

MODERNIST TOTALITIES AND THE AESTHETICS OF SOCIAL POSSIBILITY

By

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To CVH

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“Modernist Totalities and the Aesthetics of Social Possibility” examines American epic poetry from the 1920s to the 1960s as a series of experiments that interpret and express the historical shifts occurring in social life: cultural, technological, intellectual, and economic. I focus specifically on American epic poetry because in both the poetry and the aesthetic theories written by the poets we find a conversation regarding poetry’s ability to question existing social forms and imagine new social configurations.

Interestingly, aesthetics and politics lock in an almost perfect antagonism where social futures, and their arguments pro or con, reactionary or progressive, become imagined within the aesthetic theories and poetic objects themselves. The figures I use to trace these conversations include Ezra Pound’s vorticism of the 1910s and 1920s, William Carlos Williams’ experience of the ideology of America and uneven development in New Jersey in the 1930s and 1940s, Louis Zukofsky’s response to cultural elitism and anti-Semitism through his Marxism of the 1930s through the 1950s, and finally Charles Olson’s position as a hinge between modernism and postmodernism as exemplified by his stress on community, both at Black Mountain College and as a citizen of Gloucester. By focusing on these figures, I argue, we see the full arch of modernism in a two-fold

manner. First, we see how various social and cultural events functioned as so many detonators for aesthetic production. Aesthetic production overlaps with world production: common among all the epic practitioners is the now seemingly strange ideology that aesthetic forms are directly linked to possible forms of life. Second, and as a consequence of the first, the very ideology of the “aesthetic” itself becomes the arena where disagreements about political, social, and cultural futures take place. Or rather, modernist aesthetics becomes a pivot where dissensus finds continued articulation. I argue that this dissensus is not a mere disagreement about formal poetic principles, or about incorporating certain positive or negative ideologies into the content of an artwork, but about art’s function as a method of social critique, political representation, and imagination.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION: DISORIENTING AESTHETICS

In Judith Butler's introduction to the 2010 edition of Lukács' *Soul & Form* she has much more to say about "form" than "soul." A number of reasons may explain the emphasis on form, none of them conclusive. First, *Soul & Form* features the ability of literary forms to cure or take care of a languished or an alienated soul. Second, the problem of the soul modifies into the problem of consciousness in Lukács' later work, albeit not as directly or seamlessly as my own sentence implies. With both of these reasons we may anticipate how Lukács will proceed to develop a materialist theory of aesthetics and a method for analyzing literary forms in his later career, most notably the novel. The third reason, and probably the most likely for Butler, is that the politics of form shoots through nearly all the discourses of literary theory and criticism throughout the twentieth century (and now well into the twenty-first century). These arguments for or against literary formalism establish a problematic distance—or distraction—between how historical figures interrogated or theorized aesthetic forms and how scholars advance criticisms that defuse these theories to the point where the prior theories tend to appear inexplicable to present academic conversation. This is a problem of critical history, not authorial intentionality. At least this is how I read Butler when she says, "Reading Lukács now, one realizes that his own approach to form is both more subtle and complicated than either the advocates or the detractors of formalism could or can imagine."¹

¹ Judith Butler, Introduction, p. 5, in György Lukács, *Soul and Form* (New York: Columbia UP, 2010), 1-15.

I offer Butler's comments on Lukács as a situational analogy for my own project. Much of what continues throughout the course of this dissertation will no doubt appear to supplement the inherent optimism implied by her method for reexamining texts historically in order to reorient or disorient (depending on one's position) their critical possibilities: "Indeed, reviving Lukács now offers a perspective that effectively disorients the terms of the debate as they have circulated through literary and theoretical circles for the last forty years. And I am doubtless not alone in finding pleasure in being disoriented in this way."² The pleasure inferred here may be the power of offering alternative critical models through the process of continual discursive excavation, recouping theories that were inevitably displaced by the literary debates of the past half century, and repositioning texts and their well-established lineages (philosophical, literary, poetic, etc.) back into a complex historical matrix. In addition to this pleasure, however, remains the task of articulating the historical process of disorientation itself: why and how did we become so disoriented especially regarding theories of aesthetic forms? Responding both to the desire for avoiding the disorientations of our present moment *and* interrogating the historical forces that caused such disorientations create a dotted line that the following chapters negotiate. I think this is a political task that requires a certain kind of disorientation in order to reorient both the objects and methods of critical debate. It seems to me that aesthetic theory and the *ars* in general returned to a decidedly unhappy and conservative position at the close of the last century. The consequence for voluntarily folding critical thinking about art back into the regime of art appreciation is estimably severe.

² Ibid 6-7.

We know that nothing divides literary disciplines (or departments) quicker than debates regarding the politics of literary form—except perhaps the debates about “theory” and “literature,” which I would argue are a consequence of the longer debates about aesthetics. For example, when Marjorie Levinson surveys contemporary academic publications—including books, journal articles, and dissertations—she positions the debates between essentially two ideological camps:

(a) those who want to restore to today’s reductive reinscription of historical reading its original focus on form (traced by these critics to sources foundational for materialist critique—e.g., Hegel, Marx, Freud, Adorno, Althusser, Jameson) and (b) those who campaign to bring back a sharp demarcation between history and art, discourse and literature, with form (regarded as the condition of aesthetic experience as traced to Kant—i.e., disinterested, autotelic, playful, pleasurable, consensus-generating, and therefore both individually liberating and conducive to affective social cohesion) the prerogative of art.³

If upon reading this passage we are tempted to think reductively in terms of anti-capitalists (a) and capitalists (b), those initial inklings will prove invaluable. Meaning, the tradition of Marxisms and associated “politicizations” of aesthetics saturate art with the power of critiquing systemic inequalities and injustices within social, cultural, and political formations. By way of shorthand we may say artworks and aesthetic theories constitute *dissensus* or an idea that consists in the notion of a political life being perennially deferred in terms of always being *yet to be*. Here artworks may be said to always dream the day when they are no longer *necessary*; the ambition of art is self-termination. This means that even when artworks and aesthetic theories are at their steepest degrees of playfulness we find in them perhaps the most enduring moments of *dissensus* as they stand over and against alienated configurations of *work*.

³ Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism?” *PMLA* 122.2 (March 2007): 558-569, p. 559.

Reactionary ideologies seem to suggest that perhaps we are already *there* and thus art reenters the classism implied in the *l'art pour l'art* tradition where *play* no longer mediates a dialectic with *work* but instead reinforces an autotelic *leisure* within art's sovereign sandbox. The avoidance of vividly unnecessary inequalities permeates reactionary formalisms, as Levinson notes, with a "consensus-generating" politics of its own that reinscribes these injustices either by ignoring them, leaving them intact and functional, or by invoking a philosophy of reading as grounds for intellectual validation (via beauty, taste, or any number of affiliate categories). All three avenues produce their own reactionary politics. For example, although a key term is not present in Levinson's description, the ideological battle line marks a disagreement regarding the autonomy of art. If art is an autonomous category, then it maintains a Kantian *ethic* or a deontological *duty* that becomes trespassed against when it mingles with the lesser degrees of intellect: politics, history, culture, or, more bluntly, everyday life. In this sense the autonomy of art not only severs links between art and history, discourse, and politics, but it importantly eclipses all possibility of focusing on the *social production* of an aesthetic theory or artwork besides its narrow possibility as the exteriorization of an exceptional subjectivity (the "artist"). This disadvantage may be linked to Kant's aesthetic theory as claimed in *The Critique of Judgment* because there Kant memorably coupled aesthetics with the problem of teleology; aesthetics becomes a game of ends since we may only confer judgment upon the aesthetic object according to its purposiveness toward a natural end (i.e., "beauty"). Accordingly, as Levinson notes, reactionary formalisms will tend to discretize aesthetic objects—and even aesthetic *experiences*—into isolatable artifacts that mimic Kant's notion of *being* in that they are

Absolute like nature in their wholeness and completeness as they endlessly strive toward a transcendent universal. Such are the categorical imperatives of reactionary formalism in order to lift aesthetics *above* everydayness in the name of the Good.

This tends to result in a sufficient problem because, as Fredric Jameson says succinctly, “The autonomy of art today stands for little more than high literature as such, which is to say modernism and its canon.”⁴ This is also largely a narrative problem, which is to say a political problem. If we view modernism as a historical period where the process of modernization was rapidly occurring, then modernism—as an aesthetic category produced in reaction to these historical shifts—must inevitably be linked to historical, political, cultural, and other such social forces. Following Perry Anderson, it may be more accurate to say that modernist aesthetic theories and the artworks themselves are lodged between three uneasy coordinates that mark this historical conjuncture: “an economy and society still only semi-industrial, in which the ruling order remained to a significant extent agrarian or aristocratic; a technology of dramatic inventions, whose impact was still fresh or incipient; and an open political horizon, in which revolutionary upheavals of one kind or another against the prevailing order were widely expected or feared.”⁵ The ideologies of the aesthetic produced within this constellation of forces will inevitably appear, much like how Lukács appears to Butler, altogether extraordinary when set against the populisms of contemporary criticism.

Theories of aesthetics produced within the historical moment of incessant modernization depart sharply from prior systems of philosophical aesthetics due to the

⁴ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 176.

⁵ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1999), p. 81.

fact that various modernisms rivaled those inherited systems and the faulty rationalizations they produced (i.e., humanism). As Jameson says, modernism struggles to generate a “new form of philosophical aesthetics, beyond the philosophical system as such—this self-cancelling and undermining aesthetics, which now at a second power struggles with itself and limits of its own concepts—can be expected to be coterminous with the modern movement itself.”⁶ Here Jameson importantly returns to Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* in order to exemplify a speculative aesthetic theory—a “modernist” theory—that demands a constellatory rotation of its attendant concepts at all times. For example, rethinking the relationship of subject-particular necessitates a cascading drift to occur where the relationships of coherence-meaning, universal-particular, etc., accordingly unhinge. It may be wiser to use Adorno’s own terms: an aesthetic of *enigmaticalness* and *incomprehensibility*. It seems that Adorno projected the goal yet to be sufficiently addressed: “Aesthetics today should go beyond the controversy between Kant and Hegel and not simply level it.”⁷ For Adorno, this perpetual reshuffling of philosophical concepts, an act which is itself properly *aesthetic* (a gesture to candidly place theory alongside aesthetics), also maintains the potential to rid aesthetic discussions of two dominant conceptual ordinates: representation and spectatorship. These two concepts dovetail and become magnified proportionally throughout the twentieth century as they transform into the logics of a *tasteful* monotony of consumerist individualism or, as Marcuse famously termed it, the problems at the core of “one-dimensional man.” An aesthetic theory that moves beyond the problems of

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 102.

⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), p. 355.

systematized philosophies of aesthetics does so in order to generate political strategies for encountering the complications of its present and thus gambles wildly for a different future out of this process of negation. Given the coordinates that constitute modernism's historical tensions, it seems that Jameson is right to suggest that Adorno's aesthetic is quintessentially "modernist." If we are unsure that the various historical ruptures and revolutions that mark modernism as a historical period are over, that they have finally failed, or belong to a wholly different historical moment, we need only skim through Levinson's survey of our contemporary intellectual climate where philosophical aesthetics (as opposed to, say, theoretical or speculative aesthetics) are back and somehow maintain more cultural capital than ever expected. Like many other deep historical antagonisms—the Cold War, communism, utopianism, etc.—modernism was a speed bump that has now passed underneath the great white Cadillac of capitalism as it solidified into a world system.

What I will argue here is that in retracing the aesthetic theories of American modernism we not only locate strategies to challenge the continuing processes of modernization (on into postmodernization and globalization), we also form a critical history of aesthetic forms. This suggests an avenue for the course of the debates on aesthetics to continue following and perhaps now with more intensity: aesthetic objects and innovations, along with their associated discourses and theories, open up to history with the same potential as the history of manufacturing because they are, at bottom, part of cultural production insofar as they exteriorize the invisible forces of sociality; this exteriorization, sometimes referred to as reification, needs to be properly dialectical also

since *thingification* carries its own liberating potentiality (i.e., we want to see justice).⁸

The method for constructing this critical history takes as its point of departure Marx's proposal for a "critical history of technology" offered in *Capital*. In the chapter on "Machinery and Large-Scale Industry," Marx's footnote on technological evolution dialectically disorients Darwin's work in wonderfully productive ways:

A critical history of technology would show how little any of the inventions of the eighteenth century are the work of a single individual. As yet such a book does not exist. Darwin has directed attention to the history of natural technology, i.e., the formation of the organs of plants and animals, which serve as the instruments of production for sustaining their life. Does not the history of the productive organs of man in society, of organs that are the material basis of every particular organization of society, deserve equal attention? And would not such a history be easier to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter?⁹

It may be too early to speculate, but one eventual consequence of this method will be that aesthetic innovations must also be considered as technological innovations. I will say more about this in the conclusion, but for now: modernism seems to be marked by precisely this awareness that art *is* technics and that aesthetic theories are also *technical* theories regarding cultural production. What sharply differentiates Marx from modernism, and postmodernism even further, is that production had not yet become totally motivated by profit and compound growth rates however immanent this horizon appeared. Technics still maintained its utopian aspirations for improving the historical and political aspects of life; Marx never disliked technology, he simply disliked the

⁸ For the dialectical potential of reification see Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2012), pp. 24-26, and Timothy Bewes' discussion of reification and the "self-reflexivity" of subject and object it problematizes in *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 89.

⁹ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1. trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 493.

proficiency of human exploitation it made more expedient. Much like the difference between the ideologies of aesthetics, what makes the world more inhabitable for the *we* that constitute it is a matter of *will* and *power*. Unsurprisingly, then, as the initial moments of a postmodern economic system begin to come into focus after WWII, we encounter a figure like Henri Lefebvre crystalizing modernism into its essential category of *the possible*: “So it really is a question of man establishing a new attitude towards man, of a *qualitative* modification in life and culture. We already have the means to demonstrate that this fundamental modification is *possible*.”¹⁰

Modernism, as a narrative category of the process of modernization, tells the tale of a negative motivation (*will*) being installed at the root of all production under finance and corporate capitalism (Adorno and Horkheimer’s “culture industry”). But for every technological innovation of the early twentieth century—from Fordism to public relations to cinema—we find aesthetic theories and artistic practices that attempt to yield this monotonous process of economic determinism and redirect the will of technics by aesthetical means. Each and every technological innovation opened a new opportunity to conceptualize new modes of cultural production. In this regard, I think we still have much to learn from one of modernism’s early gestures: Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* from 1917 has little to do in the end with being a “found object” (or, more preferable, a “chosen object”) and everything to do with the *production* of objects; machines may be used to manufacture objects according to a different will and this is an intervention in the history and theory of technics through the lens of aesthetics. A urinal has no malevolent will of its own, nor do other technics like Law. A critical history of aesthetics,

¹⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life: Volume 1* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 249.

which is the history of the inherent ambidextrous potential of technics, seems more important now than ever as we produce technologies that are quite successful at *unemploying* workers. In these times it seems wholly predictable that the narrative of modernism still weighs upon the outcomes of our historical future. Put differently, modernist aesthetics smell much to me like culture does to Susan Hegeman: “Perhaps the last spectral whiff of another way.”¹¹

Put simply, modernism elevated the importance of artistic *practice* over and above artistic objects. As Raymond Williams says more accurately, “the artists and writers and thinkers of this phase found the only community available to them: a community of the medium; of their own practices.”¹² Impressively, however, these practices do not merely consider isolated technologies for their counter-potential, but modernism marks something even more peculiar: the entire totality of social and cultural production is reimagined within the radical singularity of the art-object. In what follows, then, is the examination of the aesthetic theories, artistic practices, and the community of thought developed by a series of American modernist poets who attempt to rethink the totality of cultural production and political life through their aesthetic theories and artistic practices: Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and Charles Olson. Each of their epic poems attempts to grasp either the entire of arch of history (Pound) or else attempts to comprehend how historical processes function within scaled metonymies via the household, the neighborhood, and the city (Williams, Zukofsky, and Olson). In all

¹¹ Susan Hegeman, *The Cultural Return* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2012), p. 39.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 45.

instances, the importance is the supposition that poetic production equates with cultural, social, and historical production.

The grouping of these artists together has nothing particularly novel about it. However, due to the reactionary debates outlined above much of the scholarship about these authors foreground “poetics” as an ultimate concern and thus neglect the possibility of a critical history of aesthetic forms.¹³ My analysis will have little to do with measuring the lineage of poetic techniques because I am responding to a largely unanswered prompt from Jameson regarding the “Pound tradition”: “The problem is then not to argue some seminal and liberating enablement of the first *Cantos* as a predecessor of everything from Eliot to Olson to Zukofsky, taking in *The Bridge* and McAdams in passing, but rather, first to understand how it was the formal idea of the *Cantos* that played this fundamental role as detonator, rather than anything in the lines of the poem, or even its content.” The framing apparatus of the *Cantos* challenges aesthetic theory not only to think in terms of including history, which is Pound’s established definition of the epic, but also to attempt to project another historical configuration in its totality through this formal idea. Perhaps this starting point is already the starting point of a politics. This supposition results in “an idea of form which it is not particularly easy to abstract or to name.”¹⁴ The following chapters attempt to summon names for this enigmatic difficulty.

¹³ See Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1973); Marjorie Perloff, *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985); Bob Perelman, *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein, and Zukofsky* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1994); Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998).

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), p. 18.

The periodizing of the Chapters begins with Pound's theories of form during the First World War through the 1930s. Here I isolate Pound's early theorization of the vortex as a reaction to the core cultural logics of liberal democracies and strengthening capitalisms. Vorticism becomes a relay for totality, and his aesthetic theory performs an important function by turning "form" from a noun into a verb, a process of social forming. Pound underscores the importance of art in terms of social organization by turning to George Antheil's musical compositions and "machine art," which assists in realigning artistic practices with *technē*. Pound's loosening of the epic form, however, maintains none of his ideologies as a necessary ingredient. That Pound turns his aesthetic in the service of fascism does not equate totality with totalitarianism. In the following Chapters I examine how the "Pound tradition" responds to, and ultimately reverses, Pound's political project several times over. Pound, however, becomes symbolic of "modernist aesthetics" as he produces and embodies historical and political contradictions.

Chapter 3 moves the focus to the geography of Americanism instead of Pound's international cosmopolitanism. I turn to the New Jersey suburbs to trace how William Carlos Williams develops his response to class and cultural elitism in his work of the 1930s and 1940s. Here Williams' work confronts the ideology and experience of "America" as a totality. Williams' work turns on two important terms, place and contact, terms stressing the ability of any geographic locale to be the starting point of a new cultural understanding that must likewise have an equaling new artistic form. The aesthetic for Williams, however, becomes largely a negative operation: *Paterson* traces a series of blockages and limits that prevent the new culture from taking place. *Paterson* becomes an archeological inquiry into the present in order to place all the wrong turns

of history into a complex and interrelated matrix. This, I argue, is Williams' production of a diagnostic totality of the contradictions of modernity that resulted in Paterson, New Jersey, experiencing the problems of uneven development and going through the first phases of post-industrial decline.

Chapter 4 locates Louis Zukofsky in urban 1930s New York as dialectical counter to Pound's project. By the time we reach Zukofsky, a second-wave modernist, the theorizations regarding totality become more politically progressive. Zukofsky's interests in Marxism permit him to rethink art-production at the level of commodity-production. Here Zukofsky charts the symptoms of an irrational capitalism within his artistic output. Throughout this process he also destabilizes prior aesthetic forms. The fugue, sestina, and canzone all pass through the process of modernization in order to carry new social contents of poverty, racism, and the commodity-fetish. By offering a re-reading of his epic, "A," I argue that use-value becomes overlaid onto aesthetic theory and enables art to critically assess a capitalist mode of production, but also re-positions art as a negative dialectic to the seemingly fixed grooves moving into the 1950s.

Chapter 5 positions Charles Olson as a figure who takes the totalizing potential into postmodernism. Olson, a hinge figure between two distinct historical moments, functions as a "vanishing mediator" for modernism's political aesthetics. In the historical moment of post-1945 U.S. politics, we find Olson arguing against the one-dimensional political agendas of the Truman administration, the incorporation of reactionary ideologies into higher education with the New Criticism and a turn toward "aesthetics" in literary publications, and also the erosion of collective thinking especially as it manifests in a dull individualism. His epic *Maximus* is an intellectual and cultural response to the

inevitable closures of U.S. post-War hegemony: he attempts to invert the totality of the capitalist world state by rehabilitating a human consciousness capable of this maximal task. To do so requires once and for all rethinking aesthetics in terms of *technē* and *technics*, which is a roundabout way of saying that the “Pound tradition” attempts to detour so many global wrong turns by adopting new *practices* and *methods* for producing an inverted semblance of that world.

What ensues, then, is a narrative of contradictions and zigzags. This narrative may be said to be political because it underscores how the “aesthetic” is a centripetal term that attracts the ideological conditions of its historical situation. It is also a concept and social category in desperate need of rehabilitation and reconstruction. Meaning, that I am proposing *now* to reconsider the concept as a vital possibility for *critical* debate is a symptom pointing to the issues raised throughout the remainder of these pages occurring for us at different degrees. As Adorno skillfully argued, a dialectical narrative of contradictions—one that exceeds and negates its own concepts and precepts—is perhaps a necessary ingredient to move theory and practice back into negation (*dissensus*). As I have been hinting in the course of this introduction, we require methods for reappraising artistic practices in ways that seem completely foreign and indexical to our epoch of perpetual crisis. And here I think we must return to Jameson’s unenthusiastic observation in *Marxism and Form*: “Works of culture come to us as signs in an all-but-forgotten code, as symptoms of diseases no longer even recognized as such, as fragments of a totality we have long since lost the organs to see.”¹⁵ For us, “modernist aesthetics” seems indexical in this way because we falsely believe our

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971), p. 416.

bodies—from the constitutive body politic to a debased individualism—to be healthy and inoculated from history. That is, for those of us who participate in the discourses of academia—itsself an incalculable body and impressive technic—the problematic separation of parts from wholes, subjects and objects, and art from history seems to be endlessly verified in the ideologies of aesthetics and the return to anachronistic humanisms that justify them in the name of the Good.

CHAPTER 2 EZRA POUND AND THE CASE FOR TOTALITY

Ezra Pound's 1938 *Guide to Kulchur*, a text forecasting the degree to which his insanity would reach, clarifies a stance upon which his entire career rests: "There is a distinct decadence when interest passes from significance—meaning the total significance of a work—into DETAILS of technique."¹ The itemizing of artworks into an array of techniques, be it a brushstroke or pacing a poem's foots and feet, reduces the total significance of artworks to degree zero. But the statement projects and performs much deeper operations. First, it functions as a reverberating mandate that undergirds not only his entire artistic production, but also his concurrent aesthetic theory. Timing the pulses of this reverberation opens the possibility of periodizing Pound's modernism through the development of his aesthetic theory: Imagism, Vorticism, and proto-fascism all become markers of Pound's confrontation with historical breaks. Pound's aesthetic theory, then, simultaneously produces and requests the potentiality of "total significance." Second, Pound encloses in this statement an unread message to future critics of his work. By the single utterance Pound himself reopens and begets critical reevaluation of his own project: amidst the literature produced on Pound's modernism few if any abide by this central mandate.

Perhaps a historical mapping of Pound's aesthetic theory, which becomes conditioned by the events of his present, opens up a different field entirely where we may reinterpret the total significance of his modernism. Raymond Williams articulates the method-as-inversion in saying,

¹ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 89.

When I hear people talk about literature, describing what so-and-so did with that form—how did he handle the short novel?—I often think we should reverse the question and ask, how did the short novel handle him. Because anyone who has carefully observed his own practice of writing eventually finds that there is a point where, although he is holding the pen or tapping the typewriter, what is being written, while not separate from him, is not only him either, and of course this other force is literary form.²

Williams asks that we approach historical figures and objects differently. Literary forms become the visible manifestations of deep historical and cultural alignments. These historical alignments comprise our interactions with what could be referred to as our world. For example, Pound as a radical reactionary functions as a hinge against the emerging project of liberalism with its celebration of regulation and industrialization. Further, and as a byproduct of industrial capital, Pound's alignment with totality is simultaneously a negation of the philosophical outlook his present inherits. Thus we can trace a statement from 1938 back to the onset of *vers libre* in 1908 as a coherent argument against nominalism.

In this Chapter I elaborate upon this method of connecting Pound's historical alignments, which his theoretical and critical writings exemplify, to the development of an aesthetic theory that spans decades—the 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s. To mark this development, Pound's project will be periodized in three parts. Pound's theorizations of the 1910s establish a platform against nominalism through the trope of the vortex and mark Pound's emergence into high modernism as an artistic practitioner in his own right. In the 1920s, alongside various other historical avant-gardes, Pound begins to exercise a method of reading cultural objects using the theories of totality and the vortex. Here his aesthetic theory relies on repurposing artworks so as to illustrate their inner potentiality of restructuring the given world. Further, style becomes entwined with

² Raymond Williams, *Resources of Hope* (London: Verso, 1989), p. 85.

modes of living that prohibit the separation of aesthetics and politics. Finally, toward the end of the 1920s and into the 1930s two crucial things happen for Pound: he attempts to solidify his aesthetic theory through the analogy to machine art by recategorizing aesthetics as *technē*, but he also more emphatically begins his aggressive support of fascism. I read this moment as a third period in Pound's career by suggesting that this last moment of Pound's aesthetic theorizing cannot be accomplished by Pound. This third period is the moment of an opening that his modernism fails to realize.

By engaging in this periodizing logic, I return to the historical moment of Pound's modernism as an event with ambidextrous repercussions. In terms of periodizing modernisms, Pound's local periodizing can become a larger cultural logic for "modernism" itself. Pound's admission into the literary canon, against the theorizations that his high modernism argues for, reduces the impact of his aesthetic theory to a set of techniques that other artists then carry into late modernism. To exemplify this type of transposition we can turn to Marjorie Perloff's genealogy in *Dance of the Intellect* as an example. Perloff's text nullifies the intersections of history, economics, and aesthetics. Her reading of Pound centers on sentences like, "From *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916) to *Guide to Kulchur* (1938) and beyond, Pound's critical prose is closely allied to his poetry by its structural properties: collage, fragmentation, parataxis."³ From the title of the text forward we engage Pound as the originator of an intellectual dance that is absolutely cut off from his inherent political polemics and avoids the historical conditioning that informs Pound's experiments. According to Perloff's narrative, modernism "obsesses" over problems that include "whether poetry should be lyric or collage, meditation or

³ Marjorie Perloff, *Dance of the Intellect* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1985), p. 22.

encyclopedia, the still moment or the jagged fragment.”⁴ I would argue that Pound’s placement in the history of modernism, and even that history itself, changes in kind when his own aesthetic formalism is detached from any tendency toward reactionary and “formal” readings.

If my own project prohibits one avenue of reading it also supports another. What I think Perloff’s method of reading denies is an opportunity to understand the historical nuances of Pound when he says, “But the aim of technique is that it establish the totality of the whole. The total significance of the whole. As in Simone Memmi’s painting. The total subject IS the painting.”⁵ Parataxis, collage, and fragmentation become symptoms and indexes of history itself. Pound delimits with absolute prohibition the idea of thinking of aesthetics as a reduction in any capacity. Technique, style, and art itself enter Pound’s idea of totality. To speak of any term requires a double speaking: one speaks of art and the entire circumference of art in a single voice. Pound’s aesthetic theory is a history of forms, but these forms are also the formation of political worlds not yet realized. That we do not wish to live in Pound’s worlds seems obvious enough, but the idea of art being a productive activity where political imaginations find experimental representations becomes paramount. Aesthetics cannot be technique unless it is a technique of encountering the existent and toppling it with severity. This, as we will see below, is the kernel of Pound’s aesthetic theory. The event of Pound’s modernism is not the pure ideation of a genealogy of technique that sets up the century to come, but is a

⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

⁵ Pound, *Kulchur*, 90.

process by which Pound initiates a connection between artworks and the possible encounter of a modified world.

Nominalism to Vorticism

By 1927 Pound periodized himself. Looking back over the decades prior, and distinguishing himself from T. S. Eliot's project of classicism, Pound articulates the importance of Vorticism: "the period of break (vorticism; 1917, etc.)."⁶ This moment of a decisive break for Pound may exist for a series of simultaneous reasons: the October Revolution throws into relief the problems facing progressive utopias; the project of liberalism in London nears its goal of cultural stultification as it gains momentum since the scaling back of the House of Lords by Parliament in 1911; Wyndham Lewis, a hyperbolic Tory and aggressive counter to the liberal celebration of industrial culture, moves into an official position serving as the painter for both the Canadian and British governments showing that, antithetical to the modern surge of romanticizing "modernolatry" inherent to Futurism, Vorticism's negations of present life forms have the potential to turn the current state around; and also T. E. Hulme, the originator of so much of Pound's aesthetic theory up to this point, dies.

Hulme's influence on Imagism and Vorticism, from the Poet's Club of 1908 to his participation in the meetings at the Café Tour d'Eiffel beginning in 1909, is well documented and therefore not in need of recapitulation here.⁷ But what does merit some attention is the way in which we see Pound echoing Hulme for the rest of his career, especially in the formation of his own aesthetic theory. From Pound's initial

⁶ Ezra Pound, *Polite Essays* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1940), p. 4.

⁷ See Wallace Martin, "The Sources of the Imagist Aesthetic" *PMLA* 85.2 (March 1970), 196-204; Sam Hynes' introduction to *Further Speculations* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1955) vii-xxxii; and Karen Csengeri's introduction to *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994) ix-xxxvi.

theorizations of the image to the compounding of the image into the vortex, both are marked by Hulme's coterminous theorizations of art. Further, and more importantly, Hulme's philosophy projects a sensibility of the world with which Pound will engage: namely, nominalism.⁸ As if in conversation with the problematic ruins of the *ancien régime*, Hulme rejected the distance created by the process of signification: if art was to deal with a concept, it was to attempt to deal with the concept directly. Concepts like truth, beauty, and style need to be particular matters of fact rather than theoretical constants or universal redundancies. The vortex stands as a metaphor for nominalism: since the Copernican revolution when the self became the center of the universe another counterrevolution—radically reactionary—became necessary to rescale the placements and hierarchies that hung on like remainders after so many centuries of metaphysical thought. These remainders, heaped into a pile of concepts, are for the London artists of the time, the current condition of neo-romanticism and neo-sentimentalism.

Thus we will notice in Pound how abstraction drifts into two distinct varieties: in a positive sense, "abstract" is in line with the artistic production of "abstract art"; in a negative sense, it is a condition of absolute reduction ("abstract" as in "to reduce") in philosophical usage as a term drifts away from what it is as a thing. "Being," for Pound, is therefore deplorable. Art's abstraction is therefore more "precise" than philosophy; art produces (complexity) while philosophy reduces (simplicity). Philosophy, and particularly metaphysics, categorizes and isolates concepts as always already known

⁸ For example, in an early essay from 1907, "Cinders," Hulme says: "World is indescribable, that is, not reducible to counters; and particularity it is impossible to include it all under one large counter such as 'God' or 'Truth' and the other verbalisms, or the disease of the symbolic language." *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), p. 9.

beforehand. Pound would likewise argue vehemently against modern semiology: the ideology of language as a method of connecting and experiencing particular matters of fact is subsumed by abstract categories (i.e., signifieds). The vortex, however, aims toward a massive simultaneity of particulars by reintroducing the trope of *movement*: how to again start forming relationships and reconnecting particulars to various new potentials; how to again think of art in terms of *producing the world*. This has local effects in terms of language—say the disruption of a “tree” as an abstract category within poetry—but it also carries farther reaching effects when applied to a concept like “history.”

In January of 1914 Pound heard Hulme’s lecture before the Quest Society of London on “The New Art and Its Philosophy” (later to be “Modern Art and Its Philosophy”). Most of the lecture consisted of Hulme’s application of Wilhelm Worringer’s ideas of vital (organic) art versus geometric (inorganic) art, which Hulme heard the previous year in Berlin. Vital art becomes tied with classical art and continues up through the Renaissance in the reduplication of life-forms: *mimesis*. Geometric art is aligned with archaic, Byzantine, and Egyptian art that serves a different set of mental needs that do not reach satisfaction in the replication of life (vitality) as it strives for new relationships to be formed: *abstraction*. Or, as Hulme says in terms with more currency: “This art contrasted with geometrical art can be broadly described as naturalism or realism—using these words in their widest sense and entirely excluding the mere imitation of nature.”⁹ Geometric art, then, is a symbolic expression stemming from nominalism; severed from any materialist determinism, geometric art is an attitude that

⁹ Ibid, 273.

runs counter and parallel to vitalism. Geometric art stems from a lineage of gradual breakdown in unified beliefs, from a central lack, in Worringer's terms, and a fundamental insecurity with the present world.

From here we are able to understand not only Pound's, but also Lewis' and the other Vorticists' essential premise: the negation of existing conditions must also include an alignment with past geometric arts in order to repeat—or modernize—previous artistic strategies that enable the artist to exert new ideational and relational constructs in the distorted and untotalizable world. This type of repetition is emblemized in Pound's "make it new" campaign: the original phrasing comes from Confucius, "Make it new, make it new as the young grass shoot."¹⁰ Nominalism is not merely an existing outlook on the world, but a problem to work through. Hulme projects an unhappy situation due to nominalism that his early interest in Bergsonism demonstrates: eventually a dead end, the early attempt sought to unfix moored particularities and place them again into flux. Indeed, as strategic complement, what Pound's early career sets out to do is precisely to identify the coordinates that are no longer acting as connectors: language is disconnected from action due to its sedimentation as reality; style is disconnected from specific modes of living as a byproduct of industrial capitalism through the increase of consumer and business societies; and thought is disconnected from its capacity to ideate relationships because of a reliance on metaphysical concepts.

Hulme, however, demonstrates a dialectical potential of nominalism:

If we take this to be in fact the new sensibility, and regard it as the culmination of the process of breaking-up and transformation in art, that has

¹⁰ Pound, *Kulchur*, 112.

been proceeding since the impressionists, it seems to me that the history of the last twenty years becomes more intelligible. It suddenly enables one to look at the matter in a new light.¹¹

What Hulme points us to is a paradoxical dilemma for the modern artist. Previous vitalistic arts eliminated the gap entirely between art and life. Art could do no other *than be life*. For example, we need only think of the classical story of a contest between Zeuxis and Parrhasius to narrate such a stance. In this scenario there is no room for new life forms to be ideated in art other than the ones that already exist in life. And here we see Pound align himself against language's usurpation by stasis and logic: against the intransitive verb, abstraction in terms of philosophical generalization and dislocation from a totalized system, Aristotelian syllogisms, and academicism, which he defines as "not excess of knowledge; it is the possession of *idées fixes* as to how one shall make use of one's data."¹² But a geometric art, on the other hand, forges a gap between *existing* life forms and *potential* life forms. The gradual "breaking-up" of forms permits their reevaluation and repurposing as a result of a loss of fixity and conceptual concreteness. In short, one way to counteract nominalism will be through deploying nominalism itself as a strategy. Since the world is incapable of being totalized in Pound's historical moment, art must simultaneously take advantage of this predicament—and it will do so through parataxis, fragmentation, ideograms, etc.—but the goal must be to overcome the reality of the existing. In order to be a modernist as Hulme presents it the artist must simultaneously be cognizant of nominalism as a

¹¹ Hulme, 279.

¹² Ezra Pound, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (Chicago: P. Covici, 1927), p. 25.

historical situation and deploy nominalism as a strategy to ideate oneself out of the harness of the existing.

Reed Way Dasenbrock has suggested reading Pound's Vorticism as a dialectical movement. I have much to agree with in Dasenbrock's reading. He posits Lewis and Pound as essentially performing a double negation of their contemporary options and thus opens a middling trajectory via Vorticism:

Vorticism as I have presented it has oscillated between attacking the Futurist mimesis of life and attacking Roger Fry's formalist insistence on the autonomy of art which would seem to be the only alternative to mimesis. It attacks both because it wants an autonomous formal art that would nonetheless involve a loop back, a return to life.¹³

According to Dasenbrock, the attack on life proposed by the Vorticists accuses not life itself but the values honored in modern life. But I disagree with what Dasenbrock targets as the result of this operation. For him the dialectical move occurs on behalf of the reader or spectator: "Beholders thus are meant to complete the 'loop' between art and the world. It is up to them to relate the art work to the world."¹⁴ This stance permits the spectator to re-imagine the world in terms of art's image: "I would like to call this stance 'affective formalism,' as the form of painting is something to be valued for its effect upon the beholder."¹⁵ What goes amiss in Dasenbrock's reading is the turn toward the affective spectator and away from the essential constructivist nature of Vorticism. The elitism that grounds Lewis' and Pound's Vorticism fails to provide a hint of recognition for the spectator. Rather, it is the preoccupation of the artist-as-creator to negate the

¹³ Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound & Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 1985. p. 73.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 74.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 74.

problems of modern life and to establish new methods of thinking that anticipates ahead of the spectator and non-artist. This is the idea behind Pound's characterization of artists being "the antennae of the race."¹⁶ Also, I do not want to risk overlapping Pound's aesthetic formalism—in terms of his theory of form within a historical field—with a formalist method of reading artworks because it is here, I believe, that so many readings of "formalism" remove the political import of artistic practice and substitute this for affective, and thoroughly subjective, responses from the spectating reader. If there is such a thing as "affective formalism" perhaps we could upend it and examine how it is constructed and produced. Because the dialectic resides here, as a differential process of construction, simultaneously disciplining and liberating forces without finality.

Therefore, when approaching Pound's Vorticist text, *Gaudier-Brzeska* (1916), we need to bear in mind the framework of a dialectical nominalism and also the alignment with geometrical art that purports a notion of abstraction based on the opening of a gap between reality and a sense of futurity through art's ability to project beyond existing conditions. *Gaudier*, like Vorticism itself, is conditioned by World War I: Henri Gaudier-Brzeska dies in the trenches, while Lewis serves in the artillery and Hulme joins the infantry only later to reenlist in the artillery. What shifts, most likely due to Pound's relationship with Lewis coupled with the War, is that Pound becomes aggressively polemical against everything under the umbrella of that which prohibits the new art from its realization. But we must simultaneously link this call for a new art as a metonymic request for a new world. This is Pound's base proposal: art, the part-as-negation of the existing, must extrapolate out into an anticipated whole that the artwork can only

¹⁶ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934), p. 73.

anticipate. Ever a coincident movement, art *subtracts* in order to *exceed* the present. As if this was somehow negligent in the original text of 1916, Pound supplements the text in 1934—a continued practice throughout his career—in order to force the point: “A few blocks of stone really carved are very nearly sufficient base for a new civilization.”¹⁷ The metaphor of the sculptor is adept for more reason than one: it presents an image of hacking off unnecessary pieces of stone which in turn necessitate the beginning of a new civilization, but it also reintegrates art into a complex system wherein it cannot be identified as a localizable part—art, stone, and civilization must interlock. Art must exist as, and within, the vortex.

In need of extrapolation, then, are the principles of construction developed in *Gaudier*. For as naïve as Pound may seem, he begins in his Vorticism to attempt to provide a theory of forms that would enable the constitution of a negated present. It is an Imagism radicalized; we are not only dealing with poetry, but we are dealing with a beyond of poetry.¹⁸ Pound searches for a way to reintegrate art as a part of a much larger complex. We thus encounter three strategies in *Gaudier*: 1) in accordance with geometric art’s idea of abstraction, art finds ways to mobilize the crystalline forms of historically congealed vitalist forms; 2) this mobilization occurs by placing forms back into spatial relationships and leads to new linguistic structures and differentiated concepts; 3) as a summation of the previous two, Pound stresses a notion of aesthetic forms that gamble on the impact of overturning the idea of form as a noun into a verb. In

¹⁷ Ezra Pound. *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir*, (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 140.

¹⁸ We should note here that this is, perhaps, what went wrong when Imagism turned into “Amyism” due to, according to Pound, Amy Lowell’s commandeering of the movement. The image became relegated to visual and sensual perceptions and lost its power of abstraction that Pound and Hulme had originally intended. A poem like “In a Metro Station,” then, should be viewed as an attempt to cause new relationships to come into being via a superpositioning of forms.

short, what *Gaudier* sets up for Pound, and which we will follow throughout his career in the 1920s and the turn toward the 1930s, especially through his advocating Ernest Fellenosa's essay, "The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry," is a process of turning *form* into *forming*. This last point will be unpacked more thoroughly in the next section of this essay.

The argument should be made, however, that *Gaudier* is a text where Pound performs a two-fold operation: he galvanizes historical documents to remember his deceased friend, but he also uses this incident to stage a polemic against the reigning theories of art (which are always metonymic and symptomatic for the conventions of the present civilization). Everything that maintains contact with and supports the existing art, even tangentially, must be disparaged. This leads Pound to formulate perhaps the exact antithesis of a materialist idea of class structures: "Our community is no longer divided into 'bohème' and 'bourgeois.' We have our segregation amid the men who invent and create, whether it be a discovery of unknown rivers, a solution of engineering, a composition in form, or what you will."¹⁹ Pound follows the class of American entrepreneurs and engineers yet signals a strict demarcation: entrepreneurship should have nothing to do with the amassing of capital, imperialism, nor the expansion of a business society.²⁰ Entrepreneurs and artist-engineers are a special class of citizen who

¹⁹ Pound, *Gaudier*, 122.

²⁰ Cecelia Tichi's work is valuable here. She assists in articulating Pound's alignment with Thorstein Veblen. She says, "Veblen's is a world in class conflict, but the antagonists are not those familiar to readers of Karl Marx. Veblen's division is not between those who control the means of production and a proletariat empowered only by its capacity to work. Instead, Veblen's classes divide by their habits of thinking. On the one side are the archaic, preindustrial-minded businessmen and their minions, the attorneys, clerks, clerics, sportsmen, and military. On the other are the engineers, scientists, technicians, and industrial workers, a confederation whose way of thinking accords with evolutionary change and has been shaped by the machine process itself. They represent the potential for 'revolutionary overturn' of old ways." *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987), p. 133.

promote the incessant change of a civilization by restructuring social arrangements and extending the capacities of the sovereign individual. This individual is not cut off or secluded from culture, nor from other individuals; rather the entrepreneurial individual is an active forming agent directly involved in, and responsible for, the conditions of the present world. Technocratic and bureaucratic modes of governing thus stifle the production of new forms of living through regulation: import and export tariffs, censorship, passports, copyright laws, etc. Government, to conclude, should serve the artist-engineer and exists solely for the sake of convenience. This grounds Pound's later adoption of "*res publica*" ("the public convenience") as motto.²¹ Pound's contemporary present, by denigrating the role of the artist through rising consumerism that necessitates an abject dislocation from active cultural formation due to hyperbolic compartmentalization and particularization, submits to the reign of nominalism and cannot permit anything akin to his always totalizing and always oscillating vortex that denies a part-to-whole logic.

When Pound stresses Gaudier's credo of seeing sculpture as essentially an art that processes forms—i.e., planes in relation—we need to apply this method of creation as a metonymy for total reintegration. One of Pound's radical cross-hatchings to exemplify form-as-creation equates mathematics and art. In a seemingly odd moment, Pound describes the different cases of mathematics. All of the cases cited produce an identical situation on both sides of the equal sign until one reaches a spatialized

²¹ Over a decade later, Pound will use the Harding memorial stamp (issued 1923) as an image of the "American situation." The stamp, which was released in a stunningly short period of time after Harding's death (less than a month), was purchased in mass quantities as America generally equated Harding to Lincoln at the time. This, for Pound, marks a baleful waste of efficiency and validates his opinions concerning the idiocy of the American people as Harding's administration becomes marked by immense corruption soon after.

mathematics via Cartesian analytical geometry: $(x - a)^2 + (y - b)^2 = r^2$. Through the plotting of coordinates on axes of two or three dimensions “one is able *actually to create*.”²² Rather than particularize the circle by reducing it to generalized laws and examining only its rules for existing, Pound here attempts to emphasize its reintegration into a larger complex system, a vortex.

Mathematics is dull ditchwater until one reaches analytics. But in analytics we come upon a new way of dealing with form. It is in this way that art handles life. The difference between art and analytical geometry is the difference of subject-matter only. Art is more interesting in proportion as life and the human consciousness more complex and more interesting than forms and numbers.²³

Analytical geometry establishes a complex equation whose rules govern facts; this equation of a circle governs over all circles at all moments, but it also graphs—*creates*—a circle within space that is automatically located in a larger field of complex relationships. Therefore, a form is created that is flexible, mutable, and recurring without producing a self-same replication since one cannot exhaust the constructive possibilities of a spatial-relational circle. More succinctly, Pound sees in analytical geometry, distinct from Euclidean geometry, the ability to rethink the forming of a circle by placing it back as an essential variable; rather than have a single rule that governs limits (Pound uses the Pythagorean theorem as example) we have, instead, an equation that enables the construction of all circles upon which we may *build*. And, following Pound, penultimate to this act, we must underscore the analogy he strives to make in terms of *art* and *life*: art handles life by placing its forms back in extension, back into a field of complex relationships that may always be added to and subtracted from.

²² Ibid, 91.

²³ Ibid, 91.

By way of a convoluted analogy, Pound defines the vortex via mathematics. The vortex is an odd equation that has nothing to do with equivocation or equality of the terms that wing the equal sign. Pound explains, “Great works of art contain this fourth sort of equation. They cause form to come into being. By the ‘image’ I mean such an equation.”²⁴ Pound’s aesthetic theory rests on this conceptual basis: art’s duty, like that of the entrepreneurs of prior civilizations, is to cause new forms to come into existence; these forms abide by an extensive metonymy that projects a modified world. This is why, if we permit Hulme to continue to reverberate, a vitalist art must be negated: inherent to *mimesis* is a project of stasis and duplication of life-forms while in *abstract* art we enter a space of perpetual intensification that is properly relational between the part and whole. Pound says more clearly, “The image is not an idea. It is a radiant node or cluster; it is what I can, and must perforce, call a VORTEX, from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”²⁵ The image, then, is totality. The vortex, as metaphor and conceptual emblem, negates the logic of particularization that Pound sees fostering ever quicker in his historical moment. The swappable terms—image-vortex—deny the opportunity to sever any single node as an isolatable part from the totality. And, as Frank Lentricchia asserts, we need think the vortex in its essential capacity for social change. Lentricchia describes the vortex as “a spatial construction of elements in superposition, not a *representation* of particularity but a *phalanx* of particularity—the military etymology is important: a cultural weapon, something like a body of infantry in close array, an idea in action, working in the social arena.”²⁶ Far from

²⁴ Ibid, 92.

²⁵ Ibid, 92.

²⁶ Frank Lentricchia, *Modernist Quartet* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), p. 196.

being an isolatable artistic *technique*, Pound's conceptual and totalizing vortex becomes a cultural *strategy*.

Again, if we return to the postscript that Pound adds decades later, the gravity of the break made possible by Vorticism becomes more evident. After noting that the “‘revolution in the arts’ was quite distinctly a revolution,”²⁷ Pound further explains, “It meant a complete revaluation of form as a means of expressing nearly everything else, or shall we say of form as a means of expressing the fundamentals of everything, or shall we say of form as expressing the specific weights and values of total consciousness?”²⁸ As if to summarize all the points of the text written decades prior that had perhaps not made a sufficient impression, Pound here emphasizes the constructive element intrinsic to re-vitalizing an entirely different sense of art and life: both terms, seen as a dialogical process with one another, constitute forms. He closes by way of finalization: the revolution was a

three dimensional assertion of a complete revaluation of life in general, of human life in particular, of man against necessity, by which I include social and physical necessity and there is, of course, in the long run no social necessity. What we call social necessity is nothing but the temporary inconvenience caused us by the heaped up imbecilities of other men, by the habits of dull and lazy agglomerate of our fellows, which sodden mass it is up to the artist to alter, to carve into a fitting shape, as he hacks off unwanted corners of marble.²⁹

Artists as entrepreneurs, as the elite class of persons who negate the reification of concepts and the privileging of objects as particularities or fixed singulars, perform their role of social change in forecasting ways out of the present-as-distortion and placing

²⁷ Pound, *Gaudier*, 141.

²⁸ *Ibid*, 144.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

this present within a much more encompassing constellation of fluctuations. However incorrect Pound's conception appears to be, especially the imagined lack of interference from sociality and his intrinsic sexism through a proposed clan of artist-men-leaders, these problems are not necessarily wed to his proposition. Or rather, if he thinks they are, his contemporaries prove him wrong. As the following Chapters will show, this proposition of setting historic particulars into an elastic simultaneous present can be turned on its head until placed right-side up.

But here we want to establish the basis upon which Pound produces a theory of aesthetic forms. And to be sure, this aesthetic theory is based on the idea of a present progressive—a *forming*—that dismantles the concepts of classic aesthetics itself; at the sentence level Pound will slide from art to economics to government in a single breath. Pound's career exhibits a commitment to a paradox that he will not emerge from, but instead rotate with increasing speed within: if the modern world is compartmentalized and conceptualized through increasing nominalization, then artists must not only account for this problem of separation, but must set this isolated problem within a more encompassing paradigm: the vortex supposes to do exactly this by setting nominalism into motion. If we turn nominalism around enough as a child turns a kaleidoscope, even upside-down, perhaps we will come to see it is an interconnected part within the totality-as-vortex that permits new relationships to be formed. The break of 1917 thus marks Pound's foray into modernism as an authentic practitioner in his own right.

Form as Forming

Seemingly unexpected, Ezra Pound translates Remy de Gourmont's *The Natural Philosophy of Love* in 1922. The translation of a Symbolist poet at this time for Pound seems quite odd: normally during this most famous year we focus on the first of the

Malatesta Cantos, Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Joyce's *Ulysses*, all of which seem to mark a three-fold shift toward modernizing the epic (Pound's infinitely open form, Eliot's closed form, and Joyce's recurring quotidian form). The translation of a Symbolist poet at this time, especially after *Gaudier* announced Pound's denunciation of Symbolism for thinking in terms of everlasting constants instead of variables, appears contradictory. Indeed, Pound was still traversing interesting niches of the European avant-gardes: his 1918 invention with Alvin Colburn, the "vortoscope," was already being used by Dudley Murphy in cinematographic experiments that led to *Ballet Mécanique* in 1924; Man Ray also engaged in, and modified, the experiments to become photograms, or "rayographs"; and in March 1920 Pound writes for *Dadaphone* No. 7 from London in support of the stranded Dadaists in Zurich. Within this context it should then not be surprising to note Pound's fascination with Gourmont's fourfold categorization of living things, his "fan" of nature: "Insect, utility; bird, flight; mammal, muscular splendour; man, experiment."³⁰ Experimentation, then, becomes the preeminent necessity that Pound places at the forefront of his modernism. Indeed, experimentation stems from an innate biological need for correction and growth. Perhaps this permits a better understanding of Pound's claim that the maximum degree of brilliance he witnesses also occurs around this time when he engages with Francis Picabia.³¹

³⁰ Ezra Pound, "Poscript to *The Natural Philosophy of Love* by Rémy Gourmont" *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 205.

³¹ See *Guide to Kulchur*. Pound says, "If one is to measure merely by brilliance, the maximum I have known was at Picabia's of a Sunday about 1921 or '22"; and again, "A definite philosophical act or series of acts was performed along in 1916 to '21 by, as I see it, Francis Picabia" (84, 87).

Gourmont, like Picabia, produces a specific *style*.³² What Gourmont's style opens, according to Pound's reading, is an instantaneous notion of social alteration that resounds from artistic experimentation. This notion of experimentation denies any chance for tautological recurrence; it is not a version of "art for art's sake." Pound says, "I believe that the species changes as suddenly as a man makes a song or poem, or as suddenly as he *starts* making them, more suddenly than he can cut a statue in stone."³³ As in the previous reading of *Gaudier*, Pound's interpretation, like his editing and translating, forces a caveat to be maintained: what we are also reading is a situational analogy of Pound's style. And this term, "style," is for Pound quite dynamic and dissimilar from our contemporary notion of fashions changing due to consumer production or even a method of literary ornamentation. There is nothing stylized in Pound's usage. For him style is sheer immanence: "Without just style, expression, no clear idea, no law, no society having a decent order, no amenity, no clean relation with things, idea, or people."³⁴

What must be admitted perforce is that, produced by and abiding by Pound's vortex-as-totality, terms create tides of homologies or chains of supplements. In short, an understanding of "style" necessitates an expounding of "ideogram," "form," and "image." In characteristic mood, Pound's vortex operates by connecting extensive patterns. For example, in an unpublished and incomplete manuscript of 1934, "A

³² Picabia's style, which like Dada's style-as-paradox, may be encapsulated in the following: "A painting doesn't exist if it doesn't know how to transport beyond all paintings." *I am a Beautiful Monster: Poetry, Prose, and Provocation* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), p. 420.

³³ Pound, "Postscript," 208.

³⁴ Ezra Pound, *Machine Art & Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), p. 121.

Problem of (Specifically) Style,” Pound makes a plea for action from either his generation or the next to “make some effort to understand the function of language, and to understand why a tolerance for slipshod expression in whatever department of writing gradually leads to chaos, munitions-profiteers, the maintenance of wholly unnecessary misery, omnipresent obfuscation of mind, and a progressive rottenness of spirit.”³⁵ Here Pound’s modernism is at work: totalizing forces one to be cognizant of deep connections at all moments not so much to comprehend, but at least to acknowledge the complex system of beliefs defining the world. Style, as Pound says elsewhere, must avoid a reified approach that leads to thinking that “Jojo’s opinion of Jimjim’s explanation of Shakespeare will shed greater light on the reader and initiate him to a higher degree of perception than would perusal of the Bard’s original text.”³⁶ Rather, style is world.

Pound finds justification for this sense of style through Ernest Fenellosa. Pound’s reading of Fenellosa’s essay, “The Chinese Character as a Medium for Poetry,” runs parallel with Vorticism. What Fenellosa underlines for Pound is the relational attributes found within the idea of the ideogram. The essay argues for the ideogram on three fronts: 1) ideographic writing places words in relation to one another since the graphic word-as-image occupies both the position of a noun and a verb in distinctive mood and thereby prohibits the idea of a noun or verb in isolation; 2) the ideogram exemplifies the ability of language to be other than arbitrary and symbolic, traits that lead to philosophy

³⁵ Ibid, 122.

³⁶ Pound, *Polite Essays*, 18.

and academicism;³⁷ 3) the ideogram forces us to see that alphabetic language relies on false relationships through empty copulas found in intransitive verb structures relying on “is” constructions. In short, the ideogram causes new relationships to form and demonstrates the ability of language to create rather than be acted upon: verbs and nouns converge in their indication of *action* rather than simply classify cases or types. The dictionary, as Fenellosa says, exhibits “a late stage of decay” where language is “arrested and embalmed.”³⁸

What the Fenellosa essay demonstrates, moreover, is the ability to rest an entire worldview on the perception of language. He notes the mistakes of Western metaphysics in saying,

Let us consider a row of cherry trees. From each of these in turn we proceed to take an “abstract,” as the phrase is, a certain lump of qualities which we may express to gather by the name cherry or cherry-ness. Next we place in a second table several such characteristic concepts: cherry, rose, sunset, iron-rust, flamingo. From these we abstract some further common quality, dilution or mediocrity, and label it “red” or “redness.” It is evident that this process of abstraction may be carried on indefinitely and with all sorts of material. We may go on forever building pyramids of attenuated concepts until we reach the apex “being.”³⁹

There looms an intrinsic weakness to this type of thinking for Fenellosa: the logic of classification disallows any new relationships to be formed and forefends any

³⁷ Jacques Derrida articulates the impact of the essay and elaborates on the significance of this point: “the necessary decentering cannot be a philosophic or scientific act as such, since it is a question of dislocating, through access to another system linking speech and writing, the founding categories of language and the grammar of the *epistémè*. . . . This is the meaning of the work of Fenellosa whose influence upon Ezra Pound and his poetics is well-known: this irreducibly graphic poetics was, with that of Mallarmé, the first break in the most entrenched Western tradition. The fascination that the Chinese ideogram exercised on Pound’s writing may thus be given all its historical significance.” *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), p. 92.

³⁸ Ernest Fenellosa and Ezra Pound, *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry: A Critical Edition* (New York: Fordham UP, 2008), p. 55

³⁹ *Ibid*, 56.

potentiality for growth—the pyramid grows in size but prohibits any alteration to its primary shape. This lack indexes precisely the goal of poetry. Subsequently poetry that relies on proper grammatical structures is indeed not poetry: no intransitive copulas permitted and no subjective inclusions. Poetry’s task is to follow the intensive forces between objects that only occur through modified “sentences.”

Fenellosa’s essay participates in framing Pound’s still developing style. It is not a technique but a method for interacting in the world. This style rests the world at the level of the sentence. The crafting of sentences becomes the blurring of the line between action and expression. Just as lightning is a sentence, Fenellosa describes lightning as a specific encounter: “It passes between two terms, a cloud and the earth. No unit of natural process can be less than this. All natural processes are, in their units, as much as this.”⁴⁰ The poet maps the interaction of units as they function like connectors. In the same breath Fenellosa will call these processes transfers of power. Pound’s style attempts to articulate how these transfers of power—from the sentence level down to the economic—function in an expansive socio-historical context.

We will revisit this notion of style again at the start of the 1930s when Pound begins his own review with *The Exile* while in Rapallo. Before reaching these texts I want to discuss at length prior texts of the 1920s, namely, Pound’s successive texts on George Antheil: *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (1924) and “Machine Art” (1927-1930).⁴¹ These texts demonstrate the complexities that Pound’s modernism maneuvers: from an interpretation of musical expression we gain an angle of entry into restructuring

⁴⁰ Ibid, 47.

⁴¹ Published in *The New Review* as “Machines” in winter of 1931-1932, Pound composes the essay as “Machine Art” from 1927-1930. I will refer to the essay as “Machine Art” since the manuscript remains uncondensed and unabridged.

the conditions of factory work; from this transition we anticipate the possibility of restructuring our reigning theories of art (i.e., “civilization”); and none of this can be broached without defining Pound’s aesthetic theory in terms of an active sense of *forming*. These moments come not before or after one another as they are all essentially happening in harmony with another. Pound’s vortex, then, is a style that manifests itself not only in his artistic output, which the *Cantos* symbolize, but also in his modernism at large.

As an American expatriate composer, Antheil is most known for his “Ballet Mécanique” which served as musical accompaniment for Murphy’s and Ferdinand Léger’s film of the same name. As part of the avant-garde circles in the early 1920s in Paris—Antheil rented the apartment above Sylvia Beach’s Shakespeare and Company—his method of performance goes on record with Marcel L’Herbier’s film *L’Inhumaine* (1924): in need of a riot scene, L’Herbier filmed Antheil’s performance at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on October 4, 1923. This, however, is completely beside the point for Pound who, along with many Cubists, Surrealists, and members of Dada, participated in the concert-riot. Antheil, who had already written about his theory of time-space for *The Little Review* and about the “Death of Machines” for *Transatlantic Review*, permits Pound to theorize independent of Antheil’s trajectory:⁴² for Pound Antheil’s music expresses the permissibility to *organize* existing modern noise and

⁴² The qualms between Antheil and Pound seem to be symptomatic of a clashing of egos. In his autobiography Antheil says, “It seems terribly unfair of me, at this time, to proceed to criticize Ezra Pound, now that the poet has fallen into disgrace. But, I emphasize, I would write these pages exactly this way if Ezra had become an international hero instead. For from the first day I met him Ezra was never to have even the slightest idea of what I was really after in music. I honestly don’t think he wanted to have. I think he merely wanted to use me as a whip with which to lash out at all those who disagreed with him, particularly the Anglo-Saxons; I would be all the more effective in this regard because I was an ‘unrecognized American.’” *Bad Boy of Music* (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran & Company, 1945) p. 119.

offers a way to get music out of the concert hall and into the factory. Pound has little in mind here for promoting or refereeing Antheil's music; instead, Pound exemplifies a method of reading that, as we will see, he carries over to other non-artistic figures like Vladimir Lenin. The act of expression, the production of "new mediums," functions as a go-between for the production of new forms of life. Antheil-as-charlatan, who would brandish a revolver from a custom-made jacket pouch before sitting to play, has zero interest for Pound. His support for Antheil, like his "support" for Lenin, comes by way of seizing the potentialities their expressions make possible.

This distinction between artistic intention and invention attempts to posit the artwork in terms of "total significance" or the "totality of the whole." Castigated is the artist as subjective interpreter. In its place, Pound offers the artist as an engineer of precise functions and ends. As Pound says, "With the *Ballet Mechanique* we emerge into a wider circle of reference. I mean that this work definitely takes music out of the concert hall, meaning thereby that it deals with a phase of life not hitherto tackled by musicians and freighted before the act with reference to already existing musical reference."⁴³ Pound locates in Antheil a way to carry out a specific task: the ability to reintegrate art at the level of inquiring into, and the production of, new life forms. Out of the concert hall, out of the museum, art will rejoin with its essential capacity as work. Antheil, however, should be further read as a figure for Pound's own agenda. *Ballet Mécanique* attempts to include all the noises, notes, and sounds of contemporary sociality: propellers, bells, sirens, xylophones, player pianos, etc. The simultaneity of all these sounds, their very overlapping and conversational aspects, demonstrates that a

⁴³ Ezra Pound, *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony* (Chicago: P. Covici, 1927), pp. 145-6.

musical organization like the fugue appears to be reappearing and undergoing the process of modernization. Music exits the concert hall—the graveyard of music for Pound because of its false interaction with sociality—and re-enters the complex arena of the socio-historical: much like the vortex, Antheil’s compositional organization stretches art forms to include the problems of the present. If we could perform the *Cantos* they would likely resemble *Ballet Mécanique*.

Relocating music from the concert hall to the factory produces two ramifications. First, Antheil composes with the sounds of machines not to copy them but in order to illustrate their organizational capacity: the distortions and interferences, Antheil’s music shows, can be controlled.⁴⁴ Antheil’s long durations and production of “deep bass” demonstrate for Pound the potential for a music that would last the length of a workday. Second, the topic and place of the factory follow Pound’s prior polemics. As an effect of its capitalist logic of segmentation and subsegmentation the factory symbolizes the malevolent force of particularization and rejection of totality; the factory *is* nominalization. This permits Pound to ideate discordant paradoxes. For example, Henry Ford as capitalist dynamo is therefore rejected while Ford as unconscious theorist of tempo and sonority through the production of a distinct type of line gains value not in terms of form itself, but as the producer of possible forms. Pound requires an inherently inseparable separation: we may bifurcate Ford-as-capitalist and Ford-as-engineer (i.e., “artist”) without qualm. One exists as fact and the other challenges the future existence

⁴⁴ Both Pound and Antheil will agree here. Antheil summarizes in saying, “I repeat again and again, even frantically, I had no idea (as did Honegger and Mossolov, for example) of *copying* a machine directly down into music, so to speak. My idea, rather, was to warn the age in which I was living of the simultaneous beauty and danger of its own unconscious mechanistic philosophy, aesthetic” (*Bad Boy* 140). This distinction assists in detangling Antheil, and Pound’s subsequent reading, from the romanticizing and spiritualizing of machines they find in Futurism.

of this fact. Perhaps now we can modify the narrative present thus far: the symptoms of Pound's various polemics indicate he is more anti-industrialist than anti-nominalist.

What Pound projects into the figure of Antheil is the musician-as-engineer. This reading assists in locating the moment of discord between the two: Antheil saw himself playing the part of cultural warning sign while Pound repositions him as cultural engineer. A Poundian artist must always perform the negating operation, but then also supplement this act with a movement beyond the limits negated. And, as stated before, we need to read these moments as the production of Pound's strategic method for encountering cultural objects. Beginning a few years after his *Antheil* text, Pound attempts to formulate a succinct theory of forms that reads as a summative envelope of his prior thinking: Vorticism may now navigate a way for cultural production, Hulme's projection that the new art will become machine-based gains nuance, and Pound comes out of the experiments of the 1920s with a theory of movement. "Machine Art" marks a significant turn for Pound similar to that in *Gaudier*: it will be Pound's sole attempt to ideate a cohesive aesthetic stance and he will do so by attempting to reverse the logic of industry. "Machine Art" sthesis attempts to re-set art's relationship with *technē*. This new category, as Maria Luisa Ardizzone says, "is the new aesthetic dimension which destroys the idea of art as imitation, all the psychologisms inherent in the idea of beauty, and the idea of style as ornament."⁴⁵ Moreover, the machine, with its incredible array of parts that all work in harmony to perform a precise function, becomes yet another avenue for Pound to attempt to relay his complex totality-image-vortex. There is a consistency to Pound's aesthetic theorizing: infinite expansion, simultaneous inclusion

⁴⁵ Pound, *Machine Art*, 9.

of all history, and the orchestration of somehow enabling everything to speak at once. A “machine” is the expression of this possibility.

Pound demonstrates this interest in machines as a metaphorical apparatus in his early associations with Hulme and the Vorticists. In *Gaudier* Pound noted that automobiles are of interest to the artist “if we follow their lines of force” that indicate expressions of efficiency and then inserts a qualifier in saying, “this beauty is in itself offensive to the school of sentimental aesthetics.”⁴⁶ These comments derive from two places. In one sense Pound seems to be validating Hulme’s 1914 prediction that the new art will culminate in the “idea of machinery”: “It is not a question of dealing with machinery in the spirit, and with the methods of existing art, but of the creation of a new art having an organization, and governed by principles, which are at present exemplified unintentionally, as it were, in machinery.”⁴⁷ The machine, then, functions by way of another elaborate analogy for the contemporary outlook that modern art exercises through a mode of cultural, albeit artistically oriented, legislation. Pound’s attitude toward machines opposes adamantly a parallel view that begins with Roger Fry’s notion that machines will be “as beautiful as a rose.” This position seems to find its instantiation and institutionalization as a strand of reified modernism—the slow turn toward late modernism—with Alfred H. Barr’s “Machine Art” exhibition in 1934 at the Museum of Modern Art. Barr says, “Not only must we bind Frankenstein—but we must make him beautiful.”⁴⁸ The second influence, as Cecelia Tichi highlights, comes from

⁴⁶ Pound, *Gaudier*, 26.

⁴⁷ Hulme, *T. E. Hulme*, 282.

⁴⁸ *Machine Art* (MoMA March 6 to April 30, 1934), Alfred J. Barr, Jr. and Philip Johnson (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1934. Reprint by MoMA, 1994).

Pound's early discovery of Hudson Maxim: literary critic, linguist, inventor of the explosive "maximite," and consulting engineer for the Du Pont Corporation.⁴⁹ Pound reviews Maxim's book *The Science of Poetry and the Philosophy of Language* (1910), albeit not altogether favorably, in "The Wisdom of Poetry" (1912). In Pound's essay he publishes for the first time ideas about abstract mathematics that he later substantiates in *Gaudier*. "As the abstract mathematician is to science so is the poet to the world's consciousness."⁵⁰ The importance, however, is that "Machine Art" tends toward this latter idea of totality ("world's consciousness"). In it, Pound draws lines of flight from the machine in order to restructure society.

The turn toward the 1930s marks Pound's adoption of Leibnizian monads for models of thought: "The ideograph is a door into a different modality of thought."⁵¹ To attempt to differentiate between the existing and the threshold of what is possible, Pound deploys the machine in a strict metaphorical and analogical sense only. Celebrating and romanticizing the machine—to adopt them as isolated forms—falls prey to prior anagogic errors exemplified by Futurism. Pound's interests discard the pure *élan* of speed and the spiritual dynamism of motion. Machines, and specifically motors, permit a tangible demonstration of the vortex-totality. The analogy cascades relationships: machines are ensembles of particularities that perform precise functions. These particularities, while still maintaining their sovereignty—a bolt continues to bolt—participates in a larger ensemble. This larger construction, the machine, establishes a harmony of precision and function as more advanced tasks are carried out. All of which,

⁴⁹ Tichi, *Shifting Gears*, 93-95.

⁵⁰ Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose: 1909-1965* (London: Faber & Faber, 1973), p. 331.

⁵¹ Pound, *Machine Art*, 77.

it bears emphasizing, underscore themes of convenience and the prowess of the engineering mind.

Machines, as a corollary to art, deny any associations with the cult of beauty. In *Antheil* Pound stakes the position without elaboration: “A painting of a machine is like the painting of a painting. The lesson of machines is precision.”⁵² Beauty, a substitution for dealing with the artwork’s inner tensions, is inaccurate thought; beauty is a cultural symptom for the inability of art to be thought in terms of functioning components. Outside consumerism, thinking about machines in their abstract capacity to potentiate new relationships, Pound turns toward motion and space: “Considering the plastic of *form in motion*, we are brought almost suddenly to our second set of perceptions. I mean from considering a space art which never ceases to be a space art, we find ourselves on the brink of considering time and recurrence.”⁵³ Once we set form in motion as *forming* we confront a spatial arrangement of forms. This spatial arrangement is not a result of machine *expression*; machines do not express time and recurrence as poetry is said to express emotion. Expression for Pound must be thought of as a definite entity in itself. Poundian machines express a strain of forces: machines, like music, force us to rethink our lived relationships to time and recurrence.

Machinery, then, becomes narrative sequel to Antheil’s compositions: *Ballet Mécanique* is not the *expression of* chaos or any eschatology. This would exemplify thinking of expression in terms of substitution by expressing *something else*. Instead Antheil offers a chance to comprehend the dynamic intersection of forces—of

⁵² Pound, *Antheil*, 52.

⁵³ Pound, *Machine*, 71.

mathematical strains—which the musical act demonstrates capable of organizing. The harmonization of chaotic and simultaneous noises is a clear demonstration that factories maintain this identical potential modification. The goal, or aesthetic end, in reading Antheil is to ideate a way to cease the practices leading to “mean labour.” Pound moves always quickly beyond a traditional notion of expression: he begets a “second set of perceptions” that disallows any reinforcement of the existing up to and including any immediate affective relationship formed by the artwork.

Pound’s treatise on aesthetics—which by now he calls a “much abused term” and substitutes “plastic” in its place to avoid problems of personality and feeling—is also a treatise on the potentiality to restructure existing life: “Machinery: from the moment we consider it as having a plastic: concerned with its form in motion. This form you may consider in relation to its aptitude to an end.”⁵⁴ An artwork is “good” if it continues working, continues to carry out its precise task until its end is reached. Pound’s metaphor is the repeating decimal: great art continues articulating its problems throughout history so long as the inner tensions remain intact. Aligning art with machines—a spatial arrangement of strains indifferent to subjective interpellations—necessitates a type of inquiry that follows new lines of questioning: what does the artwork *produce*, what remains unresolved within it, and what field of objects does it continue to affect absolutely? As if Pound’s prior polemics on art were too ambiguous, he now sights his project with more acumen. Plastics, vide the logic of the machine’s interconnectedness, refuses the idea of isolation: art participates, and moreover, *forms* culture through machine-investigations. Pound establishes a sinuous line: beginning

⁵⁴ Ibid, 70.

with the renunciation of traditional aesthetics, he repositions the impact of machine plastics to overhaul present civilization:

It is possible that machinery will lead men to cooperate more sanely, and break up a too virulent concept of private property, in so far as that concept relates to machines; or it is equally possible that it won't, and that a nation imbecile enough to produce our current bureaucracy, copyright villainy, customs cretinism and paraphernalia, will merely fall into the pit of Byzantinism.⁵⁵

Far from making claims of fact, Pound's essay proffers a space for thinking that is a pure supposition—he is gambling on the side of machines.

Machine plastics is a gesture, like Antheil's compositions: Pound may be haphazardly in the wrong here, but his point relies upon following how objects emit forces for new and as yet unrealized relationships. Machines, then, like Antheil's music, act like so many *starting points* for the thinking through of new potentialities. Pound's successive castigations of all things existing require that we see it as a double-movement: his negation of the present is also a positive stance towards the possibility of absolute modification. Abiding by the role of the artist-engineer as the experimenter of the modern Pound attempts at every turn to demonstrate how art, if it is to be of any use, must open a moment for amendments to existing society—it must *produce a new potential*. Each artwork as a machine carries the characteristics of a Leibnizian monad by becoming a pure expression of a possible world.

To complement Pound's theories of expression and style, I would like to engage a perhaps unlikely source through Pound's journal *The Exile*. Running four issues between 1927 and 1928, accompanying his theorizations of machines of the same period, these documents from Rapallo enable Pound to take full editorial control and lay

⁵⁵ Ibid, 77.

bare his project. Moreover, Pound amplifies his notions of expression and style by way of reading Lenin. Under the heading “Bureaucracy” Pound says,

Apart from the social aspect he was of interest, technically, to serious writers. He never wrote a sentence that has any interest in itself, but he evolved almost a new medium, a sort of expression half way between writing and action. This was a definite creation, as the Napoleonic code was creation. Lenin observed that bureaucracy was an evil, and “meant” to eliminate it as fast as possible.⁵⁶

Lenin’s technique demonstrates a unique political expression: the elimination of bureaucracy at the level of the sentence. This “definite creation” exceeds the limits of genteel artistic production. Expression of forms in “whatever department of writing” maintain the capacity for absolute change. Lenin, an engineer operating with sentences, is worthy of a writer’s study because “he invented or nearly invented a new medium, something between speech and action (language as cathode ray).”⁵⁷ The equivocation of the expression of forms and the actualization of forms as modes of political life define the forces that constitute Pound’s idea of style.

Pound and Modernism

Pound’s idea of style, therefore, envelops and requires the political. Pound’s career emphasizes this requirement: Gaudier hacks off marble to construct a new civilization, Gourmont exteriorizes forms to alter the species, Antheil handles noise in order to restructure factory work, and Lenin, the most unlikely example for Pound, ideates a new mode of expression that rids us of bureaucratic inconveniences. All of Pound’s political engagements operate by inversion: nominalism to totality, aesthetics to *technē*, and style to world. What Pound’s career marks, from his Vorticism through his

⁵⁶ Ezra Pound, “Bureaucracy” *The Exile* 4 (Autumn 1928), pp. 6-7.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 116.

support of Benito Mussolini, is the belief that artist-engineers must engage political life. In this way Pound's idea of style, according to the ideogrammatic mandate that noun and verb converge, forever requires style-as-action. Style, then, like form requires the noun to be enwrapped with action. But Pound's logic of inversion carries with it a potential hazard by confusing the idea of politics itself. The process of world building turns against itself as Pound's narrative becomes a classic tragedy: his own project leads to his own undoing. And this, we should note, becomes a synecdoche for modernisms.

Jacques Rancière assists in demarcating the consequences of such a move and permits defining Pound's modernism in elementary terms. Art in this paradigm aligns with *politics*. What art, as both noun and verb, encounters is the *police*. Rancière says of the police:

The police is thus first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being, and ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and the other as noise.⁵⁸

The police become associated with *law* through the embodiment of the existing distributed regime of bodies and occupations. For example, an "artist" as it is defined in Pound's historical moment delimits each and every modification he desires amended. Capitalism begins to exert pressure and consign art the nonplussed position as an expression of consumable personality; no more can the work be a definite entity of creation: it must express something *other*, it must become a substitutable expression—a *fetish*—of consumerism. The artist, then, must become a non-participant of consumer

⁵⁸ Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), p. 29.

culture and embody an expression against police logic. This monadic anti-culture stance is dialectic in itself because one must not about-face culture absolutely; this turn must initiate the avenue to build a new culture. In this way, art is politics in that it exists as “an extremely determined activity antagonistic to policing: whatever breaks with the tangible configuration whereby parties and parts or lack of them are defined by a presumption that, by definition, has no place in that configuration.”⁵⁹ Pound, as artist and theorist of the arts, aims toward a total reintegration of parts and wholes. By these definitions, however, Rancière prohibits the coercion of politics by police: the two must forever be antagonistic and never overlap. Policed-politics forgoes the political and political-police speaks impossibility.

But does not Pound’s modernism exemplify precisely this dangerous trespass? I would argue that concomitant to the production of Pound’s aesthetic theory, another traceable line exists that would confound it at each and every step: his developing anti-Semitism starting in *Blast*. By 1935, Pound’s *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* proclaims, “I am a flat-chested highbrow. I can ‘cure’ the whole trouble simply by criticism of style. Oh, can I? Yes. I have been saying so for some time.”⁶⁰ Style occupies precisely this double position of politics and police; it is as if Pound conflates politics/police to become an inseparable set of tensions in superposition. But simply because Pound’s style runs aground due to this convergence does not forecast the same fate for other modernisms. To do so requires a siding with politics in Pound’s theories of form. This haphazard parceling out becomes quite possible: Pound’s reading of Lenin exemplifies the type of

⁵⁹ Ibid, 29-30.

⁶⁰ Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 17.

separation involved via inversion. Pound, absolute despiser of Bolshevism and all conquered Marxisms, reads Lenin's political theory as the *police* and thereby locates a method for singling out Lenin's invention of a *political mode of expression*. All expression for Pound is politicized; all artistic expressions refuse the "is" of lived worlds and project a steadfast "as if" indictment. The actionable vortex is the image of the "as if" world in its totality.

Pound admits with some lucidity a problem in a 1962 interview with Donald Hall in the *Paris Review*. Pound is asked if his own style—precise expression enabling the constitution of a better world—can be used by the wrong party. Pound replies, "Yes. That's the whole trouble! A gun is just as good, no matter who shoots it."⁶¹ Pound notes a certain level of ambidextrousness to his modernism. And we know well the trajectory his modernism followed. But this does not prohibit, and it did not prohibit, a continuation of Pound's modernism that did not veer, that did not confuse the political with the police. Pound summarizes the paradox: "there is always the problem of rectification without giving up what is correct."⁶² This, I think, is the metonymic challenge Pound's modernism implies about modernisms as we have inherited them. As Pound says, the distinguishing moment is the ability to not sign on the dotted line for the opposition—to not throw out Pound's modernism with the bath water—and to maintain the political thread in Pound's aesthetic theory as a direct confrontation to a closed world.

Pound's modernism, as I have argued, periodizes itself: from Imagism to Vorticism, from the historical avant-garde to the economic fall-out that reconfigures

⁶¹ Ezra Pound, "Interview with Donald Hall" *Paris Review* 28 (1962), p. 41.

⁶² *Ibid*, 48.

modernisms in the 1930s. But Pound's last period, I would argue, must not be periodized by Pound himself. *The Exile* marks a moment of handing off the baton: Pound relays to a second generation of modernists who continue his modernism by simultaneously rectifying and yet still retaining what is correct at its core. If a table of contents may be read symbolically, the third issue of *The Exile* contains an insightful periodization: W. B. Yeats, E. P., and Louis Zukofsky. Within the same issue Pound's desperation becomes clear.

Quite simply: I want a new civilization. We have the basis for a new poetry, and for a new music. The government of our country is hopelessly low-brow, there are certain crass stupidities in administration that it is up to the literate members of the public to eradicate. Voilà tout.⁶³

Pound's last period splits off into two trajectories: we may follow Pound into oblivion—trying to force his *Cantos* to “cohere” and justify the “New Paideuma”—or we may let them stand as a hazard sign and look to the artists he recruits to be the next Poundians. Perhaps then we can begin to understand the paradoxical move Pound makes in *The Exile*: a Lithuanian Jew, Louis Zukofsky, becomes appointed as head of the first Poundian office in New York. Pound's project, as Zukofsky's career evinces, becomes the apparatus to encounter a thoroughly Marxist concept of forms.

But Pound went mad; this should never be argued against. The reason for his recklessness is curious still. He traversed many false and incorrect paths—from usury, to monetary reforms, to fascism—but his attempt to establish the vortex as a method for reconstructing and rearranging gains traction. The epic, and indeed the task of poetry after Pound, aims toward representing the complex series of relationships and processes of exchange that constitute modernity. As we will see, none of the politics, or

⁶³ Ezra Pound, “Desideria” *The Exile* 3 (Spring 1928), p. 108.

by now we should say “policings,” that Pound espoused were imbued into his totalizing method. Many would be able to see in a young Pound that his project was set to derail. And many did. Perhaps this is why the idea of totality is maintained within the epics that come after, but the political trajectories and the contents of the projects traverse along altogether different tracks whose destinations include suburban New Jersey, urban New York, and Black Mountain, North Carolina. A contradiction doubles back on itself repeatedly as Pound will become to others what Lenin was to Pound. In 1946, while interviewing Pound during his trial for *Twice-a-Year*, an exasperated and frustrated Charles Olson writes about his encounters: “In Pound I am confronted by the tragic Double of our day. He is the demonstration of our duality. In language and form he is as forward, as much the revolutionist as Lenin. But in social, economic and political action he is as retrogressive as the Czar.”⁶⁴ We should merely emphasize the doubling for now.

⁶⁴ Charles Olson, *Charles Olson & Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths* ed. Catherine Seelye (New York: Grossman, 1975), p. 53.

CHAPTER 3 WILLIAM CARLOS WILLIAMS AND THE MODULATION OF PLACE

By orienting William Carlos Williams' work toward the idea of a social totality we see two elements in the scholarship on Williams come together into a diagnostic totality. The idea of reading his modernism in the form of a diagnostic, as Brian Bremen has argued in *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture*, opens the possibility of situating Williams in a thoroughly social, if not cultural, trajectory. The idea of reading modernism in terms of a diagnostic seems quite productive. Here we could combine distant cousins in this theoretical camp to include Adorno's imperative that an artwork's contradictions throw into relief the totality of social antagonisms, Fredric Jameson's use of uneven development, and T. J. Clark's idea of reading modernism as a wind tunnel where "modernity and its modes were pushed deliberately to breaking point."¹ Modernism becomes a historical period defined by its continued, and often extreme, experience of and response to the processes of modernity itself. These experiences and responses become the raw material for the intellectual and artistic experiments carried out by modernist practitioners. These experiments, for us, still carry significant echoes in that they delineate a heterogeneous set of strategies to confront and question various stages of socio-political development.

Within this context I think we can better understand the importance of Bremen's early conceptual framework of reading *Paterson* as a form of cognitive mapping:

"To free the language"—Williams's project in *Paterson*—implies a personal, economic, and political freedom that is Williams's utopian goal. And while

¹ See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), p. 323; Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) and *Late Marxism: Adorno or the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990); T. J. Clark, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and Steam" *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 154–174, p. 165. In my reading, Jameson's "symptoms" function in this same diagnostic mode.

this goal is never reached in *Paterson*—it is, in fact, barely articulated positively—the act of diagnosis contained in this work provides us with a cognitive mapping of the textual space that constitutes our local position in the modern city.²

Since Bremen's work positions itself theoretically alongside Jameson's stratagem of cognitive mapping, it seems a worthwhile addition to include Jameson's essay wherein Williams' *Paterson* becomes the focal point by opening up a reading of modernism in terms of totality.³

I think that a careful reading of both Bremen and Jameson demonstrates the interdependence of both terms—diagnostic and totality—which I would argue become a dialectical pair necessary to understand the historical significance of Williams' modernism. This conceptual framework assists in contextualizing the importance Williams placed on fluctuating categories, modulating the local and universal, and understanding his involvement in the 1930s and 1940s "culture wars" with T. S. Eliot and the New York intellectuals as represented by *Partisan Review*. What this exercise will show is the redundancy of my own terms as diagnosing will already be included within totality's counter-process against reification. It will also align Williams' modernism with a process-oriented symbolic textual production: historical, cultural, and social paradigms are diagnosed for their systemic errors and failures (i.e., Williams' themes of culture, divorce, and the ideological impasse of autonomous categories) but are also simultaneously re-imagined as concrete processes. For example, *Paterson*, New

² Brian Bremen, *William Carlos Williams and the Diagnostics of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993), p. 164.

³ See Frederic Jameson, "The Poetics of Totality," *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 3-44.

Jersey, is the textual-geographic site where social relations are reexamined and reconfigured.

That Williams constellates his poetics—from *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, to concepts like “contact” and “culture,” and finally in the “The radiant gist that / resists the final crystallization” of *Paterson*⁴—underscores the idea that his heterogeneous and shifting category speaks directly to his diagnosis of a logic of separation paired with a disavowal of autonomy. Here the very frequent theme of anti-intellectualism for Williams becomes itself a symptom of an anti-totalizing tendency. Intellectualism is code for the reification of the Absolute:

Philosophy has been the chief offender in this respect with its pursuit of “the Absolute” which is nothing whatever—outside of philosophy. Science has been even worse with its search for the origin of “life.” Both the absolute and life belong to entirely different categories than the ones in which they are being searched for. The absolute belongs to the whole group of categories as a whole, and life to the intrinsic group common to the plants and animals where science is not extant.⁵

A much tabooed belief for us, perhaps as distant as the possibility for new social relations in themselves, Williams believes that Language is the medium where categories will once again enter a complex process whose effects will be seen, first, through a change in consciousness (such as the “variable foot” and a new poetic line), and second, through the imaginative reconfiguration and reordering of the existing social whole; an ideology, surely, but a largely productive one in this case.

For example, the fluctuations between poetry and prose in Williams’ artistic practice necessarily move beyond mere formalistic and stylistic experiments and enter a

⁴ William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1992), p. 109.

⁵ William Carlos Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*. (New York: New Directions, 1974), p. 123.

process of socio-political interrogation and expression. This does not mean that the “political” arrives after the fact as an after-image, but as Williams tells us, his poetic project itself has always put symbolic textual production at an even pace with imagined social constructions. The act of constructing takes predominance over the finished—completed and therefore “whole”—poem:

For I think that only by an understanding of my “theory of the poem” will you be able to reconcile my patent failures with whatever I have done that seems worthwhile. . . . The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture, the lifting of an environment to expression. Thus it is social, the poem is a social instrument—accepted or not accepted seems to be of no material importance.⁶

The artist in Williams’ aesthetic program becomes the figure who confronts and mediates the dilemmas of totality by first ideating how a new and total culture is imagined and then determining how it could possibly be expressed. It is in this sense that we may say that artworks operate as failed placeholders for totalities.

A diagnostic totality, then, tends toward a horizon of possibility as the outcome of a dialectical process. As Jameson tells us elsewhere, “It is a conception which includes the diagnosis of blocks and limits to knowledge (reification as what suppresses the ability to grasp totalities) as well as the enumeration of positive new features (the capacity to think in terms of process).”⁷ As quoted by Bremen above, we could say Williams indeed “barely articulated positively” the social totality of Paterson—even perhaps to the same degree that he failed to articulate the new American idiom—

⁶ William Carlos Williams, *The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1984), p. 286.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, “History and Class Consciousness as an ‘Unfinished Project,’” *Rethinking Marxism* 1.1 (Spring 1988): 49-72, p. 66.

because both tasks involve outlining the ideological blockages that will be overcome in the historical future. Timothy Bewes summarizes totality in terms of social change by stating that “an acknowledgement of the extremity—the *totality*—of the situation is a condition for changing that situation; totalization is a quality of any situation which requires urgent change, and in which change is immanent.”⁸ The diagnosing of existing social relations and their supposed historical facticity often takes the form of a negation, which in turn opens new and often unforeseen avenues that anticipate future horizons of possibility where reified objects, relations, and concepts are again reconstituted in the differentiated and heterogeneous social totality.

If we take *Paterson* as an abbreviated example, it is no accident that there is a slippage of names between the central poetic figure and the geographic locale of Paterson. To borrow an analogy from Neil Smith, in *Paterson* Williams provides a new structural puzzle by giving us the four corners of a noun—“Paterson” boxes the compass of a noun by being a person, place, thing, and idea (and sometimes a dog)—in which any attempt to render one corner simultaneously means putting the whole puzzle to work.⁹ The epic structure itself, perhaps a direct continuation of Ezra Pound’s aesthetic project, dissolves into a series of processes. At the level of a lexical category alone we see a miniature symbolic reenactment of a complex historical process: history, consciousness, and material constructions develop and interpenetrate in a complex metabolic process.

⁸ Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 254.

⁹ See Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital and the Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p. 52.

And it seems important that this interplay of social relations exists in the specific locale of the American small town of New Jersey in the 1940s. As Susan Hegeman has argued, American modernism might function like so many satellite or periphery modernisms in contradistinction to the European cosmopolitan modernisms usually connoted under the banner of an international modernism.

This experience, rather than reflecting a seamless parade of jazz, cars, and steel, is, rather, marked by a perception of uneven development, and even friction, between those sites of modernization's greatest impact and the places that it touched less completely. Thus, as Frederic Jameson has argued, modernism can be best characterized by "the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or Ford plant in the distance."¹⁰

To be a nativist American modernist means that you must necessarily consider the relationship of periphery to core as the byproduct of uneven development: for example, there are multiple cultural traffic jams domestically (the simultaneity of New York City and the New Agrarians or the lingering ideology of the "frontier") and also internationally (the emerging ideology of the Third World). This necessary and dialectical relationship then assists in explaining the importance of place and geography for Williams as a mutable and reciprocal process in contradistinction to Eliot's teleological and hierarchical model.

Uneven development provides a frame to examine in historical terms those events crucial to the experience of modernity—alienation, fragmentation, disillusionment, etc.—but also returns us back to totality. Experiencing the technological, intellectual, and economic shifts—for example, a Fordist to post-Fordist labor reconfiguration—produces

¹⁰ Susan Hegeman, *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999), p. 20.

contradictory ideologies to be rejected or confronted. When Eliot says, “you can not expect to have all stages of development at once; that a civilization cannot simultaneously produce great folk poetry at one cultural level and *Paradise Lost* at another,” the absolute rejection of uneven development becomes a problematic ideology (not to mention the problems inherent to *levels* of culture).¹¹ This is not to say that Eliot’s dismissal is not proof of uneven development’s existence—surely it is an index of exactly this—but his reaction becomes contextualized. Eliot’s writings on culture poignantly mark the process of imperialism shifting from a Euro-British context to the emerging global context of American mass production (his disdain for Hollywood film is perhaps the finest example). That Eliot and Pound abandoned the American Midwest for being culturally *underdeveloped* acts as another verification stamp of uneven development’s presence. To be more specific, Williams’ experience of “Americanism,” full of chickens and red wheelbarrows, exists precisely as an unevenly developing foil to Eliot’s longing return to a thoroughly bourgeois social whole. As Franco Moretti would say, we are approaching two contending ideologies of modernism: Eliot’s monologic social construction dreams of terminating the volatile polyphony of Williams’ totality.¹²

But we also immediately find a common relay point between Eliot and Williams with the ideology of “Americanism” itself. As Hegeman says, “One place to bridge the

¹¹ T. S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 24.

¹² See Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996). Here I am referring to Moretti’s discussion of Eliot in opposition to Joyce and Woolf: “But polyphonic futurity—which Eliot, in the conversation with Woolf, seemed basically to like—has now become anarchy: a danger, to be kept under control. *And this is precisely the purpose served by myth: to tame polyphony. To give it a form and a meaning. One. As I said earlier, The Waste Land is not a shorter Ulysses—it is a monologic Ulysses*” (227).

gap between modernism's internationalism and the American context is with an account of modernism that takes seriously the centrality of the ideology of *Americanism* to modernist theory and practice."¹³ Williams' modernism cannot be read without centralizing the ideology of Americanism. For example, in 1936 Williams participated in "A Symposium on Americanism and the American Tradition" that responded to the central question, "What is Americanism?" Williams responds by saying that the American tradition is marked by European separation some four hundred years ago: "From that point it became a separate thing, or attempted to become so. It failed in large part because of the inability of the men of that day to absorb the new ideology."¹⁴ The new ideology, for the remainder of the essay, remains undefined. It becomes the American "spirit" that crushes all new ideas from Tom Paine, Gene Debs, and Bill Haywood and continues its way through to the conquering of Marxism and fascism:

Marxism to the American spirit is only another phase of force opposed to liberalism. It takes a tough theory to survive America; and America thinks it has that theory. Therefore it will smile and suffer, quite secure in its convictions that through all the rottenness, all the political corruption, all the cheap self-interest of its avowedly ruling moneyed class—that it can and will take care of itself when the crisis arrives.¹⁵

This description seems shockingly contemporary to me because I think here Williams defines the seeds of American neo-liberalism—or at least anticipating the conservative "new liberalism" to come in the postwar era—and attempts to question a problematic cultural tradition ("tradition" being a negatively tinged Eliotic term).

¹³ Hegeman, *Patterns*, 21.

¹⁴ William Carlos Williams, "What is Americanism?" *The Partisan Review and Anvil* 3.3 (April 1936): 13-4, p. 13.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 14.

In the following account, then, I want to map how Williams' modernism constructs a diagnostic totality in response to the uneven economic changes experienced during the 1930s and 1940s within the context of the emerging ideology of "America." Rather than stop at the 1940s, however, I want to argue that Williams' project of a poetic totality—which, again, is always a relay for a social totality—remains unfinished and incomplete. This occurs, I think, not only because the task of totalizing itself prescribes incompleteness as a primary ingredient, but also due to the fact that the ideology that becomes "America" at this historical moment diverges from what Williams poetically imagines. In this Williams' modernism becomes a vanishing mediator for an altogether different American ideology than the one we inherited. Ours bears a much larger resemblance to a deeper process of reification that becomes consolidated in Henry Luce's famous coining of the "American Century."

Toward Process via Locality

At the turn of the 1920s into the 1930s, Williams' career demonstrates three important changes. First, he sets the course for his own distinctly American modernism in response to the failing European modernisms of Pound and Eliot. Here I mean failure in that the latter modernisms do not provide a workable frame for which to think through the crises Williams experiences. Second, Williams participates in a second wave of modernism that operates in a space between the Popular Front of the same decade and the radical conservatism of figures like Pound and Eliot. Thirdly, Williams begins to think through the politics of place with more acumen than previous decades. This thinking is first approached through the conceptualization of totality as a way of refuting generic autonomous categories. Then, however, Williams begins to experiment with this concept by producing texts that attempt to constitute the idea of process itself.

Paul Mariani offers an interesting periodization of Williams' career. As late as 1929 he sees Williams writing a manifesto that distinguishes his modernism from the neoscholasticism of Pound and Eliot.¹⁶ Mariani points to Williams' contribution to the final issue of *The Little Review*, "A Tentative Statement," where Williams articulates a counterattack on abstraction, the disassociation of knowledge from place, and, as a combination of the prior two, he outlines his trajectory in terms of being rooted in America: "I intend a construction, something at least wrong, from the senseless world of modern American writing."¹⁷ Wrongness here is in reference to corrective motifs of cultural (or Kulchural) restoration being performed by Pound and Eliot. For these two modernity fractures culture into monotony, standardization, and, uniformity and this, in turn, requires a corrective intervention on behalf of the threatened cultured class. But wrongness also means that Williams is wrong for staying in America where only a vulgarized version of European culture exists:

I wish to say this quite coldly. Eliot and Pound both had a mass of adjustments built up which had no touch with America. . . . Neither one of them, I think, believes that he is paying or knows the cost. Pound, with his "artificial pearl" is fastening his simulacrum of his source on the page. But Eliot has philosophically, I think, renounced America much more fully. He has completely gone over to a past. He believes he has stepped up into culture. But I insist he has stepped down from power. I believe he is not only poetically but philosophically mistaken.¹⁸

"America" as an emerging ideological concept—a concept, like the views of the Popular Front of the 1930s, Williams sees as essentially refusing definition—serves to contradict Eurocentric cosmopolitanisms. The bifurcation becomes evident enough: for Pound and

¹⁶ Paul Mariani, *William Carlos Williams: A New World Naked* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1981), p. 271.

¹⁷ William Carlos Williams, "A Tentative Statement" *The Little Review* 12.2 (May 1929): 95-98, p. 98.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 97-8.

Eliot America is modern in a pejorative sense while Europe still provides hope for an anti-modern counter (be it in London, Rapallo, Paris, etc., anywhere but Detroit or the Midwest in general).

That Mariani posits a shift in Williams' career in 1929 coincides with other important events that reconfigure the scope of his modernism: the influenza epidemic of 1929, which becomes the subject matter of his first prose publication of the 1930s, "Novelette and Other Prose," the Wall Street crash of the same year, and a new friendship with Louis Zukofsky through Pound's introduction. Not surprisingly, the theme of social reconfiguration takes precedence in Williams' work through the interrogation of category. As he says in *Novelette*, "Pound will say that the improvisations are—etc. etc. twenty, forty years late. On the contrary, he's all wet. Their excellence is, in major part, the shifting of category. It is the disjoining process."¹⁹ It is also important that this inquiry into category is offset by two successive crises. Therefore, when Williams confronts Eliot as public enemy number one for the next two decades, we should keep in mind that Williams' responses are very much informed by the contradictory experiences of the crises of capitalism itself.

The 1930s mark for Williams a continued effort towards rethinking the problems inherent to categorization. The problem of categorical divisions, and the belief in parceling knowledge into autonomous parts, elevates in importance by several degrees after 1929. To use David Harvey's phrase, the crises of that year placed capitalism's

¹⁹ William Carlos Williams, "Novelette and Other Prose," *Imaginations* (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 285.

“irrational rationalizations” into sharp relief.²⁰ Problems of core and periphery, high and low, vulgarity and erudition become so many symptoms of deep historically structured inequalities that are experienced with more intensity. We should also include within this list the problems that carry over from before the 1930s: the separation of science and philosophy, rationality and irrationality, homogeneity and heterogeneity, atomization and fragmentation, and so on.

For instance, in 1932 Williams again restarts the publication of his periodical, *Contact*, with the editorial assistance of Robert McAlmon and Nathaniel West. Comparing this second run with the initial publication (1920-1923, co-edited with McAlmon), we see informative differences: *Contact* of the 1920s, with several comic asides, poetic and narrative experiments, and the required review of a cultural event or book, tells of the struggling attempt of America to define its own native avant-garde. As the magazine resurfaces in the 1930s, this American avant-garde has working-class and Jewish contours. Many of the contributors Williams publishes are his fellow Objectivists: Carl Rakosi, Charles Reznikoff, and Zukofsky. A trio of radical New York booksellers—Martin Kamin along with David and Sally Moss—interested in working with McAlmon’s Contact Publications financed the magazine. When McAlmon declined the book offer the opportunity for a periodical was extended to Williams and West. Disbanded after three issues—all published within 1932—Williams refuses to continue the magazine over disagreements with the financiers over the tone of the magazine:

²⁰ David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital: and the Crises of Capitalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2010). Harvey offers an acutely summative description: “Crises are, as it were, the irrational rationalizers of an always unstable capitalism” (71).

Williams is not willing to promote the Communist Party nor be as radical in print as is requested.²¹

Williams is, however, quite politically active in *Contact*. To close the final issue, the two editors—Williams and West—both defend what they perceive as distinctively American concepts: vulgarity and violence. In response to a recent article in *The Criterion* where *Contact* is critiqued due to its violent content, West's comments take the form of a social realism by arguing that due to recent crises violence has become ingrained in American daily life and should therefore not be censored in literature:

In America violence is idiomatic. Read our newspapers. To make the front page a murderer has to use his imagination, he also has to use a particularly hideous instrument. Take this morning's paper: FATHER CUTS SON'S THROAT IN BASEBALL ARGUMENT.²²

West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*, published the following year, traces violence as it circulates through society with the regularity of the daily newspaper; violence, theft, rape, and misery are the necessary byproducts of industrial capitalism. Quite peculiar and appearing in new forms, these labor-forms produce an interesting type of commodity: the tabloid.

Williams' last words in *Contact* are a direct response to Eliot's recent return to Harvard in 1931 to lecture on Milton and neoclassicism: "There is a heresy, regarding the general character of poetry, which has become widely prevalent today and may shortly become more so through academic fostering: it is, that poetry increases in virtue as it is removed from contact with a vulgar world."²³ The loaded terms Williams uses—

²¹ Mariani, 319-335.

²² Nathaniel West, "Some Notes on Violence," *Contact* 1.3 (October 1932): 132-133, p. 132.

²³ William Carlos Williams, "Comment," *Contact* 1.3 (October 1932): 131-132, p. 131.

“virtue” in opposition to “contact” and “vulgarity”—brings to a head all the problems of the prior decade that are now, during the Depression, compounded exponentially.

Virtue, in Eliot’s usage, is anti-modern and anti-American. For Williams, Eliot represents a problematic ideology that runs throughout American history. *In the American Grain* attempted to map out this problematic genealogy, especially in terms of a fear of contact:

The poor are ostracized. Cults are built to abolish them, as if they were cockroaches, and not human beings who may not want what we have in such abundance. THAT would be an offense an American could not stomach. So down with them. Let everybody be rich and so EQUAL. What a farce! But what a tragedy! It rests upon false values and fear to discover them. Do not serve another for you might have to TOUCH him and he might be a JEW or a NIGGER.²⁴

Virtue becomes another code word for categorical division, a term denoting a denial of contact and a fear of contamination. Vulgarity, of course, becomes code for classism and racism.

To counter this divisional thinking, which essentially excludes Williams from high cultural institutions and university syllabi—notes to Floss about plums would be quite vulgar indeed—Williams says, “I cannot swallow the half-alive poetry which knows nothing of totality.”²⁵ An emerging concept for Williams in the 1930s, and one that becomes more developed through his relationship with Kenneth Burke, totality becomes a method of incorporating problematic social relations into poetry and examining their very construction. Discovering that ideologies like “America” are constructed similar to the very material strata of history itself opens the opportunity towards reconstruction—

²⁴ William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1925), pp. 176-7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 131.

part and parcel of the same process or movement. Williams, similar to West's reading of violence as an American idiom, is more closely aligned to Marx's idea that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."²⁶ That Williams reads American communism as an essentially heretic kind of thinking in terms of the Party—especially the idea that literature should be proletarian grotesque or agitprop—should not subtract from the implicit idea that his modernism confronts how a specific geographical location provides an opportunity for examining both culture and history as concrete processes. It also means that we should refuse to be nostalgic or sentimental towards the idea of the "Party ."

Totality is not an abstract category for Williams. It is, rather, a spatial concept that clusters with other keywords in his repertoire: contact, place, and culture being other processes within his constellation. For example, place cannot be understood without totality and vice versa. A totality, while scalable, must be placed. In fact, any system effectuating social structures can be a totality so long as it is *placed*. For example, a totality is much more readily understood in its reified form as America, New Jersey, or Paterson. Continuing with the idea of scalability we could turn to Burke's micro-example of totality through the post office:

Any single worker, handling the letter in its various stages of transit, interprets the address as instructions for a different kind of operation. Its "totality" is in the organized interlocking of these operations themselves, whereby each "specialist," performing a "partial" act, yet contributes to the performing of a "total" act, the entire arc of the letter's transit, from insertion in the mailbox at the corner to delivery at the door.

²⁶ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (London: Praeger Publishers, 1971), p. 20-1.

This kind of meaning I should call a *semantic* meaning. And extending from that I should state, as the semantic ideal, the aim *to evolve a vocabulary that gives the name and address of every event in the universe.*²⁷

The post office creates the opportunity to exemplify a totality in terms of a complex set of social relations and acts that constitute a whole. That Burke chooses one of the few socialized programs in the United States to exemplify a totality is perhaps more telling; the point at which we have addressed every event in the universe is utopia.

The imminent contradiction, however, is the symbolic act of transferring the idea of totality and its consequent ideal of reintegrating reified social facts as relationships and complex processes into an artistic form. This is the problem faced by Burke and Williams in the 1930s and beyond. In the posthumously published 1932 manuscript, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, Williams attempts to make the very form and content of the text itself a process. The text—solicited and finally rejected by Burke for its incomprehensibility—attempts to allegorize the process of writing with knowledge. For example, the text constantly begins again with multiple first chapters, redoubles on its premises, and aims to eliminate “knowledge” as an abstraction. As Williams attempts to describe it, the text is “an elucidation of the relationship between humanity and the body of knowledge as it exists in the world and to relieve both of what seems to me a burden of misunderstanding as it exists between them.”²⁸ Perhaps the incomprehensibility comes from the immense scope of the project itself, but we should not dismiss Williams’ attempt to rethink the relationship between humanity and an abstracted body of knowledge.

²⁷ Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1974), p. 141.

²⁸ Williams, *Embodiment*, 60.

The key point for Williams, then, is that knowledge is not an abstract concept. A “body of knowledge” cannot exist unless it is a complex whole of particular bodies of knowledge. A philosophical inquiry into knowledge as an autonomous category is a useless task. In its place, Williams offers his knowledge. In this way the failure of the text performs the failure of the category of knowledge. Williams knows of no knowledge except for the process by which he acquired his own; and this knowledge is informed by *place*. The text is then a demonstration of this process: from the education of the American male, the pedagogy of Hippocrates, lessons in the interpretation of French painting, to theses on Shakespeare. The concept of knowledge becomes a process much like Burke’s post office in that only by having an infinite number of texts produced by everyone about their specific and situated knowledge would the concept of “knowledge” be understood. Williams’ contribution to this unrealizable goal can only be a mere part, an *embodied aspect* of the totality of knowledge. Crucially, however, we should note that Williams’ theory of knowledge maintains the ability of a singularity (i.e., “Williams”) to not lose or forfeit any features that differentiate it from another singularity when combined into a collective. In such a configuration these singularities form a *composition* and not an *opposition*. We have a theory that not only considers unevenness, but also thrives on it.

Here we see Williams initiating a type of thinking that he will pursue through the following decades. Knowledge becomes an ensemble of interrelated parts—a whole without unity—that is itself a process initiated by a place. Williams is already working in terms of a local (or particular) and universal dialectic: knowledge as a universal exists only through the complex processes and relationships that produce so many

differentiated and multifarious individual knowledges. And since a person constitutes this very knowledge-process, the metonymic relationship forefends any moment of stasis; the whole category shifts along with the parts. Williams may be known for his distaste of (“intellectual”) philosophy, but his thinking seems to feature the sheer positivity in thinking metaphysics in terms of *becoming*. Knowledge in its autonomous form, as a category that problematizes and answers unto itself, does not exist. Like any other concept it marks the constant exceeding and surpassing of limits—*it is production and differentiation at all moments*. Start from any person, in any place, and you gain an aspect of the process of knowledge through the metabolic relationship between individual and place. Thus, place, in reciprocal fashion, is not abstract: the concept of place acts as proxy for the succession of historical processes effectuated in particular places.

The seemingly abstract idea of knowledge as an unknowable complex whole becomes its inverse: concrete in its very spatial configuration, knowledge comes back down to earth and mediates relationships. If we substitute the concepts of place or culture within this paradigm we see again the same interpenetration of local and universal: culture only exists as an ensemble of local cultures that are themselves constituted by a specific geographical and historical process. Refuse any parts, even the most vulgar or violent ones, and the conception of the whole is false. Knowledge, like culture, must take into account the social forces that produce anomalous outliers.

Therefore, totalizing concepts like knowledge, place, and culture require a type of thought based on process and modulation. There is no reified thing called knowledge, place, or culture; but there are mediating processes that, as a whole, constitute the

category of complex relationships implied under each term. The problem Williams forces us to confront is that there are no conceptual equivalents to the processes inferred by the seemingly isolated phenomena of terms like “place,” “culture,” “knowledge,” or “Paterson.” Accordingly, Williams takes up the discourses of art and aesthetics to ideate poetic and narrative analogues whose inherent contradictions often leave us frustrated and awaiting evasion: artistic objects are both historical and concrete, sensuous and particular. Perhaps now we can understand Williams’ emphasis of process (to always begin again): “*Beginning*: Nothing less is intended than a revolution in thought with writing as the fulcrum, by means of which—and the accidental place, any place, therefore America—one like another, therefore where we happen to be, our locality, as base.”²⁹ We cannot unequally weight either process or locality as both terms implicate the other. When we approach Williams’ arguments regarding culture the point should be maintained. The result of this reading becomes strategic: Williams’ modernism becomes a project of totalizing concepts through dialectical processes. For example, dialectical nature for Williams becomes tied to the cultural act of constructing a metabolic and heterogeneous whole.

The burning need of a culture is not a choice to be made or not made, voluntarily, any more than it can be satisfied by loans. It has to be where it arises, or everything related to the life there ceases. It isn’t a thing: it’s an act. If it stands still, it is dead. It is the realization of the qualities of a place in relation to the life which occupies it; embracing everything involved, climate, geographic position, relative size, history, other cultures—as well as the character of its sands, flowers, minerals and the condition of knowledge within its borders. It is the act of lifting these things into an ordered and utilized whole which is culture. It isn’t something left over afterward. That is the record only. The act is the thing.³⁰

²⁹ Ibid, 98.

³⁰ Williams, *Selected Essays*, 157.

Unreliability and Culture

By the 1940s Williams pursues the idea of totality in an important two-fold arrangement. He simultaneously maintains his arguments with Eliot regarding artistic practices and theories of culture while at the same time enacting these theories within his artistic practice. When Eliot publishes part of his *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* in *Partisan Review* in 1944, Williams' response, while not published, creates a middling space between the radical Right of Eliot and the emerging New Left of the New York School. Both the Right and Left argue for problematic ideas of cultural autonomy and hierarchy through the guises of elite culture, the admonishment of kitsch, and a return to "pure" artistic practices. Thus *Paterson*, published shortly after, needs to be read as a counter to Eliot's project of elitism, which has been argued several times before, by Bremen included. But I also want to read *Paterson* as a counter to the New York School, especially Clement Greenberg, by being thoroughly *engaged*—in opposition to Greenberg's aesthetic reification through *disengagement*—through a totalizing process. In combating both, Williams cancels out the contradictions of social and artistic wholes: they cannot be at once hierarchical and equal; they cannot mend schizoid divisions with further logics of separation.

In the winter of 1944, *Partisan Review* published Williams' poem "These Purists." The purists, seemingly artistic and cultural aficionados, separate objects from unwanted contexts in order to consume them:

Lovely! All the essential parts,
like an oyster without a shell
fresh and sweet tasting, to be
swallowed, chewed and swallowed.

Purism is a belief in essential things: the pure portion of an oyster exists without the unpalatable shell. Its symbol, moreover, is *taste*. The second half of the poem provides us with a counter image:

Or better, a brain without a
skull. I remember once a guy in
our anatomy class dropped one
from the third floor window on
an organ grinder in Pine Street.³¹

The brain, the figure of pure intellectuality, becomes a weapon; dropped from on high it hits a lower street musician. The two levels, high and low, remain separate except for the perforation of the brain. But the brain is dead and was perhaps never pure. Now we gain an image of one of Williams' medical schoolmates at Pennsylvania Hospital on Pine Street using the impure brain as a water balloon. Here issues of taste become jokes. Thus the abstraction of purity—of exquisite taste—becomes leveled in one vulgar and placed act.

By coincidence, then, in the next issue of *Partisan Review* Eliot publishes part of *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. The breadth of aristocratic villainy and theoretical piracy enacted by Eliot in this text is extensive enough: the justification of imperialism, the contractual linking of culture with religion, the *natural* separation of human beings into classes, the reinforcement of nationalism, and the ideology of family as a source of inheriting power. To avoid a cascading argument that confronts all these overlapping theses, I want to focus particularly on the process of reification within the text. Eliot's concept of culture is a *thing* much like the essential and tasty portion of an oyster. What we might call Eliot's culture concept resembles more and more an

³¹ William Carlos Williams, "These Purists," *Partisan Review* 11.1 (Winter 1944): 42.

orthodox pedagogical precept that prescribes and enforces societal strictures. As Eliot tells us, culture gains its identity through the reproduction and traditional repetition of things:

Taking now the point of view of identification, the reader must remind himself, as the author has constantly to do, of how much is here embraced by the term *culture*. It includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people: Derby Day, Henley Regatta, Cowes, the twelfth of August, a cup final, the dog races, the pin table, the dart board, Wensleydale cheese, boiled cabbage cut into sections, beetroot in vinegar, nineteenth-century Gothic churches and the music of Elgar.³²

Ideas of process or change in Eliot's ideation of culture are absent. William Phillips, responding to Eliot in the next issue of *Partisan Review* surmises the problem in saying, "I cannot see that Mr. Eliot is offering us anything more, at best, than a freezing of existing social relations and a mummification of history in order to merge the past with the present. It goes almost without saying that institutions cannot be moved from one epoch to another like so much historical furniture."³³ The idea of autonomy in Eliot is clear enough: culture-products are discrete reified things that do not tend toward one another—never the craftsman, always the object. Devoid of contact, Eliot proposes a process of relation: levels, classes, and culture-products relate to one another in a contradictory social whole. Separate but equal is the cliché best describing Eliot's thinking as autonomous zones only become whole under abstract concepts such as nationalism.

The weight of this contradiction can be found in Eliot's simple transference of scale: culture-products, all being autonomous (code for "individual" or bourgeois

³² Eliot, *Notes*, 30.

³³ William Phillips, "Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture," *Partisan Review* 11.3 (Summer 1944): 307-310, p. 308.

uniqueness), parallel a social structure based on autonomous zones whose only unification comes by force:

But if I can defend with any success the thesis, that it is to the advantage of England that the Welsh should continue to be Welsh, the Scots Scots and the Irish Irish, then the reader should be disposed to agree that there may be some advantage to other peoples in the English continuing to be English. . . . It is probably, I think, that complete uniformity of culture throughout these islands would bring about a lower grade of culture altogether.³⁴

A social whole for Eliot equates to a repetitive identity that allows several parallel and unwavering lines of “culture” to move throughout history undisturbed. The fear of disturbance speaks to a fear of homogenization and standardization (the mob, the mass, the proletariat, etc.). Culture in this scenario becomes a threshold, a limit, and a block against an integrative process. Thus we can see the importance of the differentiated process of totalization running in opposition to Eliot’s fixed grooves of history. Briefly turning to Lukács we see an insistence upon this point: “We repeat: the category of totality does not reduce its various elements into an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity.”³⁵ The process of reification beginning with a beetroot in vinegar proceeds in a direct line to ideas of inequality and nationalism. Willfully negligent to the structured inequalities between geographies, Eliot proposes equalization *ex post facto*.

Williams immediately wrote a response to *Partisan Review* regarding Eliot’s concept of culture that was refused publication by the editors. He also wrote to Horace Gregory with the hopes of persuading him to write on behalf of Williams to the editors. At stake for Williams was the presence of a faulty logic between particular and

³⁴ Ibid, 57.

³⁵ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 12.

universal: “In a discussion of local and general culture Eliot is a maimed man.”³⁶

Moreover, the descriptions that Williams deploys to counter Eliot become the movements of his epic *Paterson*: “It is in the wide range of the local only that the general can be tested for its one unique quality, its universality. The flow must originate from the local to the general as a river to the sea and then back to the local from the sea in rain.”³⁷ Williams’ trope of natural elements—if not the general insistence upon the spatial *landscape* itself in modern epics—while seemingly cliché, attempts to reintegrate nature as a metaphor for process itself. As Williams says elsewhere, “nature” is itself the enactment of process: “To imitate nature involves the verb to do.”³⁸

In a second letter to Gregory a few days later, Williams broadens his arguments to include Pound. It is here that Williams articulates the failed modernisms of both figures. By 1944, between fascism and Catholicism, usury and radical conservatism, Williams interjects by foregrounding the problem of aesthetic form. These disputes for or against a certain type of aesthetic form are always political arguments about past, present, and future forms of sociality. Thus, when Williams argues for the continuance of Pound and Eliot’s project it comes with an inverted trajectory. Williams says,

I have maintained from the first that Eliot and Pound by virtue of their hypersensitivity (which is their greatness) were too quick to find a culture (the English continental) ready made for their assertions. . . . So that both Pound and Eliot have slipped back, intellectually, from their early promise. Which is to say that the *form* and the gist, the very meat, of a new cultural understanding are interlinked inseparably.

³⁶ Williams, *Selected Letters*, 224.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 225.

³⁸ William Carlos Williams, *Interviews with William Carlos Williams: “Speaking Straight Ahead”* (New York: New Directions, 1976), p. 29.

That is why the question of FORM is so important and merits such devotion and the keenest of wits, because it is the very matter itself of a culture. We cannot go back because then the form becomes empty, we must move into the field of action and go into combat there on the new ground.³⁹

If Pound pursued the notion of process through the ideogram by making language a relay for connecting new and previously unrelated phenomenon—a lightening bolt is a sentence that connects the atmosphere to the earth—then he fails to allow this idea of process to enter his theorizations of Kulchur. On one hand the epic was no doubt considerably loosened by Pound's experiments, but, on the other hand, his inquiries into cultural forms did not follow—perhaps a possible explanation for the self-admitted failure of the *Cantos* to cohere. The form of the *Cantos* cannot solve the problems of a regressive conception of culture; Pound had the right keywords and form, but his ideologies mismatched the full gamut. Williams notes a fundamental ideological impasse that the two figures neglect: thinking through the problems of aesthetic form as a verb—a politico-cultural forming—necessarily prohibits the reification of the object of study. The artwork, whose semblance underscores the very process of social change itself through the dovetailing of incompleteness and contingency, provides an avenue to question the very non-thing implied by the conceptual process denoted under the term culture. That Pound and Eliot often substitute “culture” for “civilization” in proper nineteenth-century fashion emphasizes the very problem of regression Williams brings to our attention.

Moving against the process of reification, especially in terms of culture, becomes one primary argument of Williams' modernism. And it seems important that another early rebuttal to Eliot's culture concept maps the same coordinates as Williams.

³⁹ Williams, *Selected Letters*, 226-7.

Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, a much often quoted rebuttal to Eliot's *Notes*, importantly offers a counter proposal to Eliot's theses. That Raymond Williams comes from a working-class Welsh background makes his arguments all the more vested. He says,

In any form of society towards which we are likely to move, it now seems clear that there must be, not a simple equality (in the sense of identity) of culture; but rather a very complex system of specialized developments—the whole of which will form the whole culture, but which will not be available, or conscious, as a whole, to any individual or group within it.⁴⁰

And here we find a return back to the essential paradox of a sublimated totality. The contending ideologies of wholes constantly point back to the pivot of representation: Williams' idea of a culture-as-process cannot be represented since only its semblance may be approached. The reified culture-product (in its "low" form, the culture-commodity or kitsch), on the other hand, becomes a tangible objectification of values, traditions, and the very idea of a process terminating, however momentarily, into a thing. We have here not mere aesthetic quarrels, but deep ideologies that mark the boundaries of specific discourses (via art, aesthetics, modernism, etc.). We find that artworks are perhaps indeed quite poor representations for non-reified thinking as they present themselves as solidified and objectified things. But perhaps, then again, the problem may be in how they are approached (so, too, for *kitsch*).

By placing the aesthetic in the foreground, and by also viewing the term "aesthetic" as a centripetal ideological kernel that pulls a mass of ideologies together, the length and stride of how these terms are discussed becomes quite symbolic. For example, Marc Manganaro performs such a task in *Culture, 1922*. By starting from the artistic

⁴⁰ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983), p. 238.

object, say *The Waste Land*, we may proceed out into an ensemble of theories and ideological givens that shape the course of a concept like “modernism.” Or, at least, this is how I read Manganaro when he says,

A major argument of this volume is that the integrative wholeness that came to characterize, indeed qualify something as, a work of art in modernist criticism does not merely resemble the holism of the culture concept but in fact is a version of it. Eliot was probably the chief architect of that modern criticism, and so it is especially significant that his conception of holism extended to characterize and complexly animate not only a specific work of art like a poem but collocations of works, grouped as those by a given author, by a given nation, or by the entire Western tradition, the latter of which becomes, in Arnoldian terms at least, a definition of *culture* itself.⁴¹

Hovering over this description is the eventual codification of this holism into the purest idea of a reified modernism: namely, the canon. What becomes alarming is that we see this problem of holism, which is very often contradictory and false when it carries with structural inequalities (high/low, taste, beauty, etc.), change only in degree for much of the criticism coming out of the 1940s.

If we now turn to the responses that *Partisan Review* published in the issue following Eliot’s theses on culture, I think we find a more familiar and more reified view of modernism than the one being theorized here through the figure of Williams. This is to say that Williams’ non-appearance in the responses to Eliot marks a vanishing point that, while continuing in artistic circles, did not become publicly adopted as official discourse (as the New Criticism or Abstract Expressionism did). For instance, Clement Greenberg’s response begins very well and highlights the problems of fixity and stasis in Eliot’s conservatism: “One of Eliot’s underlying premises seems to be that the generic form, Culture, *qua* form and *qua* entelechy is immutable. Both primitive and advanced

⁴¹ Marc Manganaro, *Culture, 1922* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2002), p. 29.

Cultures obey the same basic laws as regards their development and operation; they differ only in scale and content.” He also notes a problem regarding the levels of culture in saying, “The schematic structure of the Culture in its various stages is regarded as fixed.”⁴² But when it comes down to examining *things*, however, we find the same problems rearticulated in new contexts.

When culture becomes a special reserve, set away from the demands of contemporary society, it performs the anachronistic role of chastity; it is rare and intended only for a few. Rather than have culture as the ambiguous zone of mediation, where collisions of incomprehensibility and the effects of uneven development become manifest (like the Depression era musical, *The New Yorker*, vaudeville, the nickelodeon, the proletarian grotesque, etc.), culture becomes a barrier whose fault lines and perforations must become impenetrable: on this side art and culture, on that side commodity. Greenberg’s famous essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” marks such a distinction where the ideology of a distinctly pure culture and a compromised commodity become overlaid *back* onto the history of modernism; *as if* Dada cared to parcel out its disparagement of either art or culture exclusively in its attempts to make artistic inquiry available for everyone in every sector of everyday life. In Greenberg’s response to Eliot, moreover, the underlying threat of mass-commodification of culture becomes immanent. Fordism is shifting to post-Fordism.

Now, however, that Western industrial capitalism is in the process of establishing a global economy with coordinated methods of production on all continents, the possibility of a global Culture appears. . . . The colonial Cultures, most of them decrepit in any case, are being done to death by mass-produced, ready-made commodities exported from New York and

⁴² Clement Greenberg, “Mr. Eliot and Notions of Culture,” *Partisan Review* 11.3 (Summer 1944): 305-307, p. 305.

California. There will soon be little diversity of Cultures for Mr. Eliot's common religious faith to unify. There will be just greater and lesser degrees of backwardness; and the unifying agents will be movies, comic books, Tin Pan Alley, the Luce publications (with editions in all languages), Coca Cola, rayon stockings, class interests, and a common boss.⁴³

This argument, which seemingly takes aim at Eliot—if not also positing an underlying scheme of global totalitarianism or Stalinism—turns out to be a different version of it. Eliot's qualms with American culture exist due to threats of the commodification of high culture. As Eliot reminds us, "America has tended to impose its way of life chiefly in the course of doing business, and creating a taste for its commodities. Even the humblest material artifact, which is the product and the symbol of a particular civilization, is an emissary of the culture out of which it comes: I mention that influential and inflammable article the celluloid film."⁴⁴ The consequences of this thinking may perhaps now be sufficiently measured.

Culture becomes virtually separated from economics and materiality itself. Like pure aesthetics or similar discourses on art—from the ideologies of *l'art pour l'art* to "pure painting"—in this scenario culture attempts a dislocation from the historical processes that are in fact culture's very base. Divorcing economics and culture places its attendant concepts in a vaporized free-float; it becomes something similar to Williams' critique of a "body of knowledge" separated from a particular body—the particular, if only seen as a reified thing, likewise corresponds to a reified universal. So many layers of camouflage later, we enter the absolute space of pure art, which is, of course, a non-space. And so it is not Greenberg and Eliot's critique of commodities that

⁴³ Greenberg, 306-7.

⁴⁴ Eliot, *Notes*, 94.

poses the significant problem—for exchange-value always perpetuates the dialectical problem of differentiation and universal equivocation through the money-form—it is, rather, the instantiation of an idea of culture that may be reliably calibrated as a *natural thing* and historical constant that can only be valued, weighed, and judged by its end products. To resolve this issue, perhaps culture should be examined by its uneven episodic adventures and varying historical processes. Thus we could say that Williams' arguments invert even Pound: the historical-economic process precedes the artistic process. All the more interesting now, I think, is Williams' last comment to Gregory in response to Eliot: "I think you and I should institute a research into the form of our culture—rather the forms—anyhow, we should discuss the correctness or falsity of what I am saying."⁴⁵

A Contrapuntal Dance

With a final turn, then, I want to demonstrate how the arguments up to this point function as a prologue for *Paterson*. The structure of the poem hinges at the intersection of the particular and universal. To this end, I would argue that the preface to *Paterson* projects the totalizing framework taken up throughout the poem. With regard to the category of totality, we may now say that the five books constituting the poem are a variation on the themes presented within the preface: a blurring of boundaries between local and personal histories; an inquiry into the boundaries of sociality as figured by a public park; the reification and institutionalization of knowledge through the symbol of a library; the production of nature as a historical process; and a final narrative dispersal of

⁴⁵ Williams, *Selected Letters*, 227.

personal (particular) history. In this way the text performs the shuttling and contrapuntal effects that the literary theory above argues.

For instance, if we begin with the first line of the poem—“Rigor of beauty is the quest. But how will you find beauty when it is locked in the mind past all remonstrance?”⁴⁶—the confrontation with an Eliotic mindset is already at work. Not only is the Grail-quest of *The Waste Land* parodied, but so too is the problem of a fixed and reified concept: ritual beauty. It has been suggested that Williams here reinforces his romantic tendencies—which seem to be always verified by his liking of Keats—and that the pursuit of beauty is indeed a literal pursuit towards the semblance of beauty.⁴⁷

Williams, who avidly and repeatedly renounced beauty as a prescriptive force, seems to be more interested in the problem of fixed and reified concepts. As Williams tells us in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, “The Aristotelian, the Aaron, the priest of knowledge, the select—the good, the true and the beautiful—do not exist. The beautiful has been the first to go.”⁴⁸ Myth and ritual are quickly dispensed with from the start and, in their place, Williams inserts an unstable process.

⁴⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, 3.

⁴⁷ On the problem of reading “beauty” in Williams as a tendency towards a reactionary project, see Carla Billitteri, “William Carlos Williams and the Politics of Form” *The Journal of Modern Literature* 30.2 (Winter 2007): 42-63. On Williams’ being apolitical and following the logic of capitalist production, which I think is hyperbolic, see Bram Dijkstra’s introduction to *A Recognizable Image: William Carlos Williams on Art and Artists* (New York: New Directions, 1978). Dijkstra, whom Billitteri bases much of her criticism upon, goes as far as to say, “Williams’s search for the new never became representative of a search for more effective structures of interpersonal relationships, or qualitatively better social values, upon which a more humanely integrated society might be structured” (22). Hopefully the argument put forth here amends and overturns some of these reductions. For instance, similar arguments regarding Williams’ contradictory pulls toward “modern” and “romantic” might be more advantageous to historical thinking if we place them in a context of the *transition* or *process of modernization* from one historical moment to the next. When a dog shakes a wet body not all the water is expelled.

⁴⁸ Williams, *Embodiment*, 38.

Thus we should note the ability of the preface to establish a table of contents whose themes will be pursued, revised, and sometimes abandoned throughout the remainder of the text. For example, we may connect the opening lines of the preface to the refrain “beautiful thing” that predominates Book III. The beautiful thing, which figures the problem of reification through a derogatory, violent, and sexist idiom, collides with the destruction of “civilization” that is figured in a situational analogy to the fires of Alexandria: “The Library is desolation, it has a smell of its own / of stagnation and death / . / Beautiful Thing! / —the cost of dreams.”⁴⁹ The contrapuntal relationship between a city being razed and the “beautiful thing” corresponds to Williams’ diagnosis of social problems: the “beautiful thing” is a black woman that figures as a relay for Williams by reminding him of a rape victim he treated. The problem of beauty, then, is reinserted back into a complex totality, albeit as a disruption and seemingly unconnected shock: alongside an institution denoting culture are severe—and somehow linked—issues of domination and violence. While Williams is not explicitly feminist in his text—indeed, he often resembles the opposite through a structural subordination as the figures of women are located *within* the figures of men—but here we should note that he also chronicles a moment that high cultural theorists would overlook. By coordinating a relationship between a working class black woman and a symbol of high culture, we may broaden out into vaster fissures of modernity as problems of race, gender, and class become linked to those very entities that are supposedly external to its boundaries. The nonlocatability of the intersection of these problems is a not a fault. Here, instead, we see Williams deploying poetry as a field of action where we begin to sketch a

⁴⁹ Williams, *Paterson*, 101.

complicated series of linkages that are often ignored. Once these two supposedly separate poles have a spark connecting them, a correspondingly instant recalibration and recategorization occur. Otherwise said, Williams' concept of contact is dialectically at work all throughout *Paterson*.

The theme of divorce that runs throughout the entire poem focuses our attention to an overall failure to make connections. Making these connections, which is often prohibited by a worn-out language (i.e., reification), often involves using “defective means” that challenge the summative methods of logic and mathematics. The poem's relationships do not add up correctly or provide a logical summation: “Look for the nul / . . . / the N of all / equations.”⁵⁰ The inquiry into historical facts—measurements, volumes, dates, narratives, and so on—positions historical and cultural information as hunks of detail to be reworked: “a mass of detail / to interrelate on a new ground, difficultly.”⁵¹ Rather than a reduction, the strategy is “an elucidation by multiplicity.”⁵²

Thus it is quite important that the complex identity of “Paterson” within the poem begins with the figure of a lame dog. Against Eliot's leisurely activity of naming cats, the poet-dog is afoot. A different type of sense altogether, represented by a sniffing nose, diagnoses the conditions of place much like an archeologist of the present: “The rest have run out— / after the rabbits. / Only the lame stands—on / three legs. Scratch front and back. / Deceive and eat. Dig / a musty bone.”⁵³ The archeological task becomes an investigation into things—“no ideas but in things”—but what the poem performs is a

⁵⁰ Ibid, 77.

⁵¹ Ibid, 19.

⁵² Ibid, 61.

⁵³ Ibid, 3.

convoluted unwinding that repositions these things into concrete processes. The result is that quite disparate and discrete material becomes again involved in relationships.

The contrapuntal notion of process becomes evinced several times over in the text. Accordingly, the preface establishes this process:

Yet there is
no return: rolling up out of chaos,
a nine month's wonder, the city
the man, an identity—it can't be
otherwise—an
interpenetration, both ways. Rolling
up! obverse, reverse;
the drunk the sober; the illustrious
the gross; one.⁵⁴

The complex identity is a circuitous process of mediation and a multiplication of codes. As Jameson tells us, Williams makes “articulating categories of individual subject and object unnecessary, if not redundant” and thus poeticizes a crucial moment to any historical analysis.⁵⁵ Essentially dialectical and reflexive, any attempt to follow the identity of Paterson—from moments of being a citizen, poet, dog, mountain, dream, city, or an idea—ends with frustrated results. The totality denoted under the term “Paterson” does not add up and remains essentially opposed to cognition; the totality is itself perpetually rolling up its results. The metaphors Williams uses to attempt to represent this type of process always revolve around the centralized image of a cluster: a foggy dew, mists, or rain “regathered into a river that flows / and encircles: / shells and animalcules / generally and so to man, / to Paterson.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Ibid, 4.

⁵⁵ Jameson, “The Poetics of Totality,” 10.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, 5.

The defiance of terminating the poem itself becomes symbolic. Rather than limit the poem to four conclusive books with two remainders hanging on incomplete, the fact that the poem perpetually begins again, rebounds, and elongates the process bares importance. If we were to take the finale of the fourth book, however wonderful it is—“This is the blast / the eternal close / the spiral / the final somersault / the end”⁵⁷—to be a terminal point, then we likewise fail to note that ends in themselves are shunned by the following book. Meaning, the close of the fifth book introduces a theme that then repeats in the manuscripts of the unfinished sixth book. Counterpoint becomes the musical analogy that gains representation through dancing.

We know nothing and can know nothing
but
the dance, to dance to a measure
contrapuntally,
Satyrically, the tragic foot.⁵⁸

The reiteration of the thesis from *The Embodiment of Knowledge* seems to be poetically articulated here: the dialectical process. The temptation exists, as my own language no doubt falls prey, to describe Williams’ poem as circular. Reciprocal may be better, but the essential shape seems to be more musical at best: a clustering of counterpoints that proceed forward and back, up and down the scale. The shape of the poem, its idea, and form are unstable and undeterminable.

But it seems, at least in my reading, that Williams anticipates this type of frustration from the start. Indeed, we should note the totalizing structure that, as I have argued, gains form in the preface and then undergoes successive permutations, is, in

⁵⁷ Ibid, 202.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 236.

fact, present in the epigraph. Beginning with a colon so as to initiate an odd list, the epigraph becomes the epic condensed into a most discrete totality: “*hard put to it; an identification and a plan for action to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and a metamorphosis.*”⁵⁹ That the poem begins with discrete units and broadens out into a vaster and compounded form is itself a figure for Williams’ modernism. Thus what Williams says in reviewing his fellow Objectivist and friend’s poetry, George Oppen’s *Discrete Series*, may also speak to his own poetic theory:

An imaginable new social order would require a skeleton of severe discipline for its realization and maintenance. Thus by a sharp restriction to essentials, the seriousness of a new order is brought to realization. Poetry might turn this condition to its own ends. Only by being an object sharply defined and without redundancy will its form project whatever meaning is required of it. It could well be, at the same time, first and last a poem facing as it must the dialectic necessities of its day.⁶⁰

Paterson, then, provides the thought process required to perform such an experimental and archeological inquiry into the dialectical necessities of the present. Within artworks, a peculiar political presence exists—sometimes as a metaphor and at other times only hinted at through an imagined reconfiguration—namely, the always present and constructive idea of political agency that results from history itself.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 2.

⁶⁰ William Carlos Williams, “The New Poetical Economy,” *Poetry* 44.4 (July 1934): 220-225, pp. 223-4.

CHAPTER 4 LOUIS ZUKOFSKY, USE-VALUE, AND POETIC PRODUCTION

In order to speak about Louis Zukofsky, an act that runs up against politics at each and every turn, I want to begin with a seemingly random and temporally improper anecdote. In 1981, the same year that the Socialist Party's François Mitterrand was elected President of France, Henri Lefebvre wrote the third and final volume of his *Critique of Everyday Life*. Much in the spirit of Adorno before him, the final volume echoes the pessimist view that the chance to realize philosophy had been missed: "That new changes are in store, on the way, is incontestable. Whether, as is universally claimed, they will be radical (in other words, take things and people 'by the root'), is another question." The problems and the reasons for the missed opportunity seem to find common symptoms regarding a culture of acceptance. As if pleading directly with Margaret Thatcher and her neoliberal motto of no alternatives, Lefebvre asks, "Are we not faced with an alternative?" For Lefebvre, we do not appear to be presented with any just alternatives and the fault is ours: "Acceptance involves much more than consenting to trivial acts: buying and selling, consumption, various activities. It implies a 'consensus': acceptance of society, the mode of production—in a word, a (the) totality. In this way, people (who? each and every one of us) condemn themselves to not desiring, conceiving, or even imagining possibilities beyond this mode of production!"¹

For readers who identify with certain political attractions on the Left, they may find in Lefebvre's final words an apt description of America in the 1930s with one important difference: it lacked the negation of the "not." The political, cultural, and aesthetic practices of that time were actively "desiring, conceiving, [and] even imagining

¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 3* (London, Verso, 2008), p. 1.

possibilities beyond this mode of production.” To this end it may be worth remembering that in the first volume of his *Critique* Lefebvre quoted from a collection of poems previously published in *New Masses* (which were translated into French in 1930) in order to make an argument to French audiences that American literature was more socially conscious: “While our own literature remained academic, abstract, psychological, *outside of everyday life* . . . American writers were accomplishing something we had not even been able to begin: the trial of so-called ‘modern’ life, the analysis of its contradictory aspects.”² Of interest for my purposes here is that just as Lefebvre published these latter remarks in 1947 consensus upon American literature was in the process of shifting into a mode of apolitical acceptance. The anti-capitalist momentum and the radicals behind it could not help but reel in response to the horrors of the Hitler-Stalin Pact and the news of the gulag itself; in effect, their moment to realize philosophy had been missed. According to this narrative, there was nothing left for the radicals to do (perhaps besides turn to psychoanalysis) except join the consensus of an oppressive, racist, sexist, and exploitative dominant culture going into the 1950s or retreat away from public life altogether. Or, of course, we have the option to see how political consciousness changed according to certain moments—either personal or public (both, as Lefebvre reminds us, are categories of social space)—how they critique or capitulate to certain ideologies, and how their artistic experiments continued into the radical movements of the 1960s.³ Perhaps thinking through contradictory aspects again might be beneficial for our contemporary moment.

² Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Vol. 1* (London, Verso, 2008), p. 235.

³ See, for instance, Michael Davidson’s introduction to George Oppen’s *New Collected Poems* where he recasts the Objectivists trajectory into the turbulent 1960s: “Oppen’s return to writing and publishing in the

As we will see in this Chapter, Zukofsky was indeed a radical of the 1930s who experienced all the contradictions of the decade. This point seems to pass without any contestation within Zukofsky scholarship. Like many other urban, regional, and immigrant writers he was out and out “political” (we’ll address this term more specifically later). He launched the Objectivists, wrote for the *New Masses*, worked for the Works Progress Administration, was a member of the League of American Writers, and, while not an official member, involved himself in various activities within the Communist Party. Many of these activities and identities make their way into his epic poem “A.” Like many other modernist practitioners he was not interested in agitprop or proletarian realism. Or, at least, he experimented with them and moved beyond their closed limits and sets of restrictions. As Michael Davidson says, Zukofsky and the Objectivists “regard their formalism as a material agent within the social. Formalism does not stand over against ideology but is a means by which the illusions of materialist culture can be revealed.”⁴ Whatever formalism we may want to attribute to the Objectivists, it bears little resemblance with the errors of the formalisms produced within the literary culture of the academy for the past sixty years.

The particular problem being hinted at is that Zukofsky becomes a figure that disrupts many narratives of “modernism” that seem to have so many ideological reinforcements behind them. He is not a “committed” writer—a moniker whose definition seems too inexact to be useful—and he is also not a formalist (nor does he become

1960s coincided with the miraculous emergence of an entire lost generation—Charles Reznikoff, Lorine Niedecker, Louis Zukofsky, Carl Rakosi and, in England, Basil Bunting—who for varying reasons had been invisible since the 1930s, and who suddenly appeared among us, now transformed into Venerable Sages” (New York: New Directions, 2008, *xiv-xv*).

⁴ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), p. 239.

one). He is, like so many other artists of the 1930s—Richard Wright, John Dos Passos, Muriel Rukeyser, not to mention all the Objectivists—a polyblend of both; politics and aesthetics lock in an almost perfect antagonism without solution. In fact, if we follow Zukofsky's career in and out of the 1930s, we see an interesting clash in terms of modernism itself: as he would say, the "revolution of the word" (i.e., an experimental cosmopolitan modernism) gains new referents through new turbulent historical and political realities.

For example, in 1936 Zukofsky was drafting "A"-8, a poem whose form constructs a complex textual system by attempting to integrate two fugues ("mirror fugues" is his term) conterminously into the poem that result in a simultaneous dialogue between eight counterpointing figures and themes. But, as he tells Pound in a letter of the same year, "It's tough getting up in the morning knowing what one shd. do about the rest of "A"-8 & the rest etc. etc., & having to go off immediately to the W.P.A. job till 6, & then [Communist] party shits [*sic*] etc."⁵ At a moment like this I think we must confront a certain amount of incomprehensibility: while parceling out his workday between various categories of labor, Zukofsky writes a devastatingly experimental "mirror fugue" about the dialectics of labor itself that places its main theme through a series of Spinozan inspired torsions, "Labor as creator, / Labor as creature."⁶ We, in turn, have a dilemma to sort out that carries its own political heft in order to understand how a manifold series of dialectical counterpoints becomes a *political representation* of the complex social category of labor. It then turns out that the fugue may be a useful form to represent the

⁵ Quoted in Barry Ahearn, "Zukofsky, Marxism, and American Handicraft," *Upper Limit Music: The Writing Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1997), p. 83.

⁶ Louis Zukofsky, "A" (New York: New Directions, 1978; reprint 2011), p. 43.

complex series of relationships and exchanges that produce the amalgamated totality called capitalism. The same could accordingly be said about the epic.

Zukofsky, who read Marx and read him well, thinks through the problems of artistic production in terms of commodity production: the forms of poetry, much like Marx's phantasmagoric commodity-forms, are the materialization of social relations in a *visible* form. Repeatedly Zukofsky will emphasize the importance of the aspect of constructing of an "object":

The scientist compelled to make order of a hunch, the architect building the house in which to live, the dancer telling others' eyes what it is to move, an historian shaping a sum of events to the second law of thermodynamics, an economist subsuming under a fiction of value a countless differentiation of labor processes, a weaver making the garment that will drape to a body, the painter, the musician, all who achieve constructions apart from themselves, move in effect toward poetry.⁷

From the outset of his artistic career Zukofsky was interested in poetry as an "object"—hence the "Objectivists"—but we need to be mindful that Zukofsky's "objects" echo an acute interest in use-value. Zukofsky has an eye toward the individual and social qualities congealed in the object—the dynamic factors that make the labor put into it socially necessary and constant throughout time. As he says, "You can't carry the poetic object away or put it in your pocket, but there is a use of words where one word in context defines the other and it enriches so that what is put over is somebody's reaction to existence."⁸ We have here objects defying the commodity-form under capitalism, refusing poetry-as-fetish or instrumental language. One avenue for understanding Zukofsky's modernism, I would argue, is to focus on the linked themes of labor and use-

⁷ Louis Zukofsky, *Propositions +: The Collected Critical Essays* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2000), p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid*, 235.

value. These two terms, which coincide and diverge like unruly parallel lines—sometimes splintering into alienation along the way—provide two anchor points to not only refer to while reading Zukofsky’s output from the 1930s, but also provide key reference points for how his modernism continues in the decades after. Being one link of many, the politics of *use over exchange* assists in articulating how his anti-capitalist politics finds a parallel in his artistic output.

Important work has already been done focusing on Zukofsky’s Marxism and his theories of labor and value as they manifest in his poetry. Barry Ahern, Mark Scroggins, Burton Hatlen, Eric Homberger, Bruce Comens, and Norman O. Brown have all written about the importance of Zukofsky’s “politics,” but mostly as an aspect or as a key to understanding his “poetics.” The consensus reached throughout these dialogues is that Zukofsky quits his “politics” around 1950 (especially with the writing of “A”-12 in 1950-51) because he retreats to the apolitical space of the domestic:

Where the primary scene of the earlier sections of the poem up through “A”-10 . . . has been political, “A”-12 finalizes the poem’s decisive shift of focus and attention to the domestic. The dominant locus of the harmony that Zukofsky delineates here is the family: the world at large becomes not the world of the newspapers and the class struggle but the world as seen by the three Zukofskys, and the world of Zukofsky’s library.⁹

A sleight of hand here: it is as if politics were snatched like a tablecloth out from underneath the poetic object to leave it pristine and undisturbed. These divisions—public/private, domestic/political—believe the fact that the distinctions themselves are a result of the logic of modernity, particularly as it relates to industrialization, urbanization, and the geographies of capitalism. Zukofsky studied this historical shift in his research

⁹ Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1998), pp. 207-8.

for the *Index of American Design* where he documents the importance of texts like Thomas Webster's *Encyclopedia of Domestic Economy* (1845) because they demonstrate how "collectively managed communities" of the Shaker and Amana societies "consigned the separate branches of production to different parts of their 'households.'" Indeed, Zukofsky understands precisely that the emergence of privately owned factories resulted in the reorganization of the household and society's division of labor because this shift in production eliminated a historical "time when men were likely to be found working on something at home, and for their homes, side by side with their wives."¹⁰ Maybe, then, it is not "politics" but complexity that changes. In 1940 Zukofsky wrote Pound a letter tracing the current political debates of the National Credit for Defense Act in which he says that after completing "A"-9 (in 1950), "I'll have had enough of 'complexity' & intend to swing entirely—if that is possible—the contrary way."¹¹

Hatlen, posing a similar question, asks if the "domestic poetry" invalidates the "political poetry" of prior decades—perhaps even an invalid question. But it does not, Hatlen tells us, because "the political voice sings in harmony with . . . the personal voice" and this is "the movement of history itself."¹² These ideologies, I would argue, that separate the domestic from politics and that approximate a distance between public and private are not found in Zukofsky's poetry but are rather our own ideological supplements overlaid onto the aesthetic object. Conversely, perhaps the "movement of

¹⁰ Louis Zukofsky, *A Useful Art: Essays and Radio Scripts on American Design* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 2000), pp. 101-6.

¹¹ Barry Ahern, ed., *Pound/Zukofsky: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky* (New York: New Directions, 1981), pp. 203-4.

¹² Burton Hatlen, "Art and/as Labor: Some Dialectical Patterns in 'A'-1 through 'A'-10" *Contemporary Literature* 25.2 (Summer 1984): pp. 205-234, 230.

history” involves those rare ingredients of agency and consciousness; the rare moments when we overturn these readings and note that *the social* marks the limits and horizons of the *personal*. Poetry, as Zukofsky tells us, is precisely the space where all the ramifications of sociality find expression:

Poetry does not arise and exist in a vacuum. It is one of the arts—sometimes individual, sometimes collective in origin—and reflects economic and social status of peoples; their language habits arising out of everyday matter of fact; the constructions which the intelligence and the emotions make over and apart from the everyday after it has been understood and generally experienced.¹³

In this regard, Zukofsky’s poetry functions more interestingly as a barometer of ideological temperament from the 1930s onward; as Adorno argued, the artistic object is a magic eight ball or a question mark that solicits enigmatic questions of us, and our responses show history attempting to speak.¹⁴ Zukofsky’s ideology of the poetic-object argues exactly this: poetry is the visible manifestation of the hidden forces of sociality itself.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis has articulated a similar concern in terms of a problematic pattern in Zukofsky scholarship: “We are now in a reactive period in which a keyword for literary criticism is ‘aesthetic.’ Indeed, some people have fallen upon this word as onto a plump sofa from which one never has to get up and look out of a window.” While there is much formal excellence to be found in Zukofsky, as DuPlessis reminds us, formalism entwines into a “helix” that includes “social critique in poetry.”¹⁵ There must be, and there are, types of politics that fall outside of organized politics. That a figure like

¹³ Louis Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2000), p. 99.

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), p. 124.

¹⁵ Rachel Blau DuPlessis, “A Test of Poetry and Conviction” *Jacket* 30 (July 2006): n. pag. Web. 30 July 2011.

Zukofsky became disillusioned—like many other figures in many other social contexts—with organized politics coming out of the 1940s does not equate to a last call for all political interests. I hope that other figures, say a Roland Barthes, who found the very experience of organized politics a problematic one due to its methods for winnowing categories and concepts, and albeit a figure who interrogated the politics of domesticity and privacy devoid of a typical “political commitment,” would not likewise become tagged as *unpolitical* or *apolitical* figures. As Barthes might say, it may be a more “nuanced” politics than the *topos* of organized politics. What I find problematic about these readings—aside from being reductive down to the last zero—are the ways in which “politics” becomes displaced under erasure in favor of “harmony,” which here seems to tote its synonym of “equality” just behind it; Zukofsky’s interest in class struggle is over; domestic harmony—already a contestable phrase—resembles something like Nietzschean Joy where the eternal return of the same forefends any need for adjustments or struggles. It is not just Zukofsky’s politics under erasure either, because we must include his wife Celia’s politics and our own.

It is therefore necessary to rehabilitate politics as it runs through the entire epic itself, including those seemingly apolitical moments like “A”-12. To do this requires the rehabilitation of a politics that includes all the inequalities yet to find a proper form of visibility, presence, or articulation in our historical past, present, and, perhaps most importantly, future. It will also move beyond the limits of a politics that is only identifiable—albeit “visible”—through a type of “political speech.” Indeed, for Scroggins, Ahearn, and Hatlen “politics” exists only when the appropriate signifiers are present. But Zukofsky also writes “politically” without necessarily using its causal and organizational

buzzwords (“march,” “communism,” “comrade,” etc.). Is not the idea of Marx—or at least *one* idea—found in the necessity to think through a *political* economy as a series of mysterious, phantasmatic, if not magical (but explainable) exchanges of pseudo-equalities (*inequalities*) whose historical objective it is of ours to gain consciousness of in order to terminate? By the *looks of things*, we have a long way to go.

To this end we may want to listen to Cary Nelson quite closely when he says that not all politics will appear alike (i.e., they will take divergent *forms*): “If there is anything distinctive about [H. H. Lewis and Edwin Rolfe’s] aesthetics and potential social function it will, unlike the aesthetics of *The Waste Land*, most likely be something we are unlikely to be prepared to recognize let alone value.”¹⁶ If we follow Zukofsky’s interest in labor and use-value, which Davidson has already done convincingly with Zukofsky’s “Mantis” poems, we find a politics of aesthetics in which supposedly anachronistic and tabooed forms whose exchange-value has been all but used up—who on the Left would dare write a sestina in the 1930s?—again come to life in terms of use-value. Zukofsky seems to be interested in poeticizing Marx’s supposition that use-value constructs an unseen genealogy destroyed by exchange-value: “The old form of the use-value disappears, but it is taken up again in a new form of use-value.”¹⁷ A sestina’s pivots and turns become an apt form, and its use-value remains in good standing: the twists of capital that result in poverty and exploitation find an unsuspecting form. Challenging and difficult issues, Zukofsky would argue, deserve an intricate form out of sheer social necessity. At least this is how I interpret Zukofsky when he says, “Poetry convinces not by argument but by

¹⁶ Cary Nelson, *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 64.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin Classics, 1990), p. 308.

the *form* it creates to carry its content.”¹⁸ In this way, we cannot separate how Zukofsky thinks of poems-as-objects differently from forms-as-objects.

Now, I think, we are back in Lefebvre’s territory. His description of an “object” according to Marx may help us put more focused crosshairs on Zukofsky’s own interests in labor as it relates to poetic objects. Lefebvre says,

the relation between man and object is not the same as a relation of possession. It is incomparably broader. What is important is not that I have possession (be it capitalist or egalitarian) of an object, but that I can enjoy it in the human, total meaning of the word; that I can have the most complex, the “richest” relationships of joy or happiness with the “object”—which can be a thing or a living being or a human being or a social reality. Moreover it is by means of this object, within, in and through it, that I enter into a complex network of human relationships.¹⁹

Dialectically, we may be tracing the contours of a strangely positive definition of “objectification” as it brushes up against *unalienated* experience.

What we find in Zukofsky is a paralleling desire for the experience of objects, even Language, not yet compromised by the problems of the fetish. This is an important lesson from Marx that finds many soundboards (Benjamin, Lukács, Adorno, Lefebvre, Debord, et. al.): once the object crosses over into exchange, its unitary existence as use-value is automatically eliminated; it becomes *enchanted*. As David Harvey reminds us, “you can’t cut the commodity in half and say, that’s the exchange-value, and that’s the use-value. No, the commodity is a unity.”²⁰ Consequently, the “fetishistic character” of the commodity is no longer suited to meet the demands of human needs. In sum, the commodity-fetish and exchange-value are *false equalities* by either doubling the object

¹⁸ Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry*, 52.

¹⁹ Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, 156.

²⁰ David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (London: Verso, 2011), 23.

by fetishizing it—to be something and *more*—or by placing it under the regime of *quantity*. Marx, echoing the transformative powers of werewolves and Frankenstein, articulates the monstrous shift in the identity of the commodity in terms of its “form of appearance”:

The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will.²¹

This passage, which Zukofsky will reference late into his life in order to describe his “poetics,” articulates a properly aesthetic problem in a roundabout way. What the commodity demarcates is a continual displacement; the fetishist will never be able to fully experience, nor possess, the commodity due to its contradictory status. This necessary offsetting of equalities articulates the very *politics* of Marx’s political economy; as soon as the doubling occurs, exploitation is already at work. Perhaps we could say that this may be one “unitary” experience of the world that many modernists, including Zukofsky, experience losing.

In what remains I want to show how Zukofsky attempts to outline a method for rethinking and rehabilitating a politics whose arch shuttles between both poles—equality and inequality—in order to show how limits can dialectically turn into openings. We may then approach politics whenever an inequality is present (or anticipated); if there is politics, equality must by necessity be offset. Jacques Derrida provides a summative description in saying, “A dissymmetrical, unequal correspondence, unequal, as always,

²¹ Marx, *Capital*, 163-4.

to the equality of the one to the other: the origin of politics, the question of democracy.”²² So even if the home becomes a symbol for thinking through the utopia of the present—and I would argue that even this is a misreading as it relates to Zukofsky—it must inevitably speak to a dissymmetry somewhere else. And this politics is not a reactionary or nostalgic return to a prior time: Zukofsky, with not only Marx but his entire historical cast, locates a method for redeploying forms for political purposes, and these forms must always go through the process of modernization itself. Zukofsky, as we will see below, is very much aware of the politics involved in repetition.

Below, then, I want to examine Zukofsky’s poetic experiments of the 1930s, notably sections “A”-8 and 9. But I also want to read these in conjunction with his WPA work for the *Index of American Design*. When we overlap the two activities we may begin to understand how use-value undergirds his formal experiments, but also how the resuscitation—even the reproduction of old forms—abides by the following maxim: “In objects which men made and used, people live again. The touch of the carving to the hand revivifies the hand that made it.”²³ In “A”-9 there may be a very complex political representation produced out of a “canzone of economics” where commodities literally speak of their reification as things separated from all traces of their creation. Each Marxist has a particular fetish in *Capital*, and Zukofsky follows the idea that labor is a positive and fluid force running through time whose use-value counters the “vampire-like” qualities of capital as “dead labor.”²⁴ The first half of “A”-9 regenerates Guido Cavalcanti’s canzone, “Donna me prega,” to redevelop a politics of Amor where the

²² Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2005), p. xii.

²³ Zukofsky, *A Useful Art*, 149.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 342.

barrier separating subject and object disappears. This will lead to the second half of “A”-9 where Zukofsky continues the canzone but now with Spinoza—whose *natura naturans* becomes the dialectical compliment to Marx’s labor theory of value—in order to write about a politics of love. The result is a convincing overlap where labor and love become two aspects, or “angles of incidence,” used to imagine philosophical and economic equality.

These themes will not retreat or disappear, but Zukofsky will think through use-value (whose phantasmal figure becomes love, “Living, you love / So I love / With the dead / in me”²⁵) in terms of familial relationships going into the 1950s: “A”-12 narrates his newly hinged identity with the birth of his son and the passing of his father. Domestic and familial labor, which includes his wife Celia and letters from a young friend serving in Korea, open to new spaces where the politics of use-value needs to be, and can be, rethought. But the contexts changed completely. If we must by necessity mark a distinction between the poetic moments of pre- and post-1950 as Zukofsky scholars are want to do, which I think are better articulated as historical moments, I would argue that the shift we see in Zukofsky does not mark a turn away from politics, but rather marks an experience and articulation of the failures of modernity after WWII. “A”-12 cascades a series of failures: his father’s death, Stalin’s betrayal, the treatment of Holocaust survivors after liberation, a catalogue of Zukofsky’s failed artistic projects from the 1930s, and the continuance of war in Korea. If Zukofsky desires a type of private harmony, we must relate this to incommensurability with present social realities. As Zukofsky says, “I clear my desk of clippings / . . . / Files and head / Of twenty years

²⁵ Zukofsky, “A”, 261.

notes / To make life easier to / handle.”²⁶ The chance to realize philosophy seems to have been missed, and he will negotiate this dilemma.

What this means is that “A”-8 attempts to articulate the political realities of the 1930s in fugal form; “A”-9 shows an altogether different possible reality where use-value promotes an evenness of exchange with the trope of love; “A”-12 asks how one is to continue on the course of a politics of use-value when its horizon of actuality in a Cold War context is placed even further away into the historical future. We could think of a narrative corollary for this poetic movement whose trajectory demonstrates an important social fact, a fact that Zukofsky will even argue in favor of: individual and domestic identities are shaped by social factors. His poetry, then, marks various moments and strategies for understanding how this occurs, it is an attempt to discover what ingredients and seemingly invisible social factors determine the present and also what epistemological errors keep it properly maintained.

Use-value and the 1930s

In 1929, a year after Zukofsky began his epic, he wrote about Pound’s *Cantos*. Importantly, Zukofsky argues that its form is a musical one because it handles polyphony of voices, images, and relationships. He says,

The music of the *Cantos* is of three kinds, (a) the music of the words themselves, their sound effects, (b) the music caused by the juxtaposition of the word and word, line and line, strophe and changing strophe, entire canto against entire canto, and the time-pauses between each of these, (c) the suggested music of all the *Cantos* at once: that is, as there is the entire developing and concluding music of the sonnet, not only the pairing or quadruplicating of its rhythms, there is the entire music of a single poem of length such as the *Cantos*. Pound’s achievement is that despite successive

²⁶ Ibid, 244.

process of writing, unavoidable in a poem of length, the music is always an immediacy of the entire structure.²⁷

The complicated totality called the *Cantos*—regardless of issues of completion or coherence—becomes “an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time”²⁸: how one person, signed Pound, reacted to and received the incongruities, contradictions, and ideologies of historical life, errors and all. I would suggest that this idea—or ideological category—persists throughout the “Pound tradition” where poetry is imbued with the ability to address, or speak about, *everything at once* despite its arbitrary division into sections (i.e., cantos, books, or a division into twenty-four movements in Zukofsky’s case). Franco Moretti, who takes this argument into its full geographic potential, has shown that the modern epic carries with it this new ideology: “*contemporaneity* of the non-contemporaneous moves into the foreground: the ‘Before-and-After’ is transformed into an ‘Alongside.’”²⁹ I would add that this ideology of Alongside also accompanies a notion of totality: the self-terminating wish that must continue wishing to graph the entire mode of production. As early as 1931, in the Objectivist issue of *Poetry*, Zukofsky already referred to poems as “rested totalities.”³⁰ We may only suppose, and I think we should, that Zukofsky shows a similar interest when he lists his unfulfilled projects, one of them being “*Graph: Of Culture*.”³¹

²⁷ Zukofsky, *Prepositions +*, 78.

²⁸ Ezra Pound, “A Retrospect,” *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1935) p. 4.

²⁹ Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to García Márquez* (London: Verso, 1996), p. 52.

³⁰ Zukofsky, *Prepositions +*, 13.

³¹ Zukofsky, “A”, 257.

Here we also see an inclination that will remain thoroughgoing for Zukofsky's entire career: the appreciation of thinkers who create totalizing systems initially based on variations of small components or premises that then expand. The list includes Bach's fugues, Spinoza's propositions in *Ethics*, Marx's unfolding commodity in *Capital*, Wittgenstein's more systematic propositions and proofs in *Tractatus*, and even Shakespeare's variations on a counter-epistemology that positions the superiority of the eye over the erring brain (a retaliation on pragmatism, modern science, or the "gas age" in Zukofsky speak). We should include Zukofsky as the last person in this list because "A"—importantly in quotation marks—becomes a series of variations starting from one of language's tinier units; indeed, the letter "A" stands alone as the first line of the epic "A." Or, in true form, "A" would be better understood as a pangram with all twenty-six letters of the alphabet interrelating and being voiced at once. The fugue becomes the primary form for this representative strategy in Zukofsky: by the law of counterpoint, each voice or theme continues its simultaneous dialogue until all become undifferentiated, heard but no longer recognizable or isolatable on their own—history-as-fugue or history-as-vortex. Importantly, after twenty-three sections, "A" ends with Celia's composition, "L. Z. Masque," "a five-part score—music, thought, drama, story, poem": Louis Zukofsky's entire artistic output set to Handel's "Harpichord Pieces." The composition runs for approximately seventy performed minutes, or some 244 pages, where four themes—(T)hought, (D)rama, (S)tory, and (P)oem—occur simultaneously in successive variations with the (M)usical accompaniment of Handel.³²

³² The Zukofsky's, as partners, worked to create parts of "A" (Celia was also Louis' typist) and worked together on homophonic translations of Catallus. When selling his papers to the University of Texas, one caveat was that they publish Louis' *Bottom: On Shakespeare* as a double volume to include Celia's setting of Shakespeare's *Pericles, Prince of Tyre* to music. I will be as guilty as the rest in including

This is to say that Zukofsky's reading of Marx—as with the other figures—is both for representative strategy (a type of *form*) and for the content of political theory. That Zukofsky empathizes and identifies with Marxism is clear enough, but he also appreciates how Marx crafts a representation of capitalism. For many Marxists this is unsettling news: Zukofsky finds something interestingly “aesthetic” in Marx. Indeed, as stated above, Zukofsky aims to rehabilitate the idea of the artist as a craftsman so as to include anyone who creates an object apart from oneself—be it a thing, relationship, or idea—whose “every-day exchange relation need not be directly / Identical with the magnitudes of value”; an object directed by social desire rather than the desires of the market.³³ This means that Marx occupies the identity of an “artist” for both the inseparable form of *Capital*—the unfolding and refolding of the dialectic resulting in Labor and Capital seesawing in perpetual class struggle—and the critique of political economy. Since Zukofsky tilts toward the side of Labor, his figure for the artist is a horse: “There exists probably in the labors of any valid artist the sadness of the horse plodding with blinkers and his direction is for all we don't know filled with the difficulty of keeping a pace.”³⁴ This image, here coming from an essay on Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, is appropriate for the generation that was likely taken home from the hospital after birth in a horse and buggy only to be driven to the funeral home in an automobile; the horse becomes that abstract quantitative measure of horsepower. Zukofsky notes these new quantifications resulting from industrialization: “The strength of one man can

Celia's modernism when speaking about Louis'—a rare event much akin to Gertrude and Alice—to which there is little scholarship done when much is deserved.

³³ Zukofsky, “A”, 54.

³⁴ Zukofsky, *Prepositions* +, 63.

be reckoned / 1/20 of a horsepower – / Think then, 10 turbines are 900,000 horsepower.”³⁵ How to restore the *quality* of the horse—that is, how to reorient value based on *use* rather than *exchange*—becomes the dilemma that Zukofsky admires in Marx’s handling of the subject.

In 1930, this question is asked at the start of “A”-7, “Horses: who will do it? out of manes? Words / Will do it.” As if to play on the layered puns of “sawhorse” (i.e., the poet “saw” a “horse” and “see/saw/seahorse”) Zukofsky writes in “A”-7 of sitting on a stoop in New York and encountering sawhorses that labor as barricades: “two legs stand A, four together M. / ‘Street Closed’ is what print says on their stomachs.”³⁶ What we see in this earlier moment, which is between “A”-6—which asks “*Can* / the design / Of the fugue / be transferred / To poetry?”³⁷—and “A”-8—where the first fugue takes place—is the strange identity of language with labor. Otherwise said, poetic endeavors run parallel to other categories of labor as they produce objects—here playing on the arbitrariness of “horses” as a signifier—whose process of exchange retains no relation to quantity or the money-form. The poem ends with this point as the horses speak: “Spoke: words, words, we are words, horses, manes, / words.”³⁸ We should think of this experiment as an unfulfilled thesis statement since Zukofsky is not yet sure how to overlap the poetic process and the labor process. For the rest of the decade, however, he will work on the problem. Language is no mere raw material; it already has a history and a series of labor processes imbued into it. Under the pressures of the various collapses of the

³⁵ Zukofsky, “A”, 60.

³⁶ *Ibid*, 39.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 38.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 42.

1930s, rethinking the *social value* of language-as-object has political consequence. Poetry and the poetic-labor-process become ethical insofar as they outline the contours of the *ought* or the *should*. But this ethics has politics for its marrow: Zukofsky's poems become a radical rebuttal and counter to the world of industrial-turned-finance capitalism *as it is*; he constitutes the very politics of dissensus in his writing by showing the potentiality of thinking two worlds at once through the antagonism that exists between the present stage of capitalism and the *as if* configuration of socialism (quite literally, Marx's C-M-C structure).

Here we may have a more graspable way to comprehend the following movements: "A"-8's fugal form strives to articulate the various events and histories that form structural inequalities while "A"-9's canzone presents another configuration entirely where commodities speak of their use-values. These two movements also become textually and theoretically dense: both contain hidden laws governing their forms. In other words, there is an immense amount of labor put into these poems, some of which will only be known by Zukofsky telling us. Modern poetry, for Zukofsky, should demonstrate, "that the most complicated standards of science—including definitions, laws of nature and theoretic constructions—are poetic, like the motion of Lorentz's single electron and the field produced by it."³⁹ For example, both poems have mathematical laws that govern syllable and letter distribution according to a complex calculus or ratios garnered from modern physics. As Zukofsky tells us of "A"-9, the first five stanzas "are the poetic analogue of a conic section—i.e., the ratio of accelerations and decelerations . . . of a particle moving in a circular path with uniform angular

³⁹ Zukofsky, *Prepositions* +, 7.

velocity.”⁴⁰ The distribution of *r* and *n* modulates in each line, as Ahearn argues, and produces a sophisticated architectonic: “A”-8’s calculus suggests a 360-degree rotation or a “revolution,” while “A”-9’s conic section resembles the letter “A” itself.⁴¹ Ahearn and Scroggins, whose labors deserve full credit, have painstakingly tracked these patterns and iterations in the poems in order to develop a complex scaffold that rivals the hidden structures of Joyce’s *Ulysses*. But there is too little emphasis given to the *hiddenness* of all the complexity. Scroggins argues that the hidden labor put into the poems is a result of Zukofsky’s personality and says that we need only think of his penchant for formal “obstacles to be overcome.”⁴² While the explanation via neurosis may be true, I would contend that the very notion of *hiddenness* stems directly from his interests in use-value. The form accompanies the overall argument: labor, including artistic and intellectual labor, is concealed within the object, which does not infer anything undiscoverable about it except its quantification. Perhaps we have a poetic analogue of labor: it is a capitalist dream to think that the time-congealed labor within any commodity is justly measurable, calculable, or *visible*. Even more, poetry is not *like* a science, poetry *is* a science.

The fugue of “A”-8 is better described as a cacophony than a harmony. Or, if harmonious, it has more of the ominous quality of the baroque-turned-vampire soundtrack *Toccatà and Fugue* than *St. Matthew’s Passion*. The poem works through eight themes in constant counterpoint: labor (Marx and Spinoza), music (Bach), economics (Marx and Engels), science (Einstein, Poincaré, and Veblen), nominalism

⁴⁰ Quoted in Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), p. 187.

⁴¹ Barry Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), pp. 239-40.

⁴² Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life*, 182, 184.

(Duns Scotus), personal history, art, and American history (the Adamses: Henry, Brooks, and Charles Francis, Jr.).⁴³ The poem, as Scroggins demonstrates, is a series of dialectical arguments: “the thwarting of productive labor—artistic or otherwise—by the forces of capitalism” that includes the “failed career of John Quincy Adams,” “the vast Gilded Age money grabs of Vanderbilt and Gould,” “strikes among Pennsylvania coal miners,” and Marx and Engels “who emerge as the most clear-eyed critics of the economic system under which the poet himself lives.”⁴⁴ We have here an attempt by Zukofsky to articulate—all at once—the economic and historical forces that constitute the totality of his present context. Much like William Carlos Williams’ attempt in *Paterson* to document the Language of suburban New Jersey, Zukofsky illustrates successive and compounding historical wrong turns: “And if he could come back – Henry Adams – to see / The mistakes plain in light of the new.”⁴⁵ The fugue becomes the form to narrate—or better, to *represent*—the complex and overlapping experience of Zukofsky’s present. We should note that Zukofsky amasses a checklist of poetic analogues for historical materialism—totality/fugue, labor/love, history/epic, laborer/artist, use-value/Art, and work/poetry. Marx is indeed an artist, but his artwork is not *Capital*; the book is the mere visible manifestation of an immense amount of “imaginative handling of fact” as Zukofsky calls it. Zukofsky’s analogues seem to form a coherent argument: *the artwork is devoid of quantity and whatever quantity we find in it is arbitrary*. A poem, whose unit is always “measure,” charts an altogether different value than quantity.

⁴³ Ahearn, *Zukofsky’s “A”*, 77.

⁴⁴ Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life*, 178.

⁴⁵ Zukofsky, *A*, 51.

“Poetics,” if the term is to be applicable with Zukofsky’s modernism, must be amended to always include “materialist” in front of it.

We should again emphasize the inevitable *hidden* quality of all these events. We need a special type of bifocals to read Zukofsky’s play on appearances: one lens focusing on his masterful poetic handling and another lens that attempts to see the constantly changing relationships of sociality. Like any good reader of Marx, Zukofsky seems to have noted the importance of words like “appear” and “relative.” The jigsaw puzzle Zukofsky assembles (i.e., a “mirror fugue”) is much like a telephone operator connecting callers during an emergency; inevitably strange conversations are patched together. Zukofsky is following Marx’s method by attempting to make visible the entire complex historic, political, and economic events that constitute life under capitalism. When Marx appears alongside the Adamses he is a laboring horse attempting to keep pace: “I am now working like a horse (Marx) / As I must use the time in which it is possible / to work / . . . / One cannot always be writing (*Das Kapital*).”⁴⁶ Here we have Marx writing a letter to his daughter regarding his own socially necessary labor. And this labor is analogous to Zukofsky’s own artistic and intellectual work that falls outside capitalism’s necessary desperation for quantifying labor. Moreover, Marx here is an artist because he does two important acts: the exertion of labor to create an object and the exercise of social critique. A “poet,” for Zukofsky is someone who engages “historic and contemporary particulars.”⁴⁷ The poet is also a “critic-poet-analyst”:

He has an economic basis. He has been doing a job. It will perhaps as soon not as be his salvation. He does not pretend it to be more than a job.

⁴⁶ Zukofsky, “A”, 57.

⁴⁷ Zukofsky, *Prepositions +*, 12.

Guillaume de Poitiers had several jobs. He was a poet. He went to war. Obviously he divided his energy, perhaps, perhaps not, to the hindrance of his poetry. At any rate—poetry defined as a job, a piece of work.⁴⁸

Poetry is a method for criticizing and destabilizing the supposed rootedness of present civil society and the narratives of nationalism that support it. Out of the fugue's series of counterpoints and dialectical maneuvers emerges the strenuous and totalized image of America in the 1930s.

Accordingly, Zukofsky's goal is to delineate the labor process and the artistic process as a reciprocal activity where subject and object become an identity: the laborer and the object created exist in a dialectical relationship that becomes destroyed when use-value (quality) switches into exchange-value (quantity). *Form*, however, becomes the keyword in *Capital* that hits multiple registers for Zukofsky. As Fredric Jameson says of *Capital*,

It is worth observing the insistence of Marx on the word "form," alone destined to rescue money from its own thingification or reification; and in perfect consistency with the opposition that has already been described, where the use value is material and physical, carnal and qualitative, while exchange value is very precisely mental if not spiritual: that is to say, pure form rather than content.⁴⁹

Zukofsky, who is already in the process of resuscitating artistic anachronisms—fugue, sestina, canzone—rejects these forms as "pure forms" without content. Otherwise said, Zukofsky's poetics aims toward gauging how various forms' contents maintain social relevance. The supposition that artistic form is the *visible thing only* turns on its head.

Form becomes a complicated term as it exists in fog of contexts and sits alongside other terms like "commodity" or "substance." It has everything, however, to do with

⁴⁸ Ibid, 206-7.

⁴⁹ Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital: A Reading of Volume One* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 35.

things and how we misconstrue things by their visible manifestation only. Zukofsky's maxim, "The desk, not the lumber,"⁵⁰ instructs us to focus not on the raw materials or substances because, like "unmined coal," the lumber "is a material thing, but not a commodity. When the miner digs it up, it has a use value because so much labor power has been expended digging it up for a social need." Here Zukofsky is attempting to explain to Pound in June of 1935 the importance of Marx: "There's more material fact and more imaginative handling of fact in the first chapter of Marx than has been guessed at in your economic heaven ... but you can still read Charlie and find out for yourself why labor is the basic commodity (if that word is to have any consequential meaning at all) and how the products of labor are just the manifestations, and money yr. capitalistic juggling, of that commodity."⁵¹ The parallel to be drawn is in terms of Zukofsky's overlaying of Marx's labor theory of value onto an aesthetic theory. Zukofsky's reorientation seems apparent: he is begrudgingly asking to move art away from, to use Marx's language, one "form of appearance" to another.⁵² The fugue, therefore, might be exhausted in terms of exchange-value or tabooed by cultural codes, but its use-value maintains a living potential if it finds a corresponding social need. Far from being a pure form, the fugue's social content—which includes Bach's economic struggles and his switch from the sacred to the profane—permits Zukofsky the breadth and space of textual simultaneity to engage history.

A complex string works on several horizontal and vertical connective chains in Zukofsky (i.e., it is *musical*). Artistic forms, which seem entirely tabooed for modern

⁵⁰ Zukofsky, *Prepositions* +, 207.

⁵¹ Zukofsky, *Pound/Zukofsky*, 171.

⁵² Marx, *Capital*, 127.

poetry, are again redeployed because they seem to speak again to a social need. But they are not merely repeated, they are modernized with the help of complex calculus and physics (not to mention the fugue now being *textual*). This is poetic-labor in the Marxian sense: a productive activity responding to determinate social need. But it is use-value which establishes the theoretical base for this movement; if we pay attention to Marx, use-value is not only a *productive activity*, but it also creates a counter, albeit hidden, genealogy of history by way of a *constant* method of extending prior use-values. If the exchange-value of a house reaches zero, does the use-value parallel in proportion? No, use-value has its own grooves and channels that have nothing to do with the market. Regardless of exchange, use-value is a historical constant. As Marx says,

The old form of the use-value disappears, but it is taken up again in a new form of use-value. . . . Hence the worker preserves the values of the already consumed means of production or transfers them to the product as portions of its value, not by virtue of his additional labor as such, but by virtue of the particular useful character of that labor, by virtue of its specific productive form. Therefore, in so far as labor is productive activity directed toward a particular purpose, in so far as it is spinning, weaving or forging, etc., it raises the means of production from the dead merely by entering into contact with them, infuses them with life so that they become factors of the labor process, and combines with them to form new products.⁵³

Conjuring for Marx, but perhaps art history for Zukofsky. A double movement is important here: if one is a capitalist, then this is a potentially subversive form of consciousness for a worker to embody; if one is an anti-capitalist, then we have a highly productive counter to the world of quantity by seeing use-value as a historical connective tissue forming a collective that defies temporal limits. Exchange-value can

⁵³ Marx, *Capital*, 308.

be destroyed (a home), but not use-value (the labor that went into and took place within the home).

When we apply this thinking to “A”-8 the antagonism comes into full relief. There are two historical trajectories at work: capitalism and anti-capitalism. These are the far poles of the combatting fugues that existed conterminously with one another in the 1930s: a world of two worlds, a dissensus. For example, there is a modulation or a back-and-forth occurring incessantly in the poem. Just as Marx and Engels fight for the “*legal* limitation of the working day” they also appear commenting on America: “1866. Still Marx. I was very pleased. With the American Workers’ Congress at Baltimore . . . / Curiously enough most of the demands / which I drew up for Geneva / Were also put forward there (in Baltimore).” Immediately following is a section from “1869. A Chapter of Erie. C. F. Adams (Jr.)” designating Charles Francis Adams, Jr.’s *Chapters of Erie*. The Adamases function for Zukofsky as perhaps one of the final records of attempted regulation and just business practices being sought after in the U.S. (particularly railroads and banks) before monopolization became a goal. Charles Francis and Brooks’ texts produce vehement critiques of capitalism, especially the emergence of absolute coercion and unlawfulness marked by the new captains of industry:

Ten o’clock the astonished police . . . panic-stricken railway director
In their hands . . . files of papers . . . and their pockets
Crammed . . . assets and securities . . . One,
Captain, in a hackney-coach . . . with him . . . six millions in
greenbacks.⁵⁴

For Zukofsky, the mere quoting of these figures is an attempt to pull their use-value back from the dead. One of the main themes throughout the poem is the importance of

⁵⁴ Zukofsky, “A”, 76.

textual production as a use-value (Charles Reznikoff's *Testimony* being not too far distanced as "testimony" is a mode of critiquing narratives of nationalisms and exceptionalisms; and again we see the necessity of analyzing the theories and strategies of citation and quotation—a task which must be put off for a later date). We see Marx writing, but also the Adams brothers doing the same; Zukofsky includes Brooks having a conversation with Henry (where "value" is the bingo word): "Please read this manuscript . . . tell me / Whether it is worth printing / Or whether it is quite mad. / Probably there is nothing of value in it.' / 'The gold-bugs will never forgive you. / You are monkeying with a dynamo.'"⁵⁵ We have not merely capitalism and anti-capitalism, but two entirely competing forms of production, two forms for producing the world locked in struggle: on this side, destruction and exploitation; on that side, productive activity according to social need.

A further detour is needed. All the while writing these densely theoretical poems Zukofsky was also working for the WPA under Ruth Reeve's direction on the *Index of American Design*. The *Index* charts the history of modernization by focusing on the shift from handicrafts to industrialization in terms of ironwork, chalk ware, tin ware, and kitchenware. In a radio script written but never recorded Zukofsky writes specifically about one object, "The Henry Clay Figurehead." He says, "Looking at the ship's figurehead of which the idea has been oversimplified only to appear as of today, we wonder how this *thing* could have faded so quickly from men's minds, forgetting that we probably had no opportunity to see it before." In the middle of the 1930s, Zukofsky was a New Deal employee working as a public servant who graphed the history of the U.S.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 79.

in terms of its objects. Most of these objects, like the figurehead, remain anonymous (Henry Clay names a ship). The importance of the *Index*, Zukofsky says, is that it has a potential chance to bring these objects back into full consciousness,

As pictures, yes, and as facts. They still exist, because they existed. And because rendering the truths they were to the people who made and used them becomes part of the factual material of the artist's drawing.

A drawing of the ship's figurehead becomes a guide not only to all ship's figureheads that preceded it, but a reason for creating sculpture in our time. It ceases to be a museum piece or a collector's item as soon as the form and color of the drawing help to circulate its image among people. They *must* admire, and demand an effort from contemporary art that will yield a comparable pleasure to the living.⁵⁶

It seems that the reactionary congressional committees of 1939 had just cause for being suspicious of the radical work being done by the WPA and subsequently lobbying to depoliticize it with the Hatch Act. Zukofsky is not interested in resuscitating forms or thinkers in order to dazzle by means of technical bravado—or at least it is not that alone. Instead he works within the qualitative politics of social need. A canzone, like an anonymous figurehead, is capable of articulating what is socially necessary. Both objects, figurehead and canzone, have the potential for us to, as Lefebvre said earlier, “enter into a complex network of human relationships.”

Love, Labor, and Productive Science

“A”-9 is a formally aggressive poem that took nineteen years to complete. In 1931 Zukofsky begins thinking how to construct a “canzone of economics” only to finish in 1950. The poem should be considered within three aspects: 1) as an argument against Pound's poetic project that espouses the inferiority of America and the English language in terms of art; 2) as a poetic imagining of equality produced through an equity of

⁵⁶ Zukofsky, *Index*, 150.

exchange; and 3) as a modernized version of the politics of Amor where love intersects with use-value. The poem is constructed in two halves, the first completed in 1940 and the second in 1950. In the first half Marx functions as theoretical anchor for Zukofsky in order to poeticize the premise, “If commodities could speak, they would say this: our use-value may interest men, but it does not belong to us as objects. What does belong to us as objects, however, is our value.”⁵⁷ Then, in the second half, Spinoza’s *natura-naturans* becomes the theoretical frame to argue for a collective love produced by the interplay and socialization of Desire.

Rather than articulate these two halves as a break in Zukofsky’s thinking, I want to extend and supplement Davidson’s argument in *Ghostlier Demarcations* that the poem illustrates how Marx’s reaffirmation of “the identity of labor and product” is a dialectical compliment to Spinoza’s “unities of subject and object, God and nature.”⁵⁸ There is also, however, a third dynamic operating by way of the use-value of the canzone, and specifically, Cavalcanti’s “Donna me prega.” Indeed, part of Dante and Cavalcanti’s project was to poeticize the inseparability of subject and object. But, and Davidson passes over the point entirely even with his emphasis on “ghosts,” Cavalcanti’s canzone deals with phantasmal appearances. As Giorgio Agamben says of Cavalcanti’s poetry, “The object of love is in fact a phantasm, but this phantasm is a ‘spirit,’ inserted, as such, in a pneumatic circle in which the limits separating internal and external, corporeal and incorporeal, desire and object, are abolished.”⁵⁹ “Donna me prega,” as both artistic

⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital*, 176.

⁵⁸ Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations*, 132.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993), p. 108.

form and form of use-value, demonstrates a different type of production where “as in a mirror, the union (*copulatio*) of the individual with the unique and separate intellect is accomplished.”⁶⁰ “A”-9, then, has an important fourth aspect that will only be compounded with Marx and Spinoza: Zukofsky’s argument for a *productive* and *unitary* counter-science; that is, a science countering the determinations of the market.

Scroggins’ work on the poem serves to orient my argument. As his research shows, Pound found the canzone a superior form: “Cavalcanti’s rhymes are disyllabic (‘feminine’) rhymes, far more common in Italian than in English; given the general scarcity of rhyming words in English (compared with Italian) it would seem impossible for a poet writing in English to duplicate the canzone’s rhyme scheme.”⁶¹ If we follow this argument, however, we are limiting the poem to poetics only. The poem, a dense construction in its own right, layers a multifarious kind of theoretical thinking; moreover, the treatment of the poem under the regime of poetics alone refuses to acknowledge Zukofsky as a theorist or, even more dangerously, a political theorist. When Zukofsky published *First Half of “A”-9* by himself in 1940, he included his notes on Marx’s *Capital* and “Value, Price, and Profit,” notes on Herbert Stanley Allen’s *Electrons and Waves: An Introduction to Atomic Physics* (1932), Pound’s two translations of “Donna me prega,” Zukofsky’s own translation into Irish brogue (“A foin lass bodders”), Jerry Reisman’s translation into Brooklynese (“A Dame Ast Me”), a section entitled “The Form” where the mathematical analogy to atomic physics is unveiled, the actual first half of “A”-9, and a prose restatement, line by line, of the poem. A rare event for Zukofsky to

⁶⁰ Ibid, 106.

⁶¹ Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life*, 184.

tell of everything that went into the poem and to transliterate the poetry; forty-one pages of collated research for two and a half typescript pages.

And so I think Scroggins is much too preemptive to say, “This is no disquisition on love, but an examination of labor and value.”⁶² This would depend on how Zukofsky approaches love and labor as concepts. The poem’s objective might be to invert these types of claims: labor and love are grounded in the same dialectical movement—or, the same movement that “overcomes the metaphysical fracture of presence” for Agamben⁶³—that heals the logic of separation inherent to exchange and the commodity-fetish. Zukofsky constructs an interesting line of flight that traverses a Renaissance poet, a seventeenth-century philosopher, a nineteenth-century economist, a twentieth-century physicist, and a twentieth-century poet, all of whom delegitimize various forms of separation. To use a much abused word today, the poem is *interdisciplinary*. Like Cavalcanti’s science of love, Marx’s science of economics, Spinoza’s science of collective forms of constitution (cf. Hardt and Negri’s “multitude”), and Allen’s science of atoms, poetry is a science that emphasizes irreducibly positive notions of *production* and *unification*, or even *production-as-unification*. Zukofsky is attempting to heal a massive ideological rift resulting from the Enlightenment-turned-industrialization of knowledge and human experience *tout court* as *some-thing* isolatable, calculable, and *visible*.

Before working through the poem I think an explanation of method is in order. As I have argued, Zukofsky connects several poetic analogues to Marx’s labor theory of

⁶² Ibid, 185.

⁶³ Agamben, *Stanzas*, 130.

value and the labor process. But this method, which seemingly follows phantasms and false appearances for their manifestations as *untruth*, is also a counter-science. As

Harvey says,

While the different elements of value congealed in the commodity are invisible to the naked eye, Marx is going to make the claim, which you may not like, that this mode of analysis actually produces a far better science of political economy precisely because it gets beyond the fetishism of the market. The bourgeoisie had produced good enough science from the standpoint of the market, but they don't understand how the system works from the standpoint of the labor process, and to the degree that they do, they plainly want to disguise it. . . . They cannot possibly concede that labor is the form-giving, fluid, creative fire in the transformation of nature that lies at the heart of any mode of production, including capitalism.⁶⁴

Something eerily subversive lurks here. It is as if Zukofsky will construct a chain of thinkers whose link—thick or thin—will be a variation on this method. Looming behind the existing configuration of society is a potentially more beneficial science whose excavation maintains the production of a totally different social configuration, one that factors human and social need as a priority. The three prominent figures in the poem all represent a historical periodization: Cavalcanti's ties to the Renaissance, especially Florence with its administrative and geographical shift into the municipalities of the *comuni*; Spinoza's Holland as an anomalous stronghold against the dawn of capitalism as it demarcates a new European horizon; and Marx's account of capitalism moving full tilt through industrialization. Zukofsky links all three by a variation on a simple idea: the experience of a unified world where, like Marx's worker-bee who "builds a cell in his head / before he constructs it in wax" in order to "end in the creation of a thing, / . . . / Which when the process began / Already lived as the worker's image," is quickly

⁶⁴ Harvey, *A Companion*, 132-3.

receiving its final turn of the screw.⁶⁵ But if “A”-8 maps numerous historical wrong turns resulting in a simultaneous fugal cacophony of all the forces participating in industrial capitalism bottoming out as it moves into finance capitalism, “A”-9 performs a complex counterpoint as if Marx was already before Spinoza: there exists a counter-productive power, be it labor or love.

What we begin to notice in “A”-9 is then not two halves, but two variations of forms of appearance. Although one half was published before the other, when “A”-9 was published as a completed section there was nothing separating the two sections; one poem with two distinct variants. The two variations, Marx and Spinoza, are almost identical, and it would not be inappropriate to say that Zukofsky forces them into an identity; Marx’s fetishized commodities speak negatively about exchange-value while Spinoza’s unidentified collective speaks of nature’s positive production. The same form is shown switching forms. Here we should compare the opening lines of the first and second variations:

An impulse to action sings of a semblance,
Of things related as equated values,
The measure all use is time congealed labor
In which abstraction things keep no resemblance
To goods created; integrated all hues
Hide their natural use to one or one’s neighbor.

. . .

An eye to action sees love bear the semblance
Of things, related is equated, – values
The measure all use who conceive love, labor
Men see, abstraction they feel, the resemblance
(Part, self-created, integrated) all hues
Show to natural use, like Benedict’s neighbor.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Zukofsky, “A”, 61.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 106, 108.

The mistake when reading “A”-9 is to think of labor and love as something opposed or that opting for one means the cancellation of the other—they are indeed different, but without negation. To parcel the poem apart consigns us to a vulgar antagonism—albeit a structural reading of binary oppositions—where the identity of labor and love cannot be adequately addressed.

We can begin to untangle the many conversations Zukofsky has set up within “A”-9. The first variation narrates Marx’s commodities being fully conscious of their alienation. Labor, like love, is enwrapped in the trope of “light”—a suitable figure for Harvey’s “fluid, creative fire.” When commodities speak, they speak of a negative power, “Light is / Like night is like us when we meet our mentors / Use hardly enters into their exchanges, / Bought to be sold things, our value arranges.”⁶⁷ Taken out from the totality of experience, exchange-value swaps forms of appearance as the object passes into the commodity-fetish. Zukofsky builds an antagonism point-by-point through a series of sequential reversals. The correlating lines in the second variation uses the complexity of nature—its totality—as a constellated process of production: “Light is / Like the night isolated by stars (poled mentors) / Blossom eyelet enters peeling with such changes / As sweet alyssum, that not-madness.”⁶⁸ For Zukofsky labor, whose dialectic he has already overlaid onto Spinoza’s *natura-naturans* as “Labor as creator / Labor as creature,” finds its poetic description in the production of flowers. The antagonism between labor and love is not only false, but it collapses entirely within Zukofsky’s poem. Labor in its unalienated form is a productive means towards

⁶⁷ Ibid, 106.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 108.

consciousness; love is a constitutive process that exercises a collective power through a mutual determination—a socialization—with dialectical nature. Both aspects share a commonality: the production of univocal experience fueled by desires that are always already social.

The market, as it works against nature, is a negative notion of Power. Countering this power is the totality of a dialectical nature. A keyword that Zukofsky imports from Spinoza into the second variation is indeed “power.” This counter-power, which Zukofsky again describes in floral tropes, maintains the doubling and mirror-like qualities inherent to the canzone, but unlike Marx’s doubling here we avoid the problem of the fetish: “The foci of things timelessly reflected – / Substance subjected to no human perversion.”⁶⁹ This power, which is the power of dialectical nature itself, doubles not to create one true form and one false form; the double movement is the very constitution of things-in-themselves by and with nature. Power here is a mutual determination: “Free as it exists it loves: worms dig; imprecision / Of indignation cannot make the rose high / Or close sigh, therein blessedness effected / Thru power has directed love to envision / Where body is it bears a like decision.”⁷⁰ We are wrong, I think, to assume that Zukofsky displaces the entire arch of politics here for the pastoral scene of flora and fauna as a sort of nostalgic retreat. Rather, we have a Spinozian symbol: a collective movement of objects exercising and executing actions according to an altogether different worldview besides the unnatural purviews of the market: “No one really knows us who does not love us, / Time does not move us, we are and love,

⁶⁹ Ibid, 109.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 109.

searing / Remembrance – veering from guises which cloak us, / So defined as eternal men invoke us.” Everything, like Spinoza’s focus on Desires, *tends toward another* in a complex act of elastic socialization. If we invert the world of Marx’s commodity-fetish we may indeed have a world driven by human desires and social needs—neither of which are indissociable from the other. From the viewpoint of labor and love, the world operates according to desire and need, not surplus.

Love, however, needs to be further complicated as an opening onto Spinoza’s politics. The notion of desire is not a simple one. Love, like other Desires (*cupiditas*), as Antonio Negri has argued, is a constructive and constitutional power, “*cupiditas* as a motor.”⁷¹ The function of Desire is a sheer positivity: “In what sense could it be defined negatively? There is no such possibility. . . . It is a power, its tension is explicit, its being full, real, and given.”⁷² This is a science, Negri tells us, but it is a radically politicized science.

In Spinoza science is recognized as constructiveness, freedom, and innovation. It is in no way teleologically or theologically conditioned. The scientific model that capitalism produces for its own development is implicated in the critique carried out by negative thought. . . . In contrast to all this stands constitutive thought. And that is the necessity and the possibility of science being used as a machine of liberation. This is the fundamental point. The intersection between negative thought and constitutive thought determines a harmonic force at the point of resonance between the critiqued totality and the project of liberation. The vastness of the project of liberation integrates the radicality of the negative project of the critique. Thus, science is brought back to the ethico-political dimension, it is filled with hope. . . . The constitutive project must therefore pose science as a nonfinalized essence, as an accumulation of liberatory acts. It must pose science not as nature but as second nature, not as knowledge but as

⁷¹ Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics*, trans. Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991), p. 159.

⁷² *Ibid*, 155-6.

appropriation, not as individual appropriation but as collective appropriation, not as Power (*potestas*) but as power (*potentia*).⁷³

We have here, and I think its correspondence to Zukofsky's project is acute, a science defying the trajectories that came to a climax in the past century, a science that does not bar the path toward liberation: determinate negation followed by production-as-positivity. For a poem that exists between 1931 and 1950, arguably science's most abusive and irrational period of sheer domination, art takes an important position in a historical lineage of liberation, consciousness, and resistance to this domination.

And it is art that Zukofsky has in mind. Labor and love become aspects into the constitutive and constructive arena of intellectual and artistic production. We could turn one of Negri's questions of *cupiditas* in terms of art: What else could it be but a constitutive process, a pure positivity? Its only negativity is positive: art-as-negation of untruth. As Zukofsky says, "Love acts beyond the phase day wills it into – / Hate is obscure, errs, is pain, furor, torn – a / Lust to adorn aversion, hope – love eying / Its object joined to its cause."⁷⁴ This joining, of object to cause, of subject to object, seems quite possible within art: modern semiology cannot help but displace the paradox inherent to a term like "love" that refuses the passage of signifier to signified. The unified and productive science Zukofsky outlines seems out of pace with his present, walking the edges of science and fiction.

It is not merely an innocuous love that Zukofsky is after; it is the full-blown restoration of the imaginative powers of poetic and intellectual labor to change society. If Marx was an artist, it seems Spinoza may have been one better. Here again I want to

⁷³ Ibid, 214-5.

⁷⁴ Zukofsky, "A", 110.

follow Negri's conclusions to his reading of Spinoza, because the constitutive and productive powers of the imagination reach their highest pitch:

The imagination is the heart of the constitutive ontology because it is at the center and is the emblem of its continuity, of the absolute univocality of the order of being. . . . Actually, if it is true that Spinoza still sees the world of industry, at the dawn of capitalism, as relatively insignificant with respect to the world of natural production, this attitude is misleading. Because the concept of production in Spinoza is not only the foundation of the dynamic of being but also, more importantly, the key to its complexity, to its articulation, to its expansivity. Second nature is born of the collective imagination of humanity, because science is precisely this: the productive result of the appropriative spirit of nature that the human community possesses and develops. The process of civilization is an accumulation of productive capacity.⁷⁵

Natura-naturans, especially when conjoined and overlaid onto Marx's labor theory of value, paradoxically displaces emphasis away from nature entirely: the world is production. If production is a process of complex unity, then Zukofsky offers a three-fold method to heal this abyss: Cavalcanti's fusion of subject and object, Marx's identity of labor and product, and Spinoza's world-as-production resulting from collective constitution.

"A"-12 and the Imagination of Modernism

We should close by way of examining how the next major section of the epic, "A"-12, continues the representative strategies of the fugue while also extending the theory of labor and art as productive powers within the Zukofsky household. I think we need to address "A"-12, rather than "A"-10 (which poeticizes the end of WWII) or "A"-11 (a short chorale), because this is where scholars have formed a consensus regarding his *poetic* shift from modernism to postmodernism, or rather, his retreat from politics in favor of domestic harmony. For example, Hatlen says that "A'-12 is astonishingly free of

⁷⁵ Negri, *The Savage Anomaly*, 225.

conflict, in ways that *no* family in the real world can be.” The theme we garner from these readings stems from a stress on the “domestic idyll of the family” that “allows the poet to accept the contingent, contextual status of the self and thus to initiate a movement beyond a modernist poetics of nostalgia for a lost absolute into a postmodernist poetics of finitude—and thus, of possibility.”⁷⁶ I am not interested here in thinking about *style* before *history*, so my narrative will be altogether a different one. If there is a domestic idyll—and, indeed, there is not—but if there is one it seems Zukofsky places it in a fugal accompaniment with history piling up its errors as the project of modernity moves further off target.

“A”-12’s fugal structure circulates around Bach’s name: (B) for Baruch Spinoza, (A) for Aristotle, (C) for Celia, and (H) for Hohenheim Paracelsus. Zukofsky also applies traits to each figure: blest, ardent, Celia needs no attribute, and happy. The mistake, I would argue, is to read these four traits as something existing in isolation. As in the prior sections, each of these four figures and traits is posed as a complex series of antagonisms. If we fail to see the antagonisms recurring throughout the poem, then perhaps there is a sort of idyll. But we would have to negate the contents of the poem itself along with linkages Zukofsky builds through them. However, the baby need not be tossed out with the bathwater. For instance, Zukofsky has contemporary politics running throughout the poem that includes a timeline of Stalin’s betrayals, the mistreatment of would-be immigrants due to a lingering anti-Semitism, and letters from a young friend serving in Korea. Countering this escalating sense of negative Power (destruction, exploitation, racism, etc.) Zukofsky again resurges use-value and labor as constructive

⁷⁶ Burton Hatlen, “From Modernism to Postmodernism: Zukofsky’s “A”-12,” *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa: U of Alabama P, 1997), p. 216.

and constitutive forces. Its symbol, which dodges around throughout the entire poem, is his son's fiddle.

The poem, then, opens with a quote from Bach: "*Out of deep need.*"⁷⁷ Zukofsky quickly clips through several myths of creation. After this quick dismissal he begins to articulate a different type of creation, artistic creation, with the insertion of a Valentine his son, Paul, made for Celia. One of the first major antagonisms we encounter in the poem has Zukofsky as its fulcrum: the passing of his father, Pinchos (Paul in English), and his son, Paul, who has a prodigious interest in playing the violin. Zukofsky spends significant time creating a biographical representation of his father, whose life, for Paul, will be strange and out of time. Moreover, everything about Pinchos is subsumed by *quantity* as he bore the brunt of industrialization as an immigrant Lithuanian Jew who labored in garment shops:

Six years night watchman
In a men's shop
Where by day he pressed pants
Every crease a blade
The irons weighed
At least twenty pounds
But moved both of them
Six days a week
From six in the morning
To nine, sometimes eleven at night.

Everything regarding Pinchos is quantified: his pension, his age, the contents of his pocketbook, and the duration of his activities ("To open and close the synagogue / For over six times ten years / Until three days before he died – / A longer journey than

⁷⁷ Zukofsky, "A", 126.

Odysseus’.”). This quantified life finds a summative and negative expression: “He never saw a movie.”⁷⁸

As a counterpoint there is Paul, a child existing outside the world of quantity. The connecting point for these two worlds will be a fiddle: “200-year spruce at least / For a fiddle for Paul: / Save / The heart of the wood so to speak / And who belongs to it. / Paul to Paul.”⁷⁹ The fiddles in “A”-12 function much like the horses before it. Tied into one object is a specific history and compounding use-values hidden inside it, “Father to son to grandson. / People carry a wood.”⁸⁰ And when Paul takes up the fiddle, as if he “Owed the world nothing,” Zukofsky proceeds to list craftsmen who made fiddles: “A fiddle. / Then *it is* Stainer – / Jacob Stainer – / 16 hundreds – / In the Austrian Tyrol / Knocking on a tree / Sounding it to make sure / Its wood will be right.” This narrative will continue, much like the Henry Clay figurehead, showing how each successive craftsman formed a history including the Stradivarius brothers and Joseph Slavik. The genealogy, now vividly present, parallels other transfers of labor across time. Use-value functions much like a necromancer or a ventriloquist: “A work spoken / in the name of the blest / And blest lips move in the grave / The live lips that speak it / Move with those of the blest.”⁸¹ In dialogue with “Rabbi Pinhas,” we locate more analogies of the ability to reanimate dead labor.

And it appears we have not left politics or labor behind, but rather sentimentalized them. Zukofsky opens a moment to see labor and productive activity outside of factories

⁷⁸ Ibid, 152-5.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 150.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 157.

⁸¹ Ibid, 160.

and mills; the politics of use-value occur at the level of everyday experience. The daily problem faced by Zukofsky is the repeated refrain, “Shall I teach Paul,” that echoes throughout much of the poem: What qualities will recur with Paul’s reanimation of Pinchos? For example, when Paul is quoted saying, “The horse bends down,” Zukofsky immediately switches into a discourse about labor:

The horse sees he is repeating
All known cultures
And suspects repeating
Others unknown to him,
...
The shape of his ground seems to have been
A constant for all dead horses
His neigh cultural constant
Also his sniff –⁸²

Without knowing it, the hidden qualities of prior labors—from the labors of Pinchos, to Zukofsky’s, and even the labors going into the fiddle itself—find articulation in Paul’s encounter with language and art as a child.

As I have been arguing, Zukofsky’s poetry does not represent any sufficient breaks, rejections, or movements away from politics or his interest in poeticizing the importance of use-value as a social organizing principle. Here we have the collective family—the emphasis will turn from Paul to Celia—as a political unit functioning in direct contradistinction to the regime of quantity (i.e., industrialization under capitalism’s latest phase) that Pinchos experienced; we see the attempted reversal from quantity to quality in action. This political family, the very politicization of a collective capable of experiencing the world in absolute dissensus with the present social circumstance, is the enactment of Zukofsky’s modernism hitting its highest note: another mode of living

⁸² Ibid, 175.

is *possible*. What fuels this possibility? Spinoza turns to Zukofsky for a verification stamp.

The productive and constitutive power of the imagination again finds its way back into Zukofsky's poem:

The imaginations of the mind in themselves
Involve no error,
But I deny that a man affirms nothing
In so far as he perceives –
SPINOZA.⁸³

Whenever we encounter Spinoza in Zukofsky's poetry, an antagonism is already at work. The productive capacity of a world exists, but Zukofsky spends the next sections of his poem maneuvering through several misappropriations by tracing a line of *negative repetition* by means of historical failures. For example, Zukofsky includes perhaps the only ship equaling the misfortunes of the *St. Louis's* voyage in 1939: the *Exodus's* voyage in 1947. An emigration ship transporting mostly survivors of German concentration camps, the ship sailed from Paris to Palestine by British mandate only to be commandeered by the British Navy, its passengers beaten, and sent back. At the time, and directly a result of British anti-Semitism, the passengers would be interned in Cypress (a British colony). As Zukofsky illustrates,

Tortured in the ship *Exodus*
To DDT DP's
Scuttle their prison ship
With a justice that does not exist
In the world but sterilizes,
. . .
Nothing human in common
After being lashed in common.⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid, 189.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 197-8.

As if to complement Adorno, there would be no poetry after WWII that did not start from its historical rupture. But Zukofsky, through a slight semantic chain, dialectically flips “lashes” through Paul’s inversion of a compound word, “*Lasheyes*, says Paul / Meaning eyelashes,” to which Zukofsky says, “But the language of / Diplomacy is such / I am never able / To verify it.”⁸⁵ A concept like equality (or “peace”) depends upon an everyday act of verification; if equality cannot be verified, we have an offsetting of equality and therefore a politics.

The conclusion of the poem rotates a final time around each of the points of the fugue. Celia—for “C”—receives the most attention. But when we find Celia, again we find the figure of the fiddle, “Weaving, / a fiddle.” Importantly, Celia’s entire section revolves around the theme of objects created for one another. For example, Zukofsky describes at length the decorations of their house but with special emphasis on objects created by Paul and himself for Celia, “On the third floor / Of our Brooklyn brownstone / Is my fetish for building, / A collage: / ‘Duncan Phyfe’s house, workshop and store.’” The title of the artwork is important: Phyfe was the Zukofsky’s exemplar craftsman whose furniture he praised in the *Index*. Again and again Zukofsky creates images of the mutual creation of artwork—now working three ways with Paul—within the family. The division of labor within the home, with each person working alongside one another, again brings us back to Zukofsky’s pre-industrial historical study: this is not a nostalgia for that moment, it is its repetition and modernization. There is a collective of three artists—a pianist, a poet, and a violinist—all producing objects according to the politics of *use*. The task includes an immense amount of artistic failures that Zukofsky lists at

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 201.

length. But all of these creations hinge labor and love as the activity of transferring the creation of objects from exchange, where they lie dead, back into living use:

Living, you love
So I love
With the dead
In me
Thru wet and dry
For the living

Rounding out the analogy of a familial use-value, which included Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics*, Gertrude Stein's *The Making of Americans*, and various other artists working within the tropes of genealogy, Zukofsky asks Celia to "Tell me of that man who got around / After sacred Troy fell / . . . / Start where you please." The question seems to be: How does one begin or start again now, in 1950, toward that other possibility? Celia responds, "It's so simple, / Telemachos rose from his bed / And dressed."⁸⁶ The simple method of producing a world on the basis of mutual constitution via production only seems difficult because it remains hidden. Importantly, the only other moment of simplicity we see in Zukofsky occurs with Marx: "Politics, / Record / Labor. / – Marx's presumption? / . . . / boiled down simply, / From his body to other bodies / There's a natural use / And a use that's unnatural."⁸⁷ As long as there are fetishized commodities, Zukofsky's writing will remain political.

When in 1960 Zukofsky completes "A"-13, the same point again resonates: "There will have to be a / Redefinition of writing."⁸⁸ Zukofsky becomes more hermetic, and this is uncontested, but this will not prohibit him from incorporating political assassinations or

⁸⁶ Ibid, 261.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 207.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 392.

the struggle for civil rights into his poetry. Indeed, it as if Zukofsky cannot help but continue his politics:

Touching community
Let this
Be the conclusion.

But he cannot conclude:

Further if politics be an art,
Most know nothing of peace
Supposing goods they contend for

Mean more than love
They regarded in making
Works

To occupy people
And keep them
Poor;

We can extend this pattern all the way through “A”-23, Zukofsky’s last section before Celia’s finale, where the analogy of creation against commodification closes the entire movement through a complicated homology between language and flowers: “the sea is our road / the land for our use.”⁸⁹ And I think we should make the following claim: Zukofsky’s modernism resists nostalgia and also the turn toward modernism’s own reification, especially as it reappears to us now as a “modernist poetics.” Modernism recurs within Zukofsky’s artistic output as a radical *as if* to the perpetual failures of the promises of modernity’s projects; it verifies the *possible* by producing its potential out of everyday matters of fact.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 537.

CHAPTER 5 BEFORE POSTMODERNISM CAME AFTER CHARLES OLSON

Charles Olson is prototypically a late modernist. Much of what unfolds within this Chapter will be an elaboration upon this statement as well as the many paradoxes it includes. Fredric Jameson describes late modernism most clearly when he says, “Late modernism is a product of the Cold War, but in all kinds of complicated ways.”¹ To argue that Olson was a late modernist, however, would be a redundant if not a dead-ending activity; it takes us only to the statement of a historical fact. What becomes more interesting, I think, is that by revisiting Olson’s hinged position between the narratives of modernism and postmodernism—i.e., late modernism—we see an altogether different horizon for the postmodern resembling little to the one we currently still live within; that is, if we’re not already well on our way into another vaporous historical narrative and aesthetic category. The effect, as Jameson said in another place, is that if we admit (as we must) that

there is no pure postmodernism as such, then the residual traces of modernism must be seen in another light, less as anachronisms than as necessary failures that inscribe the particular postmodern project back into its context, while at the same time reopening the question of the modern itself for reexamination.²

Jameson seems to imply an important gesture here: the possibility of folding the work of history back into the narrative of the postmodern even if that narrative itself tends to tell the story of how history-work became outmoded. And as we will see Olson is every bit a residue of modernism’s political projects even as he simultaneously experiences the

¹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 165.

² Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), p. xvi.

ground drop out beneath him due to the failure of these projects. What I want to explore here, then, is how Olson sits at the fulcrum of this historical and political process; how both modernism *and* postmodernism are recast through his unique—and largely unfortunate—experience of pre- and post-WWII Americanism.

When Perry Anderson extends the problems and questions raised in Jameson's *The Cultural Turn*, he does so in part through the figure of Olson. Jameson had theorized postmodernism as a moment when economics and culture overlap completely, when “everything, including commodity production and high speculative finance, has become cultural.”³ In a roundabout way, Anderson traces how Olson's trajectory of “post-modern” as it was formulated in 1951 becomes another, albeit diametrically opposed, ideology after Olson dies in 1970. The one-word chapter titles of Anderson's *The Origins of Postmodernity* plot the narrative points of modernism shifting into postmodernism: Prodromes, Crystallization, Capture, and After-effects. Like many other figures exemplified by Anderson and Jameson going through a paralleling process (i.e., modernism-turned-“canon” or modernism-as-“Survey of American Literature II”), Olson becomes an avant-garde poet whose notion of experimentation loses its political base; tired are the antagonisms scouted out under the banners of left and right, base and superstructure, materialism and idealism.

As Anderson tells it, by the early 1970s “postmodernism” had gained consensus that becomes typified in William Spanos' journal *boundary 2*. The journal largely rewrote the history of Olson and Black Mountain College by favoring narratives of aesthetic pleasure and by stressing artistic styles changing over social change. But *boundary 2*

³ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 73.

also “stabilized the idea of the postmodern as a collective reference.”⁴ The result: Olson’s manifesto, “Projective Verse,” must bifurcate into a vogue experimental poetics that pointed beyond humanism while at the same time “his political attachment to an unbidden future beyond capitalism—the other side of Rimbaud’s ‘courage’ saluted in *The Kingfishers*—passed out of sight.”⁵

Anderson’s account of postmodernism, which both owes to and reciprocates Jameson’s theorizations, opens the possibility of an altogether different project where we see continuity from modernism to postmodernism. Anderson pays special attention to Olson’s “The Kingfishers,” a poem that voices disagreement with U.S. foreign policy in favor of Mao’s Long March as symbol of a new collectivism:

It was here, then, that the elements for an affirmative conception of the postmodern were first assembled. In Olson, an aesthetic theory was linked to a prophetic history, with an agenda allying poetic innovation with political revolution in the classic tradition of the avant-gardes of pre-war Europe. The continuity with the original *Stimmung* of modernism, in an electric sense of the present as fraught with a momentous future, is striking. But no commensurate doctrine crystallized.⁶

Before postmodernism became, in Anderson’s words, “an appanage of the Right,” it prospected a different course of history *in advance*.⁷ How the doctrine failed to crystallize takes up the remainder of Anderson’s time. This narrative of failure echoes Jameson’s work on late modernism and charts the disarranging experience, or the misadventures, of postmodernism as it twists through a neoliberal landscape that is best summed up in a comment referring to Habermas: “For the ultimate error of modernism,

⁴ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 16.

⁵ *Ibid*, 18.

⁶ *Ibid*, 12.

⁷ *Ibid*, 45.

he explains, was not so much lack of vigilance towards the market, as too much trust in the plan.” Olson would be quite vulnerable to the same critique; as a New Deal social democrat in 1944, he was appointed third in command of the Democratic National Committee, and he deeply trusted the plan of F.D.R.’s “one worldism” before it veered into Truman’s “free worldism.”⁸ To understand the dynamics of this shift we may have to confront the consequences of inverting Le Corbusier’s motto “the Plan is the Generator” into “the Generator is the Plan.”

Here, by way of thinking initially about planning, we have a moment to reconsider Olson’s postmodernism. This requires considering the politics behind such planning—including the entire social and cultural planning implied by the New Deal in its first and second versions (from the U.S. to the world)—but also how this concept of planning fails due to an encroaching American hegemony that, via a shortcut, we might call corporate liberalism or corporate capitalism (or, even shorter, “Trumanism”). As both Michael Denning and Giovanni Arrighi argue—both building on Antonio Gramsci’s use of hegemony—social planning becomes an economic anachronism during the American Century as Fordism passes completely over into post-Fordism; Fordist inventory gives way to Toyotaism’s “lean production” or “just-in-time production” as market contingencies erode the New Deal’s promises of welfare and security—a time before “futures” became synonymous with “finance.” While Denning does not mention Olson in *The Cultural Front*, every aspect of Olson’s political and artistic career in the 1930s and 1940s coincides with the Popular Front: Olson was F. O. Matthiessen’s student at Harvard in the American Civilization Ph.D. program and worked for the ACLU, the Office

⁸ See Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), pp. 69-76, 286-305.

of War Information, the DNC, and campaigned alongside Sidney Hillman for F.D.R.'s reelection to get out the worker's vote in New York City at a time when labor occupied a good deal of office space in Times Square. To complement Anderson's reading that positions Olson's postmodernism as an event that failed to crystalize, we could say that Denning's description of the Popular Front as a vanishing mediator likewise applies to Olson: "It was a moment of transition between the Fordist modernism that reigned before the crash, and the postmodernism of the American Century that emerged from the ruins of Hiroshima." To this extent I want to follow Denning's lead by triangulating the generational frames—first and second wave modernisms or even first and second generation Americans—along with the narratives of modernism and postmodernism, Fordism and post-Fordism.⁹

But the aim here is not simply to prove that Olson was part of the larger cultural movement of the Popular Front or to recapitulate Anderson's reading of a prematurely extinguished postmodernism (which is, by another roundabout, a narrative of modernism). Instead, I want to follow the continuity of Olson's postmodernism from a prior modernism and outline the contours of this shift within his political career, intellectual output, and artistic production. This is, I hope, not so paradoxical in the end: Olson, whom we must call "modernist," attempts to continue modernism's political project well into a postmodern historical situation—that is, before it became "an appanage of the Right." For the moment, then, this argument would force us to reconsider "Projective Verse" not as a revolutionary manifesto for its platform of a "new" poetics. The revolutionary aspect may be instead Olson's own emphasis that he is

⁹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 27.

continuing modernism within the context of 1950s America with the Cold War and New Criticism (or “Eliotism”) on the move: “But what I want to emphasize here . . . is the already projective nature of verse as the sons of Pound and Williams are practicing it.”¹⁰ This means we should reconsider Olson, not as a distant “postmodernist” or master-theorizer of an avant-garde poetics that moves us beyond Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky as narratives of historical breaks would have it, but by his closeness and continuity. For someone who attended Williams’ “salon” as a graduate student, whose two initial publications owe debts to Pound’s connections that lasted even while he was at St. Elizabeth’s, and to whom Joseph Albers handed off the duties of rector at Black Mountain College, Olson’s “postmodernism” appears as a strange inversion for us: modernism continuing against its own reification.

As Michael Szalay argues in *New Deal Modernism*, Olson’s career demonstrates a refusal of a postmodern break and “instead marks out a quintessentially New Deal modernist trajectory.”¹¹ Szalay importantly links the economic condition of underconsumption found in the 1930s and 1940s to a breadth of artistic practices he locates within the social movements either directly or indirectly involved in New Deal politics. What Szalay calls the “performative aesthetic” attempts to hold onto this diverse population by showing how in different contexts artists tried to make “consumption and production one and the same process, a temporally defined activity detached as much as possible from the determining equivocations of market demand.”¹² Many of my

¹⁰ Charles Olson, “Projective Verse” *Collected Prose* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), p. 246.

¹¹ Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), p. 258.

¹² *Ibid*, 6.

remarks above parallel Szalay's, especially regarding Olson. Szalay positions Olson to epitomize Jameson's "account of the modern and the postmodern, between the fiercely autonomous, antimarket forces of an oppositional modernism and the complicity, corporation-friendly complacencies of postmodernism."¹³ Thus, for Szalay, Olson's variation of the "performative aesthetic" consolidates "the kind of contingency-free community that was one of the principal goals of the New Deal."¹⁴ However, rather than turn immediately to "happenings," which is the course Szalay's argument takes in order to emphasize performativity, I am more interested in thinking through how Olson's aesthetic might be the acting out of a politics that, while still "performative," is grounded in the theories and practices behind modernizing the concept of the Greek *polis*.

Szalay, by using Olson to briefly conclude a convincing longer argument, positions Olson at one pole: the continuation of modernism. This argument is in itself a certain refusal of a postmodern tendency. Rather than see the possibility of a continuation in historical processes, as Jameson argued long ago, "the postmodern looks for breaks, for events rather than new worlds, for the telltale instant after which it is no longer the same."¹⁵ This example is a bit upsetting for Szalay's argument only because it severely complicates what we make of Olson: he simultaneously dreams of new worlds ("to write a Republic" in *Maximus*)¹⁶ and senses a harsh postmodern break ("sometime quite recently a door went bang shut").¹⁷ Perhaps Olson deserves to be reconsidered within

¹³ Ibid, 265.

¹⁴ Ibid, 258.

¹⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, ix.

¹⁶ Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1983), p. 377.

¹⁷ Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, Volume 7*, ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1987), p. 234.

this fully paradoxical framework: how to continue modernism when a new socio-economic system denies this very possibility? My teetering above—switching from modernism to postmodernism, sometimes even to say Olson’s postmodernism *is* modernism—reflects this complication. For what I want to insist upon is that Olson becomes a symptomatic expression of an uneasy historical progression that effectively straddles modernism and postmodernism even as they seem to drift, “one leg upon the Ocean one leg / upon the Westward drifting continent.”¹⁸ Olson’s modernism, in other words, addresses a different set of coordinates than prior modernists but maintains its political project. This, of course, is where Jameson and Anderson’s arguments take us: a quite foreign and strange understanding of the postmodern before pastiche, aesthetic beauty, and genealogies of literary styles came to occupy so many postmodern connotations. In Olson, the postmodern maintains Anderson’s “electric sense of the present as fraught with a momentous future.”

As both symptom and antidote, then, we must approach Olson’s career. This requires engaging Olson as the object for his own literary method. When Olson completed his Herman Melville text, *Call Me Ishmael* (1947)—which was, importantly, rejected for publication the previous year by Harcourt Brace under recommendation from F. O. Matthiessen and Lewis Mumford—he posits a core of his “experimental” method:

I am willing to ride Melville’s image of man, whale and ocean to find in him prophecies, lessons he himself would not have spelled out. A hundred years gives us an advantage. Melville was as much larger than himself as Ahab’s hate. He was a plunger. He knew how to take a chance.

¹⁸ Olson, *Maximus*, 404.

Our advantage is not yet one hundred years, but assuredly our world appears just as inexplicable to Olson's as Olson's was to Melville's—or, even more odd, perhaps its extension. Accordingly, I want to find in Olson events and historical processes that were impossible for him to spell out no matter how sensitive he was to the historical pulse of his present (and as we shall see his awareness was honed). Starting from his work in the Popular Front and proceeding on through his tenure as rector of Black Mountain College, we find all the symptoms of a modernism continuing to assault the growing hegemonic leadership of the U.S. as the world enters a new cycle of accumulation: late capitalism, post-Fordism, or the solidification of the postmodern. It is no mistake, then, that by the third volume of *Maximus* the totality of the capitalist economic system becomes cosmological: the new mode of production is global and the U.S. made an abrupt U-turn—plan turns into contingency.

Or, finally, this is what we have to supplement to Szalay's argument: Olson's poetic is symptomatic of sheer contingency. Olson's poetic attempts to confront what he will refer to as "the speed-up" in a biography about his father's death, which, in Olson's view, was retribution for union organizing. How else are we to read "Projective Verse" except as the production of an eerily post-Fordist *line* that foreshadows an oncoming economic schizophrenia? Olson's *style* and *grammar*, then, occupy the double space of modernism and postmodernism simultaneously:

It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, their perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the

process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!¹⁹

This leads us to another question: what shifts in Olson's modernism could we stake as markers of a postmodernism? The symptoms, or answers, that account for this shift come wide in Olson—a wideness undoubtedly attributed to the spatial dimensions of a Cold War "Americanism"—and so we must be selective: the function of letter writing and the general form of the epistle in his poetry and elsewhere; his insistence on the abilities of the active and projective "present" to create new "fields" of discourse and history; and the end of all idealisms held within the archetype of the West as imagined from Homer to Melville, or, the "post-modern." All of these symptoms will take surprising turns—toward space, imperial expansion, labor, education, cybernetics, myths, grammar, etc.—but all continue to echo a kinship to the possibilities bound up in Language even as it moves into the zones of "communication" and "information." Moreover, at all moments, and at all levels, we find a commitment to the function of *critique* as a substrate to all of Olson's maneuvers: "[I] hew to the notion that we cannot afford to let out of our hand this weapon of CRITIQUE except at the peril of losing the whole world of reality of which we are a part."²⁰ And here we have one of many sinuous lines that takes Pound on into postmodernism: Olson's remarks above come from a letter to Robert Creeley, the same letter of August 9, 1951, where the "post-modern" is said to first arrive in the U.S. by Anderson and many others; but it is also where Olson stages a return to Pound in order to revive—or, rather, continue—the eldest of modern strategies: critique via totality.

¹⁹ Olson, "Projective Verse," 240.

²⁰ Olson, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley Vol 7*, 75.

Prologues of the Post-Modern

By examining *Call Me Ishmael* we find several points of interest: Olson elaborates upon his experimental dissertation, both in form and content, which borrows montage techniques from Eisenstein's *Film Form* in order to intervene in Melville scholarship by insisting that there were two versions of *Moby-Dick*—one with Ahab and one without. As James Zeigler has argued, however, the text also interestingly functions as an analogy to U.S. foreign policy in a post-WWII context. *Ishmael* performs two important tasks: it critiques U.S. imperialism by charting the expansion of the whaling industry, and it also suggests an alternative possibility for post-WWII America. According to Zeigler, by the end of *Ishmael* Olson risks a claim more impressive than the “two *Moby-Dicks*” argument:

The end of the West, as Olson imagines it, involves the dissolution of the nation-state as the predominant political unit in the world system. As the most powerful of the world's nations, the U.S. was uniquely positioned after WWII, Olson implies, to facilitate a transition to a new universalism.²¹

Zeigler moves the conversation of *Ishmael* in a productive direction: before American Studies programs dotted across American universities promoting pro-Cold War sentiments, we see in Olson's early dissertation project from the mid-1930s a different route entirely for “American Studies” to follow. To understand the ramifications of this political turn, for example, we need not move beyond Olson's immediate intellectual circle at Harvard. Mattheissen, in 1947, was barred reentry into the U.S. after participating in the Salzburg Seminar in Austria; no supporters of Henry Wallace were

²¹ James Zeigler, “Charles Olson's American Studies: *Call Me Ishmael* and the Cold War” *Arizona Quarterly* 63.2 (Summer 2007): pp. 51-80, 71.

allowed back into the States.²² Three years later Mattheissen's suicide emblemizes the closure of political futures for fellow travelers, queer intellectuals, and the Left in general.

Perhaps we should continue with the project Zeigler outlines in order to chart other instances of Olson imagining different courses for the U.S. to traverse and, while on the way, stress the political implications of these creative acts. Keeping with *Ishmael* for the moment I want to place emphasis on Olson's idea of a new universalism and link it to changes in U.S. hegemony that largely result from a radical shift in its mode of accumulation. Following Zeigler, there were three primary options present in the Cold War that were debated in 1947: imperialism, anti-imperialism, and an "open door" policy to Asia where the U.S. would essentially have access to enforce its political, cultural, and economic strength on under-developed nations—essentially the definition of a hegemonic method of "leadership." Zeigler has some trouble pinning down Olson's relationship to the three relative options because Olson opts for "the Pacific as an occasion for the development of new knowledge rather than for the super-exploitation of a diminishing resource."²³ Importantly, Olson's fourth option is a voice from the recent past and therefore marks a definite failure. Meaning, if we reconsider the text as an experiment begun in the 1930s at Harvard's American Civilization program in its inaugural year—a project including archaeology, anthropology, economics, geography, etc.—we find another reading of *Ishmael*: by 1947 Olson's fourth option is already a vestige of modernism struggling with the modes of production and accumulation that

²² Reinhold Wagnleitner, *Coca-Colonization and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1994), p. 165.

²³ Zeigler, 72.

mark the horizon of the postmodern. The year proved quintessential for its turn toward a new radically conservative U.S. domestic and foreign policy: the Truman Doctrine goes into effect; Truman issued Executive Order 9835 that permitted loyalty boards to question federal employees; Truman signed the National Security Act that created Department of Defense, National Security Council, and what will eventually become the CIA; a republican controlled Congress overturned Truman's veto of the Taft-Hartley Act, an act that effectively scaled back the power of labor by curtailing rights established in the Wagner Act. Perhaps Olson, like he says of Melville, was involved in "the creative act of anticipation."²⁴

While the publication date of *Call Me Ishmael* is 1947, it should be remembered that Olson decided to sit down and rethink the project immediately after Roosevelt's death in April of 1945. Coincidentally, Olson finishes *Ishmael* a few months later on August 6th, the same day that Truman bombs Hiroshima. Olson's idealized new universalism, a theme that continues into his poem "The Kingfishers" two years later (collectivism is possible under Mao, not Truman),²⁵ marks the betrayal of U.S. foreign policy and the failure of the of New Deal not only domestically, but especially in its global aspirations. Giovanni Arrighi assists in describing the repercussions of this shift.

Roosevelt's "one worldism"—which included the USSR among the poor nations of the world to be incorporated into the evolving Pax Americana for the benefit and security of all—became "free worldism," which turned the containment of Soviet power into the main organizing principle of US hegemony. Roosevelt's revolutionary idealism, which saw in the institutionalization of the idea of world government as the primary instrument through which the US New Deal would be extended to the world

²⁴ Charles Olson, *Call Me Ishmael* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997), p. 117.

²⁵ My reading and referencing throughout this chapter to "The Kingfishers" owes significant debt to George Butterick's "Charles Olson's 'The Kingfishers' and the Poetics of Change" *American Poetry* 6.2 (Winter 1989), pp. 28-59.

as a whole, was displaced by the reformist realism of his successors, who institutionalized US control over world money and over global military power as the primary instruments of US hegemony.²⁶

We should remember that Olson, a devout Wallace supporter, would have probably preferred Wallace's ideal of Pax Democratica over Pax Americana. For the sort of collectivism sought for and inspired by the second series of economic programs under the New Deal, means rethinking of the original aims of the New Deal and the rhetoric of the United Nations before Truman.

For example, in 1943 Wallace spoke about extending the successes of the New Deal—and its hallmark the Tennessee Valley Authority—for all. According to Wallace, the United Nations would need an “investment corporation” in order to “develop flood control works, irrigation projects, soil reclamation, rural electrification, and the like.” This does not, however, “imply that the whole answer to our own problem, here in the United States, is to be found in economic development abroad.”²⁷ Wallace imagines a point of negotiation between nation states that would require a surrender of absolute economic sovereignty on either side; an “open door” that would necessarily swing both ways. In this context, the *Ishmael* text becomes an awkward pivot, one that simultaneously demonstrates the possibility of a critical “American Studies” and imagines an alternate route to Asia, but it also mourns the passing of the ideals of global welfare and positions Truman as Ahab's successor—the dream of a bilateral door “went bang shut.” Meaning, Olson indeed points to the problems of a growing American imperialism—say, of the U.S. breaking from the system of Britain's *haute finance* of the prior century—but he

²⁶ Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 69.

²⁷ Henry Wallace, *The Century of the Common Man* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1943), pp. 62-63.

also turns our attention to a rippling effect and the consequences of specific economic and political changes: the slow erosion of material rights, the reconfiguration of labor under vertically integrated corporations, and a broad attack on collectivism as such. Something categorical must be said to change by the 1940s when “credit” is no longer offered exclusively to *investors* but also to *individual consumers for the course of their entire life*.

We should, therefore, repeatedly stress the importance in Olson’s political career of a guiding collectivist impulse. For instance, while working alongside Sidney Hillman, the founder of Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America and leader of the CIO’s Political Action Committee, Olson wrote a polemic against emerging political tactics used in the 1944 presidential campaign: namely, to attack or defame a group—“labor,’ for example”—and hide behind libel law that only protected an individual.

Our law has consequently been slow to appreciate the role of groups in twentieth century society. It took the Wagner act to write into the law the right of workers to organize. The isolated person is as helpless in the face of systematic defamation of his kind as in the face of concerted economic power. The groups that are today of political consequence are religious, racial, ideological, occupational. They are vague and untidy, with overlapping contours. But their need for protection in the face of modern political warfare is just as urgent as that of wage earners caught in economic exploitation.²⁸

Call Me Ishmael—a narrative spelling out the consequences of democratic inaction or impotence against totalitarianism, the failure of human agency to disrupt the role of myth, and the individuation of labor due to economic factors—outlines a tragic

²⁸ Charles Olson, “The People v. The Fascist, U.S. (1944)” *Survey Graphic* 33.8 (August 1944): pp. 356-68, 356.

archetype of American democracy set adrift in the Pacific. For Olson, the narrative forms a temporal bridge spanning from caravel to aircraft carrier.²⁹

The temporal simultaneity is part of the jarring encounter of *Call Me Ishmael*. Olson moves without pause between nineteenth-century industrialization and his present moment: “I’m putting a stress Melville didn’t on whaling as *industry*. Cutting out the glory: a book *Moby-Dick* turns out to be its glory. We still are soft about our industries, wonder-eyed. What’s important is the energy they are a clue to, the drive in the people.”³⁰ In the section “What Lies Under,” Olson uses an extremely clipped and compact style to reconstruct how whaling became an industry wholly dominated by the U.S.: the number of whaling vessels owned by the U.S. in relation to the world, domestic employment and investment figures, the shift of capital from textile and agriculture to whaling, the first American trust’s relationship to whaling, and how the industry falls aside with the introduction of kerosene, petroleum, and paraffin to U.S. markets. While living in Washington, DC, Olson went through *all* of the Library of Congress’s holdings on whaling in order to condense this history into a quick burst of contiguous “facts.”³¹ Interestingly, his research circles around the importance of labor. We do not usually speak about Olson’s focus on labor, but it is important and worth noting: “All this by way of CORRECTION. I don’t intend to dish up cold pork. There are histories of whaling if you are interested. BUT no study weighs the industry in the scale of the total society. What you get is this: many of the earliest industrial fortunes were

²⁹ Olson, *Call Me Ishmael*, 114.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 20-1.

³¹ See Butterick’s *A Guide to the Maximus Poems of Charles Olson* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978), p. xvii.

built on the ‘blessing’ of the whale fishery!”³² Olson simultaneously documents the process of industrialization along with the result, the “post-modern” in a pejorative sense; the moment when economic individuation peaks, when an ego-driven people reach a geographic and communicative maximal: the world is known and counted, absolutely.

To close the section, Olson focuses primarily on labor, its restructuring, and the after-effects. The methods and tactics described for restructuring labor in the nineteenth century will again be echoed when Olson pens his father’s biography as a union organizer for the U.S. Post Office during WWI. Moreover, the descriptions also bring us back to similar narratives pointed out by the Popular Front and addressed in the New Deal. Olson reminds us, “Whaling started, like so many American industries, as a collective, communal affair. . . . As late as 1850 there were still skippers to remember the days when they knew the fathers of every man in their crew. But it was already a sweated industry by the time Melville was a hand on a lay.” Immediately after, Olson again speaks of two temporalities at once:

THE TRICK—then as now:
reduce labor costs lower than worker’s efficiency—during the 1840’s and 50’s it cost the owners 15¢ to 30¢ a day to feed each crew member

combine inefficient workers and such costs by maintaining lowest wages and miserable working conditions—vide TYPEE, early chps., and *Omoo*, same.

THE RESULT: by the 1840’s the crews were the bottom dogs of all nations and races. Of the 18,000 men (Melville above) *one-half* ranked as green hands and more than *two-thirds* deserted every voyage.³³

³² Ibid, 20.

³³ Ibid, 23.

The totality of the whaling industry serves merely as a preface so that we will be able to follow how Olson pursues Melville's critique: the story of Ahab, a story of absolute lordship over Nature and the democratic crew, is Melville's narrative of American democracy in tragic form borrowed from *King Lear*. Always an impressive literary device when used by Olson, we witness a procession of prologues: the sweatshop-as-whaling vessel is the historical presupposition to the dissolution of organized labor, the completion of imperial trade routes East, and the incorporation of a new contingent body politic. For Ahab's spatial vengeance upon Nature—"the rival of earth, air, fire, and water"—becomes a relay for "free worldism" as Ahab's archetype becomes more elastic in the following century. Ahab is no longer Truman alone, but the Market in absolute form. *Moby-Dick* predicts the "post-modern" experience, "an experience of SPACE, its power and price."³⁴ But Olson turns our heads rather early on in the right direction: the absolute faith that the crew represents (the Idea, or an irrational paternalism that mistakes security for utter contingency) switches focus in the next century as the Market stands as an ideological blockade that seems to prevent democracy from taking-place. The whaling crew becomes consumers and *consumerism* itself shifts from being the practices of a collective group who seek regulation and protection for socially necessary goods and services, to a hegemonic process that *calculates opportunity* and establishes new social necessities for the *falsely individuated group*.

What becomes important, and what lets our argument proceed immediately into Olson's project of reclaiming a lost collectivism, is how he closes *Call Me Ishmael* with a periodization: "I said 3000 years went overboard in the Pacific. I was going back to

³⁴ Ibid, 71.

Homer. The evolution in the use of Ulysses as hero parallels what has happened in economic history.”³⁵ Olson uses three fast signposts hinting at global expansion: (1) Homer’s federation of city-states and the *polis* of a body politic restricted to the Mediterranean, (2) Dante’s feudalism and the movement West projected at the end of the *Paradiso*: “the entrance to the West, the Pillars,” and (3) Ahab’s odyssey through capitalism “where West returned to East. The Pacific is the end of the UNKNOWN which Homer’s and Dante’s Ulysses opened men’s eyes to. END of individual responsible only to himself. Ahab is full stop.”³⁶ Olson’s new universalism, sufficiently extinct in 1947 within America’s emerging global borders and dwindling social protections, will be completely retooled and readdressed by discarding modern imperatives of “civilization” (cf. Eliot and Pound) and, instead, revive the ideal of *polis* and the body politic within the paradoxical circumstances of global “free worldism.” For several decades Olson will turn on the following:

The question, now, is: what is our polis (even allowing that no such thing can be considered as possible to exist when such homogeneity as any Greek city was has been displaced by such heterogeneity as modern cities and nations are)? It is a point worth making, simply that it will expose the thinking of all community, cooperative, colony people, as well as the false premises by which the present political-social System imposes itself on all of us. I ask what polis we have other than the very whole world?³⁷

The answer to this question, as we will see below, involves finding a strategy capable of inverting Ahab’s dictum: how to exceed the problem of (false) individuation by projecting a human capable of rethinking the relationship between oneself and a global (economic)

³⁵ Ibid, 117.

³⁶ Ibid, 119.

³⁷ *Methodology is the Form*, typescript with handwritten annotations, 1952, Box 32, Folder 1625, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives and Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries. 1-7, p. 4.

collective. I think we are past due revisiting this aspect of Olson's thought since there is no better or superior bumper-sticker way of thinking about our present, the apex of neoliberalism, than all life—from employees being granted “personal access” to managing their 401(k)-based retirements to the wholesale loss of material rights in favor of “rhetorical rights” guised as “personal access” to healthcare, education, and “healthy living”—based upon the faulty promises of chance camouflaged as choice and freedom from the persecutions of group-think in whatever fully customizable flavor. *Individualism* has never been so collective in this negative sense, never so herdish and so utterly contingent (i.e., “collective unemployment”). Even if John Cage's work at Black Mountain College proved “randomness” to be quite lucrative as far as artistic methods go, Olson denounced “I Ching-ness” as a rather poor and haphazard method of social organization.³⁸

Toward a Projective Language

When, in 1945, Olson decides to resign from his position as the director Foreign Nationalities Division of the DNC he wrote a letter to Ruth Benedict, a former OWI colleague: “I have a feeling you will know what I mean when I regret we are not city states here in this wide land. Differentiation, yes. But also the chance for a person like yourself or myself to be central to social action at the same time and because of one's own creative work. I envy Yeats his Ireland.”³⁹ Olson's resignation from the OWI came after Malcolm Cowley, Archibald MacLeish, and Arthur Schlesinger's exit. Part of a larger political shift, artistic and intellectual figures lost their ground as new executives

³⁸ Olson, “Theory of Society,” *Collected Prose*, 186.

³⁹ Quoted in Clark, *Charles Olson*, 94.

from business and Madison Avenue began to dictate publication policy through the censoring of content. The merchandise men that fatigued Olson clue us into the rapid corporatization underway in the mid- to late-1940s. As Arrighi says, corporate capitalism positioned the U.S. at the center of “the liquidity, purchasing power, and productive capacity of the world-economy.”⁴⁰ This shift, which will lead to the Truman Doctrine being recycled into the Marshall Plan, seems to occupy Olson’s interests in the late-1940s especially as politics reproduces itself in the aphoristic image of “might makes right”—economically, militarily, etc. What remains interesting, moreover, is that Olson did not pursue the same paths of social liberalism as Cowley, MacLeish, and Schlesinger.

When we reconsider Olson’s modernism as a collision with a new epoch just coming into focus—especially the corporatization of labor and the Market as the paradoxical irrationally rational economic mean—we may begin to speculate why the “present” becomes the marker of a new poetics; “just-in-time” production reduces plan to contingency. If corporate capitalism, post-Fordism, and finance capitalism (not to mention, as David Harvey would insist, neoliberalism with the Bretton Woods agreements⁴¹) become slowly moored in varying degrees at this historical juncture, then it seems without surprise that Olson locates corresponding shifts at the level of language: its quantification, communicative marketability, and descriptive formalism. Or rather, language not only bottoms out a definite political potential, but it also moves into

⁴⁰ Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century*, 304.

⁴¹ See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007). He says, “Internationally, a new world order was constructed through the Bretton Woods agreements, and various institutions, such as the United Nations, the World Bank, the IMF, and the Bank of International Settlements in Basle, were set up to help stabilize International relations” (10).

the discourses of “information.” As Christian Marazzi points out in his work on the intersections of language and post-Fordism, by 1942, for example, the Bell Corporation claimed information a “visible physical quality” fully measurable and quantifiable.⁴² Norbert Weiner’s cybernetics becomes another culprit. Here again Olson sensed a problem. In a 1951 letter to Creeley, Olson outlined more contours of the “post-modern”: he points to biochemistry turning electrons into “communication” and “the stupidities & dangers of ‘Cybernetics,’ which, so far as the noticeable absence in it of grounded human sanction goes, most resembles that side of collectivism which we loosely call fascism.”⁴³ We encounter a fundamental paradox in Olson’s artistic output: he is fully symptomatic of a new urgency by way of contingency, but he will simultaneously attempt to slow the entire process down and refigure a body politic grounded on the emancipatory potentiality of language to effect and create facts (i.e., effectuate world change).

Almost immediately it appears that Olson forecasted the consequences of the long-term effects of the Truman Doctrine and the general attack on collectivism (which, undoubtedly, owes considerable debt to Stalinism and fascist strands of “collectivism”). Olson dodges the normative antagonism between capitalism and communism because both projects failed to produce social and cultural equity. Instead Olson pinpoints a central problem intrinsic to the corporatization of labor: the precept that with individuation (or dedifferentiation) as the end result there must necessarily be a fundamental incompatibility with collectivism. We can imagine Olson’s “objectism” and

⁴² Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext[e], 2011), p. 87.

⁴³ Olson, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley Vol 7*, 234.

the political projects implied by his modernism at one end of the room and contrast them against something like Ayn Rand's "objectivism" at the farthest opposite diagonal. With Rand we find systemic differences regarding economic "creativity," albeit for a fractional percentage of the community, and the insistence for more space for the managerial classes to capitalize on market contingency absolutely devoid of any sense of an altruistic being-with-others; the perpetual shrugging of any force besides the "free worldism" prescribed by the Market. In this world of Market transcendentalism if capitalism is ever said to fail it is because the Market never had the opportunity to reach the maximal degree of contingency required to "create." Postmodernism, an emerging cultural logic with eclectic new modes of production and methods of accumulating capital, produces both an Olson and a Rand.

This ideological and hegemonic battle-line regarding contingency, as Marazzi explains, is the point where universal rights—say, collective bargaining—and other protections and securities must give way:

When production can no longer be planned since the market is no longer able to expand infinitely, as happened in Fordism, due to the compression of purchasing power; when, in other words, contingency reigns, the unforeseeable becomes the rule and everything rests on immediate adaptability. The spaces for juridical protections and universal rights, independent from specific juridical persons, close up.⁴⁴

Olson, then, confronts a rattling contradiction that only increases to amplify throughout the rest of the century: a democracy without rights, a democracy of corporate citizens lacking agency. It is the problem Olson confronted with libel law on a larger scale as individualism elbows out collectivism. That is, if corporations are legally headless entities, they are also likewise equally humanless. The difference Olson experiences

⁴⁴ Marazzi, *Capital and Affects*, 45.

within the two historical eras he straddles, and of which the latter still remains intact for us, is the rapid shift of economic disparity in terms of Fordism's inequity of labor to post-Fordism's inequity of income: a trajectory of universal pauperization—a nation of Ishmaels, “the 99%,” etc. We have become perhaps more accustomed to the strange creatures emerging from Wall Street like “private equity” than Olson must have been at first sight.

It is within this context of growing contingency that I want to approach Olson's 1948 biography of his father in “The Post Office.” The biographical sketch tells the story of Karl Olson's punishment for becoming too involved in his work with the National Association of Letter Carriers. I am less interested in the story that Olson recapitulates—an all too familiar one of management pushing back on workers' material gains (a thirty-year optional retirement, widow's pensions, and other long-term goals in Karl's case)—than I am in Olson's use of this factual anecdote to cast a much larger net, namely, the erosion of a sense of community by reducing work to the level of efficiency. Olson moves back to Woodrow Wilson's Postmaster General, Albert Burleson, who

took the craft and country quality out of the service. The loss was the loss common to most labor since. This better be understood as not nostalgia. I was a letter carrier myself later and do not hark back. We have got so used to change that we are unwilling to believe that suddenly some change may be so total as to destroy. The path does die, and there are times when, to find his way back, man has to pick up, fiercely and without any easy emotion, traces of the way. What happened to work during the first world war is a trace.⁴⁵

Olson appears to feature the project of his own modernism here: “to pick up, fiercely and without any easy emotion, traces of the way.” Because, indeed, another such total

⁴⁵ Olson, “The Post Office,” *Collected Prose*, 229.

change was occurring for Olson's 1948 context: the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) of that same year would be one such symptom of modernism being subsumed by a new cultural logic. The instance of Olson's father becomes a synecdoche for this untidy movement. A consequence of efficiency and the speed-up of work in general—the timing of postal routes, the increase of mail distributed per hour, etc.—is the disappearance of the underlying sense of use-value at the core of a service, “What gave the carrier dignity, the sense of accomplishment, what made his day of use to the people he served as well as to himself was the illusion that how he did it was of value.”⁴⁶ To understand Olson's stress on the reciprocating relationship between work and community we should turn to Kathi Weeks' arguments regarding work's inherent sociality: “Work is the primary means by which individuals are integrated not only into the economic system, but also into social, political, and familial modes of cooperation.” To this end, when Karl Olson experiences a massive shift in work, a shift whose memory will likely be lost for the next generation of workers, the younger Olson is right to note the incompatibility between individuation and the many different levels of “community.” As Weeks says, “Dreams of individual accomplishment and desires to contribute to the common good become firmly attached to waged work, where they can be hijacked to rather different ends: to produce neither individual riches nor social wealth, but privately appropriated surplus value.”⁴⁷ Quantity and its corresponding regime of efficiency reduce work to measurable instances of labor-time that cannot

⁴⁶ Ibid, 229.

⁴⁷ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham: Duke UP, 2010), p. 8.

permit the casual cup of coffee with a resident on a letter carrier's route; service work becomes servant work.

It seems worth noting that Olson sees his father being demonstrative of a prior period: "He just happened to be one of the first, and it was clearer earlier in the postal service than in heavy industry. He was at the switch point when the turn came." The same should be said about Olson's witnessing of material rights being lost through his firsthand experiences in politics; collectivism becomes watchword for danger, "fascism," "communism," or "totalitarianism." This may be one reason why Olson's writings remain absolutely familiar for us who occupy the bull's-eye of a prior era's trajectory: "We have forgotten what men crave. We think that all workers want is pay. But that's all they are left with, when production, and that rot of modern work, efficiency, rule. Give workers only that and they'll featherbed you back. If you take away pride you'll have to give prizes."⁴⁸ Olson is, to use Peter Wollen's phrase, "both a curtain call and a prologue, a turning point in a drama we are all still blindly living in."⁴⁹ Wollen is referring to May 1968, but I think we would be wiser to push the dates back as Jameson asks in order to position Olson as a product of late modernism because, like Nabokov, Beckett, and Zukofsky, Olson "had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms."⁵⁰ Olson is unseasonable because he retains the utopian side of collectivism that, within postmodernity, becomes inverted. The utopian ideal of a completely "free market" at the

⁴⁸ Ibid, 230.

⁴⁹ Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 124.

⁵⁰ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 305.

core of contemporary neoliberalism appears quite similar to the “naïve” aspirations of prior socialisms: free market capitalism has not failed because it has never truly existed.

What the problem of Karl Olson points us to is a false sense of *measure* (and here, importantly, we find several overlaps with Zukofsky without the two ever meeting). Efficiency has always been another way of speaking about human action as a formalized adventure: without human action on the stage, economists of the postmodern administer world affairs with strictly descriptive and analytical means. It is a strange and calculated view of the world where quantity always dominates quality; or, even when it is a matter of quality, it can only be gauged by some technical measure or technology. Within this schema language can describe and analyze, but not *create*. We can predict the process of annulment that will take place within the politics of language: if you excise the possibility of language to have agency in the world of human action, then the ability of critique becomes reduced to description and analysis of the world of things as they exist. It is also perhaps why Olson’s views on language appear to us as if from another planet: a non-representational *use* of language where a word indexes local phenomena.

We should pause and consider what will eventually become Olson’s manifesto, “Projective Verse”—importantly another text written through the course of letter writing—because Olson confronts a telltale symptom of postmodernity within art. When Olson includes Creeley’s dictum, “FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT,” we must note how formalism had already washed over onto language. Indeed, in the letters where “Projective Verse” was first volleyed, Olson and Creeley note the influx of Eliotism and New Criticism within intellectual and publishing circles

that confuse “form” for “technical wonder.” And this, as Creeley comments, is “absolute bull/shit. That is: the intelligence that had touted Auden as being a technical wonder, etc. Lacking all grip on the worn and useless character of his essence: thought. . . . Anyhow, form has now become so useless a term that I blush to use it.”⁵¹ Here we begin to link themes in Olson’s thinking and why he attempts to redress concepts like quantity, measure, and history in terms of Whitehead’s notions of process or Hegel’s dialectic. Olson’s “experimental” writings, which gain a bit of contextual nuance if “experimental” is equivocated with “theoretical,” aim to remove the static characteristics of so many formalisms and to reconsider the whole endeavor—i.e., *life*—as the creation and *projection* of social facts. There is another diagonal corner to the one that Olson’s projective theory occupies: facing Olson from there the politics of language is mere commentary or, more acutely, *passivity*. We could involve ourselves in this problem altogether differently by framing the argument as another instance of *technē* being set against *mimesis*. This thread, which we will address in the following section with *technē* operating as a mediating term, enables Olson to pull together an impressive array of synonyms for “art”: totality, methodology, and technics.

If we say Olson’s sensitivity to his present was honed, it was for this reason: he demonstrates how the “post-modern” sends tremors throughout the totality of society, which we can catch glimpses of within the discourses it either produces or transforms—philosophy, labor, language, art, law, and subsequent institutions (notably, the University from creative writing “workshops” that teach writers how to communicate taste on up to the Department of Education). In this paratactic way, contingent labor and

⁵¹ Charles Olson and Robert Creeley, *Charles Olson & Robert Creeley: The Complete Correspondence, Volume 1*, ed. George F. Butterick (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow, 1987), pp. 78-9.

literary formalism intersect because both ricochet in different ways from linked systemic faults. Recoupling form and content, which we will soon have to begin calling dialectics in Olson, or seeing the “very important connection between quantity and the function of CRITIQUE,” takes us immediately on a radical departure that ceases our descent further into these fault lines, even if we cannot accurately know the depths. It is a gamble that hopes to realign the function—the very *use*—of language in society, government, and subsequent institutions according to a different axis. As Olson will insist in his essay, “The Human Universe,” “There must be a way which bears *in* instead of away, which meets head on what goes on each split second, a way which does not—in order to define—prevent, deter, distract, and so cease the act of, discovering.”⁵² For Olson language becomes projective, that is, reconnected with theatrical performance: projective language is produced at the intersection of projective geometry and the projective art of drama. It is a theoretical blueprint for language to once again gain the ability to produce collective spaces outside of quantified labor, the market, or the regime of exchange-value.

For example, we should consider the exception to the problem of form and content in terms of performative speech acts. A postmodern performative speech act would be the Chair of the Federal Reserve (à la Alan Greenspan and Rand) announcing the reduction of interest rates: a strictly analytic type of economic formalism trespasses over into “projection.” Andrew Ross has used a similar example to argue that Olson’s “objectism” tends to collapse back into subjectivism. For Ross, the speech act “I object” can only operate if the speaker “can fully affirm his unitary right as a legal subject.

⁵² Olson, “The Human Universe,” *Collected Prose*, 158.

Objecting is therefore a powerful affirmation of subjectivism.”⁵³ But while the success or failure of the Chairman’s speech act resembles the circumstances of legal debate in that they both rest on a linguistic community sharing certain beliefs, the key might be in the productive capacity of linguistic communities to effect world change; with the change in interest rates financial and governmental institutions experience immediate adjustments, but so, too, for pedestrian life.

To invert a society built upon descriptive and analytic ideologies—the Market or profits—requires capitalizing on the performative aspect of language to effect change. And I would argue this inversion is what Olson’s modernism attempts and ultimately fails. If it did not fail then this Chapter would be altogether different, brighter. But this failure marks an attempt to switch ideological frames. As Marazzi points out,

If we consider language to be not only an instrument used in institutional reality to *describe* facts, but also to *create them*, then in a world in which institutions like money, property, marriage, technologies, work itself, are all *linguistic* institutions, what molds our consciousness, language, becomes at the same time an instrument of production of those same facts. *Facts are created by speaking them.*⁵⁴

By hazard or by tangent, we have the political core of “projective verse” whose aim will be “to write a Republic.” For example, we should consider what Olson wrote to Creeley in 1951:

It is my impression that intellectual life in the West has been and still to a great degree stays essentially *descriptive* and *analytical*. And that this characteristic of knowledge is also a characteristic of art, though it is not so easily seen, simply because the act of art, any time, any where, has to be, at base, active in the sense that it is expressive. But there is, at the other end of it, room to measure how projective it is, how *wholly* active, how

⁵³ Andrew Ross, *The Failure of Modernism: Symptoms of American Poetry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), p. 112.

⁵⁴ Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Language: From the New Economy to the War Economy* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008), p. 33.

clearly it performs the task which distinguishes it *absolutely* from the intellectual.⁵⁵

The strangeness and peculiar nature of Olson’s poetics—or, his method for political change—are often seen as the advent of a distinctive postmodern style. But, again, that foreignness in Olson comes to be the very production of modernism itself, a very unseasonable form of thinking within a postmodern way of living.

To understand this transition we should consider what Olson wrote in May 1948, “Notes for the Proposition: Man is Prospective.” The essay, later to become a lecture at Black Mountain College where Olson will begin teaching in October later that year, establishes important links: “Man as object, not man as mass or economic integer, is the buried seed in all formulations of collective action stemming from Marx. This seed, not its tactic which merely secures it votes or coup d’etat, is the secret of the power and claim of collectivism over men’s minds.”⁵⁶ Olson’s “objectism” reminds us of Zukofsky’s “objectivism” in that it seeks to remove hierarchy and preference within language (i.e., ontologies of humanism, the problem of the ego, or the transcendent soul) and instead assigns language the task of creating new discourses and new communities; language projects the world in an *as if* configuration.

For example, later in “Notes for the Proposition” essay Olson turns his attention to the debates occurring in prior modernisms: “We know the gains that followed from Ford and Pound’s principle that verse should be at least as well written as prose. But it assumed, for its time, a premise which it is my impression has now to be questioned:

⁵⁵ Olson, *Olson & Creely*, Vol. 7, 237.

⁵⁶ Charles Olson, “Notes for the Proposition: Man is Prospective” *Boundary 2* 2.1 (Fall 1973): pp. 1-6, p. 3.

that prose is well written.”⁵⁷ Olson, however, is not the critic of style in the traditional, albeit conservative, sense. The bulk of Olson’s interest revolves around the problem emblemized by “Eliot and the whole school of prose—and verse—which might be called the Eliotic (and now dominates standards of writing in America, Britain and Australia).” The confrontation is with a descriptive and analytic style or Eliot’s “impeccable” Grammar that disavows Vernacular. Traces of this problem exist readily enough for us: “experimental” writing often means patterning sentences in odd ways, but for Olson the problem would be that we still tend to reject “experimental” writing that challenges the sentence-unit itself. It follows that Olson, who always cited Eliot’s rationalism as a form of neutralization in terms of social change, would teach Pound’s radio transcripts during his lecture-marathons at Black Mountain: “Pound jumped outside explication, and in this act, which irritates his admirers, I see the very virtue of his prose.”⁵⁸ In Pound’s style Olson, like so many other modernist practitioners, excavates a wild and threatening method for political action. For Olson, however, Pound symbolizes a political stance for language to occupy.

To be clear is, clearly, the point of communication. The danger, it seems to me, is that prose now has got itself into the old dilemma of language, that the school of Grammar and the school of the Vernacular have now split off from one another, and we have Mr Eliot of the one side, “glossy,” as Dante might put him, and so much of fiction on the other, a mimesis of all that is gross in people’s speech. Pound’s prose, despite so much that is cranky in it, willful, and “intellectual,” offensive in the snobbery of him, the pedagogue, whose students will not succumb to his state-slogan “My master, right or wrong,” is, in the very rhythm that enters prose the moment the path of logical explication is refused, the one prose not bled out on the horns of separation from the purposes of speech as “vulgar eloquence.”⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Ibid, 5.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 6.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 6.

Eliot becomes fully symptomatic of the regime of quantity and other associated harmful effects to the body politic: formalism, conservatism, and passivity. Olson's theory of projection would appear to Eliot, much like experimental-political writing (i.e., "theory") appears to many scholars of "form" in our present moment, as so much bad breath. After all, Eliot could it least write a well-constructed sentence.

But Pound, like the Chair of the Federal Reserve, marks a distinct possibility for language to be projective: short of logical sequence or explication, Pound's speech inscribes new relationships through his paratactic leaping. The examples are too numerous in Pound, but here is one such pestering sample: "Jefferson was one genius and Mussolini another. I am not putting in *all* the steps of my argument but that don't mean to say they aren't there."⁶⁰ To understand the possibility of projective language (including prose, poetry, music, dance, painting, and the entire *totalizing* curriculum at Black Mountain), we need only return a final time to how Olson read Melville's prose. Don Byrd summarizes this point when he says, "As Olson understands it, the tragedy which Melville records is not merely a literary event. Ahab's death is history, and it has real consequences in the real world."⁶¹ Better still, we should turn to the mode of address in *Maximus*.

"I throw this letter at you."

In the final part of this Chapter I want to examine how Olson twins the search for collectivity with artistic practice in *Maximus*. In several interesting moves Olson forms a

⁶⁰ Ezra Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (New York: Liveright, 1935), p. 19.

⁶¹ Don Byrd, *Charles Olson's Maximus* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1980), p. 9.

constellation of terms—and this will be his term, “constellation”⁶²—in order to establish a set of contiguous terms that all share the common possibility of inverting a world going headlong into the “post-modern.” The semantic chain he establishes, and one he knows lacks logical cohesion, takes us from ideas of process to totality, methodology, and a dialectical grammar. Following these moves requires going back to Olson’s letters and reading them alongside essays and seminars drafted while at Black Mountain.

Somehow Olson’s most theoretically and artistically productive years are at Black Mountain; between attempts to secure funds for a school always in the red and locating faculty willing to teach for little or no salary. What I will emphasize is that Black Mountain parallels Olson’s career, and it becomes an important link to the narrative of late modernism. Not only that it becomes underfunded, dilapidated, and eventually abandoned, but rather that it spans an interesting brick of time—1933 to 1956—and forms an alternative stance to the world coming out from underneath the ruins of WWII, the labor camps, and a burgeoning postmodern cultural system. My narrative will be a narrow one, however, because here I am only interested in tracing Olson’s involvement in this process. Where we end up is quite important because it opens us to Olson’s theory, his “poetics,” which states that totality is the only method left within the arts (as *technics*) capable of inverting the self-reflexive—i.e., singular—world economic system. Totality becomes properly dialectical in Olson’s theory: inverting the World State requires inverting everything down to the root by rehabilitating the function of the political human in society. This means we need to reconsider Olson as a negative dialectician. He is in need of a negative totality because the metonymy between the

⁶² Charles Olson, “The AREA, and the DISCIPLINE of, TOTALITY” *OLSON: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 1.10 (Fall 1978): pp. 95-101, p. 99.

human and society lacks all sense of measure and proportion. Olson's poetics becomes a strategy to rethink this possibility; poetry is one option among many that can restore proper measure to the world. The objective human becomes the projection of a totality turned right side up.

If I return again, and now at some length, to the letters exchanged between Olson and Creeley in 1951 where the "post-modern" first emerges into conversation, it is because I think the overt emphasis on "poeticizing" the term has come at the cost of the political implications investigated by the two poets through this exchange. Before I noted how the "post-modern" implies a world hitting a quantitative absolute in terms of geography, population, and technological measure (the machine age). The negative side to this process marks the possibility of the Market to encroach on all aspects of life (cf. the "culture industry" for Adorno and Horkheimer where *time* vouchsafes this fact within capitalism as Marx argued so long ago). Olson, on the other hand, sees quantity in terms of an endless accumulation of perpetual adjustments, change, or flux much in line with Whitehead's notion of *process*. The famous line from "The Kingfishers" (where the inversion of Eliot's "Fisher King" is evident from the start), functions as a sort of continuous index to this idea of process.

What does not change / is the will to change⁶³

Interestingly Olson includes the semantic bar "/" as if to emphasize the pause, the lapse, or the pivot that folds over into yet more change. It is also a wonderfully balanced paradox.

⁶³ Charles Olson, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997), p. 86.

To press the matter forward, however, the function of the “/” marks an enigmatic point of exchange *between* things that occupies so much of Olson’s thinking. And here we get a first glimpse of how we might reconsider Olson as a dialectical thinker. It is as if modernism’s use of collage, montage, and juxtaposition, which Olson had already imported from Eisenstein in *Call Me Ishmael*, becomes a new totalizing stance toward the world that inaugurates social action and new kinetic processes at every moment. Here we should cite two examples. In his essay “The Gate and the Center” Olson notes one of the few liberating acts science has left to offer is the ability to understand that “the problem now is not what things are so much as it is what happens BETWEEN things.”⁶⁴ But this method of nonstop juxtaposition is not simply an artistic technique but a complete disposition toward the world. Describing Black Mountain College to Wilbur H. Ferry in 1951, who also previously directed the CIO-P.A.C., Olson points out that the school permits inquiries into “What happens *between* things—what happens between *men*—what happens between guest faculty, students, regular faculty—and what happens among each as the result of each.”⁶⁵ To gain insight into Olson’s views on *quantity* as a concept, we may need only watch *Battleship Potemkin* to see how the sparking of two images proceeds to a new quantity—a third image.

We should put it this way: the “post-modern” levels a certain exactitude on the world by electing to place the Market at helm—the regimes of quantity, efficiency, profitability, machinery, etc.—but this comes at a high cost in terms of thinking through complex relationships, systemic problems, and, more importantly, is ill equipped to

⁶⁴ Olson, *Collected Prose*, 169.

⁶⁵ Charles Olson, “Letter to W. H. Ferry” *OLSON: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 1.2 (Fall 1974): pp. 8-15, p. 11.

confront the dynamics it produces. The world becomes a static place that can pretend evolutionary, environmental, and social mutations are complete; progress is now simply an economic affair or the ideology of *this is it*. The byproduct of this thinking for Olson is a global economic system that by definition works against all progressive ideas of collectivity because it ensnares individuals in utter contingency. For Olson, the “post-modern” stands in diametrical opposition to a very dynamic noun, the “human,” which is an object like any other that perpetually shifts location. The “post-modern,” in other words, cuts relationships down in terms of *time*. But the “human,” as Olson imagines it, is a spatial *object* and *location* that serves a different set of coordinating relationships. Put otherwise, Olson’s human-object is undoing of modernity’s dream of a universal subject.

Olson’s political project, the chart his modernism makes visible, revitalizes the possibility to always focus our attention back to the dynamic human noun as a new center, a new beginning. Collectivity has no future without this step; the human must be recast in another and newer humanism—a *postmodern* humanism—that ordines the human as a social and spatial object. In this move we should think of Olson alongside someone like Kasimir Malevich: to begin again, to construct another world, involves re-learning the functions and grammars of art from the use of color to the function of a geometric shapes. This world where collectivity may exist results when the human is the *full measure of value* and brings us to a different front door where Maximus answers: the human expressing the fullest maximal levels of place and history.

Maximus, an epic created among many other things, is a series of letters that reconstructs the world on a different axis: an ensemble of exchanges devoid of the

problems inherent to exchange-value and the idolization of surplus. The first poem-letter arrived in 1950 as a letter sent to a poet and local historian living in Gloucester, Vincent Ferrini, with a title that serves as a permanent table of contents to the rest of the series, “I, Maximus of Gloucester, to You.” This method of address, of unidentified addressee to undisclosed recipients, marks the communicative model of a twentieth-century Paul Bunyan who embodies Whitman’s method of universal address. Maximus is the necessary counter-myth and antidote to the “West” or the missing lead character in Williams’ *In the American Grain*. The recipients of Maximus’ letters are not limited to Gloucester or the U.S.; we now must expand geography in order to address the world-polis. Tracking down the assorted “I”s in the poem is as useless as the “You”s; the importance is the enigmatic and contiguous way of connecting these relationships. From the start, then, language and communication are at issue: “But that which matters, that which insists, that which will last, / that! o my people, where shall you find it, how, where, where shall you listen / when all is become billboards, when, all, even silence, is spray-gunned?”⁶⁶ The first letter, which simultaneously razes the existing world of “pejorocracy” and solicits the citizens of Gloucester to “kill kill kill kill / those / who advertise you / out,”⁶⁷ also offers a solution to solve the problem of self-estrangement caused by the “post-modern”:

. . . the form
 that which you make, what holds, which is
 the law of object, strut after strut, what you are, what you must be,
 what
 the force can throw up, can, right now hereinafter erect,

⁶⁶ Olson, *Maximus*, 6.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 8.

the mast, the mast, the tender
mast!⁶⁸

Form is no longer exclusively attached to artistic style or technique and instead refers to the entire disposition and stance of oneself toward the world. Also, form becomes a *methodology* in the dual sense of arrangement and pedagogy.

How does one redirect Gloucester away from those who advertise you out? By experiencing it differently; by measuring it not by known quantity but by how many steps it takes for you to traverse it; to rearrange it in this very process due to the objects and locations that move according to the human-as-coordinate. This is how we should understand Olson when he says, "I come from the last walking period of man."⁶⁹ If we find striking parallels between Olson and someone like Guy Debord whose psychogeography no doubt points to the same symptoms, I think the connection may not be as stretched as we first suspect. Olson's hypotheses reconnect an important series of links that eventually bring us back to Fenellosa. Much like the political gestures Pound attributed to the ideogram, Olson explodes grammar and syntax in order to reposition the human-object's relationship to language as a complex spatial and political act. Language here attempts to get out of the problems of spectatorship and representation by inserting the human-as-syntactical-unit back into the dynamic exchanges of nature (i.e., if lightning is a sentence that connects sky and earth, then so too for Maximus' every step). Maximus, like Gloucester and the world, is a syntactical *object* always in the process of articulating itself anew. Or, when Olson seeks to "write a

⁶⁸ Ibid, 8.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 622.

Republic” he might be prompting an act that need not occur on paper; the human-syntactical-unit is itself both method of inscription and measure.

For example, in “Maximus to Gloucester, Letter 27 [withheld],” Olson’s enigmatic use of “this” becomes an index for action that he cannot demonstrate or represent because the action itself accompanies the enunciation and inscription of “this”:

Plus this—plus this:
that forever the geography
which leans in
on me I compel
backwards I compel Gloucester
to yield, to
change
Polis
is this⁷⁰

The changes implied in “this”—and the *polis* that is “this”—are the results of a complex dialectical grammar. As Olson would say, “An American,” which is itself already a *sentence*, “is a complex of occasions, / themselves a geometry / of spatial nature.”⁷¹ To be more specific, what I am arguing is that the “field” that Olson’s poetry is said to create is none other than social change occurring in tandem on and off the page where language reaches a second power.

It appears we are moving quite rapidly away from Creeley and Olson’s letters. But what I think needs to be considered is a new dialectical way of reading *Maximus* in relationship to these letters. In some sense we want to read the letters to better understand the artwork, but this also works in the other direction as Olson dismisses the distinction between genres (poetic, prose, epistolary, etc.). Only after the above tangent

⁷⁰ Ibid, 185.

⁷¹ Ibid, 185.

would we be able to return to Olson's inaugural "post-modern" letter to understand the consequences of what he tells Creeley:

this is where I am arguing that there are, perhaps, *two* necessary changes:

(1), that, you and I *restore society in the act of communicating to each other*

(2), that what i mark about this correspondence is something i don't for a moment think is peculiar to thee et me—that the function of critique is more than the mere one of clarities (as, say, Flaubert, & Mme Sand), it is even showing itself in the very form of our address to each other, and what work goes along with it.⁷²

The postal system, which as we saw earlier had become reduced to another instance of efficient trade under the "post-modern," maintains the ability to foreground language as series of contiguous spatial relationships. These relationships, formed by the casting off of a projective act, become a metaphoric assemblage of the *polis*. And this new *polis*, which struggles to begin anew through the social acts that exist *between* objects, marks the paradox of Olson's modernism. There may be one World State, but it behaves quite differently at each place and level of social articulation. This ability to read multiple layers of development, or even how development occurs differently within different geographic locales, is no doubt attributed to recent disciplinary advances in archaeology and anthropology that Olson followed closely. The task ahead maintains this objective: like Maximus, we all must begin to comprehend how a change on the other side of the globe—a violation of human rights for example—forms a complicated grammar that has implications for all pronouns, subjects, and predicates. We know how to count but just not how to be accountable.

⁷² Olson, *Olson/Creeley Vol. 7*, 79.

For example, when Olson writes to Creeley from the Yucatan in 1952, which importantly becomes published as *Mayan Letters*, he embodies the position of a non-expert cultural anthropologist needed to overturn a society of engineers. Olson attempts to find an answer to what happened to Mayan society, “what happens when COMMERCE comes in” and “how do you get at what happened? when did some contrary principle of man get in business? why? what urge?”⁷³ Due to uneven development, Olson could go to and around the Yucatan in order to see how “industrial man” was being invented in another cultural context and the consequences of this transition. Olson says it better regarding an instance when a storekeeper asks him if it is possible to “see *la Guerra*,” to which Olson imagines, “Newsreel companies please note, as well as the Dept of Disappearing Culture.”⁷⁴ A twentieth-century *polis* must be created on an entirely different ground where simple human activities—writing, movement, travel, etc.—are not considered as gradations of business partnerships. Olson fears what Jameson and Anderson argue has come true: culture and economics will overlap completely.

The growth of Americanism—post-Fordist production backed by finance capitalism—to become a worldwide hegemonic force creates a moment of pause for Olson. Industrialization and modernization become eclipsed so that only the hollow black image of “profitization” is negatively visible with a glowing inversion just behind it. Instead of lasting a few moments of blinding possibility, the eclipse became permanent. The solution to the dystopia produced under WWII cannot be complete cultural and

⁷³ Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*, ed. Robert Creeley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), p. 42.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 19.

economic homogeneity spread thin over a heterogeneous world. This is not a fear of uniformity of the masses but their complete evaporation as anything beyond discrete economic units. The paradox of the *polis* becomes a fulcrum to show precisely this off-balance. By 1956 Olson refers to the *polis* etymologically to force his point: as opposed to *civis*, which refers to “the smallest unit, a village, equals domos (domus) houses,” *polis* is “the city or civic body / when joined, polis is the / community or body of citizens.”⁷⁵ To Olson the concept of *polis* removes contingent individuals from their reified status: “POLIS, then, is a filled up thing” because it is “the community or body of citizens, not their dwellings, not their houses, not their being as material, but being as group with will.”⁷⁶ *Polis* exceeds the metonymy of parts to wholes: the city and public body are more than their parts and the relationships of the parts. More to the point, Olson finds within the idea of *polis* a dialectical counterpart to surplus-value. But this idea of the city, whose image will be Socrates’ Athens, no longer exists and is no longer possible within the “post-modern.”

Polis, like totality, is a method. In 1951 this idea came by way of Olson and Creeley’s reading of M. Elath’s essay “In Another Direction.” Between Olson, Creeley and Cid Corman—the latter was busily publishing Olson and Creeley’s work in *Origin*—much interest comes to circulate on how to confront the paradox, how to rethink the twentieth-century *polis*. Elath’s essay, whose tenor and pace only find corollary with Pound, blasts through the errors of so many modernist-turned-postmodernist projects that take wrong turns in the second half of the century. Elath cites the New Criticism,

⁷⁵ Charles Olson, “Definitions by Undoings” *Boundary 2* 2.1 (Fall 1973): pp. 7-12, p. 11.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 11.

James Laughlin's adoption of social credit, Allen Tate and the Southern Agrarians, and all of *Partisan Review*—a suitable envelope for late modernism. No doubt of interest to Olson, Elath locates problematic methods in all the figures. For example, when speaking about Laughlin's adoption of social credit Elath says, "S[ocial] c[redit] is an inadequate method. L picks it like a bird at a dungfeast not realizing it is a *method* and not a position—ie, not something that he can be for or against but something that works or does not work."⁷⁷ The method that Elath purports to work, however, is the method of totality. But the method of totality is never exemplified in a definitive or positive sense. Elath crisscrosses totality with Edmund Burke's idea of totality in the act of reading, Alfred Korzybski's abstracted semantics, and Pound's assembling of history in the *Cantos*. However loose or faulty Elath's elucidations are, the importance for Olson was perhaps how Elath outlines the negations of totality: "totality does not identify with fascism, fascism arose out of 20th century need for totality."⁷⁸ Totality becomes a sort of riddle left over from assorted modernisms: if we could figure out what totality is, and also how to execute it as a method, then the paradox collapses. Until then, however, speaking about totality and executing it as method means speaking in negative terms, "totality does not," "totality is not," etc. And here the paradoxes and contradictions of totality merge with a "post-modern" *polis*.

Elath and Olson's contemporary moment—the twilight years of late modernism—is utterly bewitched: the method of totality took too many wrong turns and, subsequently, the wrong spell has been cast. The first half of the twentieth-century, which includes the

⁷⁷ M. Elath, "In Another Direction: Commentary and Review of Three Anthologies" *Intro* 1.3-4 (1951): pp. 112-36, p. 117.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 113.

entire process of modernization and the aesthetic category of modernism produced as a result, become so many variations on and symptoms of the need for totality. Modernism failed, absolutely. Rather than creating a world-polis, the moderns created “Big Boy, the emerging World State,”⁷⁹ not Godzilla or the 50-foot woman, but something homegrown, bigger, without maturation, and presumed innocent. In response to Elath’s essay, Olson wrote an unpublished essay, “The Methodology is the Form,” where he argues that totality took a sharp wrong turn: “My own assumption is, that what we who refuse to buy the collective as the only necessary outcome of totality . . . are beholden to do this difficult thing, to know all our parts and all of their relationships.” This task routes us back to *polis* because, if we recall, it is a filled up thing exceeding a dwelling, geography, or containment; totality and *polis* intersect at the point where we must measure anew, where humans are reconsidered as more than the sum total of their parts and of their relationships—*polis* is the dialectical third of this exchange.

For example, Olson provides an analogy through Socrates’ Athens: “Socrates put it sharply when he explained his choice of suicide over exile to his afflicted friends: he pointed out that in his suicide, Athens committed suicide.” The event of Socrates’ death, where concepts like justice, democracy, and truth departed, affirms a long Westward movement away from totality and toward the ideology of totalitarianism. Rather than abandon the projects of the *polis* and totality, however, Olson aims to rescue them. The failure of modernism—an event that subsequently marks the end of the myth of the “West” for Olson—does not equate to a wholesale liquidation of modernism’s various political projects that address the need for a social totality. Instead, it means placing

⁷⁹ Olson, *Methodology is the Form*, 5.

them back in the wind tunnel in order to diagnose what impairs their lines of flight from succeeding. For Olson breaking the spell of totalitarianism requires inverting totality once again:

And what makes me think that totality is invertible is that totality has so turned Socratic man inside out that it kills members of itself daily in a colony so distinct, a community so impressive, a “utopia” so in existence that one man at least has had the penetration to see that “utopia” as evidence of the fact that the post-modern economic system is already growing like a body out of the cancer of all we have known. I refer to the slave labor camps.⁸⁰

Turning to Adorno at this moment seems appropriate. If we think of the problem in terms of theory and practice, then the *practice* of totality—or “method” for Olson—got into the hands of Ahab. But this does not corrupt the theory. As Adorno says, it is “Discrepancy between murdering the Jews, burying them alive because they weren’t worth the second bullet, and the theory that is expected to change the world.”⁸¹ In short, we adopted the wrong trajectory and believed it to be final.

But totality maintains that other possibility, the full reclamation of the human being as a new center of value that expresses the opportunity of once again living a political life. The fundamental loss for Olson, much like Adorno and Horkheimer, is the dialectical reversal of labor caused by the camps:

The System is our polis, and the price of the membership is not our lives or our liberty (those the concentration camp showed had been taken from us) but something much more necessary and more terrible in its loss, our labor—and without choice of losing it, merely seized from us. So, all choice, too, goes down. . . . All free labor goes down (it has become one of the absolute iron edges, the daily hot fire all workers a writer, for example, to speak for myself to have to ask himself if any word he makes can get free,

⁸⁰ Ibid, 5.

⁸¹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Towards a New Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 19.

even tho it is free labor from The System—if it isn't actually so trapped it only contributes to the continuing success of that System.⁸²

The dialectical opposite of labor is barbarism and the opposite of work is not leisure, but consumption. Here we see how Olson aims to undo the relationships of labor and work from barbarism and consumption through a familiar narrative of late modernism: absolute autonomy from the System. In surprising ways Olson becomes a thinker much like other notable late moderns, especially Adorno. What we begin to notice is that as we move further along in Olson's poetic theory we simultaneously escalate the degree of paradoxes and contradictions until totality becomes an *aporia*. Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* explicates some years later the situation that Olson encounters for the first time above: "If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one harmless domain among others. The social totality appears in this aporia, swallowing whole whatever occurs."⁸³ Under this rubric, so to speak, I would argue we have opportunity to reconsider Olson's political attempts to rid art of its accumulated Westernisms, especially spectatorship and representation. But to do this requires rethinking Maximus as the figuration of a new philosophical and political *maxim* in the "know thyself" tradition; Maximus is the possibility of a postmodern polis, the expression of a new general truth and social principle because it is the figure that confronts the problems involved in "making a Republic / in gloom on Watchhouse / Point / an actual earth of value."⁸⁴

⁸² Olson, *Methodology is the Form*, 6.

⁸³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), p. 237.

⁸⁴ Olson, *Maximus*, 584.

At the level of totality, then, Olson navigates a method appropriate for a type of resistance that when complete—when Absolute—eliminates itself *and* the existing System. Revolutions, in so far as they are merely the ousting of one political regime by the authority of the successor, must perpetually fail so long as the ideologies—i.e., the hegemonic forces behind the myth of the West, totalitarianism, and capitalism—are not comprehensively addressed. This inability to address all negative ideology marks the failure of the moderns. Interestingly, for Olson, the counter-totality is not a counter-system, it is the radical expression of “any of us”: “I put it this way, this sort of way to emphasize why, I take it, we have not yet done—any of us—the job: to invert totality to oppose it—by discovering the totality of any-every-single one of us.”⁸⁵ For Olson, we have not lived so long as in our death the System remains. The old humanisms, the worn out ideals of a universal subject, must be finally abandoned:

I deliberately state that, despite the increase of the quantity of knowledge, population, and the polis from a city of Athens’ size to the present World State, it is impossible to know all things by knowing yrself. And not because of the old dodge that the commons of a man never change. Not that, but something else: that the imperative of a society is never allowably more important than a man who does know himself (as Socrates surely did, or Christ) is permanently, and even presently, in the face of the slave labor camp, true.⁸⁶

The old maxim that carries the promise that through the act of “knowing thyself” one is also open to know the *polis* or the social totality can no longer hold. The terms have fallen completely out of congruence. To know thyself in a society where labor camps are present, means to know the inverse of the social totality. As Olson says it in *Maximus*:

⁸⁵ Olson, *Methodology is the Form*, 7.

⁸⁶ *Ibid*, 7.

“Gloucester too / is out of her mind and / is now indistinguishable from / the USA.”⁸⁷ It is an issue of realignment not reform: the metonymy can no longer hold between individual and totality if one of the terms—or, worse, both the terms—is persistently false.

Totality, then, foregrounds the political strategies behind prior modernisms by continuing the argument that art is properly a science like any other; art properly returns to *technē*. Concurrent with his essays on totality, Olson continues his non-stop exchange of letters. In the summer of 1952 Olson writes to Corman and again casts a large theoretical net in order to winnow out political approaches. For example, Pierre Boulez, the musician whose serial compositions and theorizations about twelve-tone scales so affected John Cage while at Black Mountain, prompts Olson to refocus artistic techniques in terms of *technē*. As a term “technics” has become another bastard of the “post-modern.” To prove this Olson turns to the dictionary, “*technic* adj. (meaning #3 reads: *Stock Exchange*. Designating or pert. to, a market in which prices are mainly determined by manipulation or speculative conditions!”⁸⁸ Against the regime of art implied by the dovetails of spectatorship and representation, Olson aims to recuperate aesthetic form as something “deeper than technique” because “there is a will to form, in initiation in us to express ‘forms,’ to bring them into being.” The argument may be more succinct if summarized this way: Olson’s famed “postmodern style” becomes none other than modernism itself pushed beyond its own breaking point. And this break—say, the failure of art to be recouped in terms of *technē*—failed because it wasn’t aggressive or

⁸⁷ Olson, *Maximus*, 599.

⁸⁸ Charles Olson and Cid Corman, *Charles & Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964 Volume 1*, ed. George Evans (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1987), p. 272.

all-encompassing enough. Again, according to Olson, the possibility remains because the negative image of this possible world still thrives. As Olson says about industries in *Call Me Ishmael*, the importance is the force they are a clue to, the drive and will of the people turned toward a negative power.

We should not take it as coincidence that Olson's final seminar at Black Mountain, "The Special View of History" (1956), emphasizes the connections between dialectics, totality, and social change. Basing its postulations from Heraclitus' adage, "Man is estranged from that with which he is most familiar," Olson wants to restore the idea that, "Like it or not, see it or not, history is the *function* of any one of us."⁸⁹ History, too, is now *technē* and carries the full weight of totality and method. But, moreover, Olson turns to Hegel directly for an exemplification of a dialectical totality. In a passage that solidifies many of the fragile links above, Olson positions the entire Fenellosa line of artists as writers of dialectical sentences:

One can see the whole Hegelian proposition as noun and verb, the noun being the understanding, that which is finite, and the verb being that which is the dialectical, and the third or speculative, the mere recognition that you need both to make what the third, in short, or the "Speculative" is, a sentence. *To take thought* is a sentence. A sentence is a complete thought. Only—as Fennollosa, and thus Keats point out—a sentence is in fact a transfer of force, from object to object by verb; thus the actionable, or, the very act of the sentence, is the dynamic which matters. And for that dynamic to come into play one has to go back to the original noun-verb terms, and not remove the "thought" from the function of the finite noun and infinitive.⁹⁰

I would insist that here we must again return to the discrepancy between theory and practice. For example, when Pound invigorated so many artists through his use of the

⁸⁹ Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), p. 17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 44-5.

ideogram borrowed from Fenellosa, he grasped the right theory but involved himself in malpractice. The totality he dreamed was like a dinner party whose historical deadline was 1917 and whose only guests would have been Dante and Cavalcanti. For Olson, very much in line with Zukofsky's differentiation of the *power* of production being ambidextrously liberating or domineering, the theory of totality and its attendant mandate for social change is a matter of *use* or *will*:

Thus the use of positive and negative is not as of reason so much as it is of will: one can choose to use the implicit powers either negatively or positively, and the difference between the positive and negative use is the whole difference. One is power. The other is achievement. One is the self as ego and sublime. The other is the self as center and circumference. . . . And the only way the Will can be seen to be positive, and thus creative is when it does not fall back to Understanding, but keeps the verbal force of the Dialectical (change) and thus sits above or outside or under, asymmetrical to both the Power and the Good.⁹¹

But isn't this ambidextrous power another trope for the narrative of modernism? Without question the various liberating political projects of modernism failed, but not for lack of trying. There was another will, the bewitching spell that holds the eclipse still in place, present. We can call it the West, Ahab, capitalism, patriarchy, paternalism, or any number of subsequent ideologies and political realities it produces, but without a proper name we may only approach the issue by totalizing the symptoms it produces.

Whatever questions you may ask of the enigmatic socio-economic system of late capitalism, the answer is always the same: *totality is not*.

Perhaps it is not through Pound that we see the clearest example of this updating of modernism, but through Gertrude Stein. By the final pages of *Maximus* the discussion turns to migration, an idea which opens us to history as much as any other. Migration is

⁹¹ Ibid, 45-6.

the pursuit for a “preferable / environment,” to which Maximus says, “If I were pressed / I’d add” (and again we encounter the troubling “this”):

that the Mind or Will always

successfully opposes & invades the Previous, This
is the rose is the rose is the rose of the World⁹²

⁹² Olson, *Maximus*, 565.

CHAPTER 6 CODA: AFTER BLACK MOUNTAIN

By focusing on methods of crafting and making a world—not only its “objects,” but its concepts, apparatuses, and ideologies—we return to the problem of *technē*. To say this forces us to also acknowledge that the “objects” resulting from the practices of *technē* are the reifications of politics and the forces of sociality seen through the category of culture. Reification, as the process that terminates process in terms of the objectification or thingification of social relations, must remain dialectical. One of the more productive aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic theory is that he positions aesthetics within the tensions of reification. For example, to claim that a *finished* aesthetic object is better understood for its incomprehensibility or enigmaticalness points to such a contradiction: the aesthetic object, itself a reified thing brought into being, struggles against the forces of capitalist reification (the subject struggles to adhere within the object). This is surely the *aporia* that Olson reached in Chapter 5: how does an artist *produce objects* within the situation of the market. Indeed, we should pull the poetic theories of Chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 into this context: the common theme is the contradictory status of an aesthetic *forming* and the belief in *process* running throughout the artworks—how to prevent this thing from becoming a mere thing.

One key to Adorno’s aesthetic theory is that he places reification alongside the seemingly antithetical concept of aesthetic judgment, thus eliminating the ideology of a Kantian transcendental Good. Taste and beauty can only have effect, can only become cultural practices, through agreement and mediation regarding the function of these concepts. As Timothy Bewes says, “Insight into the processes by which capitalism produces a reified and administered subject is removed from certainty to the same

degree as aesthetic judgment.”¹ From this premise, which seems to undergird the entire aesthetic category of modernism, we find a dialectical potential: “As Adorno’s writings on art demonstrate, reification is by no means simply soluble; nor is there any verifiable example in history of a non-reified society, or one in which subjectivity is unmediated by the object. If reification is the most extreme because the most abstract model of capitalism’s destructive consequences, this abstraction is also the very reason why it can and should be remobilized as a tool for understanding capitalism’s contemporary phase.”² Perhaps we should reconsider modernist poetics as the remobilization of political strategies to comprehend—and this comprehension includes a potential termination—capitalism’s methods for exacerbating the contradictions involved in discretizing subject and object, universal and particular. We should continually return to Adorno’s premise regarding the multiple dynamics of mediation that artworks draw our attention to, not just the fracture in metaphysics in terms of subject and object, but the kind of theoretical negotiations that are themselves a form of thought that struggles against the “epiphenomenon” of reification:

If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things, and thus art turns against art. The totally objectivated artwork would congeal into a mere thing, whereas if it altogether evaded objectivation it would regress to an impotently powerless subjective impulse and flounder in the empirical world.³

That is, what we notice about the authors under review is a propensity to use cultural objects and practices as dialectical strategies to reverse several malevolent

¹ Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 110.

² *Ibid.*, 110.

³ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998), p. 175.

processes. By way of closing, I want to focus specifically on Olson in order to come to a very terse conclusion about our entire cast of characters: these artists were already engaged in critical cultural studies. For instance, Olson reads history as cultural production—its objects, artifacts, fictions, interpolations, organizations, etc.—as the genetic code of past decisions embalmed in things that varied both in terms of durability and temporality and as exteriorized human memories. Olson was, as George Butterick puts it, “a participant in the twentieth-century ‘knowledge explosion,’ who share, no, luxuriated in data, broke it down like a micro-organism does a plastic, and, most of all,—the key—who *believed* it was possible to know everything, or at least everything that one needed to know!”⁴ Fused within things—archives, narratives, topographies, etc.—is the chance to decode the totality of a system or distill the invisible idea of a cultural *polis* in order to comprehend, like Olson’s visit to the Yucatan, how and why self-destruction sets in, and what impedes action on behalf of a people who let it happen.

We know Olson was interested in Ruth Benedict’s cultural relativism and Carl Sauer’s cultural landscapes. And Olson seems to understand that in order to pass through the problem of the aesthetic one is already situated in questions of culture. Any presentation of the surfaces and masses of poetic forms will always already be working at the level of cultural production. Perhaps not so much an ideology but a matter of fact: repositioning poetry within the category of culture empowers poetic forms to reconstitute the totality of which they are part and parcel. To be more specific, I am arguing that Olson was already considering the consequences of a political task that Bernard Stiegler says is yet to be accomplished when he suggests that an “industrial politics of

⁴ George Butterick, “Charles Olson’s ‘The Kingfishers’ and the Poetics of Change” *American Poetry* 6.2 (Winter 1989), pp. 28-59, p. 31.

the future must understand technological development as an essentially cultural question, and must understand that the cultural question from out of the question of *technē*, the Greek name for what we call art.”⁵

Olson, like the other poets studied here, seems to have written the above passage in reverse: starting from the basis of *technē* we have opportunity to reconstitute the totality of industrial development that will inevitably produce another culture according to a different axis; a shift from the reception and inheritance of culture to its production. For Stiegler, an industrial politics of the future can only result from a radical dialectic that reverses the practices claiming control over cultural production: “it is a matter of the invention of a new order, and the constitution of a *new model of industrial development* as well as of cultural *practices* (and practices *irreducible to mere usages*), at the very moment that culture, or rather the *control* of culture, has become the heart of development.”⁶ *Technē* gains an important power: the chance to conceive—and to create through this imagining—new models of cultural production that reconstitute political life that remains incalculable to the current cultural logics of late capitalism. Stiegler seems to unravel the dialectical positive from Adorno and Horkheimer’s negation of culture: “the culture industries are not inevitably harmful, or worse—and it is for this same reason that, finally, they must *also in principle* be capable of the *best*.”⁷ Here we have a discussion where the perspective shifts away from the vantage of

⁵ Bernard Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 18.

⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁷ *Ibid*, 18.

consumption; *technē* reorients artistic practices in terms of production—actual, possible, or otherwise.

The “post-modern,” to use Olson’s version of the term, inaugurates a problematic type of cultural production that ties into the core antagonisms of capitalism. Reification, in so far as it is a malevolent concept, marks a process of removing all traces of production in the thing produced. And here, returning to Bewes, we gain opportunity to read Olson’s theory of the *polis* against the problems of Gloucester increasing its rate of reification exponentially:

The process of reification in capitalist society is one of embedding men and women in the particular, of hiding from them their implication in and constitution by a social and historical ‘totality’; and of subsuming them beneath a false generality (such as their membership of families, states or nations)—an ideological process which must take different forms at different times. In each case, reification is opposed in principle to the failure to think the totality.⁸

To borrow Marx’s analogy that Zukofsky overlaid onto artworks: in late capitalism the bee no longer forms an identity with the hive. The dialectical constitution of subjectivity and objectivity at the core of work and social production *tout court* become untethered: “One will get nowhere in catching the traffic of the human universe if one does not recognize that a man is at once subject and object, is at once and always going in two directions.”⁹ If we focus on Olson’s project in *Maximus*, we see the consequences of Gloucester being reified via this separation. To momentarily bracket the legal and political dilemmas of citizenship as itself a reified concept, in Gloucester the citizens of the *polis* resemble alienated workers: the citizens who constitute and produce the

⁸ Bewes, *Reification*, 12.

⁹ Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), p. 32.

invisible idea of the *polis* no longer find themselves by, in, and through it. The *polis* is simply “used” without realizing that practices, or lack thereof, form it.

As we saw in the Chapter 5, the metonymy between individual and city had completely fallen out of congruence; the individual can no longer establish identity with the larger collective or the institutions that comprise the objective form of the *polis*. That Olson holds locality to be a gateway to a universal is all the more telling: at a global level something unhinged and this lack of congruence, or lack of identity between subject and object, comes to mark a fundamental disjuncture of the experience of modernity. Jameson describes the paradox more completely: “despite the historical fact of production itself—the human world, which, as Vico put it, people have themselves produced—we find universal alienation of the most literal kind, in which the object, the not-I, comes before its subjects as what is radically other and the property and dominion of a foreign power.”¹⁰ This is a logic impacting all cultural landscapes with varying degrees of severity: racism, nationalism, sexism, etc. To repeat an earlier passage now in a new context, Olson seems to have created his own adventure through a series of eclectic thinkers to end up with the same conclusion: “Like it or not, see it or not, history is the *function* of any one of us.”¹¹ The loss of this notion of history—and the separation of subject and object—are for Olson found to be central to the faults of humanisms that establish a distance or space between the concepts of the individual and society. The question remains: how to restore a *dialectical* identity, one that does not seek an

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations: On the Phenomenology of Spirit* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 112.

¹¹ Olson, *The Special View of History*, 17.

equalization and thus a neutralization of subject and object, but one where the terms fold back into each other in a self-constitutive struggle.

When Olson links art back to technics, I want to suggest that he speaks to two symptoms at the core of our political economy. The logic of Americanism—the hegemonic “post-modern” that Ahab expresses as historical fact—is making it difficult, as Olson tells Cid Corman, “to see how one system basing itself on credit and so limiting production in the face of its own technological forward motion comes more and more to resemble and collaborate (essentially) with another system, basing itself on an unobservable destitution of the masses.”¹² Rather than an opposition in typical Cold War fashion, we have capitalism and communism creating an ideological composition that means “each comes, by the final act itself, more to resemble each other than any common difference of the citizens of each.”¹³ This anxiety concerning the mutual perpetuation of administrative models nullifies the possibility of the citizen to find him- or herself produced within the *polis* as his or her role drifts from a participant to spectator or, worse, a pure consumer of inherited cultures.

Second, if we follow the narrative of Chapter 5, we should recall that Olson frames his initial inquiry as it pertains to a general loss since WWI in terms of our *labor*. As Stiegler describes it, this problem exceeds universal pauperization, because it concerns “the worker’s *loss of knowledge*, the worker tending to become unskilled *pure labor force*—and lacking any *motive* to work beyond the need to subsist.”¹⁴ Here the

¹² Charles Olson and Cid Corman, *Charles Olson & Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950-1964 Volume 1*, ed. George Evans (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, 1987), p. 270.

¹³ *Ibid*, 270.

¹⁴ Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 62.

consequences are steep: both *savoir-faire* and *savoir-vivre* become compromised; the cessation of technics in this way, as that which endlessly constitutes culture through *practices*, marks a certain failure when these practices became autonomously controlled by the culture industries. Olson, again, seems to pinpoint and speak to this problem of labor practices acutely in terms of a loss of history:

I see history as the one way to restore the familiar to us—to stop treating us cheap. Man is forever estranged to the degree that his stance toward reality disengages him from the familiar. And it has been the immense task of the last century and a half to get man back to what he knows. I repeat the phrase: *to what he knows*. For it turns out to coincide exactly with that other phrase: *to what he does*. What you do is precisely defined by what you know. Which is not reversible, and therein lies the reason why context is necessary to us; it is only that when one can say either (if it is the person's life) here is a perfect thing or (if it is a created thing—which every act is, by its very source as rising from one of us) here is form.¹⁵

Every act, which is the result of a determined or ad hoc practice, results in a created thing, which is to say that every act—even a proposal or a projective thought—results in new forms that must always already be cultural.

These two narratives of reifying all labor to merely subsisting waged labor—which Olson rightly points out is a problem of *credit*—and the overarching experience of citizens to feel powerless as a community of citizens to intervene in the matters of the *polis* form two interrelated aspects for describing the contradictions of modernity. Melville predicted the myth of America that was to replicate in the twentieth century as the citizens of the U.S., and Gloucester more specifically, mistake paternalism for security and repeat the powerlessness that the idea of the crew resembled: inaction. It seems to follow, then, that Olson wants to reorient “humans” along their *prospective*

¹⁵ Olson, *The Special View of History*, 29.

historical potential: there is a tendency in us—which are again “objects”—to alter the future via technics (which, is for Olson, aesthetics).

Olson’s response to the historical estrangement of his present is brief: expression. Expression still maintains the ability to prospect about in order to bring new forms into being. One cannot participate in expression by proxy.

And [expression] is the only answer to the spectatorism which both capitalism and communism breed—breed it as surely as absentee ownership (whether of a leisure class or of a dictatorship, in the “proletarian” sense) doth breed it, separating it from action as surely as—as a leadership—these two identities limit production, or regulate it, in that monstrous phrase which turns all things toward creation’s opposite, destruction.¹⁶

As we saw earlier, Olson turns to technics in the immediate paragraphs following this passage in order to position methods of expression as the actionable criterion for social change. *Technē* maintains the possibility to turn a damaging cultural logic around by producing a radical singularity where subject and object rejoin dialectically through the production of artworks; and artworks underscore a method of counter-production—Olson’s favorite example is dance.

To this extent it would perhaps be more interesting to think of the “letters” in *Maximus* as so many conceptual or prospective Letters to the Editor (in terms of a general or universal addressee); or, better, *Maximus-as-Letter* or *Maximus-as-counter-proposal*. As Peter Anastas explains—in perhaps the most important “minor” work in Olson’s oeuvre¹⁷—upon returning to Gloucester and experiencing the effects of a newly restructured local government, itself being a shift that points toward the neoliberalism to

¹⁶ Olson, *Olson & Corman*, 271.

¹⁷ Charles Olson, *Maximus to Gloucester: The Letters and Poems of Charles Olson to the Editor of the Gloucester Times, 1962-1969*, ed. Peter Anastas (Gloucester: Ten Pound Island, 1992). See Anastas’ introduction, pp. 15-73.

come, Olson deployed the same practices in local struggles that we find in his poetic “techniques.” For instance, Olson sends poem-letters to the local newspaper about every intrusion upon the *polis*. In his “A Scream to the Editor” published in the *Gloucester Times* on December 3, 1965, Olson questions what motives are now taking root in the city that would allow the demolition of a historic home in order to make way for a YMCA swimming pool:

how many ways can value be
allowed to be careless with, and Hagstrom
destroy? how many more before this obvious
dullness shall cease?

oh city of mediocrity and cheap ambition destroying
its own shoulders its own back greedy present persons
stood upon, stop this renewing without reviewing
loss loss loss no gains oh not moan stop stop stop this¹⁸

For a New Dealer the reckless and hasty “planning” behind urban renewal was abominable. That Gloucester’s citizens resemble a city of Ishmael’s is worse. And it is the problems of Gloucester that deserve more emphasis—how could expression, itself a process of reification, help this *polis*?

In 1951, the same year that Olson coins the “post-modern,” the city of Gloucester was facing the challenges brought about by a slumping fishing economy that necessitated the city to seek new measures and solutions for the problems resulting from post-industrial decline. In Olson’s opinion, the city made two decisions that would have deleterious effects by choosing to reinvigorate the local economy through “urban renewal” that demanded restructuring local government. As a result, in 1952 Gloucester saw its first city manager; an event that disbanded the mayoral-council form of

¹⁸ Ibid, 88.

government it had maintained since a city charter was successfully petitioned for in 1873. The cultural logic of a “post-modern” economic system landed squarely in Gloucester. It is this timeframe that marks the production of *Maximus*; Olson visited the fishing town since he was a child, but he had never resided there for any considerable amount of time until his return, in 1957, the year after Black Mountain College closed. As citizen, he was displeased with what he witnessed: the privatization of waterfront and public property, the razing of historical landmarks, and the filling in of ponds with concrete. When we think of Gloucester and the politics of *Maximus* it should be within this context of a local *polis* going through new problems ushered in by bewilderingly contrary economic solutions. The invisible idea of the *polis* of Gloucester was moving toward, in Olson’s words, corporate “statism.”

But what we should continually underscore is the metonymy always at work: the critique exceeds Gloucester because the new cultural logic of Americanism and post-industrial capitalism unevenly affects all localities. Olson chose Gloucester much like Williams chose Paterson—neither of them natives to either place—because of scale. Olson saw the vantage point of studying the idea of the *polis* through the third eldest establishment of the New World (i.e., being part of the original Massachusetts Bay Colonies). Charting the production of Gloucester’s culture opened an aspect to critique a growing hegemonic Americanism. This ideology of comprehending the universal through the accuracy of the particular is doubtless one of Whitehead’s more productive notions (or Williams’ for that matter). From Gloucester forward, Olson could study how the idea of *polis* grew into its current unfortunate form—how it was *made*, what decisions went into this “creation,” what wills and powers.

What becomes striking about Olson's letters to the editor is how they almost completely overlap with *Maximus* in the sense that they seem missing from the longer work. If we follow the semantic chain of projective, prospective, etc., it will likely take us to the fundamental act central to *Maximus*: a proposal for new social practices. For example, in 1965 Olson is again writing letters to the *Gloucester Times*, and this time the title becomes more important, "Poet proposes Gloucester restore selectmen." Olson begins by echoing Carl Sauer's work on cultural landscapes:

What bastard man today does not know, or his fellows who sell him abuse in and for him, is the created conditions of his own nature. One of these certainly is topography, that is that the shape of things on earth¹⁹

And then Olson moves to the ecological impacts as a point of demonstration,

it was ecology as man's own tonight I thought which is, unknowingly, what he and his badgered and mostly stupid leadership, are removing from him, and from his earth and the ways of his life. And I care at least as much for him as I do for fish, and birds, and shellfish, and kelp. . . . The hedge-row, they call it east of Buffalo, what is the unturned edge between adjoining plowed fields of two owners, and where, like I'm hoping Mill Pond will be left, because these places between places breed future.²⁰

Eisenstein's *Film Form* seems to exceed a mere formal aesthetic theory. Here juxtaposition and the places where species and objects intermingle become the productive spaces of dialectical sentences—or at least potentially so—in that they provide a complex metabolic relationship. If the local government chooses to fill in Mill Pond with concrete and privatize wetlands, then we have an ecological interruption because the lands will no longer be *public*, which is to say, the scope of future creation

¹⁹ Olson, *Maximus to Gloucester*, 93.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 94.

becomes narrowed: “Man today is so stolen and cheated of creation as part actually of his own being.”²¹

Olson, however, offers a solution to upend this cultural logic:

I propose Gloucester restore her original selectmen as her Governing Body solely to redeclare the ownership of all her public conditions—including the governance of anything in that Body’s and the total Electorate’s judgement / no longer any appeal to eminent domain, or larger unit of topography and environment than the precincts of the City’s Limit/--in other words to re-establish the principle of commoners, for ownership of the commons. This alone will cut through all the preservations, historical commissions, as well, thank God, all any future except that of the hybridized man himself, aware he’s diddling when he touches marge of being, including his own. He be commoner, we be, Gloucester be common(s).²²

In 1873, the year Gloucester obtained its city charter, its governing body took the form of a commonwealth. From this date forward, Olson will track the slow process towards corporatism.

Here we approach the politics of the contradictory *polis*. Contradictory in that the Greek city-states that formed a federation in the Mediterranean cannot, and should not, be reconstituted (especially on the grounds of citizenship, literacy, the nation-state, etc.). But the idea of the *polis*, as Stiegler assists in explaining, precisely because it is an idea as such means it can only exist through consisting: “[I]t is not only God who, though not existing, consists. It is also art, justice, ideas in general. . . . Ideas in general, and not only the idea of justice, whatever these ideas may be, do not exist: they are only made to exist.”²³ And here we return to the fundamental necessity of *technē*: through aesthetic practices, which are technics passing through the category of culture

²¹ Ibid, 95.

²² Ibid, 96-97.

²³ Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 90.

(there is no other way), we have the dialectical potential to bring into existence—which is to say reify in a positive way—altogether necessary ideas. Said otherwise, Olson wants to pass the idea of the *polis* through the process of modernization in order to reflexively help terminate the haphazard byproducts of modernization itself.

The *polis*, then, is for Olson a socially necessary idea. To say that *polis* aligns with totality simultaneously implies that we should consider it as sign and symptom of historical problems. *Polis* speaks to a genuine historical need: to reconstitute the negotiation between subject and object, to effectively recouple the dialectic between parts and wholes, between person and place throughout all stages of production in its widest sense. If we recall Jameson's initial prompt—to seek out what Pound detonated with his initial formal idea—the answer may begin to narrate how capitalism increases the separation of subjects and objects in exponential ways throughout the twentieth century. Pound, however, theorized an aesthetic form to confront this event. The intermingling of radical parts back into dialectical wholes underscores this symptomatic narrative: Pound's metonymic machine-art, Williams' compound noun, Zukofsky's rehabilitation of totalized particulars (i.e., "A"), and Olson's *polis*.

All of these are in their own stride ways to reincorporate the *calculated and discretized particular* back into a dialectical totality. To this end, a whole new project—one unable to be completed here—would need to reprioritize the very process of reification implied within the two major aesthetic theories discussed here: objectivism and objectism. These aesthetic theories aim to compose and produce objects (to bring forms into being) that defy and overturn the harmful cultural practices that define capitalism's interference in daily life. And here I think we must reconsider the

importance of expression. Little is gained by thinking about aesthetic expression outside the imagined boundaries of social and cultural circumstance. Each of the aesthetic totalities studied here, through the very practices that become reified in their objective artworks, exemplify the radical singularity that the artwork itself seeks to make commonplace. They are performative in this way: like technical manuals of machines that do not yet exist. Through the very act of proposing—including the politics involved in such conceptualizations—we repeatedly find cultural practices that deny the logics behind separation, discretization, and categorization. By and through these acts, the aesthetic foregrounds the possibility to think through types of cultural production where theory and practice continually mediate the process of objectification.

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