luz,                                    |                                       |
| piso de mármol donde la carne está tirada, |                                       |
| cuerpo, cuarto de ópalo que siente casi un |                                       |
| párpado,                                |                                       |
| unos labios pegados mientras los muslos   |                                       |
| cantan!                                  |                                       |

Looking at the entire last line we find a rather explicit physical correlate: the line seems to imply that even though some lips (oral lips) are closed, other lips (vaginal lips) can be open and singing. The image relies heavily on the playful eroticism of taboo objects: Aleixandre creates a layer of concealment by using the plural indefinite article “unos labios,” which can be translated to either “some lips” or “a pair of lips.” This

76 Aleixandre p. 236
indefiniteness hints at the possibility of yet another pair of lips, which are open and singing. Given the general erotic nature of Aleixandre’s poetry, the erotic images within “Juventud” (“breasts, dark and un kissed,”), as well the fact that the poem seems to be addressed at just one specific woman, we are left to imagine that these other lips also belong to the same woman who has some lips closed. The use of “singing,” instead of the more blunt “open,” adds to the concealment of the image of an open vagina since we must infer, rather than imagine directly, that the singing lips are necessarily open. Bousoño, only quoting part of the line, seems to miss this very important aspect of the image, perhaps because he did not want to discuss the explicit nature of the imagery, or perhaps simply because he did not look at the line in its full context.

Even if we have found the means by which we can compare the image of thighs and that of singing, we do not have an explication of why we might want to compare these two images. What kind of meaning could this have for the discourse at hand? We will try to answer this by again using the cognitive semiotic blending model. The reference space for this blend contains the thighs of the woman. These thighs are not just described as thighs, per se, however, but rather as performing an activity which in reality they cannot do: sing. The thighs are presented by the singing, and hence we have singing in the presentation space. One might raise the objection here that it should be the other way around, that we are trying to describe singing, and in doing so we use thighs, as a means of bringing sexuality into singing. This may also be the case since we do not have clear deictic markers that might indicate the specificity of the thighs.

Perhaps this could be done in a poem, but I do not believe it is the case in “Juventud.” From the third stanza to the final we have a reversal of emotion that revolves around a
central figure, the body of a woman. The penultimate stanza expresses this body as repressed or inert, whose sexual potential is yet unfulfilled: “Body, alone in the morning, aching, / without fever” (“Cuerpo que solo por la mañana, dolido, / sin fiebre.”) The final stanza then denies this dead/cold state of the previous stanza: “But no. Youth, excitement, joy, heat or light, […] a pair of lips closed while the thighs sing! (Pero no. ¡Juventud, ilusión, dicha, calor o luz, […] unos labios pegados mientras los muslos cantan!). The poet has revitalized the body by the attribution of a list of bright adjectives and by the suggestive images that follow, of which the singing thighs is perhaps the strongest, since, as I have mentioned, it leads us to the image of a woman’s open legs. The singing, viewed as such, is the means by which the poet expresses, rather than the object he describes, which is why the singing is in the presentation space. The body, that which is being described throughout various presentations, is the reference.

We can represent the relevance schema for this as a model where two attracting poles compete to capture a flow (Figure 10). We seem to be watching the poet debate over whether or not the woman he is addressing is alive or dead, ecstatic or inert. The debate waives back and forth, pulled by each subsequent line’s positive or negative weight, only to be successfully captured by the heavy positive attractor in the last line of the poem.

77 For a further explanation of this kind of schematic meaning, see René Thom’s work on morphodynamic typology, such as in his book Structural Stability and Morphogenesis (1972).
This schema, though perhaps difficult to abstract at first from the poem, helps us understand the simultaneous presence of both the positive and negative images in the poem, which may seem paradoxical or contradictory at first glance. It also gives us a primitive narrative structure wherein two forces compete with one another for a prized object. We also can understand each subsequent change in direction as an event.

In conjunction with this, we also find another relevance schema that is more characteristically surreal. It pertains to the way in which the trajectory resolves at the end of the poem as the body is vitalized. Within this transformation there is a schema of disconcealment wherein the private is made public. We view the lips of the mouth, which are typically available to public eyes, as inactive, “sealed” (“pegados”), while the typically private vaginal lips are brought forth by their singing—an example par excellence of a public act. This change in sensory modalities, from visual to aural, also augments the impact of the disconcealment due to the fact that vision is passive while singing is more active: if there is an object in the room, one can avoid looking at it, while if there is a song playing in the room, it is practically impossible not to hear. The private domain of sex, by the image’s disconcealment, becomes transcendentally public, filling
up the space of the poem, just as sound fills a room. Also the vagina’s role is reversed
since it is not a receiver, as a space or gap for entry; rather, it acts as an intensive point
which radiates sexual joy. For Bousoño, the act of sex can erase the distinction between
the opposites private and public.

Critic Y. Novo Villaverde notes that this kind of transformation of objects is very
typical of Aleixandre’s surrealism:

The ultimate reason for the metamorphosis of beings and things is this attempt to catch
the unobtainable and to accept nature’s initial chaos… [The] desire to reach primogenial
virginity is manifested in the urgency of expressing the workings of an immaculate mind
before the originary act of speaking: “virginal” inasmuch as it is the place for the
integration of opposites and can achieve “the instantaneous communication with the
center” (this line is from the prose poem “Flax in the gust,” “Lino en el soplo,” from
Pasión de la Tierra)

(Las metamorfosis de seres y cosas tienen su razón última en este intento por atrapar lo
inasible y por asumir la naturaleza del caos inicial… [El] deseo de alcanzar la
virginidad primigenia se manifiesta en… la urgencia por expresar el funcionamiento de
una mente inmaculada ante el acto originario del habla: "virginal" en tanto que es lugar
de integración de opuestos y puede llegar a "la instantánea comunicación con el
centro")

Aleixandre gives us an irrational metamorphosis wherein a private interior is made into a
public exterior through a series of seemingly irrational flows of positive and negative
images. Novo Villaverde also notes that Aleixandre himself believed that these images
could only be created through irrational thought. She quotes part of the following
paragraph from one of Aleixandre’s essays, the entirety of which I will quote since it is
interesting for our study:

Poetic genius escapes from old, constricting molds that man has created, which are like
insufficient signs of an indescribable force. That escape, or better, that clash from which
the impassioned light of the poem emerges, is its (the poetic genius’s) passionate
quotidian activity: escape or destiny towards a magnanimous realm, plentitude or
sovereign reality, a supersensible reality, an uncertain world where the mystery of poetry
is traversed by supreme categories, ultimate powers that illuminate and signal the dark

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78 Novo Villaverde “Pasión de la tierra y Espadas como labios: aspectos cosmovisionarios y simbología surrealistas” p. 123-4
revelation for which words can upset their normal meanings. (italics in the Novo Villaverde quotation)

(El genio poético escapa a unos estrechos moldes previos que el hombre ha creado como signos insuficientes de una fuerza incalificable. Esa fuga, o mejor ese choque del que brota la apasionante luz del poema, es su patética actividad cotidiana: fuga o destino hacia un generoso reino, plenitud o realidad soberana, realidad suprasensible, mundo incierto donde el enigma de la poesía está atravesado por las supremas categorías, últimas potencias que iluminan y signan la oscura revelación para la que las palabras trastornan su consuetudinario sentido). 79

She argues that Aleixandre is referring subconsciously and intuitively to surrealism in this passage, though one could also make the case that he is avoiding, like I have assumed for Bousoño, the term for political or nationalistic reasons. At any rate, Aleixandre seems to hold many of the same beliefs expressed by Breton and others in the “Surrealist Manifesto”: traditional forms, and one must utilize special subconscious powers as a means of freeing the poetic expression and making it beautiful again. The poet is a romantic figure who can escape the conventional restrictions.

I would also like to highlight that in “Juventud” Aleixandre demonstrates the subconscious power to transform objects into their opposites by erotic means. This use of eroticism, I believe, is something that is characteristic of Aleixandre’s poetry in comparison to the rest of the other surrealists I am discussing in this thesis. As we have seen, Éluard and Breton often use love as well as woman as the basis for transformation, but, as far as I have seen, it is never so deeply entwined in the act of sex like in the example we have examined from Aleixandre.

79 Aleixandre, Obras Completas, p. 1559. Quoted on page 142 of Villaverde.
9.2.3. Conclusions for Bousoño, Aleixandre, and Góngora

Before moving on to Lorca, I would like to make a few general conclusions about the advantages of a cognitive semiotic approach as opposed to Bousoño’s. In Bousoño, we find an early attempt at trying to account for the uniqueness of early twentieth century imagery in Spain. His account, however, seems a bit dramatic in that it assumes we are using a new kind of cognition in order to support these new kinds of images—a cognition where emotion comes first and logic only appears later. In Aleixandre’s example, though we may not be able to formalize a topological schema, like I have done, to account for the vacillation between positive and negative poles, we still see that there is both negativity (“Body, alone in the morning, aching,” “inexplicable sadness”) and positivity (¡Juventud, ilusión, dicha, calor o luz…!) that are spaced very close to each other. This pushing and pulling, I believe, is what makes “while the things sing!” such a strong image, and not, like Bousoño argues, the fact that it is an image which can only be understood on an irrational level. Furthermore, the emotional effect of the golden hair in Góngora’s sonnet is not driven by the physical similarity between the two images. The emotion, as noted, results from the kind of illogical persuasion that is made possible by the physical connection.

9.2.4. Irresolution in Federico García Lorca

Now that we have characterized an aspect of Aleixandre’s poetry, I would like to compare this with our other Spanish poet from the Generación de ’27, Federico García Lorca. Lorca’s career is one of great transformation, which saw many styles and genres
throughout its tragically short but prolific course. Paul Ilie notes that Lorca began as a poet largely influenced by traditional form as well as subject matter: “A glance at Lorca’s early poetry shows at once that its sophisticated interest in children’s songs, metrical games, and popular ballads was matched by a mastery of the most advanced techniques of European art.” In this section I will take up his most experimental work, *Poeta en Nueva York*—a work whose complexities, I believe, have not been well understood. I hope to illuminate some of the difficulties found in the book.

In *Poeta en Nueva York*, similar to what is found in Aleixandre, there is a constant, irrational vacillation between positive and negative symbols. The difference in Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York*—and I propose this as the general thesis of this section—is that we never achieve the kind of release found in Aleixandre’s poetry, as in the singing thighs at the end of “Youth.” Occasionally there is vague potential for this to occur, as we will see, but it is off in some uncertain or impossible future. This also sets Lorca apart from the French surrealists Éluard and Breton who, as I have shown, tend towards a certain optimistic resolution in their poetry. Lorca tends to remain stuck among the strange forms he creates throughout *Poeta en Nueva York*, waiting for their imminent force to arise rather than witnessing resolutions, like in Aleixandre, or demonstrating their potential for transcendental psychic purity, such as in Breton or Éluard.

One clear example of this kind of unresolved wavering is the opening poem in *Poeta en Nueva York*, “Back from a walk” [“Vuelta de paseo”].

| Asesinado por el cielo, entre las formas que van hacia la sierpe y las formas que buscan el cristal, dejaré crecer mis cabellos. | Murdered by the heavens, between the forms that head for the snake and the forms that seek crystal, I will let my hair grow. |

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80 Ilie, p. 57
81 Lorca p. 471
Con el árbol de muñones que no canta
y el niño con el blanco rostro de huevo.
Con los animalitos de cabeza rota
y el agua harapienta de los pies secos.
Con todo lo que tiene cansancio sordomudo
y mariposa ahogada en el tintero.
Tropezando con mi rostro distinto de cada
día.
¡Asesinado por el cielo!

With the tree of stumps that doesn’t sing
and the child with the white egg face.
With the little animals’ cracked heads
and the tattered water of dry feet.
With all that has deaf-dumb fatigue
and butterfly drowned in the inkwell.
Stumbling upon my face, different each
day.
Murdered by the heavens!

Gustavo Correa, in his book *La poesía mítica de García Lorca*, notes that this first poem
displays what will become a general tendency throughout the rest of the work: “…[The]
ordering of the poetic material in positive and negative symbols that sometimes are in
conflict with each other and at other times are in reciprocal combination…” ([la]
ordenación del material poético en símbolos positivos y negativos que unas veces en
confrontación los unos con los otros y otras en mutua combinación…). 82 For example,
the familiar, typically positive symbols “tree,” “child,” “little animals,” “water,” and
“butterfly,” are matched with a series of negative physical attributes: “stumps” (note that
“muñones” in Spanish more typically refers to the stump of an amputated limb), “cracked
heads,” “tattered,” and “drowned in the ink well.” Correa even notes that within the
contained symbolic system of *Poeta en Nueva York*, the “egg-white” face is likely not
intended as a positive image since it stands in contrast to the red flush of blood that Lorca
often uses to signify life and vitality (for example “the grassy blush of the smile” [“en el
gramíneo rubor de la sonrisa”]). 83 The Aleixandrian version of this conflictive ordering
technique may be initially disorienting, but the overwhelmingly positive, even sublime,

82 Correa, p. 167
83 Ibid.
exclamation at the end of the poem eventually reorients us and resolves the tension created in earlier lines. In Lorca, however, we practically never find such means of escape from the tight ordering of oppositions.

So if not the ecstatic beauty that is characteristic of Aleixandre’s surrealism, what do we find in Lorca? In order to get a grasp on “Back from a Walk” I find it useful to take a look at Lorca’s unique conception of death, which he felt was indispensible to art and beauty. In his famous lecture “The Duende: Game and Theory” (Teoría y juego del duende) Lorca expresses the importance of the mysterious duende, which is essentially some kind of little demon inhabiting the act of artistic creation. Much has been written on this duende, and its significance for Lorca’s work, so here I will touch on just a few relevant points.84

In the lecture, Lorca quotes a dictum uttered by an influential Flamenco singer, Manuel Torres85: “All that has black sounds has duende” (“Todo lo que tiene sonidos negros tiene duende”), and Lorca further remarks that: “…there is no greater truth” (“Y no hay verdad más grande”). He then continues about the nature of these “black sounds:”

These black sounds are the mystery, the roots that probe through the mire that we all know, that we all ignore, but that gives us whatever is sustaining in art. Black sounds said that famous Spaniard, and he concurred with Goethe, who created a definition of the duende when he said, speaking of Paganini: "Mysterious power that everyone feels and that no philosopher explains.”

Estos sonidos negros son el misterio, las raíces que se clavan en el limo que todos conocemos, que todos ignoramos, pero de donde nos llega lo que es sustancial en el arte. Sonidos negros dijo el hombre popular de España y coincidió con Goethe, que hace la definición del duende al hablar de Paganini, diciendo: "Poder misterioso que todos sienten y que ningún filósofo explica.”86

84 See, for example, E. Hirsch’s “The Demon and the Angel,” or M. J. Nandorfy’s The Poetics of Apocalypse for fuller treatments of the subject.
85 I am uncertain to what extent the two were friends but Lorca dedicated a section of Poema del cante jondo to Torres.
86 Lorca, p. 110
For Lorca, if something is to be beautiful it must contain the appearance of death, because death is the ultimate unexplainable mystery to which art is directed or dedicated. Both Lorca and Breton, then, see mystery as an indispensable aspect of art, but Breton believed the mystery lay in the pure, chaotic interior of the human psyche, which was essentially life affirming. Lorca on the other hand, associated it directly with a demonic prosopopeia of death, who comes not from the interior of the mind, but rather “up from inside, up from the very soles of the feet.”

With all its distorted figures and assassinations in both the first and last lines of the text, it is easy enough to see that “Back from a walk” contains more than just a hint of death, but I believe it also contains a discussion of this duende, showing it at work in the poem as it taints the poet’s world. The duende in the poem comes out in the line “and butterfly drowned in the inkwell,” which I believe is a crucial image for the interpretation of the poem. I will try to demonstrate this using the cognitive semiotic blend.

If we imagine that the inkwell in the poem is referring to Lorca’s own inkwell, we can easily understand this as a metonymy for his own writing, especially if we remember that Lorca felt it was necessary for beauty, like the butterfly in his inkwell, to be tinged with blackness. Lorca’s writing, then, makes up the reference space, since it is what is deictically implied (“my writing has undergone such and such a change”). The poetic image of the butterfly in the inkwell makes up the presentation space, since it is the unreal, figurative part of the expression. In the blended virtual space, we have Lorca’s poetic expression as “blackness that somehow contains a butterfly,” or, less figuratively, blackness that contains a kind of fleeting beauty.

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87 Theory and Game of the Duende
88 Lorca somewhat facetiously notes, in his lecture on Góngora, that he only ever writes with black ink, “La imagen poética de Luis de Góngora.”
The relevance schema for this blend has to do with what we can call a transformation or initiation wherein a subject or object passes through a barrier and appears on the other side as modified by that barrier.\textsuperscript{89} I have represented this in the diagram as an object $x$ passing through a transforming barrier, so that it becomes “another $x$,” which I have represented with $x'$. Lorca’s expression ($x$) is now mediated through his death-black ink, which is nevertheless beautiful like a butterfly ($x'$). This schema is made more concrete if we attend to the semiotic base space, which contains Lorca, struggling and depressed in the strange new environment of New York City. Lorca informs us through the title that he has just taken a walk through this new world, and we can easily imagine him coming back home, sitting down, and writing out his impressions—and, as it is the opening of the book, we can imagine that they are his first impressions, or at least what he intends for us to think are his first impressions. Correa also notes that the poem is likely about a walk through New York since the referentiality to the city is extended by the second and third lines of the poem: the “forms that head for the snake” are those descending to the subterranean subway tunnels, and those “that seek crystal” are the those ascending in the glass skyscrapers (\textit{cristal} in Spanish means both crystal and ordinary glass).\textsuperscript{90} Lorca is fixing a viewpoint for his new poems, which is neither up in the crystalline heavens nor down in a serpentine hell, but rather stuck in a dystopic world full of the beautifully black images.

The meaning space of this blend—the way in which it is perceived as meaningful to the reader—is that it informs the reader, in a sense, how to look at the images described

\textsuperscript{89} We can think of any ceremony of initiation rites the subject becomes somehow imbued with the powers that have been concentrated and condensed as part of the ritual: the communion taker consumes Christ localized in the Eucharist and then becomes “more Christ-like”\textsuperscript{90} Correa, p. 166
in the poem and throughout the rest of *Poeta en Nueva York*: beauty that is beautiful in its blackness. It is a sort of introduction to the world of a poet who has been “murdered by the heavens”; we are given these details to “see in the way that the poet sees.” Rather than the world containing the black *sounds* that Lorca mentions in his lecture on the *duende*, the world is written in black *ink*—not a far stretch to make considering that Torres, to whom the “black sounds” quote is attributed, was a singer, whereas Lorca is a writer. The image of the butterfly gives us the relevance schema of the initiation which we can then apply to the rest of the poem’s images: objects in the city that are beautiful because they are tainted with death.

![Figure 11: "Butterfly drowned in the inkwell"](image)

This world, however, is different from the surrealist world which Breton evokes in his essay on surrealist painting where one is looking out onto *another* world. It is rather a
vision of our own world transfigured: note that the referentiality to skyscrapers and subways of New York City is maintained, but they are given new poetic dimensions, both religious and mythic, by the crystal and the snake. Lorca’s images further distance themselves from the normative poetics outlined in Breton’s manifesto in that they do not reach a state of primordial chaos: they are actually synthesized, as I noted, into mythic and religious motifs, i.e. the skyscraper becomes the seat of the heavens, and the subway becomes hell.

Before concluding, I would like to take a quick look at two critical treatments of Poeta en Nueva York in relation to the notion of the “unresolved wavering” I discussed above. This will also allow us to examine two more poems from Poeta en Nueva York so that we can see this technique in more of Lorca’s work.

In a book dedicated solely to Poeta en Nueva York, Nandorfy attempts to demonstrate that objects in Lorca’s world sometimes do resolve. She quotes the following lines from “The Dance of the Death” (La Danza de la Muerte): "Because once the wheel forgets its formula / it can sing naked with the herds of horses" (“Porque si la rueda olvida su fórmula, / ya puede cantar desnuda con las manadas de caballos.”). If we look a little more closely at the lines and their context, it becomes much less clear whether or not Lorca is really expressing some kind of optimism through the transformation of objects.

First of all, Nandorfy’s own translation of these lines, which I have cited above, is misleading. She translates the conjunction si as “once,” which implies a certain faith on the part of the poet that this wheel will, at some point in the future, “[forget] its formula.” This is an unorthodox translation of sí, which is almost always translated as “if,” whose conditionality adds ambiguity to the image, since we do not know whether or not the poet
believes this transformation is possible. I offer my own, hopefully more literal translation of the following lines, as well as the rest of the stanza, which I will also discuss:91

| No es extraño para la danza  | It is not strange for the dance, |
| este columbario que pone los ojos amarillos. | this columbarium that turns the eyes yellow. |
| De la esfinge a la caja de caudales hay un hilo tenso que atraviesa el corazón de todos los niños pobres. | From the sphinx to the safe there is a tense string that pierces all of the poor children’s hearts. |
| El impetu primitivo baila con el impetu mecánico, ignorantes en su frenesí de la luz original. | The primitive impetus dances with the mechanical impetus, ignorant in their frenzy of original light. |
| Porque si la rueda olvida su fórmula, ya puede cantar desnuda con las manadas de caballos: | Because if the wheel forgets its formula, then can it sing naked with the herds of horses: |
| y si una llama quema los helados proyectos, el cielo tendrá que huir ante el tumulto de las ventanas. | and if a flame burns the frozen projects, the heavens will have to flee before the tumult of the windows. |

Looking at the entire stanza, we notice that all of these strange events are happening under the sign of the “Dance of Death,” which is an image that appears throughout the poem and is also its title. With this foundation we should be skeptical of claims that there is an underlying optimism in these lines. Even if there is a kind of fundamental surrealist connection between all things, it hardly seems desirable: the string that binds the sphinx and the safe may be a string that binds oppositions (both ancient-modern and mythical-technological), but it is also a string that pierces “all the poor children’s hearts,” stringing them up as if dolls. As for the couplet mentioned by Nandorfy, about the wheel singing with the horses, it seems difficult to draw any kind of certain optimism out of this expression. It is vaguely possibly that Lorca wanted to express optimism since there is a reversal of a mechanical technology (wheel) to natural technology (beasts of burden), which fits a certain model whereby technology, which oppresses mankind, reverts to a natural category. However, the song sung by the wheel and the horses is also not

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91 Lorca p. 484
necessarily a positive song like the one sung by the thighs at the end of Aleixandre’s “Youth.” Lorca was deeply indebted to the flamenco tradition, as I have mentioned, in which song can only be beautiful when it has duende, when it has the “black sounds” of death. Furthermore, if we look at the couplet that directly follows these lines, the couplet that concludes the stanza, we find more ambiguity: “and if a flame burns the frozen projects / the heavens will have to flee before the tumult of the windows.” Though these lines may be a formula of how to free trapped potential, they still present us with a scene so terrifying that the el cielo (which in Spanish can mean either heaven or sky) must flee. Perhaps these final lines could support Nandorfy’s argument about social criticism if we interpret them as sort of prophecy proclaiming that the imminent power of the New York City blacks—those frozen in housing projects—is so great that there is no need for religious transcendence, but we could also easily interpret these lines as evoking a hell so horrifying that it scares away God. There is an enormous amount of potential in this scene created by the patterning of negative and positive symbols, but this potential remains difficult if not impossible to resolve, which I cannot help but believe was Lorca’s intention, since any kind of positive transcendence would invoke white light instead of the blackness Lorca wanted to express.

This great ambiguity in Lorca’s work seems to have given another critic difficulties as well. In a chapter on Lorca’s poem “Oda a Walt Whitman,” Ilie notices that Lorca often tends to express one sentiment, and then reverses it:

He wants to depict America’s urban decay, and yet this prayer is that “the strong air of the deepest night remove flowers and letters from the arc where you sleep.” He hopes, in other words, that the same city which he rejects will be instrumental in fulfilling his
ideas. As stated in the final couplet: “And may a black boy announce to the wealthy whites the arrival of the kingdom of corn harvests.”

Throughout the entire chapter he notes many instances of this kind of positive and negative patterning, so he is not, unlike Nandory, misguided in looking for resolutions. Oddly enough, however, Ilie believes that despite Lorca’s “doubtless understanding” of the symbolism of his imagery, “the totality of symbols reveals an unconscious irony never intended by Lorca. His wish is to turn a dream into reality, but his poem separates nightmarish reality from dream.” Ilie does not go into any detail explaining why he believes that Lorca was unaware of this irony, despite giving several seemingly omniscient insights into Lorca’s “unconscious” throughout the chapter. It seems unlikely that Lorca’s intention, as Ilie believes, is to turn his dream into a reality, since we know that any kind of idealized state could not be beautiful in terms of Lorca’s death-tinged aesthetic.

While I do not wish to claim that I understand Lorca’s strange book particularly well, I do believe that much of the criticism surrounding the work is misled. I also do not believe that it would be easy, if possible at all, to find any kind of transcendental (French) or erotic (Aleixandre) unification of opposites in any of the poems in Poeta en Nueva York. My intuition is that Lorca’s poetry more closely resembles cubism where we are given so many perspectives simultaneously that it is impossible for the image to stabilize and resolve.

92 Ilie 1968, p. 81
93 Ibid.
9.3. Conclusions for Aleixandre and Lorca

To conclude this section on the Spanish poets I would like to discuss some of the relations among these Spanish poets and the French poets I discussed previously. I will also discuss some relations just between Aleixandre and Lorca.

In Aleixandre, we do see potential for the reversal of opposites that we so often find in French surrealism. Though we have only examined one poem by Aleixandre, I do believe that “Youth” is particularly characteristic of his style in that it demonstrates active tension between opposing forces. It is also characteristically erotic, an element that does exist in French surrealism, but usually to a much lesser degree since the French poets tend to focus on the nature of reality and perception. In Aleixandre’s drive to resolve opposites, we do find a certain degree of romanticism that is often found in the French poets. This romanticism is especially clear in Aleixandre’s essay that I quoted above, in which he establishes the role of the poet as breaking apart antiquated ways of thinking as a means of disrupting, and hence reinvigorating, the conventional meanings of words.

Though Aleixandre’s poetry is distinct from the expression of the French surrealists, it is much more difficult to find connections between Lorca and poets such as Éluard and Breton. Like in Aleixandre, we find a great interest in the creation of tension by the careful ordering of positive and negative objects and ideas, but there seems to be no transcendent notions of knowledge anywhere. Attempts like Nandorfy’s to find the erasure of opposites are inconclusive at best. Again, Lorca’s somewhat playful and naïve concept of the duende could be of use in interpreting Poeta en Nueva York, a dark world where nature can be just as tragic as the city, and the discussion of a “reality” behind
nature is non-existent; this essentially points to the fact that there is little if any romanticism in the book.  

10. General Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

To conclude this discussion of Breton, Éluard, Aleixandre, and Lorca, I would like to come back to a notion that I discussed briefly in my section on literary criticism and structuralism, that is, Jonathan Culler’s idea of “literary competence.” Culler describes this notion of literary competence as a “set of questions” that are productive for helping one understand a text. So, what set of questions do I believe I have given the reader that can help him or her better understand some aspects of surrealist poetics?

As for the French school, the question of the sign is of particular interest, and how our understanding of it allows for such things as a metaphysical progression towards an ideal and a “reality” that is somehow hidden behind not just nature, but also perception. The Enlightenment aestheticians’ emphasis on the representation in the mind of the perceiver, as opposed to the physical aspect of the object itself, helped create the possibility for the actual appearance of an object to misrepresent the object itself. One area for future research is to trace this conception of semiotics through the different movements of the nineteenth century to see how it is linked, in a genetic sense, to the surrealist poets. Along these lines, we know that both the aestheticians and the surrealists believed in the power of poetry to alter our reality for the better since it could somehow recover a purer world.

94 For an example of nature as tragic see “Cow” (“Vaca”), where a setting moon at sunrise, symbolized as a cow, “bled into the heavens.” (“sangraba en el cielo”). Another example is in “The boy Stanton” (“El niño Stanton”) where at the end of the poem the poet runs off into a forest described as “the green statures of Malaria” (“las verdes estatuas de la Malaria”.)
that had been lost. Looking at pre-Enlightenment and contemporary notions of the “purpose” of poetry would also be an interesting topic for study.

As for the Spanish Generación de ’27 poets, we see an interest in conflicting forces. Asking ourselves how these are at play in a particular poem may help us better understand the logic of the poem, since this tension seems to be a characteristic aspect. For Aleixandre, we have seen at least one example where these forces end up resolving, and a transcendence occurs through an explicitly sexual image. It would be interesting to examine more examples of the erotic in Aleixandre and compare them to other instantiations of eroticism, love, and feminine beauty in the rest of the surrealist literature.

As for Lorca, we are certainly presented with a reality that is strikingly unfamiliar and disorienting, but I feel we may only be able to judge him as a surrealist on these vague, intuitive grounds. The questions about knowledge, reality, metaphysical ideals, and the dissolution of opposites that we can productively use to understand the French surrealists, and to a certain extent Aleixandre, seem to fail when we apply them to Lorca. These questions, I believe, are misleading, and can even force Lorca into a frame in which he does not seem to fit. I believe we have seen Nandorfy make this error in trying to find the dissolution of opposites and a call for social reform, two hallmarks of French surrealism, in the lines from Lorca’s “Dance of Death”: “Because if the wheel forgets its formula, / then can it sing naked with the herds of horses.” In a different context, these lines could mean what Nandorfy asserts them to mean, but in the case of Lorca, they remain highly ambiguous. One area for research, which I believe is particularly important since it seems little understood, is to examine the function of this constant ambiguity in Lorca’s work.
This study could involve an examination of more of Lorca’s work, including his theater and his visual art.

Another topic of research would be to look more deeply into the Spanish baroque, especially the poetry of Luis de Góngora, since both Lorca and Aleixandre sight his poetry as an enormous influence on their own. Further along this line, the Generación de ‘27 was also heavily influenced by Spanish modernist poetry, especially the poetry of Juan Ramón Jiménez. I believe a study of Jiménez’s poetry would add insight into the Spanish surrealist question.

Finally, the best advancement of this study would be to examine more poets from both the French surrealist movement, such as Aragon and Artaud, and from the Generación de ‘27 such as Alberti, Guillén, and Cernuda. Due to the scope of the current project, I could not address all of these writers since the kind of close, formal analysis I have tried to give requires a great deal of space to explore in any kind of detail.

There is almost no critical literature comparing the French and Spanish surrealist movements. This is surprising given that both of the movements are referred to generally as surrealism. I hope that this work serves as a starting point for anyone interested in exploring this question further. This being said, I still believe that more attention could be given to the textual level of each individual movement. A great deal of critical work has been done both on the French poets and on the Spanish. I believe that much of it, however, was solely written on the intuitions of literary critics who pay little attention to the language that is actually used. I hope that this study, in which I tried to give close attention to the functions of individual images and metaphors, is the first step in a movement that will look more closely into the textual, and not simply cultural, basis for
surrealism. Lastly, I also hope I have shown that the cognitive semiotic model of blending is a useful way to dig into the strange semantics of surrealist texts.

11. Bibliography


