

# Minotaur in Manhattan: Nicolas Calas and the Fortunes of Surrealism

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## 1) Prodigal

Born Nicolaos Calamaris, in Lausanne in 1907, to a wealthy Greek family, but raised and educated in Athens, Nicolas Calas assumed the role of the nomadic intellectual from an early age.<sup>1</sup> Having already achieved considerable notoriety through his involvement in political and literary debates in interwar Athens, Calas soon found himself drawn to the then centre of avant-garde developments, the Paris of André Breton and the circle of surrealist writers, artists and initiates, which he joined by moving there in 1934.

A fellow Trotskyist and active member of the *Fédération internationale des artistes révolutionnaires indépendants (F.I.A.R.I.)*, which Breton set up in Paris after the visit to Mexico,<sup>2</sup> Calas first appears in print in *Minotaure* in 1938,<sup>3</sup> and in the same year with a book of Freud-Marxist-inflected surrealist theory, entitled *Foyers d'incendie*.<sup>4</sup> A few years in preparation, the book gathered together fragments of literary, philosophical and scientific wisdom, delivered in an erudite, polemical and typically eclectic style, which reflects both the idiom and concerns of its milieu, but also the growing ambition and confidence of its author. In the form of a *'prière d'insérer'*, Breton offered exuberant praise for Calas's book: "a manifesto of unprecedented necessity and breadth", "a work prohibited to the ignorant, the conformist, the tired and the cowardly", where "all the questions which have been posed to us in the last twenty years find their inspired, decisive, exultant answer".<sup>5</sup> In his 'Paris Letter' for *Partisan Review*, 'Sean Niall' (alias of the American Trotskyist poet and activist Sherry Mangan) also wrote enthusiastically of Calas's book as an important new contribution to the Surrealist scene, and selections from *Foyers* were published, in an unattributed translation, under the title 'On Revolutionary Sadism', in 1940, issue 7, no. 1 of the journal.<sup>6</sup> Mangan described Calas as a sort of "Wyndham Lewis of the Left", who alternately rapped "the knuckles of both Marxism and psychoanalysis when the more religious of their practitioners try to extend them beyond the limits of their own fields".<sup>7</sup>

But Calas's golden age was inaugurated by a further accolade: when *Books Abroad* polled "a number of writers and critics" in June 1939 for their opinions on a 'Super-Nobel prize' – to determine "which is the most distinguished book or group of books from one writer that has appeared anywhere in the world . . . since November 1918," William Carlos Williams's vote was for Calas. Williams commented: "Calas' book concerns the artist. The artist is the control board of the plane. What he does and says others in science, in philosophy, in government will be doing tomorrow."<sup>8</sup> This was perhaps not surprising coming from a man who had already stated in a 1929 essay:

Did the academicians but know it, it is the surrealists who have invented the living defense of literature, that will supplant science; and it is they who betray their trust by allowing the language to be enslaved by its enemies; the philosophers and the venders of manure and all who cry their wares in the street and put up signs: 'House for sale'.

Language, which is the hope of man, is by this enslaved, forced, raped, made a whore by the idea venders. It has always angered me that other classes of men write their books in words which they betray. How can a philosopher, who is not an artist, write philosophy in words? All he writes is a lie. Surrealism does not lie. It is the single truth. It is an epidemic. It is. It is just words.<sup>9</sup>

Williams, however, had added the following caveat: "But it is French. It is *their* invention: one. That language is in constant revolution, constantly being covered, merded, stolen, slimed. *Theirs*".<sup>10</sup> As this essay will go on to show, it was through Calas's mediation that Williams was briefly reconciled with Surrealism's foreignness (or, more specifically, Frenchness); his dazzling, erudite, brash attempt to synthesise scientific, artistic and

political discourses towards a definition of objectivity, resonated with the American poet, the radical empiricist, whose motto famously was "no ideas but in things".<sup>11</sup>

Taking its cue from Breton's reflections on the "fundamental crisis of the object" triggered by Surrealism,<sup>12</sup> Gaston Bachelard's non-Cartesian epistemology as a model for mapping "a new aesthetic mind",<sup>13</sup> and the transformative momentum of Freudian thought, *Foyers d'incendie* proposes to expose the errors of subjectivist conceptions of art, redefines the relationship between reality, desire and aesthetic form, and sketches the features of the revolutionary hero who will carry this new light forward. In other words, *Foyers* often becomes what it sets out to explain, reading like an extraordinary blend of cool-headed science and 'blasting and bombardiering' (perhaps what prompted Mangan's reference to Calas as the 'Wyndham Lewis of the Left'). In that sense, *Foyers* is a manifesto, an exhibition of intellectual militancy, a marshalling of forces to the cause of revolution:

Art is passionate, it is made of love and hate, of pleasure, of pain, its surprises are shattering, its comedy frenetic, its tragedy cruel, blood flows on stage, we live in an atmosphere of crime, everywhere we go we are persecuted, as Kafka saw it in *The Trial* or Chirico in *Hebdomeros*. Art frightens, stirs up envy, excites sexuality, makes our limbs tremble, troubles the eye, maddens the hysteric and offers up the insane as example. Art is never sentimental, never moral, it is against established order, against the dominant class, against all conformism, against masters of all kinds and provenances. The Parthenon proves it: Art is an arsenal!<sup>14</sup>

The literally explosive potential of art is encapsulated by the striking and almost oxymoronic image of the Parthenon, converted into an arsenal during the period of Ottoman rule, which becomes for Calas an emblematic figure, and a kind of mantra in his writing. He offers the image as a key exemplar of the incendiary potential of art in his attempt at an official ("Third") Surrealist Manifesto, in 1940:

DURING THE TURKISH RULE THE PARTHENON HAD BEEN TURNED INTO AN ARSENAL.

No deed, coming from a conqueror especially, could be more *poetic* than that. Nothing could reveal more clearly the desire to turn art into an explosive force. What a powerful catalyzer was needed to unite the Parthenon to gunpowder!

I affirm, without the slightest hesitation, that poetry *begins* with the transformation of the Parthenon into an arsenal and *ends* with the blood of Marat spilt by Charlotte Corday.

The mythological value of these two colossal poetic events saves us the trouble of behaving like historians and looking for chronological sequences. All that is *needed* is directed towards the future.<sup>15</sup>

Tragedy, cruelty, spilling of blood, anti-conformism, rebellion are leitmotifs here and throughout Calas's work, core elements of his own mythopoeia; surprise, amazement and that great avant-garde muse, chance, are surrealist tenets that Calas proposes as the core elements of a new objectivity, which will be materialist and partisan:

Art is not impure. It is formal matter.

Art cannot be fascist or socialist. There are artists who are fascists, as there are those who are socialists or liberals. There are artists of bourgeois or aristocratic origin, and others of proletarian origin. Every artist, as artist, is a revolutionary, since without the prospect of overthrowing an established order, a normal and unsurprising state of things, it is impossible for him to create an affective shock and associate elements in a surprising manner. Without that shock we can conceive nothing, neither Aeschylus nor Heraclitus, Greco or Galileo, Grünewald or Newton.

It is for us, men of today, to discover new forms in life, to create new forms and to discover new forms in those created by others yesterday and the day before.<sup>16</sup>

Again, this kind of assertion would provide ammunition for a writer like Williams who had conceived of his own freedom or libertarian prerogative as a modernist writer in the following terms: "There is nothing sacred about literature, it is damned from one end to the other. There is nothing in literature but change and change is mockery. I'll write whatever I damn please, whenever I damn please and as I damn please and it'll be good if the authentic spirit is on it".<sup>17</sup> A later statement, produced after Williams's encounter with Foyers, shows a

growing affinity with Calas's thought. In 'Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist' (1939), Williams writes of the necessity of new form: "A work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm".<sup>18</sup> Williams invokes a figure of fire and regeneration as the analogue for "the salutary mutation in the expression of all truths, the continual change without which no symbol remains permanent. It must change, it must reappear in another form, to remain permanent. It is the image of the Phoenix. To stop the flames that destroy the old nest prevents the rebirth of the bird itself. All things rot and stink, nothing stinks more than an old nest, if not recreated".<sup>19</sup> The Phoenix may be a more traditionally poetic, or mystical, take on Calas's use of the rebellious prototype, the Marxist-Romantic thief of fire:

The duty of the artist and all men is to create forms, which in turn are only strong when they step solidly on the ground, when they come out of the earth and don't fall from the sky. The image of Prometheus will be forever the most beautiful one to hold against God. Fire erupts from the earth's bowels. Fire, matter and lava, light, images and ideas. All spring up from this or other earths. Forms are more solid when they are composed with the aim of opposing the concrete world, since they belong to it.<sup>20</sup>

This motif of fiery transformation, favourite of both Williams and Calas, was not unique to either, but they each fashioned from it militant strategies to suit their own aesthetics and politics. Both tackled the issue of tradition and conformism in poetry, and Williams found Calas's emphasis on objectivity and the anti-metaphysical stance, or, more concretely, labour, of the language-artist, particularly enabling. For Calas, "[t]he poet fights for surprise. The rest of the world accepts habit",<sup>21</sup> and true objectivity comes from surprise and the will to transformation:

It is not enough to view the world in an objective manner, as this objectivity is double. If we view it from the angle of surprise, it is revolutionary, but if we view it from the angle of habit, it is conformist. The conformist point of view is static, as it engenders a habit that is forced to conceal from us the elements of transformation, since every transformation is a surprise. The conformist looks at what is conserved, whereas the revolutionary point of view is the only one that allows us to perceive new transformations and to follow the evolution of the world according to the laws of historical becoming. That is why every true will to objectivity presupposes a revolutionary bearing. In order to be revolutionary, one must see the transformations in the environment, but in order properly to see them, one must feel them.<sup>22</sup>

There are echoes here of the thought of Walter Benjamin, another exponent of historical materialism, who wrote in the same period with a distinctive sense of melancholy urgency: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it",<sup>23</sup> but also of Saint Paul, an earlier thinker of radical anachronism, whose polemical writings influenced Calas: "Do not be conformed to the present century, but be transformed by the renewal of your thought".<sup>24</sup> Neither a Marxist nor a revolutionary, Williams seems to have heard in Calas's exalted rhetoric echoes of his own attempt to formulate a theory of poetry as creative materialist practice, based on the authentic humanity of concrete, living speech and the spirit of transformation. But there was another chord that Calas struck.

## **II) Pater/Son**

Only a society where the father no longer exists as a social force will be able to save the child from identification which constitutes an obstacle to progress. Only the violent killing of the father and the passionate devotion to the brother will allow the working class, when it assumes power, to liberate itself from the desire to replace the dead father.<sup>25</sup>

This proclamation introduces a core motif: "I cannot live unless another past is found for me", he wrote in a Greek poem,<sup>26</sup> reformulating Breton's command of inventing one's own ancestry. This clearly had personal and political poignancy for Calas; already, when starting out in Greece as a fledgling revolutionary critic and

futurist poet, he had adopted the alias 'Manolis Spieros' – derived from the name of the notorious leader of the French Revolution, Robespierre. The other *nom de plume*, by which he undersigned his poetic efforts, had a more intimate provenance: 'Nikitas Randos', the surname a near anagram of Dora, a girlfriend's name. Ultimately masculinised, the assumption of the female element may be read as a playful restaging of the Bretonian *amour fou*, or a personal take on that key trope, the Surrealist androgyne,<sup>27</sup> but Calas's gesture also betrays a preoccupation with gender ambivalence, which clearly troubles him during that period.<sup>28</sup>

Calamaris/Spierros/Randos form a trinity of masks for an increasingly theatrical figure, which later coalesces into the name 'Calas', an allusion to a case of religious intolerance in pre-revolutionary France, known as the Calas Affair (1762-63), a case which made Voltaire's name too. Jean Calas, Huguenot merchant from Toulouse, was unjustly accused of murdering one of his sons to prevent him from converting to Catholicism. Although the son had in fact committed suicide, Calas was found guilty and ceremoniously executed (he was tortured, broken on the wheel, strangled and burnt). Their property confiscated, the rest of the family were forced into exile. By the time Voltaire heard of the case it was too late to help Calas, but he set himself the task of clearing his name. He wrote letters to authorities and issued a flood of pamphlets. After three years of intense activity he succeeded in getting the guilty judgment reversed by a higher court and rehabilitating the family.

This terrible invocation points to an operatic streak in Calas (some would say he took more from Maria Callas than Jean Calas), but like all Surrealists, he was never a shrinking violet. The Oedipal charge in the allusion to the Calas affair was *de rigueur*, as was the revolutionary flavour. There's an added *frisson* in the fact that the story, at least the way Calas would have read it, involves the killing of the father, through the suicide of the son, a sacrifice of sorts, another figure of which Calas was to become particularly fond, fundamental as it is for an understanding of a tragic continuum in art and the formation of the subject. There are biblical connotations too, of the sort that Calas was to become an expert in tracing and reversing: an oblique mirroring of Abraham's sacrifice (of his son Isaac). At the same time, Calas declares himself officially a 'son' of another great moment of danger (pre-revolutionary France), assuming his own filiation and casting himself back into history as witness to the event, understood in Alain Badiou's sense as the "opening of an epoch, transformation of the relations between the possible and the impossible".<sup>29</sup> As Badiou puts it, in his account of Saint Paul as a prototypical activist and militant figure:

[I]t is only by being relieved of the law that one truly becomes a son. And an event is falsified if it does not give rise to a universal becoming-son. Through the event, we enter into filial equality. For Paul, one is either a slave, or a son [...]. To declare an event is to become son of that event. [...] Philosophy knows only disciples. But a son-subject is the opposite of a disciple-subject, because he is one whose life is beginning. [...] One must depose the master and found the equality of sons.<sup>30</sup>

The dialectical and confrontational relationship contained in the Father/Son formulation troubles many modernist artworks, and was certainly poignant for Williams, who, in a way like Calas, made his name by reinventing his provenance in the epic sequence he called *Paterson*, after the New Jersey town near which he lived. We will return to that connection later, but for the moment, in the late 30s, Calas's anarchic rendition of the Oedipal formula seems to resonate with the spirit of the times; what he puts forward is a 'super-' or counter-heroic undertaking: "The superhero is [...] that son who no longer wants to have a mother, who wants to be a man and wants his mother to become a woman that depends on nobody, not even him. Perhaps the first superhero will be a woman. The superhero wants to replace birth with life and the mother with the future".<sup>31</sup>

### III) Partisan

Indeed, the reception of *Foyers* prepared the ground for a 'superhero's' welcome by the left-leaning and *surrealisand* American intelligentsia, when, fleeing Nazism, Calas and other fellow émigrés arrived in New York in 1940. As Breton's English-speaking right hand, and with his recent credentials as a significant critical voice, Calas was feted by the emergent New York avant-garde.<sup>32</sup> Charles Henri Ford, editor of *View* magazine, threw a party in his honour, and Calas was soon at the helm of the journal, issuing challenges and proclamations from on high (quite literally – he was a very tall man). Straight away, he took on *Partisan Review*, the dominant vehicle of the American anti-Stalinist left:

With the July-August number the *Non-Partisan Review*, as it ought to be termed, inaugurates a jesuitic form of attack against Surrealism. [...] [C]an *Partisan Review* be considered anything else than a bureaucratically directed paper? Does not its policy that zigzags from Trotsky to T. S. Eliot follow a broken cultural line? [...] As to the article on the French, and not Swiss, poet Ivan Goll in which we are told that he is greater than Apollinaire and has gone beyond the Surrealists, it cannot be taken seriously by anyone who knows anything about contemporary French literature.<sup>33</sup>

The occasion for this piece of polemics was that *Partisan Review* had turned down a poem by Benjamin Péret, sent by Breton, without the slightest explanation. Calas also accused Clement Greenberg, the resident art critic of the journal, of stealing his ideas. Greenberg and Calas were on friendly terms at the time, until the party at Cyril Connolly's house, where legend has it that a bloody fistfight took place between them. Given that there is another, well-documented incident which features an impromptu boxing match, this time at the apartment of Peggy Guggenheim and Max Ernst, between Calas and Charles Henri Ford (when Jimmy Ernst famously ran around taking the Kandinskys down from the walls to save them from the flying gore),<sup>34</sup> the Greenberg episode might in fact be apocryphal. On a different level, and displaying more earnestness and impatience than anything else, the son-Calas (*éminence grise*)<sup>35</sup> took on *père*-Breton (known in New York circles as 'the black Pope') à propos of *VVV (Vie, Vie, Vie)*,<sup>36</sup> a glossy avant-garde magazine that was meant to launch Franco-American surrealism. Although originally intended as one of the editors, and a contributor (with a 'Review of Reviews'), Calas openly questioned what he perceived as Breton's dangerous reluctance to issue a straightforwardly political rallying call to radically-minded artists: "Vanguard reviews of art and poetry compete in their common effort to justify the artist's escapism. [...] Now it is not only useless but it becomes reactionary to rationalize anxiety and turn it into doubt as does Breton – to say nothing of his suggestion to create a new myth. To spread the gospel of doubt in days of agony is like shipping spices to the starving populations of Europe".<sup>37</sup> Mid-struggle, as Calas saw it:

Nobody knows where the future battles of Marathon will be fought for the Persians are now everywhere and what we mean by Greece – the animus without which no further progress can be accomplished – is momentarily confined to very small groups; but they, too, are to be found everywhere. [...] Poets are not seized by vertigo, they must be inspired by Aeschylus, Prometheus is revealed by him – Aeschylus the poet warrior is Promethean.<sup>38</sup>

To preach to the 'Pope' about 'Prometheus' was provocation, but it was also predictable coming from a Surrealist. As Breton himself put it in the first *Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924), speaking of Surrealism's progenitors: "They were proud instruments, that is why they were not always in tune".<sup>39</sup> This particular instrument, however, hit an additional, unique note: in this passage, Calas the Greek pulls rank: Marathon, the Persians, Aeschylus, even the mythical Prometheus, are 'his' to invoke before they are 'ours'. Taking aim at Breton's well-known contempt for the (Ancient) Greek paradigm, and buoyed by the contemporary references to (Modern) Greece's heroic resistance to Fascism (while, of course, France had capitulated),<sup>40</sup> and for all his own anti-essentialism, Calas dons the mantle of the authentic spokesperson for the living 'Greek spirit'.<sup>41</sup>

He was not the only one out of tune; those were discordant, dissonant times, and suspicion was rife. Nor was he totally unjustified in his assessment of hostile attitudes to Surrealism and Europe. As Dore Ashton points out, there was a number of reasons for the local resistance to the message and methods of the newly-arrived European artists and intellectuals: "For one thing, there were very few Americans who could read other languages, and there was paucity of translation into English"; and then there were ingrained habits:

the old nationalistic impulse that resented the importation of theory from Europe; the snobbery of the élite, which swallowed all Gallic innovations whole, and fostered bitter resentment among the local artists; the pragmatic bias which found the manic lyricism in surrealist texts excessive, and repulsive; the puritanism that fought off the hedonistic impulses so visible in surrealist poetry and painting. Above all, there was the Anglo-Saxon tradition of rationalism which set Americans against everything that denied the functions of common sense and logic. [...] The European was adept at reconciling art and politics because of his theoretical training. It was easy enough for him to lift the appropriate quotation from Engels to suit his polemic. The American, on the other hand, might have been able to

quote Engels, but would have been incapable of quoting Baudelaire; he might have known his Marx but would have been vastly ignorant of art history.<sup>42</sup>

Compounding this latent suspicion, for the resident intellectuals, the *émigrés de luxe* brought with them tidings of a culture in crisis.<sup>43</sup> Fascism after all was a European disease and France, more than other countries, was scandalously sick. Harold Rosenberg, doyen of the left, wrote in a 1940 article in *Partisan Review* that:

The laboratory of the twentieth century has been shut down [...] up to the day of the occupation, Paris had been the Holy Place of our time. The only one. Not because of its affirmative genius alone, but perhaps, on the contrary, through its passivity, which allowed it to be possessed by the searchers of every nation. [...] The hospitality of this cultural Klondike might be explained as the result of a tense balance of historical forces, preventing any one class from imposing upon the city its own restricted forms and aims. [...] Twentieth-century Paris was to the intellectual pioneer what nineteenth-century America had been to the economic one.<sup>44</sup>

While Rosenberg pays tribute to that undoubted cultural capital (in both senses of the word), he goes on to argue that despite its achievement, or indeed because of that arrogance, its time has passed – “other forms of contemporary consciousness, another Modernism” is possible.<sup>45</sup> He then concludes with the *coup de grâce*: “Currents flowing throughout the world lifted Paris above the countryside that surrounds it and kept it suspended like a magic island. And its decline, too, was the result not of some inner weakness – not of ‘sensuality’ or ‘softness’, as its former friends and present enemies declare – but of a general ebb. For a decade, the whole of civilization has been sinking down, lowering Paris steadily toward the soil of France. Until its restoration as the capital of a nation was completed by the tanks of the Germans”.<sup>46</sup> Rosenberg’s dubious welcome, couched in covert accusations, was echoed by many.<sup>47</sup> In one of his letters to Calas of the period, William Carlos Williams makes the point more directly:

We must not forget that any culture that comes to us now marked as French has to bear the burden of coming from a region, a group, a society which failed to save itself but sold out to the enemy. The culture didn’t sell itself, but the culture failed to prevent those most expected to be influenced by it from a debacle. There are great weaknesses which cling to all valuable advances. We must separate the good from the bad. We are seeking a sort of transfusion from America – but NOT to save a corpse. That has to be clear. Some things have died completely. I speak freely to you.<sup>48</sup>

The underlined ‘you’ suggests a different kind of confidence and growing empathy between the two writers. In the period 1940–45, and until they meet again under a different star in the early 1950s, the rapport leads to a number of collaborations, including a magazine of art, poetry and criticism, originally entitled *Gold*, then *Midas*, that Calas and Williams would edit, along with Yves Tanguy, Kurt Seligmann, Gordon Onslow-Ford and Max Ernst. A programmatic statement for it was written by Williams in 1941:

The poem alone focuses the world. It is practical and comprehensive and cannot be the accompaniment of other than an unfettered imagination. [...] That climate which gives it life to expand is love, as gold, its symbol, is most gold when it is given freely to the beloved. That basis is the Midas touch, the alchemy of the mind which cannot be seduced by political urgencies – but makes all into gold: the COM radical; com-bined; com-plex; com-plexion; com-prehensive; reaches out, takes hold. [...] We seek as far as we are American to take in the difficult ‘foreign’, identical with us in the GOLD of it no matter how the ornament is shaped or what may be the purpose to which it seems to be put. To reject the spurious, i.e., war, fake. To reveal the rare and the curious relationships which are the mind’s true business.<sup>49</sup>

With its indirect reference to the Surrealist impetus (‘the alchemy of the mind’) and the discourse of national wealth as deriving from a culture’s receptivity of the work of artists (echoing Rosenberg’s back-handed compliment to Paris as a ‘cultural Klondike’), this statement reflects Williams’s own openness at the time. The magazine never materialised, but Williams engaged with the ‘difficult foreign’ element in another way, by translating four of Calas’s poems written in French, ‘Wrested from Mirrors’, ‘The Agony Among the

Crowd', 'Narcissus in the Desert' and 'To Regain the Day Again'.<sup>50</sup> 'Wrested from Mirrors' was published as a folio by the Nierendorf Gallery in 1941, featuring an etching by the Swiss artist Kurt Seligmann on the cover (Fig. 1). As Williams put it to Calas, in a letter dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1940, "You know, all this fits well into my scheme. I don't care how I say what I must say. If I do original work all well and good. But if I can say it (the matter of form I mean) by translating the work of others that also is valuable. What difference does it make?"<sup>51</sup>



Fig. 1

Etching by Kurt Seligmann, cover for Nicolas Calas, *Wrested from Mirrors*, trans. William Carlos Williams, Nierendorf Gallery, 1941.

(Source: The Nicolas and Elena Calas Archive, The Nordic Library at Athens)

According to Dickran Tashjian, there *was* an important difference:

By borrowing Calas's metaphor of the mirror, Williams identified himself with the Surrealist poet and implicitly denied that his Surrealism was solipsistic. The poetry *was* accessible through translation. But Williams had hardly become Calas's double in the process. The shock of recognition also involved a shock of difference. To look *through* the mirror was to take translation as an act of transmutation, moving Williams through a period of crisis in a world in shambles, shifting him betwixt and between one language and another, between a European avant-garde and the American.<sup>52</sup>

Williams is indeed sanguine about the challenge posed by the attempt to transpose Calas's French into the American idiom, and he does comment on the "extremely personal and introspective character" of the poems.<sup>53</sup> As Christopher MacGowan has noted, Williams seems to have had problems handling Calas's use of the French second person singular, an ambivalent marker of doubleness in the poems.<sup>54</sup> These were fruitful difficulties, however, and anyhow there were other, more accessible points of entry. For Williams, images were the *lingua franca* of art. He wrote to Louis Zukofsky in a letter dated 5 July, 1928: "Eyes have always stood first in the poet's equipment",<sup>55</sup> and Calas's striking Surrealist imagery lent itself to the exercise of

translation: "Avenger and conqueror of myself / I swear by these quakes of destiny / A fierce world of violent ideas will raise itself / Its image carved on that clearest eye / Already denies the capricious humor of the prophets / Roughens the mirrors / Lifts the ensanguined heads of the black bulls."<sup>56</sup> For Calas, too, "because their value is independent of the culture that produces them [images] can conserve their value even in periods of collective regression".<sup>57</sup> More specifically, Calas sought in his writing to stress the radical potential of images, when viewed, that is, with a partisan or impassioned eye: "To experiments and masterpieces we must oppose *icons*. [...] It is from the point of view of "iconolatry" rather than iconology that a picture must be studied".<sup>58</sup> In the same piece, Calas comments on the painting of a fellow refugee from Paris, the Cuban Wifredo Lam:

For those who live under the Sign of Separation it is profoundly encouraging to achieve communion, however brief, with magic icons. It is still more encouraging that communion takes place *now*. Uprooted from the land of their strongest anthropomorphic associations – land of childhood and confusion between dream and reality – artists powerful enough to re-establish new relationships on a very high level of condensation, on a plane where submission to both the past and the present has been successfully avoided, force their way to creation.<sup>59</sup>

The 'uprootedness', though endemic and enabling of a necessary restlessness or flight, was particularly poignant for Calas and fraught with both psychological and aesthetic problems. 'Wrested from Mirrors' was thus an appropriate title for the exercise, personal and political, that the poems and that period represented. At the same time, as MacGowan has argued, the encounter with the estranged and dislocated self imaged in Calas's poetry served Williams well in his own creative process: "Characteristic of Calas' poetry that no doubt interested Williams as he worked on the formal problems of *Paterson* – in particular, perhaps, the relationship of Dr. Paterson to the city – were the attempts to fuse the self with the world outside the self, and to find a language and sequential progression sensitive to the simultaneity and dual aspects of the relationship".<sup>60</sup> Appreciative of the "fierce meaning that the form, as form should reveal", as he put it in a letter to Calas dated 12<sup>th</sup> December 1940, Williams persevered with Calas's idiom and declared a fundamental sympathy with his poetic and critical enterprise: "It is always forgot that as literary men, so called, we should be actively applied to the outer fringes of thought *as a weapon*. This is what you have taught and in this I agree with you and am willing to follow you".<sup>61</sup>

Williams was also one of the few sympathetic readers of Calas's sequel to *Foyers*, *Confound the Wise*, published in New York in 1942 by Arrow Editions. Featuring a decalcomanic design by Brion Gysin on the dust jacket, the book comprised a set of essays dealing with "specific problems of the time and space association of images",<sup>62</sup> which, however, failed to re-ignite the fire that *Foyers* had started. It was predictably slated by *Partisan Review*, in a short piece by H. J. Kaplan called 'Confound the Wiseguy'. There were less histrionic responses, but they were too qualified to allow the book to be discussed more widely. Williams alone, it seems, could declare that: "I have a very [...] strong intellectual attraction for your way of proceeding. I do not always follow you but I always know that you are right. I know what your graphs and glyphs are about. They agree perfectly with my own code – unexpressed with any satisfaction to myself".<sup>63</sup>

In *Confound the Wise*, Calas speaks with the voice of 'the difficult foreign', as Williams had put it: "Perhaps none better than a European who is now living in America can feel some of the consequences of this situation. By his past the European is linked to another Time, in his present he is attached to a completely different Space and the fundamental notion of Value without which Time and Space are meaningless, is changing again entirely".<sup>64</sup> Calas's was an enabling foreignness, or, as he puts it more emphatically elsewhere, an 'indispensable' element: "Among the first to flee the Portuguese Inquisition were Spinoza's parents, crypto-Jews from Lisbon. The [un]doing of the Gothic spirit was now completed. Spinoza is to the Dutch complex what El Greco is to the Spanish and what the Arabian mathematicians were to the Portuguese, the indispensable foreign element without which no qualitative advance of national and cultural life is possible".<sup>65</sup>

As exuberant and erudite as ever, Calas revisits his 'core themes': militancy and partisanship. In a bold gesture, he claims "the spirit of the early Christian church" as his revolutionary witness:

Correctly conducted activity is always pursued in 'the spirit of the church'. There are two phases in all partisan activity. First *preaching*, which today is called *propaganda* and then action, which in older



times led to what was called *miracles* but are termed by those who do not believe in religion as *works of genius*. When a miracle occurs, that is to say when there is *proof* that successful action has taken place, then preaching becomes more effective. Saint Paul is the father of propaganda, and those who are interested in political literature should study his writings. [...] It is by the strength of its opposition that we can judge the value of partisan literature. This is why it is so often at its best when addressed against heretics.<sup>66</sup>

The phrase “confound the wise” is borrowed from Paul’s first Epistle to the Corinthians, and, like Paul, Calas seems implicitly to cast himself in the role of the “century’s interlocutor” (*sizittis tou aiona toutou*). Inspiration, exultation, and magical, transformative ways of seeing are the main foci of this approach.<sup>67</sup>

I like that idea, developed by the Christian painters, which consists in encircling the heads of certain heroes with an aureole. Genius is lucidity, and because the heroes whom I cherish are not saints, in the place of an aureole of glory, I would like to see a terrible expression given to the light of their faces. Let us invent for them a flaming eye and a look more piercing than a spear!

This look is not that breathless light, hewn from terror that troubles, more than it illumines, the look of certain madmen. I refuse to confound the poet with the madman. [...] The poet explores the limits of the spirit like the savant who exposes himself to the most awful disfigurement when he demands that radium yield to his audacity.<sup>68</sup>

What drives the argument here is untimeliness, estrangement, and the desire to capture what Surrealists would call *l’or du temps*, the gold of time, suggesting the most precious element, but also through its homonym, *l’hors du temps*, the most fugitive or forward-looking.<sup>69</sup> For Calas,

the only question we are justified in asking in matters concerning our reflection upon the act of writing is ‘Why do you write?’ If the poet is lucid he will always then give a reply that will explain to us that he is trying to locate in another time, past or future, all that he feels could serve as compensation for those actions in space he does not undertake because they would cause him too much suffering. It is because the poet is most unadapted to the present that he appeals to the past or future. It is this call for another time that introduces poetic values in all arts. All artists must be poets. It is because every artist refuses to submit to existing reality that he is a rebel.<sup>70</sup>

As in *Foyers*, Calas’s writing is performative here. A mini-treatise on the Portuguese Baroque folds out onto a genealogy of dynamic, ‘open’ (as opposed to ‘closed’),<sup>71</sup> ‘restless’ and ‘unquiet’ (as opposed to ‘restful’), Surrealist and Romantic (as opposed to Classical),<sup>72</sup> ‘incomplete’ and multi-polar (as opposed to ‘finished’) forms.<sup>73</sup> And in a typically broad gesture, it is asserted that: “Baroque is not so much a style reflecting a certain civilization, but a law of culture, one of the constants of history. [...] [It] reappears in each civilization when the need for a reaction against the classical spirit makes itself felt. [...] Baroque and Classical are two constants in culture, just as liberty and tyranny are two constants in the civilization of a society that is divided into classes”.<sup>74</sup> To the rigidity of that division, Calas opposes open forms, poetic criticism and monstrous images. These, as Williams had seen, constitute (at least) attempts towards new symbols of the here and now, which in turn prevent ‘traditional’ associations from ossifying into conformism.

In *Confound the Wise*, Calas proposes a number of random examples of such striking forms: “the legless Iphigenia”, “sacrificed on that great altar, the automobile”,<sup>75</sup> that is, a young Portuguese girl, model for an artist friend, who had lost both legs in a car crash, but was still a beautiful icon for the artist; the Venus with a Telephone, from a contemporary advert; and the ‘salutary image’ of a three-faced Christ (Fig. 2):



**Fig. 2**

Anon., Zante (?), 18<sup>th</sup> c., 'Three-Faced Christ'

Source: Loverdo Collection (L 434/CL 429), Museum of Byzantine Art, Athens

One of Calas's "magic icons", this rare example of the three-faced Trinity serves as a cue for an excursus on the motif of the double in myth, psychoanalysis, behavioural psychology, sociology and portrait painting. At the same time, in its disturbing and poignant qualities, it is celebrated by Calas as a crucial embodiment of the persistent human demand for monstrous or hybridic figurations. Linked in Calas's etymological reading with the term "hubris",<sup>76</sup> the hybrid form of the Greek Trinity is more than an aberration, a departure from the norm. This image has an ancient provenance but also the potential still to provoke or to inspire new imaginative figurations of a heretical simultaneity between the authority of the father and the challenge of the son. In its evocation of discredited beliefs, prised from the safe context of scholarly cataloguing and considered in a modernist manner alongside the random examples of everyday monstrosities, the icon assumes for Calas the features of a radical emblem:

Among monsters, the triadic ones are of special interest. It was not Freud, but Plutarch, who first spoke of the sexual character of Trinitarian divinities. [...] The Triad is an intercessory power. Gibil, a God of Fire of the Babylonians, in the creed of Israel turns fire into luminous words; in the work of Aeschylus he inspires man, not with a divine, but a Promethean confidence. The Three-times-great Hermes of the Stoics intercedes as a comforter; a luminous nimbus surrounds his head when the worshippers repeat over and over again with ardent fervor their unshakable belief in the Athanasian dogma of consubstantiality. Today, to what aims is this Comforter the intermediary, to what actions is he to inspire us? [...] The more I look at the three-faced Greek trinity, the stronger grows my

conviction that in the critical hours that tear apart the face and soul of man, new forces can emerge, satanic forces, fearful for the timorous, but exalting for all who believe in the diabolic and are not afraid to be poets.<sup>77</sup>

Both the legless Iphigenia and the three-faced trinity caught Williams's eye. In a 1942 poem entitled 'The Phoenix and the Tortoise', he makes explicit reference to Calas's monstrous apparitions:

The link between Barnum and Calas  
is the freak  
against which Rexroth rages,  
the six-legged cow, the legless woman

for each presents a social concept  
seeking approval, a pioneer society  
and a modern asserting the norm  
by stress of the Minotaur.

Williams quotes a passage from Calas's book in the poem, after suggesting that:

[...] we  
should show ourselves  
more courteous to Calas the Greek

who has come from Oxford via Paris  
to enlighten us, affect  
less flippancy toward his  
Confound the Wise [...] <sup>78</sup>

The trinity, too, in its ardent figuration of the Pater/Son problem, crystallizes Williams's thinking on his magnum opus, which he was tackling when reading and writing to Calas. According to Mike Weaver, here was "the secret source of the triadic whole composed of 'Noah Faitoute Paterson'".<sup>79</sup> No wonder, then, that after they had met again, in 1950, in the Yado Writers' Colony, where Calas was putting together his interminable study of the fifteenth-century Flemish painter Hieronymus Bosch, Williams was quick with his offer of support in the form of an enthusiastic report on Calas's manuscript, submitted to the Bollingen Foundation. He speaks there of Calas's "passionate application" and success in "mak[ing] Bosch's mind work as if it were a contemporary mind (and we know the mind has always worked the same): he gives Bosch a contemporaneity we cannot ignore".<sup>80</sup> Calas's argument that this polemical, parabolic painting pictorialises the writings of St Gregory and St Augustine by way of exposure of some of the heresies of his day relies on a method of meticulous decoding, which, however, amounts to more than scholarly explication. As Williams puts it: "It is rather an evocation in which the present mind brings the past up to today and makes it work before our eyes. It is an eye cast into Bosch's mind, true enough, but it is also our eyes and mind which we lend to the past that it may live again as we watch it performing, alive before us. Calas lends Bosch his faculties and bids him speak".<sup>81</sup> This feat of animation, "the laying bare of a living flame, never out",<sup>82</sup> may have moved Williams but left the Bollingen committee cold. As in the *Gold* period, neither Williams nor Calas turned out to have the Midas touch, perhaps confirming a younger Calas's definition of what 'golden ages' really stand for:

[I]t is when classes are on the rise, in those epochs when they have not lost their ideals, when they have not yet become conservative, when they have not forgotten unhappiness, that great works can be created. They hope, suffer, are full of good intentions and empathy. Even as centuries go by, those works still move. That is why Paul's *Epistles* are one of the most moving human creations. [...] By contrast, the ages that are called 'golden', ages when too much gold is concentrated in the hands of the few, do not produce good works. They are ages when the ruling class, materially secure, becomes totally conservative.<sup>83</sup>

Calas was later to cannibalise the work and publish fragments of it in various art journals through the 1960s and 1970s, and Williams was to learn much from Calas's scholarship and attention to detail, as well as from his determination to decode Bosch's punster's universe.<sup>84</sup>

Back in New York in the 1950s, Calas, who had played his outrageous, ambitious, hubristic cards not very close to his chest, lost out to the soon to be dominant exponents of American art's new flame, abstract expressionism. Clement Greenberg turned out to be quite the New Prometheus, stealing the Surrealist fire and extinguishing the briefly ascending star of the no-longer-so-heroic Nicolas Calas. The 'School of Paris' had returned to Europe or burnt out in one of those acts of self-immolation that punctuate the history of the avant-garde (with the most traumatic for the group being the suicides of Arshile Gorky and Wolfgang Paalen), leaving a few sparks alive in the occasional enactment of Surrealist play (fig. 3).



**Fig. 3**

New York, 1957: Rehearsals for *8x8: A Chess Sonata* (dir. Hans Richter and Jean Cocteau). From left to right: Nicolas Calas, Dorothea Tanning, Richard Huelsenbeck, Enrico Donati, Marcel Duchamp.

Source: The Nicolas and Elena Calas Archive, The Nordic Library at Athens

In a youthful piece on C. P. Cavafy, Calas had spoken of the Alexandrian poet's "proud eclecticism".<sup>85</sup> He could have been describing himself and his future career, for in that later period Calas applied himself to a plethora of projects, always reflecting (and in many cases presciently prefiguring) the most urgent intellectual concerns of the day. He reinvented himself as a cultural anthropologist (having worked under Ruth Benedict for a Columbia University research project on contemporary culture), co-editing an anthology on the *Primitive Heritage* with Margaret Mead,<sup>86</sup> with whom he also planned another study provisionally entitled 'The Clothing of Thought' and then 'From Ritual to Freedom'. Neither that nor the intriguing, post-Surrealist cultural magazine 'Lucifer' were ever to materialise. An icon of sorts for the poet-rebels of the Beat generation,<sup>87</sup> he occasionally, and reluctantly, featured as a veteran Surrealist at various happenings, and made his name (again) as an early and influential exponent of Pop Art.<sup>88</sup> He continued to write as a cultural critic (or 'diagnostician', as he put it), with a column in the New York *Village Voice*, and he travelled back and forth to France and Greece (where his poetry was to attract state laurels in the 1970s), while holding the post of Professor of Fine Arts at Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey. Fittingly perhaps, this prodigal son never truly returned.

Alain Badiou suggests that “Paul himself teaches us that it is not the signs of power that count, nor exemplary lives, but what a conviction is capable of, here, now, and forever”.<sup>89</sup> This essay has argued that Nicolas Calas should be seen as a figure of conviction, an inspired reader, and a catalyst. Linguistically and culturally deterritorialized and nomadic, he was a transformative thinker. His work is marked by paradox and proclamation, a proud and precise eclecticism, and an eye for monstrous icons and metamorphoses. His voracious (almost obsessive compulsive) search for the miraculous in art springs straight from and flows back into our understanding of the sources of the last century’s militant modernity: flight and experiment, passion and prescience, hubris and heroic failure, vigilance and critique – or, as Calas himself would put it: “I believe that the role of the artist is, in wartime, to sing like a nightingale, in daytime to hoot like an owl, at all times to be contrary, leaving it to the wingless to feed the fowl”.<sup>90</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> As Calas put it in an interview with Paul Cummings, in December 1977, “My mother was one of the greatest snobs I’ve ever met. She was a very beautiful woman, and she was the only direct descendant of one of the Greek national heroes, Marco Botsari [who fought with Byron in Missolonghi]. So from that point of view she had all the right pedigree, you see. [...] [My paternal grandfather] was a self-made man. He made his fortune in Romania [...] by the sale of grain, and then it was a generation of Greeks, the first generation of real ship owners, who made their fortune when the Suez Canal opened. [...] My father was actually born in Romania. They used to transport wheat from Romania and cotton from Suez so there you had the wealth and the time on a rather opulent level” (Unpublished taped interview with Nicolas Calas, conducted by Paul Cummings, New York, 12 December 1977 and 26 January 1978, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington).

<sup>2</sup> Calas contributed to the two issues of *Clé* magazine, the ‘Monthly Bulletin’ of the Federation and added his name as a signatory to the *F.I.A.R.I.* manifesto. He was never to abandon his Trotskyist convictions. For a detailed discussion of that episode in Surrealist activism, including Calas’s contribution, see Helena Lewis, *Dada Turns Red: The Politics of Surrealism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 154-60.

<sup>3</sup> Nicolas Calas, ‘L’amour de la révolution à nos jours’, *Minotaure* No. 11, Third Series, Fifth Year, Spring 1938: 52-3.

<sup>4</sup> *Foyers d’incendie* (Paris: Denoël, 1938). All translations in this essay are mine from the French original.

<sup>5</sup> André Breton, ‘Prière d’insérer pour *Foyers d’incendie* de Nicolas Calas’, *Oeuvres Complètes II*, ed. Margeurite Bonnet, Philippe Bernier, Étienne-Alain Hubner and José Pierre (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 1221 (my translation).

<sup>6</sup> ‘Paris Letter’, *Partisan Review* 6: 3 (Spring 1939): 100-5; Mangan singles out Calas’s book as “indubitably the most stimulating that France has produced this year” (105). It is reviewed alongside Sartre’s *Le Mur*, Queneau’s *Les Enfants du Limon*, Bachelard’s *La Psychanalyse du Feu* and Giono’s *Les Poids du Ciel*.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in Alan M. Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1983), 183.

<sup>8</sup> Cited by Christopher MacGowan in his edition of *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume II 1939-1962* (New York: New Directions, 1988), 452.

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<sup>9</sup> William Carlos Williams, 'The Simplicity of Disorder', *Selected Essays* (New York: Random House, 1954), 96.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Simplicity of Disorder', 96. For nuanced and richly detailed accounts of Williams's engagement with Surrealism, see the Special Issue of the *William Carlos Williams Review* ('Williams and Surrealism', guest edited by Glen MacLeod), 22: 1 (Spring 1996), especially Tyrus Miller, 'Poetic Contagion: Surrealism and Williams's *A Novelette*' (17-28) and Christopher MacGowan, "'Sparkles of Understanding": Williams and Nicolas Calas' (81-98). The present essay is particularly indebted to the latter article for first drawing attention to the encounter between the two poets.

<sup>11</sup> The line appears in Williams's 1927 poem 'Paterson', published in *The Dial*, and later in Book I of *Paterson* (' – Say it, no ideas but in things –'), *Paterson*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1992), 6.

<sup>12</sup> See Breton's lecture 'Surrealist Situation of the Object', delivered in Prague in 1935, in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972, 255-78), 257-58.

<sup>13</sup> *Foyers*, 33. My translation of Calas's term '*le nouvel esprit esthétique*', which is an adaptation of the title of Bachelard's ground-breaking 1934 thesis *Le nouvel esprit scientifique*.

<sup>14</sup> *Foyers*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> 'Towards a Third Surrealist Manifesto' (1940), in Nicolas Calas, Herbert J. Muller and Kenneth Burke, *Surrealism: Pro and Con* (New York: Gotham Book Mart, 1973, 31-44), 32-3.

<sup>16</sup> *Foyers*, 107.

<sup>17</sup> 'Prologue', *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* [1920], in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott. (New York: New Directions, 1970), 13.

<sup>18</sup> 'Against the Weather: A Study of the Artist', *Selected Essays*, 196.

<sup>19</sup> 'Against the Weather', 208.

<sup>20</sup> *Foyers*, 147.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Meaning of Surrealism' (1940), in *Surrealism Pro & Con*, 13.

<sup>22</sup> *Foyers*, 126.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Fontana Press, 1992), 247.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>25</sup> *Foyers*, 246.

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<sup>26</sup> ‘Contract with Demons’ (1934-1936), *Surrealism in Greece: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Nikos Stabakis (Austin: University of Texas Press), 73.

<sup>27</sup> No doubt Calas would have been influenced by the fascination with what Whitney Chadwick calls “the long Surrealist search for the perfect androgyne”. See *Myth in Surrealist Painting, 1929-1939* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1980), 30. Traces of the ‘search’ abound in Surrealist writing and art, but more serendipitously, the eleventh issue of *Minotaure* (Spring 1938), which included Calas’s ‘L’Amour de la révolution à nos jours’, also featured a piece by Albert Beguin on the androgyne.

<sup>28</sup> As he writes to his close friend Giorgos Theotokas, in October 1938 from Paris, “My life is going through a radical transformation. Psychically, I feel I resemble that hero of Virginia Woolf’s, Orlando, où tantôt le côté féminine et tantôt le côté masculine prédomine [where sometimes the feminine side and others the masculine side dominates – French in the original]” (*Giorgos Theotokas-Nicolas Calas: Mia Allilographia*, ed. Ioanna Konstantoulaki-Hantzou. Athens: Prosperos, 1989) 34-5. My translation. According to John Geiger, biographer of Brion Gysin, Beat artist and collaborator of William S. Burroughs, it was Calas who led the neophyte poet into “those dark, dangerous underworld passageways of queer sex”, in Paris, Athens and the Greek islands in 1934 (*Nothing Is True Everything Is Permitted: The Life of Brion Gysin* (New York: Disinformation, 2005), 42.

<sup>29</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 45.

<sup>30</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 49, 59.

<sup>31</sup> *Foyers*, 257.

<sup>32</sup> In an interview published in *View* in August 1941, Breton spoke of Calas’s critical work as the clearest statement of the true Surrealist way, in accordance with Rimbaud’s precept of *the derangement of all senses* (André Breton, *Entretiens 1913-1952*. Paris: Gallimard, 1952), 230.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to the Editor, *View* 1: 2 (October 1940): 1, 5.

<sup>34</sup> Peggy Guggenheim mentions the incident in her autobiography: “There was a terrible fight between enormous Nicolas Calas and little Charles Henri Ford, and in the middle of it Jimmy rushed to take down the Kandinskys from the wall before they were splattered in blood. [...] The house was entirely warmed by the blood of these two intellectuals” in *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict* (London: André Deutch, 1980), 260. See also Jimmy Ernst’s account in *A Not-so-Still Life: A Memoir* (New York: St Martin’s/Marek, 1984), 223.

<sup>35</sup> As John Bernard Myers, managing editor of *View* in the 1940s, recalled: “In Paris [Calas] published a book called *Foyers d’incendie* that was highly thought of by the Surrealists, and the legend had grown up that Calas occupied the position of *eminence grise* to Breton. (Anti-Surrealists call Breton the “black pope”); *Tracking the Marvelous: A Life in the New York Art World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), 41.

<sup>36</sup> According to Ian Chilvers, “the title was explained by Breton as a reference to the words Victory, View, and Veil in a passage mentioning ‘Victory over the forces of regression’, the ‘View around us’ and the ‘View inside us’, and ‘the myth in process of formation beneath the VEIL of happenings’” (‘VVV’, *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art*. Ian Chilvers. Oxford University Press, 1998 (Oxford Reference Online. Oxford University Press. University of Glasgow.) (accessed 29 August 2009) <<http://www.oxfordreference.com/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t5.e2793>>). Anita Burdman Feferman, in her biography of Jean van Heijenoort, Leon Trotsky’s personal secretary, bodyguard and

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translator, records a simpler explanation: 'VVV (*Vie, Vie, Vie*)', *Politics, Logic, and Love: The Life of Jean van Heijenoort* (Wellesley, Mass.: A. K. Peters, 1993), 220.

<sup>37</sup> 'The New Prometheus', *View 2*: 2 (Oct 1942), 14-15, 18-20. For an account of the 'incident', see also Lena Hoff, 'A Surrealist Controversy: The Ideological Conflicts between Nicolas Calas and André Breton during World War II', *Scandinavian Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 1 (2002), 20-29.

<sup>38</sup> 'The New Prometheus', 20.

<sup>39</sup> *Arson* 1 (March 1942), 20. Peace was soon restored, however, and Calas continued to collaborate with Breton, most notably for the 1944 'Imagery of Chess' exhibition curated by Marcel Duchamp and Max Ernst for the Julien Levy Gallery in New York. Breton and Calas contributed a chess set with shot glasses filled with red and white wine instead of pawns, accompanied by a short piece entitled 'Profanation: A Chess Game' (*Transfigurations*, 243-45).

<sup>40</sup> See for instance Williams's letter to Calas dated 4<sup>th</sup> December 1940: "I wish the war would end. Sometimes I think it will be over by spring but now, with the submarines again, I begin to wonder. Anyhow we all salute the Greeks. More power to them. It is something to be proud of – live or die" (Calas mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University).

<sup>41</sup> See also Calas's contribution to Klaus Mann's journal *Decision*, in February 1941, with a piece entitled 'The Greek Door to Europe': 44-47.

<sup>42</sup> Dore Ashton, *The School of New York: A Cultural Reckoning*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1992), 85, 86-87.

<sup>43</sup> The phrase derives from the title of Maurice Dekobra's novel, *Emigrés de luxe*, which, according to Jeffrey Mehlman, encapsulates the attitude towards the French intellectuals and artists seeking refuge in New York during the war: "The émigrés of 1940, uncertain about the future, were, after all, the privileged notables of what must have seemed an *ancien régime*: the Third Republic. [...] An intellectual needed a sponsor (frequently the Rockefeller Foundation) prepared to pay cash and to make the case for that intellectual that only he (or, more rarely, she) could perform the task for which immigration was being allowed. It was, in brief, an aristocracy of sorts" (*Émigré New York: French Intellectuals in Wartime Manhattan, 1940-1944* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 2.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Fall of Paris', *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 209-10.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Fall of Paris', 220.

<sup>46</sup> 'The Fall of Paris', 220.

<sup>47</sup> For accounts of the heated intellectual debates and divisions of the period, which were soon to be conducted along strict Cold War lines, see Lionel Trilling, *A Gathering of Fugitives* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1957); David A. Hollinger, 'Ethnic Diversity, Cosmopolitanism and the Emergence of the American Liberal Intelligentsia' in *American Quarterly* 27: 2 (May 1975): 133-51; Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1983).

<sup>48</sup> Letter to Calas, 10th November 1940 (Calas mss., Lilly Library, Indiana University). Writing to Norman Macleod on 25<sup>th</sup> July 1945, Williams would maintain: "Surrealism, the science of misnomers (a purely local



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and temporal phase) evading correct nomenclature, entirely a product of contemporary France. The immediate sequel of Dadaism and the First World War with the actual but diverted defeat of France. Thus, “The Nude Descending a Staircase” is actually the Fall of France – which could not be stated formally in any other way” (*Selected Letters*, 240).

<sup>49</sup> ‘Midas: A Proposal for a Magazine’ [*Now*, 1941], *Selected Essays*: 242-43, 244.

<sup>50</sup> Williams, ‘Nicolas Calas: Four Poems’ (1941), *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume II 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (New York: New Directions, 1988), 38-41. See also Nicolas Calas, *Dekaexi Gallika Poiimata kai I Allilografia me ton William Carlos Williams* ([*Sixteen French Poems and the Correspondence with William Carlos Williams*]), ed. and trans. Spilios Argyropoulos and Vassiliki Kolocotroni (Athens: Ypsilon Books, 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Calas mss., Lilly Library. As Christopher MacGowan points out, this was not the first or last time Williams would resort to translation as “a way to encounter the concreteness of language itself”. See ‘Williams’ Last Decade: Bridging the Impasse,’ in *Twentieth Century Literature*, 35: 3, (Autumn 1989): 389-405, 396.

<sup>52</sup> *A Boatload of Madmen: Surrealism and the American Avant-Garde, 1920-1950* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 209.

<sup>53</sup> Letter to Calas, 10 November 1940 (Calas mss., Lilly Library).

<sup>54</sup> Christopher MacGowan, ““Sparkles of Understanding”: Williams and Nicolas Calas’ (*William Carlos Williams Review* 22: 1 (Spring 1996), 81-98), 85.

<sup>55</sup> *Selected Letters*, 102.

<sup>56</sup> ‘Wrested from Mirrors’, *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume II 1939-1962*, 38.

<sup>57</sup> Nicolas Calas, *Confound the Wise* (New York: Arrow Editions, 1942), 181.

<sup>58</sup> ‘Magic Icons’ (1947), *Transfigurations: Art Critical Essays on the Modern Period* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985, 7-15), 8, 9.

<sup>59</sup> ‘Magic Icons’, 15.

<sup>60</sup> MacGowan, ““Sparkles of Understanding”: Williams and Nicolas Calas’, 88.

<sup>61</sup> Letter to Calas, 15 October 1942 (Calas mss., Lilly Library).

<sup>62</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 10.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Calas, 15 October 1942 (Calas mss., Lilly Library).

<sup>64</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 11.

<sup>65</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 144-45.

<sup>66</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 7-8.

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<sup>67</sup> "In morphological terms it is a matter of finding a way of using closed forms in an open synthesis. In architecture, it is a matter of interpreting the cupola or the pyramid in Baroque language. We are on the eve of new and vast syntheses, and the ideas of monads or of complexes seem to be at the root of new researches. In criticism we start from the complex point of view, which is that of revolutionary reality. When we say that criticism must be inspired, we are applying a complex method of criticism which holds that the past should be [interpreted] according to the needs of a cause that we make our own. In everything, in art and politics alike, our attitude is a partisan one" (*Confound the Wise*, 103).

<sup>68</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> As Calas points out in 'The Challenge of Surrealism' (1979), "Breton's motto *je cherche l'or du temps*, inscribed now on his tomb, epitomizes his whole "alchemical" concept of poetry. Interpreted literally, it means "I am seeking the gold of time". It might also be translated as *je cherche l'hors du temps*, that is, the outside of time, or the beyond time" (*Transfigurations*, 81-93), 87.

<sup>70</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 36.

<sup>71</sup> "Form is that aspect of the object that is retained by memory. Conscious memory held collectively is what we call culture. [...] Forms belong to two types, *open* and *closed*. They are open when it is possible, by extending them, to generate new forms, and they are closed, on the contrary, when any new development becomes impossible. [...] What characterizes Baroque architecture and Romantic literature is just this use of open forms" *Confound the Wise*, 100-1.

<sup>72</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 99.

<sup>73</sup> "A feeling of restfulness which comes from everything which is finished is at the basis of classical taste. [...] But in Baroque, the feeling of duty, like that of rest cannot exist. *Restlessness* is not a duty. Inquietude always forces us to wonder what is going to happen *afterwards*, but in Classicism, *afterwards* does not exist" (*Confound the Wise*, 105).

<sup>74</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 94.

<sup>75</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 187.

<sup>76</sup> Calas uses the same etymological conflation when writing about Max Ernst's paintings: "[Ernst] is not after perfection of form, but new combinations and unexpected images. Bird, reptile, quadruped, those creatures are hybrids. Hybrid derives from the Greek word *hybris*, i.e., outrage. Max Ernst means to outrage." See Nicolas and Elena Calas, *The Peggy Guggenheim Collection of Modern Art* (New York: Harry Abrams, Inc., 1969), 114.

<sup>77</sup> *Confound the Wise*, 230-31. Calas points to a genealogy of such figures elsewhere: "Since cubism, plastic arts have once more familiarized us with representations of the monstrous, i.e., unsatisfactory identifications, so that it is as easy for us to accept now that Narcissus has two or three heads as it is to believe that he lives without a nose (Gogol), without a shadow (Chamisso), or as an insect (Kafka). In a Christian conception of the world to adore the monstrous is heretical. [...] But the persistence of artists, of great artists especially, to include in the field of consciousness what to others – to priests of established religions and to critics of art chapels – appears only as monstrous, is a sure sign that art will never accept being fettered by dogmas." 'The Monstrous Narcissus', *View* 3: 3 (Oct 1943): 74.

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<sup>78</sup> *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams. Volume II 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan. (New York: New Directions, 1988), 101-2.

<sup>79</sup> Mike Weaver, *William Carlos Williams: The American Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 148.

<sup>80</sup> Williams, 'Nicolas Calas's Illumination of the Significance of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Delights*' (1951), *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists*, ed. Bram Dijkstra (New York: New Directions, 1978, 188-95), 195, 193.

<sup>81</sup> 'Nicolas Calas's Illumination of the Significance of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Delights*', 192.

<sup>82</sup> 'Nicolas Calas's Illumination of the Significance of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Delights*', 195.

<sup>83</sup> Calas, 'Return to Man' ['Epistrophe ston Anthropon'] [1932], *Keimena Poiitikis kai Aisthitikis*, ed. Alexandros Argiriou (Athens: Plethron, 1982), 215. My translation from the Greek original.

<sup>84</sup> Paul Mariani, 'The Eighth Day of Creation: Rethinking *Paterson*' in Harold Bloom ed., *William Carlos Williams: Modern Critical Views* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 101-19.

<sup>85</sup> Calas, *Keimena Poiitikis kai Aisthitikis*, 77.

<sup>86</sup> Nicolas Calas and Margaret Mead eds., *Primitive Heritage: An Anthropological Anthology* (New York: Random House, 1953). The selections (chosen by Calas, 'subject to a veto' by Mead) are characteristically eclectic, ranging from Herodotus and Strabo to Engels, D. H. Lawrence and Maya Deren.

<sup>87</sup> Calas was invited by Allen Ginsberg to teach a series of seminars at the Naropa Institute in 1976. He had previously introduced the Beat poet to Peggy Guggenheim. Calas's poem, 'Black Is Beautiful', was published in *Beatitude* 29 (Fall 1979): 17.

<sup>88</sup> See for instance, *Art in the Age of Risk*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968 and (with Elena Calas), *Icons and Images of the Sixties* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1971).

<sup>89</sup> Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 30.

<sup>90</sup> 'Editor's Letters', *Art News* 59: 7 (November 1960): 6.