Robert Desnos: Contrée

Robert Desnos (both ‘s’ pronounced, 1900-1945) was a Surrealist French poet. During World War II, after initially serving in the French army, Desnos became an active member of *La Résistance*. The illustration shows a photograph taken in 1943. On 22 February 1944, Desnos was arrested by the Gestapo and deported to Auschwitz. From there he was transferred to the Flōha labor campe, and finally, in April 1945, to Theresienstadt in Czechoslovakia. Though Theresienstadt was liberated on 8 May, Desnos died there of typhus on 8 June. *Contrée* (“Against the Grain”), a book of 25 poems celebrating the land of France and its resistance to oppression, was published in 1944.

Rrose Sélavy

In 1921, the young poet Robert Desnos met André Breton (1896-1966) and became an enthusiastic participant in the automatic writing sessions of the Surrealist Movement. During this time, he also became smitten with Rrose Sélavy, the *altera ego* of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). The name is a pun for *Eros, c’est la vie* (“love is life”), or *arroser la vie* (“give a toast to life”). In 1922, Desnos published under the title *Rrose Sélavy* multiple brief wordplays, puns and spoonerisms, supposedly dictated to him by Rrose while the poet slept (Conley, 2002, pp 15-44). Breton described them as “words making love” (*les mots font l’amour*) (Desnos, 1999, p 159).

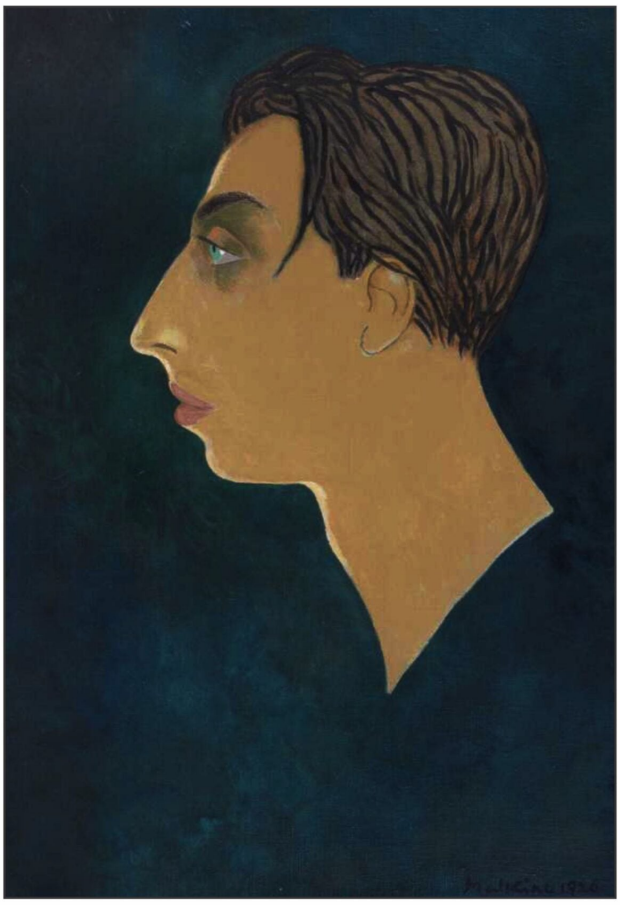
The following are three of the wordplays:

> Rrose Sélavy voudrait bien savoir si l’amour, cette colle à couches, rend plus durs les molles couches [Rrose Sélavy would like to know if love is the fly-paper that hardens the soft foundation.]
>
> La solution d’un sage est la pollution d’un page. [The

solution of a sage is the pollution of a page. (page in the sense of both book-page and page-boy)]

Est-ce que la caresse des putains excuse la paresse des culs teints? [Does the whore’s caress excuse the laziness of dyed buttocks?]

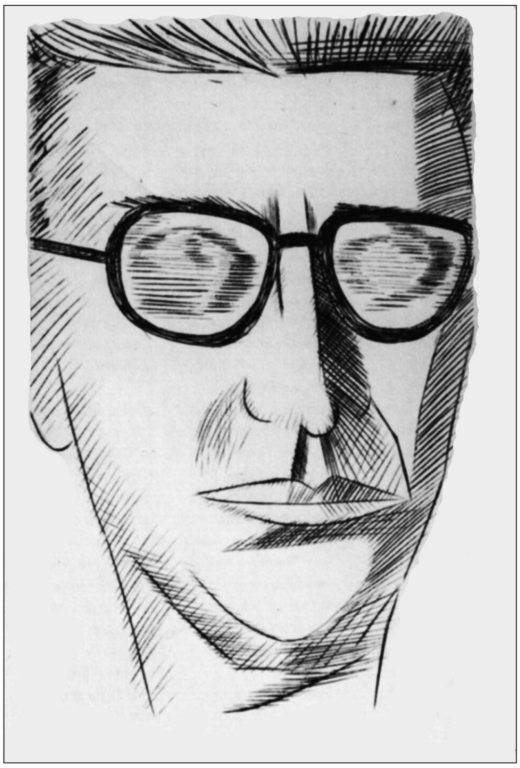
The following illustration shows a photograph of Desnos by Man Ray (1925) and a painting by Georges Malkine (1928).



Desnos and Breton denounced each other in 1929. Desnos continued to write poetry though his days of automatic sleep-writing were over. During the 1930s many of his works were dedicated to the love of his life Youki (Lucie Badoud), who had been the muse and model for the Japanese artist Tsuguharu Fujita. Her nickname was the Japanese word for “snow.”

World War II

During the initial period of the war when very little happened – *la drôle de guerre* (phoney war) – Desnos enlisted in the army. When Germany invaded France in May 1940, he was captured, released, and then demobilised. He became a journalist at the newspaper *Aujourd'hui,* but continued to write poetry. Those poems that were more overtly anti-fascist were published clandestinely using pseudonyms. He participated in *La Résistance* by providing them with information secretly available to the newspaper, and arranging counterfeit papers for Jews and others sought by the occupying Germans. In February 1944, he was apparently betrayed by someone he had offended, and deported. The following illustration shows a photograph by Dora Maar taken in 1943, and an engraving portrait by Gaston Roux that was used for the volume *État de veille* (State of Alert) published by Robert Godet in 1943.

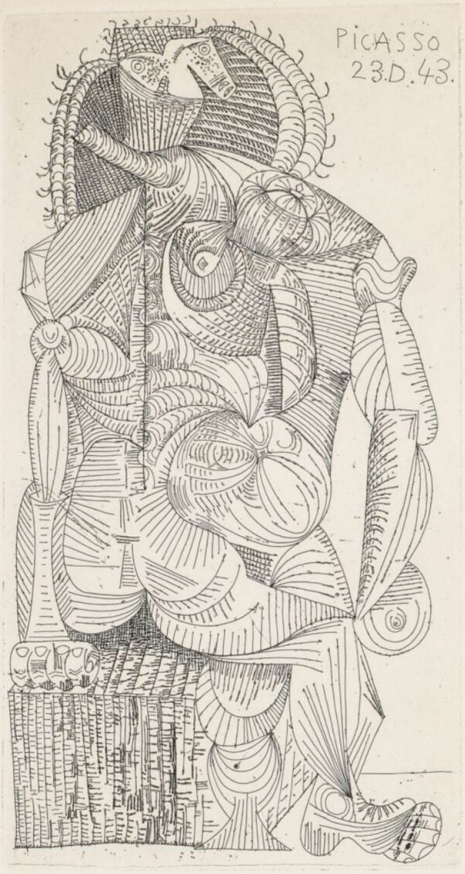


Contrée

Robert Godet published *Contrée* after Desnos was deported. The meaning of the title is complex. Both the French “contrée” and the English “country” derive from the Latin *(terra) contrata* which means “(the land) spread out before one.” In both languages the words came to mean the land around a town or city: rural rather than urban. In English, “country” was also used to denote the political entity that governs a defined region, a meaning that in French was taken by “pays.” The word “contrée” can also be the feminine past participle of the verb “contrer” meaning “act against” or “counter.” Adès (2017) translates this as “against the grain.” For Desnos “(la terre) contrée” suggests both the enduring land, and its rebellion against the current government.

The following illustration shows the etching of Dora Maar by Picasso that was included in the book, the title page, and then the first poem (*La cascade*). The etching shows a woman

seated with her legs crossed on a chair made of books (Swan, 2017). The woman appears to be seen from both front and back; some have suggested that this double perspective might represent an embracing couple. Youki thought that the etching represented “a knight leaning on a stack of books” (Swan 2017, p 5). Picasso arranged for parts of the etching to be printed with each of the poems in the book. This may represent the desecration of the body of France by the Germans.



ROBERT DESNOS

CONTRÉE

Eau-forte de PICASSO

ROBERT-J. GODET
19, AVENUE VICTOR-EMMANUEL-III
PARIS
M CM XLIV

LA CASCADE

Quelle flèche a percé le ciel et le rocher ?
Elle vibre. Elle étale, ainsi qu'un paon, sa queue
Ou, comme la comète à minuit vient nicher,
Le brouillard de sa tige et ses pennes sans nœuds.

Que surgisse le sang de la chair entr'ouverte,
Lèvres taisant déjà le murmure et le cri,
Un doigt posé suspend le temps et déconcerte
Le témoin dans les yeux duquel le fait s'inscrit.

Silence ? nous savons pourtant les mots de passe,
Sentinelles perdues loin des feux de bivouac
Nous sentirons monter dans les ténèbres basses
L'odeur du chèvrefeuille et celle du ressac.

Qu'enfin l'aube jaillisse à travers tes abîmes,
Distance, et qu'un rayon dessine sur les eaux,
Présage du retour de l'archer et des hymnes,
Un arc en ciel et son carquois plein de roseaux.

According to Conley (2003, p 124), *Contrée* contains one poem for every hour of the day and concludes with an epitaph. Although some of the poems are in free verse, most are formal in structure: nine poems are sonnets. Translations are difficult since one must find some compromise between form and meaning. Kulik (Desnos, 1984, 2004) uses free verse and finds exact meanings; Adès (2017) uses rhymes when Desnos does, albeit not always in the same order. The following sections present five of the poems from the book in the original French (Desnos, 1999; also Rimes website), and in the English translation of Timothy Adès (2017). Each poem is recited by Yvon Jean.

La cascade

Quelle flèche a percé le ciel et le rocher?
Elle vibre. Elle étale, ainsi qu'un paon, sa queue
Ou, comme la comète à minuit vient nicher,
Le brouillard de sa tige et ses pennes sans noeuds.

Que surgisse le sang de la chair entr'ouverte,
Lèvres taisant déjà le murmure et le cri,
Un doigt posé suspend le temps et déconcerte
Le témoin dans les yeux duquel le fait s'inscrit.

Silence ? nous savons pourtant les mots de passe,
Sentinelles perdues loin des feux de bivouac
Nous sentirons monter dans les ténèbres basses
L'odeur du chèvrefeuille et celle du ressac.

Qu'enfin l'aube jaillisse à travers tes abîmes,
Distance, et rayon dessine sur les eaux,
Présage du retour de l'archer et des hymnes,
Un arc-en-ciel et son carquois plein de roseaux.

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/La-cascade-Yvon-Jean.mp3

The Waterfall

What arrow split the sky and pierced the rock?
Vibrant, it spreads its peacock tail and flaunts
Its blurry shaft and sleek unblemished flights,
The way the midnight comet finds its mark.

The flesh is opened. For the blood to rise,
While lips suppress the murmurs and the cries,
A finger bids time stop, pre-occupies
The witness who records it with his eyes.

Silence? And yet we know the passwords well.
We strayed from our camp-fires, we sentinels:
Drifting from shady corners we can smell
Salt surf aromas, honeysuckle smells.

Dawn bursts on far-off depths; a sunbeam limns
Upon the waves, at last, a sketch that leads
Back the returning archer and his hymns:
A rainbow, with its quiver full of reeds.

This poem, the first in the collection, seems on the surface to be like the love poems of the French Renaissance, wherein the lover sought to capture his beloved with the arrows of desire. However, the poem describes “the political pursuit of armed Resistance fighters hidden in the landscape of France” (Conley, 2003, p 131). Near a waterfall someone has been wounded, blood flows, passwords are given, and eventually the *maquisards* returns to their hideout and dawn arrives. The imagery for the waterfall is striking: the waterfall is likened to the tale of a peacock or a comet. Because of Desnos’ love of wordplay, one must wonder whether the word *paon* should recall *païn* meaning “pagan” – one who does not

follow the established faith.

Le paysage

J’avais rêvé d’aimer. J’aime encor mais l’amour
Ce n’est plus ce bouquet de lilas et de roses
Chargeant de leurs parfums la forêt où repose
Une flamme à l’issue de sentiers sans détour.

J’avais rêvé d’aimer. J’aime encor mais l’amour
Ce n’est plus cet orage où l’éclair superpose
Ses bûchers aux châteaux, déroute, décompose,
Illumine en fuyant l’adieu au carrefour.

C’est le silex en feu sous mon pas dans la nuit,
Le mot qu’aucun lexique au monde n’a traduit
L’écume sur la mer, dans le ciel ce nuage.

À vieillir tout devient rigide et lumineux,
Des boulevards sans noms et des cordes sans noeuds.
Je me sens me roidir avec le paysage.

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Le-paysage-Yvon-Jean.mp3

The Countryside

I dreamed of loving. Still I love, but now
Love is no more that rose and lilac spray
Whose perfume filled the woods where each pathway
Led on directly to the blazing glow

I dreamed of loving. Still I love, but now
Love’s not that storm whose lightning kindled high
Towers, unhorsed, unhinged, and fleetingly

Would set the parting of the ways aglow.

Love is the flint my footstep sparks at night,
The word no lexicon can render right,
Foam of the sea, the cloud across the sky.

Old age makes all things fixed and luminous:
Knots are unravelled, streets anonymous;
Set in our ways, the countryside and I.

The countryside of *Contrée* stands in ironic contrast to that espoused by Vichy propaganda. Conley (200 3, p 1260 remarks

> Under Pétain liberty, equality, and fraternity became outmoded concepts replaced with the moralizing, hierarchical values of work, family, and the notion of a mythical homeland led by the patriarchal Marshal.

Desnos remembers the springtime of his life when love blossomed, and the stormy time that followed when the war began. Now the country has hardened into resistance. Love still exists but it is now the flint that attempts to ignite rebellion.

La peste

Dans la rue un pas retentit. La cloche n’a qu’un seul
battant. Où va-t-il le promeneur qui se rapproche lentement et s’arrête par instant? Le voici devant la maison. J’entends son souffle derrière la porte.

Je vois le ciel à travers la vitre. Je vois le ciel où les astres roulent sur l’arête des toits. C’est la grande Ourse ou Bételgeuse, c’est Vénus au ventre blanc, c’est Diane qui dégrafe sa tunique près d’une fontaine de lumière.

Jamais lunes ni soleils ne roulèrent si loin de la

terre, jamais l’air de nuit ne fut si opaque et si
lourd. Je pèse sur ma porte qui résiste…

Elle s’ouvre enfin, son battant claque contre le
mur. Et tandis que le pas s’éloigne je déchiffre
sur une affiche jaune les lettres noires du mot « Peste ».

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/La-peste-Yvon-Jean.mp3

> **The Plague**
>
> In the road a footstep echoes. The bell has only one clapper. Where’s he going, the walker, coming slowly nearer and briefly stopping? Now he’s outside the house. I hear him breathing behind the door.

I see the sky through the glass. I see the sky where the
stars run on the rooftops. It’s the great
Bear or Betelgeuse, it’s Venus the white-bellied,
it’s Diana unfastening her tunic near a fountain of light.

Never did moons or suns run so far from the
earth, never was the night air so dense and so
heavy. I lean on my door which resists…

It opens at last, it swings and knocks against the
wall. And while the footstep moves away I decipher
on a yellow poster the word in black letters, “Plague”

The poem is written in free verse with the line-endings arbitrarily placed between article and noun, adverb and adjective. The world is out of joint. Never were the heavens so far from the earth. An unseen walker labels the house wherein we live in terror as infested by the plague. The label is ambiguous. Does it represent the oppression of the occupiers or the paralyzing fear of the oppressed? On another level the yellow poster recalls the yellow star that French

Jews were required to wear.

La voix

Une voix, une voix qui vient de si loin
Qu’elle ne fait plus tinter les oreilles,
Une voix, comme un tambour, voilée
Parvient pourtant, distinctement, jusqu’à nous.
Bien qu’elle semble sortir d’un tombeau
Elle ne parle que d’été et de printemps,
Elle emplit le corps de joie,
Elle allume aux lèvres le sourire.

Je l’écoute. Ce n’est qu’une voix humaine
Qui traverse les fracas de la vie et des batailles,
L’écroulement du tonnerre et le murmure des bavardages.

Et vous ? Ne l’entendez-vous pas?
Elle dit « La peine sera de courte durée »
Elle dit « La belle saison est proche ».

Ne l’entendez-vous pas?

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/La-voix-Yvon-Jean.mp3

The Voice

A voice, a voice coming from so far away
That it no longer rings in the ears,
A voice, like a drumbeat, muffled
Reaches us even so, distinctly.
Though it seems to issue from a tomb
It speaks only of summer and spring,

It fills the body with joy,
It kindles a smile on the lips.

I’m listening. It’s only a human voice
Coming across the din of life and of battles,
The crash of thunder and the babble of talk.

What about you? Don’t you hear it?
It says “The pain will be short-lived”
It says “The beautiful season is near”.

Don’t you hear it?

This poem is a poem of hope. In the noise of battle and the babble of talk, a voice promises that beauty will return. The voice is not loud, it is like the “still small voice” of God who promised Elijah that Israel would be delivered from its oppressors (1 Kings 19: 12).

L’épitaphe

J’ai vécu dans ces temps et depuis mille années
Je suis mort. Je vivais, non déchu mais traqué.
Toute noblesse humaine étant emprisonnée
J’étais libre parmi les esclaves masqués.

J’ai vécu dans ces temps et pourtant j’étais libre.
Je regardais le fleuve et la terre et le ciel
Tourner autour de moi, garder leur équilibre
Et les saisons fournir leurs oiseaux et leur miel.

Vous qui vivez qu’avez-vous fait de ces fortunes ?
Regrettez-vous les temps où je me débattais ?
Avez-vous cultivé pour des moissons communes ?
Avez-vous enrichi la ville où j’habitais ?

Vivants, ne craignez rien de moi, car je suis mort.
Rien ne survit de mon esprit ni de mon corps.

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean:

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Lepitaphe-Yvon-Jean.mp3

The Epitaph

I’ve lived today, and since antiquity
Been dead. I lived intact, but I was prey.
Man’s nobler side was jailed and put away;
Among the slaves in face-masks, I was free.

I’ve lived today, and nonetheless been free.
I watched the river and the earth and sky
Turn round me, and they kept their harmony;
Honey and birds, a seasonal supply.

How did you use these gifts, you there alive?
Did you misuse the days I spent in toil?
Did you make common cause and till the soil
To harvest? Did you make my city thrive?

Don’t fear me, you who live: I’m dead and gone:
Not soul nor body, nothing lingers on.

The sense of the poem stems from the ideas of mortality of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC), epitomized in the Latin epitaph used by many of his followers:

> *Non fui, fui, non sum, non curo* (I was not; I was; I am not; I do not care).

Desnos agrees that today he lives, that before that was dead, and that after he dies nothing will remain. He cares not for before or after but concentrates on today. Despite the awfulness of the time into which he was born, he strives to remain free and to live in harmony with the world. He asks his readers if they using their talents for the common good or

resigning themselves to servitude. The meaning of the poem is encapsulated in the line

J’ai vécu dans ces temps et pourtant j’étais libre

Imprisonment and Death

After his arrest and interrogation by the Gestapo in February, 1943, Desnos was sent to the transit camp in Compiègne. Youki visited him there and provided him with a care package. However, in April, Desnos and 1700 other prisoners were sent on to Auschwitz. From there, he was transferred to Buchenwald and then in May to the Flossenbürg concentration camp in Bavaria. Soon after his arrival Desnos was transferred to the Flōha sub-camp for where he worked for 11 months (Humphreys, 2002). During his stay there he wrote a few last poems usually at the request of his co-prisoners. On 14 April 1945, as the Allied Forces advanced into Germany, SS leader Heinrich Himmler ordered all concentration camps to be closed. After a forced march, Desnos arrived in Theresienstadt (Terezin) in Czechoslvakia on May 7. Germany surrendered on May 8, and all the guards left the camp at Theresienstadt. A period of chaos and starvation ensued. On June 4 a French-speaking Czech medical student Josef Stuna, assigned to help at the camp recognized Desnos. They talked about poetry, but Desnos was terribly sick with typhus, and died on June 8. The following photograph shows Desnos in a group of prisoners at Theresienstadt. He is in the center, leaning on the shoulder of a companion dressed in a black coat.

Mémorial des Martyrs de la Déportation

In 1962 a memorial to the 200,000 people who died in concentration camps after being deported from France during World War II was constructed behind the Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris on the eastern tip of Île de la Cité. The memorial, designed by Georges-Henri Pingusson, has an entrance is marked by two concrete blocks. Inside is the tomb of an unknown deportee. Along both walls of a narrow chamber leading underground are 200,000 crystals meant to symbolize each of the deportees who died in the concentration camps. The actual numbers were less than 200,000. Among those deported were

75,000 Jews; of these only about 2,500 survived. Of the 88,000 deported on political rather than racial grounds, about 53,000 survived (Wieviorka, 2016, p 417). On the walls inside the memorial are brief quotations from several French writers: Paul Élard, Jean-Paul Sartre, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, and Robert Desnos. The following illustration shows the memorial and the two quotations from Desnos:

The first quotation is from the ending of a poem published in 1944:

> Car ces cœurs qui haïssaient la guerre battaient pour la liberté au rythme même des saisons et des marées, du jour et de la nuit.
>
> For these hearts that hated war were beating for liberty to the very rhythm of the seasons, the tides, day and night. (Adès translation).

The second quotation came from what was incorrectly assumed to be his last poem (Conley, 2003, pp 203-207; Desnos/Adès, 2017, p 93). This was quoted in Czech in a brief article in a Czech newspaper on 1 July 1945 that announced the death of the French poet at Theresienstadt. Translated back into French the poem read

> J’ai rêvé tellement fort de toi,
> J’ai tellement marché, tellement parlé,
> Tellement aimé ton ombre,
> Qu’il ne me reste plus rien de toi.
>
> Il me reste d’être l’ombre entre les ombres,
> L’ombre qui viendra et reviendra
> Dans ta vie ensoleillée.

The poem was thought to be addressed to France. However, the lines actually came from a 1926 prose poem that Desnos wrote for his love at the time: the singer Yvonne George

> J’ai tant rêvé de toi, tant marché, parlé, couché avec ton fantôme qu’il ne me reste plus peut-être, et pourtant, qu’à être fantôme parmi les fantômes et plus ombre cent fois que l’ombre qui se promène et se promènera allégrement sur le cadran solaire de ta vie.
>
> I’ve dreamed of you so much, walked, talked, slept with your phantom so much that all that’s left to me perhaps, is to be a phantom among phantoms and a hundred times more shadowy than that shadow walking in joy, now and in time to come, across the sun-dial of your life. (Adès translation).

Springtime

Desnos’ real ‘last poem,’ written on 6 April 1944 in the Flossenbürg camp (Desnos/Dumas, 1999, p 1259; Desnos/Adès, 2017, pp 512-513) was:

Printemps

Tu, Rrose Sélavy, hors de ces bornes erres
Dans un printemps en proie aux sueurs de l’amour,
Aux parfums de la rose éclose aux murs des tours,
à la fermentation des eaux et de la terre.

Sanglant, la rose au flanc, le danseur, corps de pierre
Paraît sur le théâtre au milieu des labours.
Un peuple de muets d’aveugles et de sourds
applaudira sa danse et sa mort printanière.

C’est dit. Mais la parole inscrite dans la suie
S’efface au gré des vents sous les doigts de la pluie
Pourtant nous l’entendons et lui obéissons.

Au lavoir où l’eau coule un nuage simule
À la fois le savon, la tempête et recule
l’instant où le soleil fleurira les buissons.

The following is a reading by Yvon Jean

https://creatureandcreator.ca/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Printemps-Yvon-Jean.mp3

Springtime

Rrose Sélavy, beyond these bounds you stray.
Meanwhile the waters and the earth ferment;
The rose on fortress-walls pours out its scent;
Love has its sweats and springtime is their prey.

The rose has torn the stone-limbed dancer’s side.
While others plough and sow, he treads the boards.
The public, blind and deaf and dumb, applauds
This rite of spring, when he has danced and died.

The word that’s writ in soot is wiped away
At the wind’s whim by fingers of the rain.

Nevertheless we hear it and obey.

Down at the wash-place where these waters run,
A cloud portrays both soap and hurricane,
Retreating when the thickets bloom in sun.
(Adès translation).

The poem hearkens back to the days of his youth when Desnos was in love with words and with Rrose Sélavy, and looks forward to the days when spring would dispel the darkness that was Europe during the Nazi era. Desnos was forever the optimist. He used to read the palms of his co-prisoners and he would always find happiness in their futures (Desnos/Caws, 2007, p 1280). An apocryphal story is that he read the palms of a group of prisoners slated for the gas chambers and that his description of their future lives so confused the guards that the prisoners were not executed.

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