

Project MUSE - La conversation transatlantique: Les échanges franco-américains en poésie depuis 1968

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Abigail Lang's *La conversation transatlantique: Les échanges franco-américains en poésie depuis 1968* [*Transatlantic Conversation: Franco-American Exchanges in Poetry Since 1968*] is a book that needed to be written. Anyone reading and studying French and/or American poetry of the mid- to late twentieth century was keenly aware of the fruitfulness of the exchanges between French and American poets. This book archives, records, and documents the challenging theoretical, national, and literary questions that both French and American poetries of this period address. Lang's book is composed of an approximately thirty-page introduction, followed by chapters dedicated to Objectivist poetry, the "community of poets," and the various forms of "spoken and performed poetry," followed by a ten-page conclusion that asks necessary questions concerning the issues of the day.

Lang uses 1968 as a starting point. Prior to that moment in history, there were, of course, exchanges between French and American (or English) poets. Lang reflects on the relationship between Poe and Baudelaire; she discusses the impact of Mallarmé on

American, French, and English poetry; the appreciation of French literature as expressed by Pound, Eliot, and Yeats—but she designates Marjory Perloff’s opinion of Rimbaud as a moment when English and American poets began to perceive and practice poetry differently. Lang argues that according to Perloff, it is Rimbaud who “inaugurates... the literalist tradition of an art that privileges the surface... the process, discovery... and presentation” (27) of poetry.¹ Lang traces this particular impact of Rimbaud’s influence and helps her readers more easily grasp not only the influence of Pound’s particular form of modernism, but also how abstract expressionism in the plastic arts, another manifestation of the surface in performance, influenced poets on both sides of the Atlantic. Lang views these influences as a framework for a particular and “intransitive” (28) manifestation of modernism that appears in the poetry of Denis Roche and Marcel **[End Page 184]** Pleynet. Whether discussing William Carlos Williams, Robert Creeley, or Denis Roche, Lang addresses a general movement in writing, one that spans the ocean in a shared effort to express immediacy, leaving behind the quest for eloquence or truth. As Lang finishes her wide-reaching and highly informative introduction, she evokes John Ashberry’s ten years in Paris as an art critic; speaks to Pierre Reverdy’s influence on Ashberry; and how they do away with poetry’s focus on symbolism, meaning, and allegory. It is the post-1968 era that ends what Lang calls the “poet’s role as the herald of emancipation” and she suggests that at this point in time, French poets are beginning to “rethink the relationship between poetry and politics” (42)² and finding that conversations with their American counterparts are important.

Lang posits that from 1968 to the end of the twentieth century (and beyond), poetry focused on breaking the structures of language that, in fact, structure thought and meaning, nothing less. Her foray into how and why poets embraced such efforts begins with her chapter about Objectivist poetry and its reception in France. Lang discusses how poets moved from the need to express truth or eloquence to objectivist writing, which she understands as “thinking with things instead of at them,” “emphasizing measure over interpretation,” and “relying on the ethical imperative of sincerity” (51–52).³ Different elements of the works of American poets such as Charles Reznikoff, George Oppen, and Louis Zukofsky were influential in different circles of French poets. Whether addressing how poets such as René Char, Yves Bonnefoy, and Paul C elan responded to the American Objectivists, or later, how Emmanuel Hocquard, Olivier Cadiot, and Pierre Alferi constructed their own response to Objectivist poetry—in the *Revue de litt rature G n rale*, for example—here the strength of Lang’s work becomes clear. She articulates distinctions between different “camps” of poets, moving seamlessly from Walt Whitman, Zukofsky, Pound, and Charles Bernstein, to Paul Verlaine...