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CRISIS AND THE US AVANT-GARDE

POETRY AND REAL POLITICS

BEN HICKMAN

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Introduction

In 2012, the Californian poet Joshua Clover, recipient of the Walt Whitman Award, professor of English at University of California Davis and regular contributor to *The New York Times* and *The Nation*, had this to say about the politics of poetry:

> I think that for a while now, many of us poets have been telling ourselves lies about the political force of poetry. Many of these we know by heart. Speaking truth to power. Finding the form which might both reveal and persuade. Preserving the space of critique. Preserving the feel of some undomesticated common zone. Giving voice to the voiceless. Laying bare the truth of the ineluctably immiserating mechanism in which we live. We have been aided in this set of justifications by that peculiar historical development known as capital-T Theory, and particularly by ideas based around the primacy of discourse and 'the materiality of the signifier'—ideas which allow activities at the level of language to claim the same material force as a thrown brick. Both constitute the world.
>
> But it's such bullshit, isn't it?[1]

Clover was arrested in 2009 for his participation in student protests at his workplace and has been one of the most involved activists in and sensitive commentators on social movements flourishing in the wake of the 2008 global recession. His conclusion – that recent theoretical politicisations of poetry be dismissed as 'bullshit' – is likely not, then, the bluff refusal of the reactionary, rejecting any political force falling outside the status quo. The targets of Clover's engaged statement, those particular Theory-based and language-centred conceptions of the poetic, are more carefully addressed than the sweep of his list would seem to imply. As Clover has put it elsewhere, 'Certain things will have to be actively destroyed on the side of capital . . . And they will not be destroyed with language.'[2] The one-word critique of the grand potencies of poetry we have come to learn 'by heart' is a response to a tradition, active since

Romanticism, that treats the political efficacy of poetry as an already existing fact. For any political poetics put forward today, seeing this for the uncritical assumption it is may be a good place to start. Rather than presuming that all the world's important political energies inhere in poetry at all times, this study examines what poems historically have and have not been able to do – to affect, effect, articulate – within and against the structures of the avant-garde.

1   Crisis and the avant-garde

For the last forty years, experimental American poetry has concerned itself programmatically with its own political functions. Poets and critics, influenced by French theory and the Language writing that most successfully imported it into an American poetic context, have succeeded in theoretically inscribing issues of poetic technique within the broadest historical processes: the production of meaning, commodification, and the rule of capital itself. The aim here has been directive rather than descriptive: Language writing and its descendants today continue to seek a poetry that will directly intervene in the fight against capital – that will, in the words of Ron Silliman, 'carry the class struggle for consciousness to the level *of* consciousness' through poems that, in their very form, challenge commodity fetishism and surplus value.[3] This ambitious sense of literary force has necessarily been long on speculative theories of poetry's politics and short on analysis of the context and affect of individual political poems. From such speculation Silliman's project has fostered an environment in which experimental poetry becomes the most important political activity of our times. Likewise, the particular energies of poetry are impoverished by pressing them into a direct assault on the economic base of capitalism they are ill-equipped to make.

This study rejects such literalisations of the poem and its alleged formal correspondences with economic processes.[4] It investigates instead how moments of political crisis can sharpen our sense of the historical force of poetry, and how American poems have sought to intervene in specific political upheavals. Such an investigation is not, however, an attempt to return to historicist models of literary meaning. The concept of crisis, in its specific and increasingly urgent sense today, can illuminate poetry's capacity for simultaneous response and intervention in a way occluded by both the speculative preoccupation with poetry's relation to the commodity and historicism's immovable 'context'. There are three simple but important implications the concept of crisis holds for the reading of twentieth-century poetry: (1) it is a single and concrete political

moment; (2) it signifies a turning point, the potential for this moment to result in revolutionary change; and (3) as such, it invokes the agency of individuals. All three meanings are at the centre of contemporary philosophical discussions of crisis and, as I shall outline, collectively harness the major characteristics of the American avant-garde, whether in its responsiveness to political events as opposed to the historical European avant-garde's vocation as initiator of anarchy, its tendency to reconstruction over destruction, or its search for lyric subjectivity through political change. My aim is not to suggest that the only legitimate poetry is that which engages crisis, or even that all political poetry is the poetry of crisis. Neither, though, do I want to propose art and politics as sites of accidental and temporary overlap, carnivalesque moments which are ends in themselves – a move typified by the 'transversal' model of Gerald Raunig's otherwise excellent *Art and Revolution*.[5] Rather, crisis stands in this study as something throwing into relief dynamics at work in poetry at all times, since all times relate themselves in one way or another to crisis, whether in preparation for it, in the grip of its moment, or in its wake.

Following events like September 11, the Iraq war and the global recession after 2008, the word crisis has become ubiquitous in the Anglophone world. From politicians only too willing to invoke it as an excuse for a whole range of extra-ordinary measures to its commodification in the media trade of alienated *Schadenfreude*, the multiple uses of the term show a concept itself in crisis, threatened with meaninglessness. The significance of crisis can, however, be wrested from its approximations. The key distinction for this study is between a sense of crisis as permanent chaos and crisis understood as an essentially punctual phenomenon. The former is often based on a certain reading of Marx, proposing that capitalism is *always* in crisis, which it exploits and finds perpetually necessary for its existence.[6] Capitalism clearly does thrive on its destructive tendencies, endlessly adapting to its own excesses, but this is not the same as saying that capitalism's permanent condition is one of crisis. Such permanence too easily slips into determinist reductions of Marx's theory of capitalist development, in the conviction either that capitalism will collapse under the weight of its own contradictions, or that it is simply indestructible. Marx himself, obviously the most total theorist of economic crisis, insists that the chronic tendency of capitalism to crisis is not the same as a state of chronic crisis – as he unambiguously states in the *Theory of Surplus Value*, 'Permanent crises do not exist.'[7] The lesson for art is that capital will always periodically open itself up to crisis, that it will repeatedly leave itself vulnerable at certain moments, but that it equally holds in such moments the capacity to wrest victory

from the jaws of its apparently imminent failure. In its etymological root, which I will return to in a moment, a crisis cannot be prolonged or delayed, let alone made permanent: *krisis* is the moment of decision, *krinein*, the turning point at which, in ancient pathology, a patient will either recover or die. It is this double urgency of political turning points that Wallace Stevens invoked when he wrote of the inescapable 'fact' of war pressing upon us the equally urgent and unavoidable moment of our decision: 'in war, the desire to move in the direction of fact as we want it to be and to move quickly is overwhelming'.[8]

In concrete terms the distinction between crisis as a process and crisis as a multitude of moments helps to separate economic dynamics from the political sphere, a separation central to contemporary conceptions of crisis. Jürgen Habermas's notion of a legitimation crisis, for example, holds that political crisis occurs when any government 'lags behind programmatic demands *that it has placed on itself*' to manage capitalism's economic contradictions, but his more pertinent contention for this study is what the State's increasing success means for other political agents. As governments better manage economic crises, according to Habermas, so the systemic problems of capitalism are transferred to the shoulders of government planning, creating an increased sense of social power over forces previously conceived as natural and insuperable. Structurally the argument is not dissimilar to Lenin's in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*: as anarchy is more and more removed from the economy, so human agency accrues more and more responsibility, a responsibility currently invested in elites but increasingly seen as transferrable to the majority of the population. Agency-through-crisis is equally palpable for Habermas culturally where, likewise, traditions lose their 'natural' character as they are enrolled in the emergency defence of state legitimacy, and thereby become called upon to 'decide': 'The stirring up of cultural affairs that are taken for granted thus furthers the politicisation of areas of life previously assigned to the private sphere.'[9] Returning to the etymology of the word, we can see legitimation crises as prompting normally dispossessed agents to take decisions in response to the sickness of their regulating system.[10] Twentieth-century crisis management tends, then, to call upon agents to act or decide, jolting them out of the general despondency at supposedly capricious and natural economic processes. Giorgio Agamben reaches a similar conclusion in his account of crisis dynamics, *State of Exception*, where the increasingly unexceptional use of the state of exception, or the suspension of the law in order to defend it, shows less the fraudulence of so-called emergency powers than the possibility for society of doing away with the law entirely:

To show law in its nonrelation to life and life in its nonrelation to law means to open a space between them for human action, which once claimed for itself the name of 'politics'. Politics has suffered a lasting eclipse because it has been contaminated by law, seeing itself, at best, as constituent power (that is, violence that makes law), when it is not reduced to merely the power to negotiate with the law. The only truly political action, however, is that which severs the nexus between violence and law . . . To a word that does not bind, that neither commands nor prohibits anything, but says only itself, would correspond an action as pure means, which shows only itself, without any relation to an end. And, between the two, not a lost original state, but only the use and human praxis that the powers of law and myth had sought to capture in the state of exception.[11]

The state of exception, then, allows us to see the fundamentally 'anomic' and contingent character of the law, in the process opening up a utopian space for collective self-constitution and liberated human action. Crisis breeds an extra-legal use of power, but in doing so draws into question the law it professes to defend. Both Habermas and Agamben insist on crisis as the fundamental catalyst for the assumption of agency in those parts of society (economics, the law) hitherto seen as immune to human action.[12]

What can all this tell us about avant-garde poetry? Crisis has always been at the centre of avant-garde projects, almost all of which have taken on the responsibility of *instituting* crisis, of confronting bourgeois complacency with disturbance and trauma. André Breton's Surrealist call for 'a general and emphatic crisis in consciousness' is a paradigmatic instance of the avant-garde's wider destructive drive to open creative spaces through the violence of critical moments.[13] In Matei Calinescu's words: 'As a culture of crisis, the avant-garde is consciously involved in furthering the "natural" decay of traditional forms in our world of change, and does its best to intensify and dramatise all existing symptoms of decadence and exhaustion.'[14] The avant-garde functions to extend into bourgeois consciousness crises that already exist politically in the world, a fact Peter Bürger considers to be so central that its loss signifies the death of avant-gardism itself:

While the historical avant-gardes could rightly consider the social context of their actions to be one of crisis, if not revolution, and could draw from this realization the energy to design the utopian project of sublating the institution of art, this no longer applied to the neo-avant-gardes of the 1950s and 1960s . . .[15]

The avant-garde does not quite *create* crisis in these theories, but it does seek to transform latent social energies into revolutionary decision by

engineering a crisis in art. Given this tradition, it is clear that the 'real politics' of this study's subtitle cannot refer to poets' participation in government as legitimising agents whose last example in English was John Milton. Nonetheless, I want to describe in American poetry a different negotiation of crisis than that described by Calinescu or Bürger, and to account for a more specific political content than what Calinescu describes as the 'universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde'.[16]

Alain Badiou's proposed dialectic for thinking through the character of negation in art may be illuminating here. In a short lecture on Pasolini, Badiou separates the figure of negation into 'affirmative' and 'negative' modes. The latter is the 'destructive' dimension which seeks the overthrow of existing systems – Badiou's examples are Schönberg's 'destruction of the tonal system' and Marx's 'negation of capitalism by the complete destruction of the machinery of bourgeois State'. The former, negation that affirms, works in relation with destructive negation but is distinct from it:

> For example, the new musical axioms which structure for Schönberg the admissible succession of notes in a musical work, outside the tonal system, are in no way deducible from the destruction of this system. They are the affirmative laws of a new framework for the musical activity. They show the possibility of a new coherence for musical discourse. The point that we must understand is that this new coherence is not new because it achieves the process of disintegration of the system. The new coherence is new to the extent that, in the framework that the Schönberg's axioms impose, the musical discourse avoids the laws of tonality, or, more precisely, becomes indifferent to these laws. That is why we can say that the musical discourse is subtracted from its tonal legislation. Clearly, this subtraction is in the horizon of negation; but it exists apart from the purely negative part of negation. It exists apart from destruction. It is the same thing for Marx in the political context. Marx insists on saying that the destruction of the bourgeois State is not in itself an achievement. The goal is communism, that is the end of the State as such . . .[17]

Negative and affirmative negation are therefore interdependent. For Badiou, however, they must be properly balanced to respond to that which they negate, their historical situation. Destruction, Badiou says, is 'the very essence of negation' in the twentieth century, both in political practice (Lenin or Mao) and art (Duchamp or Cage), and what we need now is an account of negation that can be affirmative and world-building. My claim is that the US avant-garde's distinctiveness lies in how it already shows us such an aesthetic. US poetic avant-gardism, though invested in traditional avant-garde projects of formal experimen-

tation and the sublation of art and everyday life, holds much less stock with the obliterative methods used by European modernism to attack institutions. American experimental poets, always less associated with the visual arts whose institutions were so decisive for historical avant-garde practice in Europe, and always less coherent than the organised bodies that enabled those artists' spectacles of shock, primarily seek to negate existing systems through the construction of new frameworks. In important ways, that is, American poetry 'exists apart from destruction'.

This is abstract, and the challenge here is in avoiding the suggestion that American avant-gardes have no politics at all. This is a popular position, made influential by Marjorie Perloff.[18] The absence of absolute opposition, however, is not the same as political detachment. I want to claim, simply, that the US avant-garde's forms of negation are more directed and responsive to particulars, particulars that will be the focus of the discussions below. Put simply, American avant-garde poetry proposes the affirmation of alternative modes of political thought in a manner that goes beyond the confrontations of experimental form. The tensions of affirmation and negation in the face of crisis are many and do not always find political poetry as their resolution, as some of the following chapters will show. Nonetheless, affirmative negation can help us to explore the relations between vanguard political action and avant-garde artistic practice without eliding the actual distance that has historically existed between the two. At the centre of the divide is the difference between the *forms* of cultural confrontation and political struggle, and within this the tendency of the avant-garde to deny any such difference, as Calinescu outlines:

> In the 1870s in France, the term avant-garde, while still preserving its broad political meaning, came to designate the small group of advanced writers and artists who transferred the spirit of radical critique of social forms to the domain of *artistic forms* . . . For they believed that to revolutionize art was the same as to revolutionize life. Thus, the representatives of the artistic avant-garde consciously turned against the stylistic expectations of the general public, whom the political revolutionists were trying to win over through the use of the most platitudinous revolutionary propaganda. The seeds of a conflict between the two avant-gardes was there.[19]

As I explore the relations of aesthetic form and utopian thinking in American poetics, and particularly the role of lyric subjectivity within them, it will become clear that what is partly under discussion is the American negation of key avant-garde principles. My study claims that this particular negation is what should make the experimental, mid-century American poetry of crisis important to us now. In the face of

recapitulations of historical (or real) avant-garde practice, typified by the New Conceptualism and UbuWeb ('All avant-garde. All the time.'), the historical US avant-garde can serve as a reminder of sources of negation that inhabit but do not find rest in avant-gardism, where avant-gardism itself is more than a synonym for political-by-default, and in which oppositional force goes beyond the confrontations of unconventional form.

2 Form and address

All twentieth-century debates about aesthetic form were debates about the utopian function of art. The century's two formal paradigms are manifest in the celebrated argument of Lukács and Adorno, and respond at base to art's conflicting impulses to realism and projection, or what Virginia Woolf called the granite and the rainbow.[20] For Lukács, revolutionary potential is always already part of the real, and so realism transmits a future-orientation not usually associated with the petrified surfaces that French theory influentially attributed to it. The rainbow was also in the granite for Lukács's American social realist comrades in the 1930s, who labelled Louis Zukofsky a 'detached recorder of isolated events' precisely because he was *not* a realist, but a writer whose Eliotic formalism 'identifies life with capitalism, and so assumes that the world is merely a wasteland'.[21] For Adorno, quite differently, 'Art's Utopia' is a 'counterfactual yet-to-come [that] goes on being a recollection of the possible with a critical edge against the real'.[22] Seeing much less hope for revolution in existing social conditions, Adorno stresses the urgencies of autonomous form to negate the real in a manner 'pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure'.[23] In opposition to the American avant-garde's hybridising and osmotic sense of aesthetic form, Adorno might be said to foreshadow the commitment of its later readers to protecting poetic form as the last free space for utopian thought. Juliana Spahr has been one of many to recently recognise the restrictions of this position:

[T]he problem with the way we study literature in the academy is that Adorno . . . seems to have won. He is winning even when he isn't . . . in that even when we talk with admiration about subversion, we do it in sadly narrow ways. We are often talking about the language practices of a poem as subversive of the idea of the poem or the subversion of genre within the work . . . In this moment, we tend to limit poetry's possibilities to subversion of genre. And as we do this we ignore all those moments when poetry has intersected with various movements in other geographies and in other times.[24]

I want to contrast the 'subversion' Spahr critiques here to the richer and more varied sense of political intervention the poetry of crisis can provide. The poets presented in this study are a counter to the dominant conception of subversion as the resistance of commodification through difficulty, appropriating Adorno's sense of modernism as though it were a tactic for all seasons. In this formalism poetic technique is essentially defensive, establishing a protective layer against commodity fetishism that increasingly prevents any entry into the world at all. The strange insistence, inherited from Adorno, that works of art have 'their own internal logic', has been the central motif of the belated, post-1970 avant-garde's reading of its historical model.[25] Jed Rasula's distinction between a 'politics *of*' and a preferred 'politics *in*' poetry, proposed as a means for advertising the political valences of Language writing, is a typical limitation of poetry's social faculties to self-reflection. I will discuss such reductions more fully in Chapter 6: here I mean only to establish that this book does not seek to interrogate a crisis within the poem, a crisis *of* verse assuming upheaval within poetic form signals crisis for civilisation as a whole. Rather, in what follows, I will address the intersections Spahr feels are neglected in discussions of poetry. These extensions of poetic language stand in stark contrast to the conscious introversion of the decadent avant-garde's anachronistic repetitions, as we see Amiri Baraka, musicologist, playwright, political activist and pioneer of cultural studies, pit himself against directives to, in the words of Bruce Andrews, co-editor of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, 'Stay inside. It is all here. The non-imperial state: without need for the expansion of externalisation that comes from the refusal to redistribute the surplus at home.'[26] Baraka's position is only the logical end of the American avant-garde's constant tendency towards leaving the house of the poetic, witnessed in Charles Olson's archaeological poetics, Muriel Rukeyser's documentary-journalistic work, and even in the class historiography begun by Zukofsky. If we agree with Clover's point that '[c]ertain things will have to be actively destroyed on the side of capital . . . And they will not be destroyed with language', but we want to retain a sense of poetry as a political force, we must interest ourselves in how poets have attempted to go beyond language.

This beyond is the political agency poetry cannot provide but can, crucially, point toward. Such pointing emerges from the subject. Poets find themselves in crisis, that is, in finding a lack – in coming out the other end of upheaval with a subjectivity at once dismantled and full of potential. The American poetry of crisis, this study will propose, succeeds when it articulates the fullest, social, utopian sense of subjectivity, a subjectivity seeking to prove and galvanise the agency of individuals to

act collectively and fulfil this potential. As I have noted, crisis highlights normally alien political processes as radically changeable and open to the multitude, with moments of decision trumping the smooth running of the system. Before this optimism gives rise to a transcendent vision of subjectivity, we must recognise the generally conservative tradition of the crisis poem, more broadly and historically conceived. Most discussions of crisis in relation to poetry have had a quasi-religious focus.[27] Here, subjective potency is usually only present as the *opposite* of political agency. In Harold Bloom's theory of the crisis-poem, for example, the moment of decision is a fundamentally spiritual crux, an *agon* of the soul, where all 'crisis-points' or 'crossings' are heading one way: 'A movement toward an even greater degree of internalisation of the self, no matter how inward the starting point was.'[28] However ruthlessly and powerfully the crisis itself is expressed, the paradigm of crisis for New Romantics like Bloom is found in the movement famously performed in Wordsworth's *Prelude* from an exposed social self into a private one, a 'resolution' apparently withdrawing from political uncertainty and confusion into Nature, where metaphor, rhetoric and duplicity are absent and the self is constantly in the presence of truth. With political crisis escaped, for a reader like Bloom Wordsworth recognises the priority and last word of Nature, where the poet is no longer called to decide.[29] The defence of Pound through implicit attack on the very idea of political poetry is also rooted in this tradition, ranging from Robert Lowell's dismissal of Pound's fascism as a manifestation of the fact he was an interesting person ('He had no political effect whatsoever and was quite eccentric and impractical . . . [His political beliefs] made him more human and more to do with life, more to do with the times. They served *him*.'), to Language-centred critics who read Pound's political conviction as a fascinating symptom of a mental state: 'If the *Cantos* could speak . . . part of what it would say is "I myself am hell"', according to Jerome McGann.[30] Emptying political content out of modernist poems has an obvious function in the case of Pound, but there are poets of crisis within the US avant-garde whose works bear a resemblance to this structure of withdrawal. This structure is variously figured: Zukofsky's retirement from energetic engagement with social particulars into an ultra-Poundian sense of aesthetic order in music; the habits of anti-Vietnam war poets to view individuality as something *preceding* politics and therefore threatened by it, from the pained withdrawal of Denise Levertov to the *amor fati* of Robert Duncan, 'standing by ones life-work in the face of catastrophic times'; the inwardness of Language poetry itself.[31] In the main, however, the poets under discussion here are those who see subjectivity's potential to be *fully realised* in crisis, even if

withdrawal remains a potent question for them, as it does for Rukeyser. I have touched on the links between crisis and subjectivity in a general sense, but I want finally to stress how this dynamic is especially open to dramatisation in the particular *address* of American poetry, in how the voice of the individual speaks to the multitude in the poem.

Only seemingly against the self-centred theories of crisis outlined above, the great formal principle of the last forty years has been the prohibition on the 'I', a ban based on claims that subjective expression has always served as an uncritical and self-heroising guarantor of authenticity. Bowing to accounts of subjectivity like Bloom's, this proscription increasingly defines avant-gardism itself in American poetry today, principally through the trademarked anti-subjectivism of the New Conceptualism. The poems under discussion in this study, however, find in subjectivity, in personal experience and the capacity of the individual to speak of and against that experience – in however compromised and painfully self-conscious a manner – the grounds for political utterance. This is often work dismissed for its naïve beliefs in the ability of the individual to speak truth and language's capacity for political content: Zukofsky's early politically committed poems, Rukeyser's and Levertov's public personalism, Olson's and Ginsberg's grand vatic style, Baraka's improvisational rage. The reasons for looking at such poets now are obvious. Since the self is already under constant attack by capitalism, it is not oppositional to ratify that process by excising subjectivity in poetry. Since the urgency of today's search for new political forms increases with people's sense of atomisation, to pretend that this atomisation does not exist, and therefore that the poem can *be* political action by default through unconventional form, does not engage anybody's social experience. If the subject is itself currently in crisis, increasingly unable to find itself in social life, the complexity of the search for it and what the imagination can bring to this search are utterly lost if we blame the subject as the primary barrier to collective action and abandon it in revenge.

This is not to say that the poem's value in the twentieth century has been to provide a site for transcendent individualism, a spa-town for restoring the individual agency so obviously lost in the real social world. This study has no overarching theory of the poetic subject, but it is influenced implicitly throughout by the thinking of Paolo Virno, who presents a compellingly different subjectivity. In *Grammar of the Multitude*, Virno, treating Marx's work as 'a realistic and complex theory of the individual', outlines a '*process of individuation*', in which two things are important for my concerns. Firstly, individuality is the destination of social existence, not the inviolable soul lost in the crowd:

as in Aristotle, Hegel and Marx, the self is found in society. More specifically, though, Virno suggests a particular role for language within this dialectic, proposing it as one of two key sites for individual realisation. Language encompasses questions of potential because it moves from 'the act of *parole*', of the child merely speaking words still alien to it, to the '*capacity* for saying things', for invention and creativity. In the latter, 'the pre-individual linguistic faculty [becomes] the basis for individuated singularity, or the real within which this singularity takes its form'. Secondly, this stress on potential over fulfilment means that '*individuation is never concluded*'. This seems like a quotidian observation, and obviously follows from the equally banal fact that society itself is never concluded. The particular vocabulary, however, partly paraphrased from the French philosopher Gilbert Simondon, is suggestive:

> [T]he life of the group, is not, as we usually believe, the sphere within which the salient traits of a singular individual diminish or disappear; on the contrary, it is the terrain of a new and more radical individuation. By participating in a collective, the subject, far from surrendering the most unique individual traits, has the opportunity to individuate, at least in part, the share of pre-individual reality which all individuals carry within themselves. According to Simondon, within the collective we endeavour to refine our singularity, to bring it to its climax. Only within the collective, certainly not within the isolated subject, can perception, language and productive forces take on the shape of an individuated experience.[32]

'By participating', that is, we finesse our individuality by transforming *Gattungswesen* (Marx's term for 'generic existence') into an 'opportunity'. The thesis resembles Badiou's Event in which, among much else, the subject is born *as such* in choosing the 'totally ab-normal' or even 'impossible' act that breaches the status quo. In Virno's words, the opportunity is the 'new terrain' that offers the 'opportunity to individuate' in the total sense.

We are back in the realm of crisis here, and I want to bring these observations over to the study of avant-garde poetry in two ways. At the general level, the poets in this study never simply *assume* subjecthood, but rather enact the self's becoming through language as an address to the multitude in which it finds itself. However, I want to propose that the poet is even more radically incomplete than Virno's individual. Since poetic language never directly intervenes in Virno's other key site for individuation alongside language, the relations of production, poems constantly find themselves only able to offer themselves as a beginning. In Lisa Robertson's words:

> The poem distributes itself according to the necessity of subjects to begin, to begin speaking to anybody, simply because of the perception of continuous co-embodiment as the shared condition of language. This shaped speaking carries . . . an embodied stance, an address, the poem's most important gift to politics.[33]

A beginning, then, might articulate a potentiality, spoken from the multitude but at the same time posing its recreation – even if the poem's will to change can never 'climax'. The poem leaves itself open not by offering readers the chance to 'participate' in constructing its meaning as 'co-producers', as in the recent pseudo-democracy of the word, but in the sense that it articulates a shared lack that may help establish the grounds of a solidarity to overcome it. In what follows I will variously figure this compromised position: Rukeyser's excluded but all the more willing political agency, the projective but never fully extended poems of Olson, Ginsberg's vulnerable community of the lonely, the contingent and instrumental performances of Baraka.

It is from this incompletion that we see American poets seek out a radical contemporaneity. The poet, in the various facets of his or her subjectivity, is the point where the agency of the present mediates between history and the future. With some notable exceptions, the major project of the poetries of crisis presented here is to imagine an open history, to follow Benjamin's directive: 'To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it "the way it really was". It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.'[34] To seize hold of history in poetry is to write what Foucault has called a 'history of the present', conceptualising a past as something retroactively founded on the present by which the imagination might show 'the genesis of differences' and 'how that-which-is has not always been'.[35] The purpose of viewing the past 'not so much from history as from the present' is that this very act, in the explicit presentation of a contemporary point of view, gives us a 'historical awareness of our present circumstance'.[36] The poets here are in the business of myth, tradition, and the historical document to assert the alien facts of the past, and by this to intimate social contingency and the fundamental fact of change. The poet in crisis brings this contingency to his or her own threshold, at the same time projecting the present into a future that can only be figured as something different from what exists now. This is neither a matter of learning the lessons of history (as in Wilfred Owen's crisis poetry: 'All a poet can do today is warn'), or an ungrounded futuristic optimism. American poets open up, in widely varying ways to be sure, imaginative ground for the unknown, the impossible, the unprecedented, whose particular character will depend on our decision as contemporaries.[37] This

process is at the centre of Zukofsky's materialist revision of modernist historical containment, of Rukeyser's similar challenge from a marginalised feminist-activist perspective, of Olson's project for a new 'special view of history', of Ginsberg's visionary invitations, of Baraka's rewritten story of the American relation to political oppression and emancipation. The historiographical thrust of American avant-gardism can only be sketched abstractly here, but its intersections with concrete issues of nation, class, gender, race should become clear in the individual discussions that follow.

3 An outline

Such, then, are the concerns and motivations behind this book. The study is structured around six crises: the Great Depression, the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the Vietnam war, the racial conflicts of the 1970s and the advent of the neoliberal regime of capital in the same decade.

Chapter 1 charts the tensions between modernist literary aesthetics and vanguard politics through the figure of Louis Zukofsky. Observing the shifting emphases in Zukofsky's Objectivist poetics between a materialist art of objectives and a transcendent notion of the poem as object, we witness in poems like "A"-1 and 'Mantis' a pained but productive negotiation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy and a Poundian sense of literary tradition that helps us begin to outline initial fault-lines between modernism, the historical avant-garde and the ambitions of art to agitate and project.

Chapter 2 examines Muriel Rukeyser's changing sense of poetry's political life within the context of the Second World War. This chapter describes Rukeyser's feminist appropriation of modernist myth, charting a move from the revision of individual myths toward a reflexive concern with the mythopoeic itself. From here, we can observe how Rukeyser reconceives myth as the permanence of human restlessness for historical change as, excluded from the war proper, she seeks an imaginative ground to assert the force of human agency and historical progress.

Chapter 3 frames Charles Olson's distinctive archaeological 'postmodern' poetics as a response to the 'Roman' petrification of historical dynamism in the Cold War US. Moving from Olson's early interest in Mao to his attempts to imagine the forces of human history in general, and finally to 'do' another kind of politics at Black Mountain College, this discussion focuses on the dialectic of past and present implicit in Olson's notion of projection, seen as a method to explore

political agency against a background of international and domestic malaise.

In Chapter 4 a range of poets is examined to present the common pre-occupation with conscience in the anti-war work of the 1960s, before a discussion of Denise Levertov and Allen Ginsberg, the decade's two most important poets of crisis. Here the central trope of immanence begins to reveal its importance to avant-garde practice as its insufficiency surfaces. Both Levertov and Ginsberg, that is, reveal a shaken confidence in the ability of poems to carry an inherent political force, as both stage the necessity of incompletion for effective social address.

In Chapter 5 I survey Amiri Baraka's neglected poetry of the 1970s rather than the equally pertinent but already well-discussed earlier black nationalist work. This chapter picks up where Chapter 4 leaves off, with the issue of address, investigating the importance of self-implication in Baraka's 'you'. I return here to the issue of music, and claim that the differences between Baraka's and Zukofsky's use of sound signals a split in conceptions of political aesthetic form. I argue that sound in Baraka is able to effect, through a dynamic conflation of form and content, an *attitude* that speaks to its audience but also agitates the poet himself.

Finally, Chapter 6 explores the crisis of avant-gardism itself in the 1970s, through the retrenchment of its historical methods and motifs in Language writing. My aim here is to show how Language poetry can be construed as an afterlife of avant-gardism, especially by indicating the problems of responding to the burgeoning of neoliberalism with mod-ernist techniques and an avant-garde sense of vocation. The chapter's survey is brief and highly selective, but points to a response very differ-ent from Baraka's to the problems of vanguard politics in the seventies.

The poetries under discussion here are not intended to be exhaus-tive, nor to represent the only relevant forms of poetic utterance – or even political poetic utterance. They show, however, important ways in which twentieth-century poets have occupied their contemporary moments. The poetry of crisis, in its various guises, is a phenomenon we have lost sight of critically just as its practice and urgency form the most vibrant and important aspect of twenty-first century Anglophone writing. This book gives an account of the crisis poem's avant-garde life.

'Longing for perfection': history and utopia in Louis Zukofsky

Critical consensus has long been reached on the trajectory of Louis Zukofsky's literary career. The story of the poet's move from a self-defeating political verse in the 1930s to a liberating poetics of pure form after the war is well rehearsed. As the world continues to face the deleterious effects of the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, it is a good time reconsider the priorities implicit in this narrative, and in doing so the literary history that has been forgotten in its construction. This chapter will chart the development of one of Zukofsky's key preoccupations: the presentation of historical particulars, seen here as a dialectic rooted in tensions between a materialist revolutionary politics on the one hand, and a modernist sense of tradition with Poundian, reactionary aesthetics on the other. In the argument below, Zukofsky's primary value lies in his work's embodiment of conflicts that go to the heart of the relationship between political vanguardism and the particular inheritance of Anglophone modernism. The lessons that Zukofsky offers the contemporary reader are in how his experimental political poetry straddles Anglophone modernism and social realism, whose separate tensions with avant-gardism are brought together to occasion a vanguard poetics in the fullest sense of the word. This chapter suggests that the overcoming of these difficulties in Zukofsky's later career, in large part through the celebrated trope of music, is less a solution to than an elision of the political, a surrender to formalism that we might see as the inevitable outcome of attempts to reconcile modernist ideals of aesthetic order with a radical political impulse to change the world.

1 Historic and contemporary particulars

Since the first essays on the Objectivist poets by Hugh Kenner and Cid Corman there has been an anxiety among commentators to decant the

poets associated with the movement from the revolutionary cultural milieu that gave rise to their unique fusion of modernism and left-wing politics but at the same time made them seem naïve, political and topical. Kenner's contention, for example, that Objectivism was 'separable from the revolutionary high spirits of its launching' because its poets 'simply got on with their work' has long been rendered absurd by our increasing understanding of the writers' involvement in, and conceptual grappling with, the various controversies, organisations and publications emerging from radical, proletarian and leftist literary quarters in the 1930s.[1] The considerable extra-curricular activities of those contributors to the Objectivists number of *Poetry* alone are enough to persuade us that Zukofsky and his peers were doing more than simply getting on with their work.[2] If the link between thirties political vanguardism and modernist avant-gardism cannot simply be separated, however, it has not yet become clear how their relations should be described – a task made especially difficult by the decade's own failure to reconcile its tensions.

It is Zukofsky, the central force in the Objectivist aesthetic, who presents this tension between revolutionary politics and avant-garde aestheticism at the highest pitch, and who, not coincidently, has been the subject of some of the most unhelpful critical revisions regarding his commitment to communism. Biographical facts regarding Zukofsky's deep philosophical allegiance to Marxism and his involvement with the US Communist Party and its organs continue to be ignored by Zukofsky readers at both ends of the political spectrum. Such ideological whitewashing goes back to Eric Mottram's 1973 essay, 'Politics and Form in Zukofsky', which describes a poet 'without ideological dogma' who 'did not plump for Russian leadership in the Thirties' (he did).[3] In such evaluations Zukofsky's radicalism is dismissed as youthful exuberance or a 'stage of development' preceding a proper commitment to poetry, or seen as mere 'content' irrelevant to a free radicalism of poetic form in which even Zukofsky's most political work may 'as well have been written by a Buddhist as a Marxist'.[4] These apologies often sound strained:

> Zukofsky's poetry of the twenties and thirties may be among his most *rhetorically* Marxist . . . But Zukofsky's verbal exchanges are ultimately inspired by a spiritual perception of language and history rather than the implications of one political ideology . . . using an almost mystical projection of broken language.[5]

'Literally,' Barrett Watten tells us, 'Zukofsky is a poet who was influenced by Marxism in his youth, but went beyond it for modernist horizons.'[6] It may be that Zukofsky moved away from Marxism, but

to herald this as a step 'beyond' is to decide key questions of poetry and politics in advance, however much one celebrates the gesture as 'an intervention in Zukofsky studies'.[7] Charles Bernstein, likewise, claims that Zukofsky's 'proletarian mode' only becomes meaningful once its 'insufficiency' as a political form is admitted by the poet.[8] The question of Zukofsky's conscious aims is entirely avoided by such readers, because it would take us back to the awkward facts of the poet's activism within the Communist Party, the Soviet-sponsored League of American Writers, and *New Masses* ('at formidable cost of time and energy'), along with his defence of Stalinism in the decade, before we even come to consider the ubiquitous presence of Marx's and Lenin's writings in the poetry itself.[9] All such facts suggest Zukofsky was, at least at one time, a poet interested in a good deal more than subverting 'New Critical close reading', which is constantly and anachronistically presented as the great aim of his work.[10]

The distance commentators have attempted to place between Zukofsky and the cultural leftism of the 1930s is partly based on misunderstanding. No reader wants to associate a poet they admire with dogmatic anti-intellectualism, personality cults and aesthetic conservatism; that post-war critics have traditionally read the radical literary scene of the 1930s as such has led to the assumption that 1930s politics and modernist poetics are separated by an unbridgeable gulf. Left literary movements of the 1930s, however, were far less unified or consistent than this characterisation suggests, and they remain very difficult to extricate from other, especially experimental, movements of the period. Eric Homberger's suggestion that the 'gap between the verse in *New Masses*, *Anvil*, and *Dynamo* [and] *An "Objectivists" Anthology* was too great to be meaningfully crossed' assumes two constitutionally opposed camps, but the revolutionary literary scene in the 1930s was not a marginal constituency any modernist, much less a Marxist one, could simply pass by.[11] It was ubiquitous, forcing its controversies into mainstream and experimental publications of the time and the minds of their writers, and in many cases setting the very terms under which issues of creative freedom, social function and aesthetic value were being discussed. Al Filreis's book on 'the conservative attack on modern poetry' in the 1950s exhaustively presents us with exactly this phenomenon to show the concerted attempts of Cold War anti-communists to obliterate its history and sanitise modernism; his book on Wallace Stevens, meanwhile, shows the influence of revolutionary aesthetic thought in even the most apparently *dégagé* of poets.[12] *New Masses* and other magazines crossed Homberger's 'gap' into modernism, sometimes with friendly, sometimes with hostile intentions – in ways Zukofsky felt to be eminently mean-

ingful, as we shall see. Zukofsky was not, however, a mere observer of the burgeoning revolutionary aesthetic in the manner of curious or sympathetic poets like Stevens and William Carlos Williams. His early poems, after all, though they did not appear in *Anvil* and *Dynamo*, did appear in similar magazines such as *The Left*, *Contempo*, *Front*, *The Symposium*, *The Windsor Quarterly* and repeatedly in *New Masses* itself, where Zukofsky reached the largest audiences of his career.[13] Mark Scroggins is one of the few critics to take Zukofsky's Marxism seriously, but his habit of treating Mike Gold's hard-line social-realism as representative of the 1930s cultural left obscures the period's plural-ism and spirit of debate, which Zukofsky, far from being the passive victim of editorial policy Scroggins describes, participated in as a writer and editor.[14] Zukofsky had an up-to-date knowledge of these debates, as his letters to both Pound and Williams, who censured Zukofsky for a 'fixation' with *New Masses* in 1936, show. Zukofsky peppers these letters with expressions of frustration and excitement at the operations of various leftist publications, worrying over their future direction, and constantly attempting to intervene in them, often on behalf of Pound or Williams (or, more broadly, on behalf of modernist poetry).[15] Zukofsky knew many of the figures presiding over such controversies personally; that he felt many of them were 'bastards', 'nitwits' and 'shit-heads' does nothing to obscure his commitment to a different order of poetry, responsive to the crisis of capitalism, of which they were offering various versions.[16] In the shape of the early movements of *"A"*, his launch and subsequent defence of the Objectivist aesthetic, his abandoned *Workers Anthology*, and much else besides, Zukofsky was, for a period, seeking to *intervene* in literary innovations whose practices both irritated and inspired him.

Zukofsky initially saw a convergence between the new revolutionary literature and the Poundianism he had invested in from the beginning of his poetic career. In terms of a shared internationalism, a common challenge to bourgeois liberalism, and a broadly economic aesthetic, Zukofsky at first felt Pound could be made congenial to Marx and vice versa. The belief was not far-fetched. Even Gold was friends with Pound, and his apparently anti-intellectual directives for proletarian poetry in 1930, for 'technical precision', 'as few words as possible' and 'clear form, the direct line, cinema in words', have obvious affini-ties with Pound's early, imagistic manifesto statements and Zukofsky's own Objectivists programme.[17] Pound, indeed, appeared in the first ever issue of *New Masses* with a salutary greeting in which he her-alded the magazine for almost making him 'think of a trip to America'; and his striving after a megaphone lyricism in *Eleven New Cantos*

XXXI–XLI (1934) bears striking similarities with the agitational verse of the magazine.[18] Zukofsky's 1929 essay on Pound draws deeper connections, describing a poet allied with Lenin whose words 'are principals of a line of action', whose archaic references project into the 'Soviet Idea' as attacks on private property, and who embodies 'the complete passage through, in and around objects, historical events, the living them at once'.[19] Though Pound's influence on Zukofsky is of a specifically poetic order, Zukofsky sees Pound's medium as the artistic equivalent to the political upheavals in Russia and around the world, and quotes Pound's 1926 enthusiasm for Lenin approvingly: 'Lenin has invented . . . a new medium, something between speech and action which is worth . . . study.'[20]

Clearly, however, as much as he was excited by Pound's political poetics, Zukofsky was far from sharing Pound's actual political viewpoint on such 'historical events'. The friction of the two poets' letters in the mid- to late thirties, in large part prompted by disagreements on the nature of labour, along with other economic issues, strained the personal relationship between the two to breaking point. Pound, indeed, threatened to bar Zukofsky from inclusion in a collection of 'economic' poetry he was editing because of the younger poet's Marxism.[21] Zukofsky's exchanges with Pound in the period show, above all, the younger poet's deep commitment to Marxist theory. Zukofsky was, at this point, an orthodox Marxist-Leninist who believed in the proletarian revolution as the saviour of mankind, and conscientiously defended this belief against the fascist and racist hectoring of Pound. '[T]he communist idea of action is the right one,' Zukofsky assured Pound in 1936, adding: 'It's very simple. Any intelligence worth anything can see that communism is the only way out – whatever he thinks of the present control of the Party.'[22] That this confidence comes from a sure theoretical grounding in Marxist thought is evident in the arguments Zukofsky had with Pound over the finer points of subjects varying from internationalism to the status of the commodity, from Marx's critique of anarchism to the role of the Party.[23] That Zukofsky considered his Marxism to be intimately connected with his writing is demonstrated throughout Zukofsky's theoretical statements of the thirties, as well as intricately Marxist poems like "A"-8 and the first half of "A"-9. Zukofsky thought, like many other writers of the time, that Marxism had as much to give to the writer as the writer Marxism: 'in Marx's economy, of all economies, alone there is substance for doing the new canzone'.[24] The presence of such 'substance' in Zukofsky's writings of the 1930s – in the shape of poetic interrogations of *Das Kapital*, historical vistas of European revolution interpreted through Marxist writings, hymns to and invocations

of Lenin – is clear and vital, and must be analysed as more than so much arbitrary raw material in a carnival of bricolage.

In Zukofsky's work, the conflict between Poundian poetics and Marxist-revolutionary politics is embodied in two specific approaches to history. That Zukofsky is equally committed to both Marxist historical materialism and the early Pound's conservative sense of literary tradition in which 'all ages are contemporaneous' is decisive for his poetry.[25] This tension is expressed early in his career, in the Objectivist essays written for the Zukofsky-edited March 1931 number of Harriet Munroe's *Poetry*, and 1932's *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*. For all their talk of 'contemporary particulars' like 'the Russian Revolution and the rise of metallurgical plants in Siberia', these statements of intent insist on ideals of abstraction like 'a realization of rested totality'.[26] The relation between the two is obscure: how is the poem to be considered an 'act upon particulars', as Zukofsky writes, but at the same time 'the totality of perfect rest'?[27] Poetry should aspire to be 'a context' at one moment, and to a 'pure poetry' in the line of Johnson, Dryden and others the next.[28] How Zukofsky seeks to forge a radical poetry of the present responding to the Depression while remaining tied to nostalgic notions of literary tradition can tell us much about the relations of modernism, vanguardism and avant-gardism in the American 1930s.

One way Zukofsky connected these two impulses was to press literary history itself into the service of socialist revolution. Zukofsky's 1935 *Workers Anthology*, an unpublished compilation of poems from the likes of Ovid, Villon and Robert Herrick for the edification of the working class, intended to establish a tradition of proto-Marxist verse.[29] Showing the manifestation of 'revolutionary struggle and idea [*sic*] in some of the *best* poetry of 2000 years', the anthology's preface, like the earlier 'Program: "Objectivists"', invoked Lenin:

> Lenin has said that art must unite the feelings, thoughts and wills of the masses, and awaken and develop the artist in them. The excellence of these selections should help to develop the artists in the worker, and awaken the class conscious artist to the possibilities for excellence in poetry for the masses.

Pound had claimed that the myths of the classics could be interpreted 'as equivalent of some current struggle which they are unable to treat more directly', but never that Ovid, Dante and his like were *forerunners* of Marxist struggle to the point that they could act as agitators.[30] The past, that is, is appropriated by the future in *A Workers Anthology*. Just as Zukofsky had cast Pound as an agitator for the Soviet Idea and writers as remote as Longinus and Dante as prophetic practitioners of

dialectical materialism elsewhere, the book assimilates poetry apparently distant from Marxist theory into its tradition.[31] The fourteenth-century Kildare poem, 'Lollai, lollai, litil child', is annotated by Zukofsky as 'the cry of the enslaved folk', which is 'hardly a coincidence' considering its 'basis in fact'. The note to Shakespeare's 'The Phoenix and the Turtle' reads: 'cf. Marx's emotional attack on the nationals of property . . . Shakespeare, in these verses, seems to have anticipated Marx's irony with greater accuracy than just poetic instinct'. The historical 'fact' of each poem is described (slavery in the context of fourteenth-century feudalism, the nascent capitalistic property relations of Shakespeare's time), and then inscribed within a larger logic of 'struggle'.

This manoeuvre stands at a slant angle to both the early Pound's ahistorical conception of tradition and the deterministic readings of Marxian historical materialism prevalent in the 1930s. By it, Zukofsky wants to outline a tradition that is neither a timeless standard detached from social conditions nor a materialism confining aesthetic value to a certain context. Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Peter Quartermain see the dynamic between the two as Zukofsky's attempt to bring a 'dialectical, materialist, and situational accountability to [Pound's] notion of "order"'.[32] Specifically, Zukofsky describes a 'tradition' in which a poem's durability is paradoxically dependent on a commitment to its present. Zukofsky praises his own contemporary William Carlos Williams for writing such poetry:

> History is in these pages and in the poems – history defined as the facts about us, their chronological enlivening for the present set down as art, and so good for the next age and the next . . . realized by one vitally of his time . . . unsatisfied by the routine repetition of events.[33]

Permanent value and contemporary vitality exist side by side here: as in *A Workers Anthology*, timelessness is a function of topicality. In the terms of Zukofsky's introduction to *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, 'pure poetry' is a type of verse 'bound up with events and contingencies'.[34]

Before analysing these claims in the context of the Objectivist episode itself, it is illuminating to look at "A"-1, the forerunner to most of Zukofsky's poetry of the Depression era. "A"-1 can be considered the original experiment in what would become the contextualising materialism of the Objectivist essays, since its story is essentially the unfolding of disembodied aesthetic value into the situation of the real world. Most readers of the poem have noticed the conflicts it rehearses between the aesthetic and the material, but have tended to assume Bach's music represents a desirable standard of transcendent art. Tim Woods, for example, argues that Zukofsky reads Bach's art as autonomous in

Theodor Adorno's sense: that is, cut off from the world to the point where, by virtue of its very autonomy, art begins to show just how hostile and anti-social the (capitalist) world is. Bach here is at once the counterpoint to early twentieth-century class struggle and the symbol of its solution. This, however, reduces the 'outside' world (what Woods calls the poem's 'trivialities') to an entirely negative status very different from the importance Zukofsky would attach to 'particulars' in his Objectivist aesthetic.[35] In "A"-1 itself, any question of Bach's autonomy is dismissed: Zukofsky is acutely conscious of the sleight-of-hand that has made Bach *seem* above the concerns of the real world. As the poem's first thirty lines show, Bach's opera is not intrinsically transcendent but actively *severed* from any grounding in a context by the performance Zukofsky witnesses. Here silence and black dress are insisted upon by the producers, abstracting the artwork from both its original eighteenth-century context ('where are your motley / Country people in Leipzig . . .?') and its current twentieth-century setting, revealed only after the show. It is the context-negating nature of the 1928 performance, rather than Bach's work itself, that creates the dialectic between the 'feet off ground' aesthetic transcendence on the one hand, and 'the reverses' of production relations on the other. Indeed, the poem critiques transcendent abstraction for facilitating the concealment of the material world:

> A round of fiddles playing
> Without effort –
> As into the fields and forgetting to die.
> The streets smoothed over as fields,
> Not even the friction of wheels . . .[36]

Zukofsky knows much better than to think the Carnegie Hall production of the *Matthäuspassion* is 'without effort' or 'friction', however much it excites a 'longing for perfection'. He knows the opera's possibility is dependent on the class exploitation that forms its backdrop, and tells us so:

> About me, the voices of those who had been at the concert,
> Feet stopping everywhere in the streets,
> High necks turned for chatter:
> 'Poor Thomas Hardy he had to go so soon,
> He admired so our recessional architecture –
> What do you think of our new Sherry-Netherland!'
> 'Lovely soprano,
> Is that her mother? lovely lines,
> I admire her very much!'
> And those who perused the score at the concert,
> Patrons of poetry, business devotees of arts and letters . . .[37]

Zukofsky admires Bach's opera, but not as these chatterers do. With high necks like ivory towers, this bourgeoisie conceals from itself 'the tramp's face', just as it has stripped the contexts of Bach's art down to a 'lovely soprano'. Bach is patronised in both senses of the word by this class, who transplant his work from a context to a site of ahistorical consumption. Such 'smooth[ing] out' is soon linked to the specifically poetic escapism of 'flaunters / of the Classics and of / Tradition / . . . Who sang of women raped by horses': a critique of Eliotic modernism's penchant for reducing the past to a reified mythological network whose incidents have nothing to do with them having happened in history.

"A"-1 has another 'longing for perfection' in its utopian yearning for proletarian victory in the class struggle. If Bach is expressly not the representative of aesthetic purity, however, his positive relation to the world of capitalist exploitation is less simple. Zukofsky's quotation from the opera can help us here. The libretto is presented in contrast to the situations it punctuates – not in the way Carnegie Hall evades all situations per se, but as a counterpoint to the actual social relations of the United States in 1928. We see such a contrast at the poem's conclusion:

And the great Magnus, before his confrères in industry,
Swallow tail, eating a sandwich,
'Road map to the stomach,' grinning,
Pointing to a chart, between bites.

'We ran 'em in chain gangs, down in the Argentine,
Executive's not the word, use *engineer*,
Single handed, ran 'em like soldiers,
Seventy-four yesterday, and could run 'em today,
Been fishin' all Easter
Nothin' like nature for hell-fire!'

Dogs cuddling to lampposts,
Maybe broken forged iron,
        '*Ye lightnings, ye thunders*
        In clouds are ye vanished?

        Open, O fierce flaming pit!'[38]

The plights of the chain gang and Christ are, of course, deliberately conflated here. We are not, though, supposed to read Christ's Passion as a serious equivalent to working-class life under Fordism. Bach's Christ is less a concomitant of the proletariat than of the suffering Zukofsky struggling to reconcile the two. What is emphasised, via this ironic similarity, is the essential difference of Bach's time and our own 'Dead century'.

This is not to say Bach is irrelevant to the present of Zukofsky's

poem, but that his relevance is more than a matter of expressing identical themes. We might read the poem's contrapuntal rhythm of past and present in relation to the historiography of Quentin Skinner in which 'classic texts are concerned with their own quite alien problems, and not . . . somehow concerned with our own'.[39] By this we can escape the timeless 'themes' alleged to be essentially 'relevant' to the present, and allow history to instead provide its lesson that things change. In Skinner's terms Bach does not 'anticipate' Zukofsky's dilemmas: his work is a 'context' of it. Bach heightens Zukofsky's self-awareness by representing something quite different to the New York of 1928. In this sense, the Christianity of Bach's opera, though it has been ignored in critical discussions of "A"-1, is crucial to its status as an ethereal counterpoint to class struggle. As such, the *Matthäuspassion* is already concerned with an unworldly perfection, whatever the ontological status of music generally. Christ's status in the opera as a passive receptacle of our suffering at once gives weight and dignity to the suffering observed outside the opera and, given the quite obvious culprits of it, shows the insufficiency of passivity and trust in a higher power. Bach's art has a limit in a foreign context it had no intention of addressing, and the opera is partly, therefore, a prompt for the poet to look for something *new*. "A"-2 will, indeed, make this lesson explicit, rejecting the 'clear music' promoted by the hypocritical character of Kay as an abandonment of contemporary particulars like 'imperialism, wave games, nations'.[40] That Zukofsky called his first collection of short poems '18 Poems to the Future' is no accident: the future is the context that makes experimentation worthwhile and prevents the present from becoming the mere repetition of the past. Zukofsky's Objectivist essays will go on to theorise such projection further, thinking through how poetry should not simply record the world as it is, but in some way 'aim at' something better.

2 Objects and objectives

"A"-1 brings us to a question raised by Zukofsky's Objectivist proposals for a poetry 'in the direction of historic and contemporary particulars': how should the poem be 'in' history?[41] Direction presupposes an 'objective', a sense in which poetry acts in the world rather than simply observing its particulars as a bystander. But does Objectivist verse seek to *direct* or does it merely look in a certain *direction*? Fundamentally, how do we read the word 'Objectivist'? The term splits into a number of distinct meanings. Zukofsky tries to have it three ways: the Objectivist poet is to be at once a standard of objectivity, the champion of

objectives, and the producer of poetic objects. Leaving the last of these aspects aside for the moment, we are immediately faced with a dialectic of truth and action. In Zukofsky's terms, the 'revolutionary word' of the Objectivist should be at once a poetics of precision or 'historical and contemporary particulars' in which 'shapes appear concomitants of word combinations', *and* a poetics of 'direction' where such precision should have a partisan perspective, something 'aimed at'.[42] Objectivity, as it were, both *is* and *is a means to* an objective. There is something in the relationship of these terms, approximating the 'great writer' alluded to in Zukofsky's issue of *Poetry*, Lenin, whose practice 'between speech and action' had so impressed Pound and Zukofsky.

Marxism itself has an ambivalent attitude towards objectivity as a perspective that is at once a myth of neutrality and detachment and a necessary universalist concept to fight liberal subjectivism. Objective as a term meaning the sober and true version of historical events remains a cliché in communist terminology, and yet it carries no 'bourgeois' connotation of disinterested observation. The American Trotskyist Max Eastman, the most influential writer to think such dilemmas through in the 1920s and 30s, typifies the attempt to reconcile objective fact with utopian perspective: objectivity, he says, means being

> ruthless in confronting the facts, whether they be tough or tender, and clear in conceiving the ideal . . . employing thoughts in order to better the real world, the world of all men, not in order to attain a comfortable equilibrium in your own mind.[43]

Objectivity should not be solipsistic, but neither should it be classless, non-partisan or without direction. Lenin himself refers to the 'partiality of objectivity', making the splitting of objectivity central to orthodox Marxist epistemology. The French philosopher Alain Badiou, meanwhile, has aptly summarised the radical logic of Marxism:

> Every Marxist statement is – in a single, dividing movement – observation and directive. As a concentrate of real practice, it equals its movement in order to return to it. Since all that is draws its being only from its becoming, equally, theory as knowledge of what is has being only by moving toward that of which it is the theory. Every knowledge is orientation, every description is prescription.[44]

In the mini-controversy surrounding his '*Objectivists*' *Anthology* (1932), Zukofsky was accused of flouting precisely this dialectic of objectivity. In the months following the volume's publication, despite its theoretical emphasis on something 'that is aimed at', Zukofsky's poetics were attacked from a number of left-wing quarters, always on the premise

of Gold's famous claim that revolutionary literature 'is never point-less'.[45] The March 1933 issue of *Poetry*, for example, carried a review by Morris Schappes, a left intellectual (but not, at the time, a member of the Communist Party). Entitled 'Historic and Contemporary Particulars', the review attacked the anthology, and particularly Zukofsky's *"A"*, movements 1 to 7 of which were included in the book, for a descriptiveness that was 'without direction, but *mere*' and discouraged 'conscious action'. The Objectivists, according to Schappes, are defeatist nihilists: 'In protesting, [the Objectivist poet] nevertheless accepts [capitalism's] premises; instead of questioning its economics, its politics, its morals, its values, he denies that there are values.'[46] Having no perspective but a vague objectivity, Zukofsky 'withdraws into rootless esotericism'. The editors of *Dynamo*, an independent quarterly of proletarian literature, would make much the same charge a year later. Sol Funaroff claimed that 'the Objectivist has no objective', is 'pre-occupied with the external' and 'remains the dispassionate one, the non-partisan, without direction', when in fact the role of the revolutionary artist was to 'transform himself from the detached recorder of isolated events into the man who participates in the creation of new values and of a new world, into the poet who is proud to give voice to this new experience'.[47] Herman Spector, a poet Zukofsky had helped to get published in Pound's *Exile* five years earlier, asserted in the same issue of *Dynamo* that the 'fatal defect of the Objectivist theory is that it identifies life with capitalism, and so assumes that the world is merely a wasteland'.[48] All these readings claim that Zukofsky's focus on the objects of contemporary capitalism leaves the reader feeling that nothing else, no objective beyond capitalism, is possible. The consensus was that Objectivism the self-proclaimed 'revolutionary' poetic movement was indistinguishable from objectivism the bourgeois myth of detachment.

Zukofsky did not agree. In a reply to Schappes in *Poetry*, he invoked Lenin, whose 'relation . . . to the subject of poetry', even the mediating editors of the magazine admitted, may be 'a trifle overstressed':

> As for the failure 'to ally oneself with the revolutionary proletariat': 'This party rejected Marxism, stubbornly refused to understand (it would be more correct to say that it could not understand) the necessity of a strictly objective estimate of all the class forces and their inter-relation in every political action.' (Lenin–*Left: Communism, An Infantile Disorder* [*sic*]). In a word, this statement is the concern of the editorial presentation and the poetry of *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, whether the presentation be statement, image, contrast (satire), or assertion.[49]

Zukofsky had himself criticised poetry in which 'Nothing [is] "aimed at"' in his issue of *Poetry*, and he continues to fight on the same ground

as his detractors here. His notion of aiming is markedly different to Schappes, Funaroff and Spector, however. Despite the desire to ally himself with the revolutionary proletariat, Zukofsky had said that, for all its being 'bound up with events and contingencies', Objectivist verse should be 'free of predatory intent'.[50] The revolutionary emphasis in Zukofsky's case is on the importance of seeing the truth of things as they are, rather than in promoting aims for the future with the supposedly non-poetic designs on the reader this requires. That is, Zukofsky feels his notion of objectivity as perception is in itself a political objective. Objectivist description is action, unlike passive realism, because of its function to construct relations. To this extent, Zukofsky's means for overcoming a bourgeois objectivity that 'carries the mind to a diffuse everywhere and leaves it nowhere' is contextualisation, the 'interrelation of every political action'.[51] 'The context' of thought is what, in the essays, turns a naïve conception of discrete particulars into a properly Marxist account of the world as a series of relations. It is only with 'everything aptly, perfectly, belonging within, one with, a context' that 'writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking *with* the things as they exist'.[52] In 1936 Zukofsky speaks similarly of Charlie Chaplin's films possessing a 'material thoughtfulness and . . . historical meaning' that give more than 'merely a notion, a general sense of today, or an understanding of politics, art, life or whatever, but inventive existence interacting with other existence in all its ramifications'.[53] For Zukofsky, art can be an *act* of context, an 'interacting', thereby requiring no further justification or instrumentalist abstraction. Poetry is a matter 'of thinking with the things as they exist', not simply thinking of them as they apparently 'are'. Objectivist poems are therefore political, simultaneously descriptions of and 'acts upon' particulars.[54]

We see this dialectic in action in 'Mantis' (1935), which with its sister-poem written a week later, 'Mantis: An Interpretation', is perhaps Zukofsky's most significant investigation into the possibilities of the Objectivist aesthetic.[55] Together the poems are Zukofsky's definitive engagement with the issue of propaganda in art. The crucial threshold the poem occupies is between a propagandistic poetics that wilfully overcomes existing material relations and a realist aesthetic focusing on objects as they are. 'Mantis', as its 'Interpretation' explains, seeks to transform the demoralising 'growing oppression of the poor' into a call to arms for its overthrow. In this sense, the status of the mantis as a political idea (an objective) is just as important as its significance as a living thing in need of representation (an object). The mantis strives to confirm revolutionary theory (the historical destiny of the working class) through sensory values (the mantis and other phenomena of the

subway), to 'fly . . . on the poor' and 'build the new world in your eyes'. This is the structure of the poem Zukofsky summarises in the interpretation: 'the mantis / the poor's strength / the new world'. The poem's utopia remains rooted in the real, however: 'The facts are not a symbol.' Utopia and description are never mutually exclusive in the work, which describes its projections as the natural outgrowth of what it observes: 'No one would be struck merely / By its ungainliness, / Having seen the thing happen'. Zukofsky seeks to 'think with the thing as it exists', and in doing so witnesses its potential to unfold into historic originality.

This thinking returns Zukofsky to the urgent question of form. It has been claimed that Zukofsky rejected Gold's aesthetic of 'proletarian realism' out of hand because of its assumptions of the natural emergence of form from content, and of words as a transparent medium to communicate reality. Tim Woods, for example, pits Gold's 'naïve proletarian fundamentalism' and 'doctrinal representation' of proletarian realism against the early movements of *"A"*, written years before Gold ever formulated proletarian realism.[56] Charles Bernstein makes a similar gesture in an analysis of the poem.[57] Both 'Mantis' and its interpretation are in agreement with Gold in many important respects, however. Zukofsky is explicit that the use of the sestina should be seen as organic:

> That this thoughts' torsion
> Is really a sestina
> Carrying subconsciously
> Many intellectual and sensual properties of the
>   forgetting and remembering Head
> One human's intuitive Head

Though the sestina may appear constraining, Zukofsky claims that, for the scene he observes, 'one would lie to one's feelings not to use it'. The epigraph to the 'Interpretation' from Dante's Latin, 'names are sequent to the things named', makes the notion of organic form central to the poem's argument. The work makes the case for the ability of poetic form to mould itself around thought: the unlikely idea that an strict form like the sestina is what naturally grows out of the mantis encounter is explained by the 'ungainliness' of the poor and Zukofsky's relation to them.

Counter to this organicism, however, is the interpretation's radical historicisation of the sestina, making the form seem contingent and compromised. Here, content becomes far less important to 'Mantis': 'the mantis itself [is] only an incident', and not '*all* that was happening'. This 'all', the context, is what separates the poet from the poor, who fail to grasp their destiny in the meaning of the mantis scene. 'The poor's

separateness' is a result of their failure to empathise with the poet's 'fright' in the face of the mantis, which they simply 'laugh at', failing to perceive the utopian potential of the immediate scene. Just as 'Mantis' is more about Zukofsky's surroundings than the mantis itself, so its 'Interpretation' is less about the poem than the context of its form. In this, the 'Interpretation' does not so much repudiate the propagandising of 'Mantis' as contextualise it. In the light of its interpretation, 'Mantis' inhabits the history of its production, from an account of the original experience and first drafts to the wider historical determination of the poem. The work, then, enacts a similar dialectic to "A"-1, contrasting archaic art (in this case the Dantean sestina) with contemporary poverty.

Again, the past model is not just 'relevant' to the 'growing oppression of the [twentieth century] poor', however much it spontaneously suggests itself to Zukofsky's 'many and diverse thoughts'. Zukofsky does not want to return to the 'original' as Pound did in his imitations of Provençal achievements in the form. Zukofsky indeed said that the 'general insight' of the sestina was based on Pound's *Sestina: Altaforte*, suggesting that the contextualising interpretation itself was an attempt to correct an ahistorical tendency in Pound's use of the form.[58] Zukofsky's concern is as much with what the proletariat of 'our time' does to the sestina as it is with how the sestina determines the portrayal of the poor. '[T]he mantis *can start* / History', we are told.

> Whatever seeming modelling after the event,
> 649 years, say, after Dante's first canzone,
> If it came back immediately as the only
> Form that will include the pertinent subject of our day—
> The poor—
> Cannot mean merely implied comparison, unreality
> Usually interpreted as falsity.

The fact that the 'world will not stand . . . a too regular form', is not an indictment of sestinas per se, but of unchanging form generally. The use of an old form should not simply imply comparison with the present: rather, the introduction of the proletariat to the sestina *changes* the form. At one point, it is not even clear whether 'Mantis' itself is 'a sestina / Or not a sestina'. Zukofsky's strange justification of the original sestina, therefore, rests on the way it 'jumbles' its strict poetic form through the force of its necessary subject matter of poverty and revolution:

> the
> only thing that can sum up the
> jumble of order in the lines weaving

'thoughts,' pulsations, running commentary, one upon the other,
itself a jumble of order
as far poetic sequence is concerned:

> the mantis
> the poor's strength
> the new world.

The combined sense of the sestina as an organic standard and historicised form expresses a dialectic between creative agency and historical determination. On the one hand, that is, the sestina is a natural form for an imagination that, like Adam, awoke and found it true; on the other it is a radically contextualised, contingent and self-conscious device defined by the 'particulars' of its history. Taken together, these two conceptions of poetry create a sense of 'Form that will include the pertinent subject of our day', that will be determined by historical forces, but also able to intervene in them.

Marx said 'social revolution . . . cannot draw its poetry from the past, but only from the future'.[59] The brilliance of the 'Mantis' poems lies in how they accommodate a future or 'new world' into their contexts. That the mantis can 'start' history as well as being *of* it gives the poem its objective. 'Mantis: An Interpretation' overhauls Eliotic collage techniques that seek a 'return to the source' by throwing items together to 'exhort' the future into existence.[60] Stephen's Fredman's ideas on assemblage in post-war American poetry, laid out in his *Contextual Practice*, are invaluable here: 'Contextual practice works by uncovering new energies and images through juxtaposing found materials' and 'deliberately seek[s] to create a new context by selecting materials from the most disparate sources, leaving in plain view the fact of their having been "torn" from elsewhere'.[61] American poetry's jarring elements are not used, as in Eliotic modernism, to show up the degradation of modern society by comparing it unfavourably with the achievements of the past, but to open up new contexts. The transparency of Zukofsky's labour in writing the poem is key to this. Radical context, Fredman argues, has a 'transformative' quality because it places process at the centre of its operations, something 'Mantis' makes its theme. In not simply *going back* to past sources, but rather in going back to them *from* the present context of thirties poverty, Zukofsky is able to present the mantis, like its sestina form, as itself in a process of becoming. Crucially within this, however, the sestina itself carries an ability to *speak* revolution: the interpretation refers to propaganda as 'real' and 'necessary' because the original poem shares its desire to expressly speak a particular future, to explicitly propose the direction of its 'new world' as proletarian revolution. It is by

both process and proposition, becoming and statement, that Zukofsky is able to open up a context of change.

3 What is objectively perfect

The notion of the poem as a perfect object has been put to one side in my argument so far, but cannot be permanently dismissed from Zukofsky's thinking. Though the usual task of the scholar is to resolve a writer's contradictions into something comprehensible, Zukofsky is one of many artistic figures whose lessons to us are found in the wider cultural dialectic he represents. To fail to unveil the supposed underlying consistency of Zukofsky's thinking is, therefore, less a critical shortcoming than an accurate representation of the complex and paradoxical figure Zukofsky was. We can see this inconsistency everywhere, though it has so far been elided. While "A"-1 has been presented as a discussion of the impossibility of pure art, for example, such perfection echoes into the Objectivist essays as a legitimate aspiration for poetry; at the same time as Zukofsky appropriates swathes of literary history for the cause of proletarian revolution he can be seen rejecting a propagandistic aesthetic; though Zukofsky wants to historicise his historical moment and literary materials, he is drawn towards a Poundian, ahistorical sense of aesthetic order. More importantly, while I have suggested that change is central to Zukofsky's Objectivism, this commitment coexists uneasily with an ideal of the poem as 'rested totality'.

These tensions represent conflicting political and poetical modes and objectives. Considered in its broadest terms, Zukofsky's positing of a political objective *within* rather than in addition to perceptual objectivity is as much a rejection of the supplementary per se in poetry, as of the bad politics of generalisation. With a concern arguably more aesthetic than political, Zukofsky repudiates not only the 'predatory', but more broadly the desire for 'a something else from poetry–not poetry' in the 1930s.[62] As I have outlined in my introduction, this fortified sense of poetry and its sanctified interiority is a withdrawal twentieth-century political verse often effects. When such an order of poetry informs Zukofsky's Objectivism, attention to present particulars is impeded by a desire to order beauty into a universal aesthetic standard without the interference of the non-poetic. In his enthusiasm to show that 'the good poems of today are not far from the good poems of yesterday', Zukofsky wants to show how their 'rested totality' is equally present and applicable to contemporary problems.[63] Despite not dealing with metallurgical plants in Siberia, therefore, Dante and Shakespeare are deemed

'more modern' than anybody. In this sense, the term 'Objectivist' is synonymous with the term 'poetry' – all great writers are essentially Objectivists, and the term does not announce a new kind of poem so much as it acts as a standard for all poetry. Zukofsky, that is, wants the term 'Objectivist' to simultaneously describe an 'eternal' standard of the 'classic', as outlined in Pound's *ABC of Reading* (1934), and a poetry 'bound up with events' and 'thinking with the things as they exist'.[64] The latter is essentially projective ('in the direction of . . .'), the former conservative ('[n]o more modern than a Shakespearean conceit').[65] The conflict stems from an attempt to take Pound's early aesthetics in combination with a quite different historiography. This leads to considerable confusion, as in Zukofsky's tortuous definition of the word 'context' in his preface to *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, where the 'revolutionary word' could easily be read as a matter of recycling the old masters.

The strains begin to get resolved in Zukofsky's 1946 annotated anthology, *A Test of Poetry*. *Test* builds upon the aborted *Workers Anthology* mentioned above, retaining most of its poems, and adding 150 extra works. The difference in purpose of the two projects, however, could not be greater. The original *Anthology* was to be an agitational collection of revolutionary verse: 'the purpose' of *Test* is to provide a standard of taste'.[66] Rachel Blau DuPlessis's suggestion that Zukofsky is interested in 'normalising' the verse of the poor in *Test* is suggestive, but if one accepts this, it is hard to escape the conclusion that such normalising effectively co-opts class struggle into a bourgeois standard of aesthetic pleasure, or at least neutralises it under a generalised rubric of 'objectified emotion'. The first thing one notices about *Test* is that Zukofsky's relationship with Poundian aesthetics has become markedly less complicated. Pound noted in 1950 that it 'looks like [Zukofsky] is following ABC' in the book, and the affinities of *Test* with Pound's educational tracts are obvious.[67] Where Pound's *ABC of Reading* defined the effects of poetry as a question of 'phanopoeia, melopoeia, logopoeia', Zukofsky's book announces that 'The test of poetry is the range of pleasure it affords as sight, sound and intellection'.[68] Where Pound grandly announced that 'ONLY EMOTION ENDURES', Zukofsky asserts: 'As poetry, only objectified emotion endures'.[69] Almost all of the poets in *Test* appear in Pound's *ABC*, and Zukofsky's tradition is indistinguishable from Pound's: its heroes are Chaucer, Elizabethan verse (especially Golding) and Browning, and its enemies the Romantics and Victorians. Zukofsky even chooses the same candidate for the best English-language sonnet ever written, Mark Alexander Boyd's 'Sonet'. The book is also more committed to Zukofsky's universalising

tendency, which was heavily qualified by the dialectical materialism in his earlier work in the 1930s. The claim that 'certain lasting emotions find an equivalent or paraphrase in all times' is a direct repudiation of the historicism at the centre of the Objectivist experiment.[70] Rather than particulars, *Test* is exclusively concerned with what 'endures'. Shortly after the book's publication, in a 1948 piece on Williams, Zukofsky consolidates this idea: 'Art means standards, recurrences. True enough with a difference in each instance – of medium, person, place, material, time, whatever the residues that wear: but leaving the recurrence, "made by man."'[71]

Williams's greatness in 1930 stemmed from his dissatisfaction with a 'routine repetition of events'; here, eighteen years later, history is reduced to a series of recurrences. Such a changed conception of 'historical particulars' would force Zukofsky to literally revise his earlier aesthetic: his early essays, because of a desire to create what Mark Scroggins calls 'timeless and contextless critical dicta', find most of their particular detail removed when collected in *Prepositions* (1967).[72] In 'An Objective', for example, the three essays, 'Sincerity and Objectification', 'Program: "Objectivists," 1931' and '"Recencies" in Poetry', are combined, leading to the removal of references to Mussolini, Ernest Hemingway, Charles Reznikoff, the Russian Revolution and other 'historical particulars'.

Sound dominates this decontextualised aesthetic standard in *Test*. The book's contention is that, though 'mere fashions of poetic style' force us to admit superficial differences in poems over different historical epochs, the fundamental musicality of poetry reassures us that 'certain lasting emotions find an equivalent or paraphrase in all times'.[73] Music is the 'universal language'. The 'whole art of poetry' can therefore be boiled down to music, 'music being the one art that more than others aims in its reach to speak to all men. Beside this definition of poetry, all other definitions of poetry would appear niggardly'.[74] In his rejection of Marxism just after the Second World War, Zukofsky uses music to make the point: 'Materialist philosophers of history may do well to think about Bach's remark: 'The order which rules music is the same order that controls the placing of the stars and the feathers in a bird's wing.'[75] From here music is well placed to transcend history. In the late 1940s, 'music' or 'sound' are part of Zukofsky's attempts to name something essentially *poetic*, unsullied by the particularity of historical circumstance.

What has changed for Zukofsky, then? After all, the early parts of *"A"* and Zukofsky's 1930s essays were equally attracted to a musical vocabulary in order to describe Objectivist aims. The fundamental

difference between early and late Zukofskian sound is how, in a movement that mirrors the universalising liberalism of former radicals in the post-war years, music goes from being a metaphor that can help describe some of poetry's workings to become a literal model. In the Objectivist essays, for example, music is a figure for what is tangible in a poem. In the mantis poems musical shape is a symbol of how the instrument of poetic form can animate readers. Slightly differently, music is important thematically in the early movements of *"A"*, where Bach comes to symbolise the relationship between aesthetic beauty, historical context and political crisis. Even formally, Zukofsky conceived the well-known 'fugal principal' of *"A"* as an *analogy* for literary technique as a 'matter of musical approximation', stressing in the letter to Pound discussing this his ignorance of actual musical principles.[76] After the war the role of music becomes much more literal and exaggerated in importance. In this period Zukofsky insists not on music as a general analogy for poetry, but on poetry's structural embodiment of specific musical forms, as words are increasingly made to imitate music phonetically. In this sense "A"-24 is a logical extension of the other verbal music in the post-war movements of *"A"*: the mime of a Bach partita in "A"-13, the musical suites of a number of movements, the ubiquitous homophonic translations, the dodecaphonic 'tone row' in "A"-20, and so on. The 'fitting of words to musical composition' becomes the great preoccupation of Zukofsky's later years, with his famous 'upper limit music' standing as a practical specification for the 'desire for perfection' expressed earlier in the Objectivist experiment.[77] The historical reasons for this change are open to debate: his marriage to a musician and composer in 1939, and the gradual disappearance of cultural communism in the US, no doubt helps to explain the move from 'the revolutionary word' to 'speech tapped off music'.[78] My aim, though, is to draw attention to this movement as implicit in the contradictions the 1930s had already given rise to in Zukofsky's work. Zukofsky does not so much reject a straightforwardly political poetry in favour of an essentially hermetic, musical aesthetic, as he is forced into resolving the tensions between what the Objectivist essays juxtaposed as 'what is objectively perfect' and 'historical and contemporary particulars'.[79] Music, that is, represents a return to a certain version of modernism insofar as it functions as a de-historicising gesture. As the so-called music of poetry is taken literally by Zukofsky after the war, it takes on a universal and transcendent status as a model. The 'strictly objective estimate of all the class forces' that the early Zukofsky claimed for his Objectivists issue of *Poetry* is substituted for the abstract perfection of music:

Music does not always
Call on the human voice
Only free (often wordless)
Men are grateful to one another

Voice without scurf or gray matter
For the eyes of the mind are proofs.[80]

The withering away of the State has been achieved through the withering away of words in the face of music. In one simple gesture, political discord is neutralised by sonic perfection. Richard Parker's term for this changed utopianism, the 'paradisal', is apt to express the 'more transcendent utopianism' Parker rightly sees in Zukofsky's musical turn, aimed at 'an ideal audience in which the boundaries and temporalities of normal understanding are removed'.[81]

In an essay written while translating Latin, Zukofsky makes a bold claim regarding the transhistorical nature of poetry based on an argument about its musicality. The 'musical horizon of poetry', Zukofsky writes,

permits anybody who does not know Greek to listen and get something out of the poetry of Homer: to 'tune in' to the human tradition, to its voice which has developed among the sounds of natural things, and thus escape the confines of time and place, as one hardly every escapes them in studying Homer's grammar.[82]

Catullus (1969), Zukofskian music *in extremis*, shows us just what such an 'escape' to the 'human tradition' looks like in practice. Worked on by Louis and his wife Celia over two decades, these translations embody much of what Zukofsky's post-war criticism had recommended. Zukofsky's preface to *Catullus* reads: 'This translation of Catullus follows the sound, rhythm, and syntax of his Latin – tries, as is said, to breathe the "literal" meaning with him.'[83] We can see what such literalism means in practice in number 70 (the Catullus original is followed by the literal Loeb translation, then the Zukofsky version):

Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle
quam mihi, non si se Iuppiter ipse petat.
dicit: sed mulier cupido quod dicit amanti,
in vento et rapida scribere oportet aqua.

*

None, says my woman, would she want to marry more
than me, not if Jupiter himself insisted.
says: but what a woman says to a smitten lover,
on wind, should be written, on running water.

*

> Newly say dickered my love air my own would marry me all
>   whom but me, none see say Jupiter if she petted.
> Dickered: said my love air could be o could dickered a man too
>   in wind o wet rapid a scribble reported in water.[84]

Ron Silliman says that *Catullus* 'gives primacy to the signifier' in a process he calls 'composition as action'.[85] Zukofsky's translation obviously resists transparency and emphasises materiality through tangible sound, but it does not simply abandon Catullus's meaning to the contingencies of sound correspondence. The odd words that permeate his poem, such as 'dickered' (to haggle), show that Zukofsky is attempting to combine sound with sense. Indeed, the homophonic method is abandoned to ensure the words 'love' and 'water' appear. The centrality of syntax and pauses to Zukofsky's method should also be borne in mind: Zukofsky is dedicated to keeping the sound of the poem as a whole intact, rather than just mirroring the individual sounds of its words. Beyond a mere primacy of signifier, Zukofsky's poems enact a complex relationship with their originals in which historicity, the distance between the two, inevitably comes to the fore.

One reading of the work that does address the question of history claims that *Catullus* makes the Latin poet *strange*, which is to say it emphasises the Latin's foreignness and historicity.[86] This has partly been my contention about Zukofsky's earlier engagements with Bach and the sestina. There are a number of problems with this reading in the context of *Catullus*, however. Firstly, it runs counter to Zukofsky's announced aim in the preface and his other statements about foreign literature, as on Homer above. Secondly, it makes an uncritical assumption that translations that *sound* strange necessarily portray an original *as* strange. Thirdly, it begs the question as to why Catullus needs to be made strange in this manner at all, since he is already so before translation (Zukofsky's versions were first published alongside their Latin originals). Since *Catullus* ambitiously attempts to 'breathe' Catullus into the present in his entirety – sound, rhythm, syntax, 'literal' meaning and all – there is something to be said for the idea that Zukofsky's aim is to make Catullus *less* strange. Paul Mann, analysing the work in the context of translation studies, says *Catullus*

> reaches back to very old poetic modes, shamanic or even talmudic attitudes toward language . . . Zukofsky's translation is therefore not just new and experimental but anachronistic, even a bit superstitious: it comes from a poetic perspective where one cannot tamper with a thing's name without affecting the thing itself; or where reappearing the syllables of that name

– 'breathe the "literal" with him' – brings the spirit back from the dead. The spirit is literally *in* the letter. This is translation-by-séance and, as in a séance, the form that reappears is frightening, mangled, ghostly, no longer quite alive.[87]

By 'breathe the "literal" with him', therefore, Zukofsky essentially means *at the same time as him* – homophonic translation in this sense can bridge gaps in history by virtue of the transcendental musical quality that all poetry shares. 'Music being the one art that more than others aims in its reach to speak to all men', in Zukofsky's 1946 definition of poetry, homophonic translation speaks to all epochs: it can update Catullus by simply echoing his noises through a contemporary language serving as a form of musical notation.[88] Catullus, that is, is made to sound like us, removed from history into the present; he is ultimately made *more* familiar to us than is the case in conventional translations. Zukofsky's use of the word 'literal' to mean sound is revealing in this sense, since it signifies the priority of poetry's music as the primary site of its meaning.

One question here is to what extent Zukofsky continues earlier modernist strategies, and to what extent he predicts postmodern or poststructuralist ones. As Mark Scroggins has shown, the roots of Zukofsky's application of music to poetry are decidedly in the early Pound, whom Zukofsky closely echoes in all his theorising on the subject.[89] At a basic level, Pound's *melopoeia*, 'wherein the words are charged, over and above their plain meaning, with some musical property', predicts the Zukofskian musical essence transcending material circumstance.[90] The figure is not Pound's alone, however; in an essay written just before the completion of the musically modelled *Four Quartets*, 'The Music of Poetry', Eliot made a number of specific musical analogies with poetry that would echo into Zukofsky's *Test of Poetry* and his essays after:

There are possibilities for verse which bear some analogy to the development of a theme by different groups of instruments; there are possibilities of transitions in a poem comparable to the different movements of a symphony or a quartet; there are possibilities of contrapuntal arrangement of subject-matter.[91]

These comparisons are a development of Eliot's conception of the 'auditory imagination', a quality characterised by 'the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling' and 'sinking into the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin'.[92] Music for Eliot is a device for flattening poetry into a dehistoricised universal: it 'fuses the old and obliterated and the trite, the

current, and the new and the surprising, the most ancient and the most civilized mentality': 'Poetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle, and it retains that essential of percussion and rhythm; hyperbolically one my say that the poet is *older* than other human beings.'[93] Such an ahistorical conception of poetry easily translates into a standard of taste, and would later be used to justify the removal of context from the poem-as-object poetics of the New Criticism. Music, the non-discursive alternative to rationality, was indeed a cornerstone of that critical movement's notion of the 'heresy of paraphrase', and informed its central metaphor, in the oft-quoted phrase of Archibald MacLeish, that 'a poem should not mean / But be'.[94]

Zukofsky's relation to this reactionary notion of music is not easily gauged, though he must be considered within its context. As the model of Language writing's 'materiality', Zukofsky is usually posed as the polar opposite of such a fundamentally closed and reified conception of the poem. Bernstein's choice of words to describe Zukofsky's work, however – 'It's not a matter of what it says, but of what it is' – tells us that the opposition is not always so clear-cut.[95] Exactly what Zukofsky means when he says music, and how far it chimes with post-Eliotic New Critical ideas, might be usefully approached comparatively in relation to his contemporary, John Cage. Cage, who was at least as influential on the New American Poetry and Language writing as Zukofsky, shares many of the qualities often associated with the poet, especially his emphasis on form as a material. As far as sounds are concerned, Cage treats them as tangible objects rather than receptacles of meaning:

> When I talk about music, it finally comes to people's minds that I'm talking about sound that doesn't mean anything. That is not inner, but is just outer. And they say, these people who finally understand that say, *You mean it's just sounds*? thinking that for something to just be a sound is to be useless, whereas I love sounds just as they are, and I have no need for them to be anything more than what they are. I don't want them to be psychological. I don't want a sound to pretend that it's a bucket, or that it's president, or that it's in love with another sound. I just want it to be a sound.[96]

Here, Cage foreshadows the New American Poetry's consciously anti-symbolist interest in language as a thing, and resembles the Zukofsky described by Language poetry, 'excisi[ng] all but ears to the language itself'.[97] Cage, like Zukofsky, is part of the anti-interpretation aesthetic of the 1950s, as finally theorised in Susan Sontag's 1964 'erotics of art'.[98]

There is, however, something fundamentally different about Zukofsky's thinking by comparison. For all the talk of his 'social

materiality', Zukofsky's art is singularly hermetic in comparison to Cage.[99] Cage's notion of music is a radically situational and socialised form:

> And what precisely does this, this beautiful profound object, this masterpiece have to do with Life? It has this to do with Life: that it is separate from it. Now we see it and now we don't. When we see it we feel better, and when we are away from it we don't feel so good. Life seems shabby and chaotic, disordered, ugly in contrast.[100]

Music *is* context in Cage: art is the *happening* of a situation rather its transcendence. *4′33″* is, of course, the recognised pinnacle of this aesthetic, where art is literally, though not unproblematically, reduced to life, and life becomes the object of attention. 'Wherever we are,' Cage writes, 'what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.'[101] The emphasis Cage places on his work's theatricality, and on the theatre's democracy ('The reason I want to make my definition of theatre that simple is so one could view everyday life itself as theatre'), is part of a project to make art present by making the concrete conditions of its performance and the situation of its reception apparent.[102]

Leaving aside oppositions of Zukofsky and the New Critics based on tired generalisations regarding closure, the late Zukofsky seems less Cagean and more a follower of the New Critic Cleanth Brooks, for whom 'the primacy of the linguistic medium', as in Zukofsky, is summed up in a music that gives poetry 'its own dynamic' and tangible emotionality.[103] Zukofsky, who would eventually be introduced to Cage's work by his son Paul ('John Cage is an intellect; I think that's the trouble with him,' Louis later told L. S. Dembo), sees music as not just the unbroken thread running through poetry and history, but the very means to 'escape the confines of time and place'.[104] Compared with Cage, whatever other status it holds, late Zukofskian music is supposed to emanate from elsewhere than 'Life', from outside contemporary or historical particulars. Zukofsky's 1959 poem, 'Peri Poietikes' (About Poetry), is revealing as a sort of statement of intent: 'What about measure, I learnt: / *Look in your own ear and read*.'[105] Unsurprisingly, this aural solipsism is inspired by words in a letter from Pound, in turn inspired by Philip Sidney, 'Look into thine owne eare and reade'.[106] The emphasis throughout Zukofsky's theorising is on the essential *separateness* of music and the supposed 'confines' of the non-aesthetic world. Poetry, therefore, is the freedom of transcendence. Zukofsky says in 1966, a year before the publication of *Catullus*: 'I want to present things quickly by scenario or song . . . You put one thing against another and

the poem is its own little world again'.[107] The resemblance of this conception of poetry with the 'clear music' *critiqued* in the early parts of *"A"* as an escape from the dynamics of history hardly needs mentioning.

Though these intentions are of importance in themselves, the extent to which Zukofsky's theorising finds expression in his poetry remains debatable. To reduce *"A"*-23, for example, to an aesthetic of 'upper limit music', as here outlined, would hardly do the work justice. In general, the later parts of *"A"*, as the 'poem of a life', work differently, retaining a natural tie to Zukofsky's earlier work in a way a book like *Catullus* does not. In *"A"*, music is always a situated phenomenon produced in a particular space. The space is, nonetheless, the increasingly highly idealised locus of family and less rich than the tense context of a poem like "A"-1. Furthermore, especially in its very final movements, *"A"* turns history back on itself, as in "A"-22 and "A"-23, where music functions as a means of aligning the past with the natural world, and thereby erasing it, 'best emptied of names' / impertinence'.[108] One can ultimately trace the convictions of Zukofsky's musical poetics from *Catullus*, through the experimental music-making of *"A"* and *Autobiography* (1970), up to Zukofsky's last work, the 'book of songs' *80 Flowers* (1978), where Zukofsky can at least be considered as putting the 'wrought' in the New Critical notion of the 'well wrought urn'.[109] In this sense, Zukofsky radicalises certain post-war assumptions about art and poetry rather than offering radical alternatives to them.

The older Zukofsky would not, I think, object to such an evaluation, given that it reflects his avowed intentions.[110] There remains a need to stress it, however, given the exaggerated politicisation his later work has been subjected to. This chapter has argued that there are other ways of looking at the removal of political content in Zukofsky's work than those proposed by figures admittedly central in re-establishing Zukofsky's importance. The long-overdue removal of stigmas attached to consciously political content in poetry is a key step to rediscovering the radicalism of Zukofsky's early work, and the compelling routes it had offered out of Eliot's and Pound's narratives of inexorable historical decline. It may be that Zukofsky's later work goes back to the more complacent assumptions of reactionary modernism, with its concern to transcend history and establish language as the pre-eminent social form, and that Zukofsky's early work is the more distinctive in relation to the mainstream offspring of this modernism, the New Criticism. This is not to say Zukofsky's later work is without considerable value for other reasons; the contention here has been that the compelling approach to the politics of history, opened by Zukofsky's early work, is not one of them. That Zukofsky was unable to sustain such an original

and dynamic contextual practice within the Poundian tradition he so obviously worked within for most of his career is unsurprising; indeed, it is built into the very dialectic Zukofsky is briefly able to establish between past, present and future, tradition and agency, history and action. The key question suggested by the narrative told here seems to be whether, politically, the compromised political poetics of 'contemporary particulars' was always destined to be subsumed by its counterpoint, the Poundian 'rested totality', into an ultimately idealised utopia of 'imagined music'.[111] Such a radical interiority, a sense of poetry's power to inhere political force, is one pole of American poetry's response to crisis. Zukofsky began, however, by suggesting a quite other response. This would be more fully developed by poets both following his example with similar allegiances, and those seeking very different modalities and breaking with modernist priorities entirely.

'Atlantis buried outside': Muriel Rukeyser, myth and war

In 1968 Muriel Rukeyser wrote a poem called 'Myth', responding to Gustave Moreau's 1864 painting *Oedipus and the Sphinx*:

MYTH

Long afterward, Oedipus, old and blinded, walked the
roads.   He smelled a familiar smell.   It was
the Sphinx.   Oedipus said, 'I want to ask one question.
Why didn't I recognize my mother?'   'You gave the
wrong answer,' said the Sphinx.   'But that was what
made everything possible,' said Oedipus. 'No,' she said.
'When I asked, What walks on four legs in the morning,
two at noon, and three in the evening, you answered,
Man.   You didn't say anything about woman.'
'When you say Man,' said Oedipus, 'you include women
too. Everyone knows that.'   She said, 'That's what
you think.'[1]

Oedipus fails to recognise the mother because he refuses to acknowledge the feminine. He gives 'the wrong answer', a revision that changes the entire story: the patriarchal 'correct' answer is refigured as a mistake, a blindness to female difference that is shown to be the origin of Oedipus's misfortunes. The sphinx, meanwhile, both reclaims woman from the hegemonic category Man and rejects the presumptuous universalism of Oedipus's second person pronoun: the *you* that speaks of Man, she tells Oedipus, is only your *you*, and certainly not *me* as a woman. Rukeyser's version is an alternative explanation for Oedipus's blindness, but also a troubling of mythic origin itself: where Oedipus's victory over the man-eating femme fatale 'made everything possible' in the original, his mistake here has a doom-laden legacy, in itself a counter to the Old Testament origin-myth of the Fall through Eve, but perhaps also refusing the Oedipus narrative in general. Inverting and undermining Oedipus at the same time as using his story to make a point distorts the

usually unsullied window onto human consciousness myth is assumed to be.

1 'a hope and a perspective': positioning myth

This chapter will sketch the movement in Rukeyser's career, which 'Myth' performs in miniature, from the revision of individual myths, adapting their political content to the demands of testimonial witness, toward an interrogation of the mythopoeic itself, occasioned by the loss of direct witness during the Second World War. 'Myth' is a cheeky poem facetiously wielding Oedipus as a stick with which to beat lazy gendered language. Throughout her career from the early 1930s to 1980, though, Rukeyser would insist on the necessary energy of myth for the writing of all political poetry, for the articulation of 'everything possible'. Her central statement on the imagination, *The Life of Poetry*, written over a ten-year period in the thirties and forties, places myth at the centre of the poet's proposed contribution to 'the future':

> If our imaginative response to life were complete, if we were fully conscious of emotion, if we apprehended surely the relations that make us know the truth and the relations that make us know the beautiful, we would be— what? The heroes of our myths, acting perfectly among these faculties, loving appropriately and living with appropriate risk, spring up at the question. We invented them to let us approach that life. But it is our own lives of which they remind us. They offer us a hope and a perspective, not of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future. For if we lived in full response to the earth, to each other, and to ourselves, we would not breathe a supernatural climate; we would be more human.[2]

Here myth functions as a reminder of desire and possibility: its reso- nances are not rooted in humanist universals, but remind us of a fuller though unspecified way of living. Myth for Rukeyser was a central mode of passion, a powerful expression of struggle: when we see ourselves in myth, we do not see our uncorrupted, primitive being, but a common desire for a better world. Rukeyser allies myth to poetry as a 'type of creation in which we may live and which will save us'.[3] It comes from what she called 'the lost, the anonymous, the dream-singers': myths are forgotten dreams rather than hidden qualities, and as such they are con- tingent and future-oriented. Myth's 'wishful dreaming', as she termed it, is seen in Indian tribes' 'singing of how they would save themselves, and would rise and fight; and then, losing that promise, began to tell, to sing their dreams'.[4] Myth is struggle for Rukeyser, but it is also 'morphology' – in articulating desire, myth not only expresses frustration and struggle,

it also imagines fulfilment, that we can be 'heroes of our myths', since '[t]he world of this creation, and its poetry, is not yet born.'[5] In sum, Rukeyser conceives of myth as a projective resource, propelling us with a unique visionary energy to seek fulfilment as a society, in a struggle retaining heroic and utopian possibility. Such a conception, as we will see, is not dissimilar to Charles Olson's inversions of Pound, in which the scholar-poet labelled himself 'an archaeologist of morning'.[6] As I will outline, Rukeyser's modernist mythopoeia is distinctive in its refusal of origin.

Rukeyser's career is an example to American poets because she so consistently put herself on the frontline of history, and yet so insisted on imaginative forms unique to poetry to explain its political power. Rukeyser was a poet, unlike any other, who sought crisis out – from her home country's biggest ever domestic industrial disaster, as a journalist in Spain at the outbreak of the Civil War, as a propagandist in the Second World War, later as a visitor to Vietnam – but insisted, simultaneously, that poetry had a *life* of its own, that was not to be in thrall to political demands, but that could rather bring its special energy to social movements. A sustained engagement with myth is only one aspect of this life in Rukeyser's work, but through its development we can see a changing engagement with crisis that says a great deal about the legacy of high modernist poetics in the hands of marginalised figures writing in changing political contexts.

The two immediate commitments that complicate and galvanise Rukeyser's mythopoeia, to feminism and communism, can be sketched separately. The phallo- or at least androcentric nature of most myth has been well documented since Rukeyser died in 1980. Jane Caputi's notion of 'psychic activism' as a counter to such patriarchal narrative suggests one possible response. This is the strategy of 'fight[ing] fire with Fire', reclaiming the power of the female from phallocentric myth by reasserting the force of the Goddess.[7] The American poet Robin Morgan's conception of this power is uncomplicated, for example: 'We are the myths. We are the Amazons, the Furies, the Witches. We have never not been here, this exact sliver of time, this precise place.'[8] As well as a response to the deep history of narratives that women were not involved in writing, this is also a corrective to the twentieth century's misogynistic reading of myth, be it in the passive-mother-fertility female figure that dominates Frazer's *The Golden Bough* or Pound's macho inhabiting of Isis gathering the limbs of Osiris.[9] Rukeyser directly takes up the approach recommended by Caputi – indeed, Isis herself is the empowered figure at the centre of *The Book of the Dead*, her first mythopoeic writing. Rukeyser goes beyond this, however, to perform the equally necessary

task of challenging the biological naturalism implicit in myth per se. Donna Haraway's 'Cyborg Manifesto' is of interest here. Haraway calls her cyborg figure a 'myth', but distinguishes it fundamentally from the 'organic' mythmaking of her contemporaries:

> American radical feminists like Susan Griffin, Audre Lorde, and Adrienne Rich have profoundly affected our political imaginations – and perhaps restricted too much what we allow as a friendly body and political language. They insist on the organic, opposing it to the technological. But their symbolic systems and the related positions of ecofeminism and feminist paganism, replete with organicisms, can only be . . . oppositional ideologies fitting the late twentieth century.[10]

For Haraway, Griffin, Lorde and Rich privilege the organic or given over the made or *technē*. Cyborg myths, on the other hand, 'subvert the central myths of origin of Western culture', challenging the myth of myth, as it were.[11] Not merely oppositional, such post-humanist mythopoeia, full of 'creatures simultaneously animal and machine', rejects the essentialism of traditional myth (there's an Amazon in every woman) with an emphasis on the created and contingent nature of myth itself.[12]

Rukeyser was, perhaps more than any other experimental poet of the period, involved in the project of proletarian writing: her poems, reviews and articles naturally gravitated toward *New Masses* as well as Louis Zukofsky's *'Objectivists' Anthology* and *Partisan Review*. The stance of *New Masses* toward experimental modernism is complex, but its generally social realist tendency had space for a poet like Eliot. Since even unorthodox Leftists, like Adorno and Horkheimer, have been dismissive of myth as the bourgeois siren-song of pre-capitalist fantasy, 'the nostalgic stylization of what may no longer be sung', this space among social realists was predictably small, and would ultimately be unsatisfactory for Rukeyser.[13] Alongside the usual anti-intellectual denunciations of *New Masses* editor Mike Gold, who deemed Eliot 'dull, bloodless, intellectualistic' though 'well-tailored', there were serious engagements with Eliot's work.[14] Joseph Freeman, also an orthodox communist, could make the distinction between the Eliot of twenties and the Eliot of the thirties, claiming in the pages of *New Masses* that Eliot only *turned* reactionary and that, indeed, his early work was 'revolutionary', with his aesthetic and political trajectory mirroring that of Wordsworth and Coleridge. The Russian D. S. Mirsky was gushing in his praise for the 'unsurpassed . . . bourgeois poet' whose 'rare poetic gift is allied with a social theme of real significance'.[15] Rolfe Humphries admired 'the white-hot fervor of energy which fused and smelted the scrap-metal in *The Waste-Land* [*sic*] to durable poetic amalgam', and called Eliot 'a

prophet of the revolution'.[16] In all this appreciation of Eliot, however, there was a still a fundamental reserve: Eliot was always in the end an enemy, a poet whose brilliance lay in his ability to manifest the symptoms of his decadent class. Humphries, for example, concluded:

> he has written, with poetic authority too great to be questioned, the elegy of an age that is passing. Let us not be so boisterous shouting our war songs that we fail to hear from the citadel of our enemies the cry of capitulation.[17]

In essence, the proletarian critic could only engage with Eliot as a reconnaissance exercise, with suspended disbelief. In other words, the formal achievements of a poem like *The Waste Land* could not be conceptualised in a way that could be put to *use* by radical poets.

This chapter will explore Rukeyser's own dissenting interrogation of high modernist myth, but it is worth pointing out from the start that she differed from *New Masses*-type readings in that she thought modernism's mythical modes were worth using and interrogating in the first place. Rukeyser shows us how the radical writer could exploit the mythopoeic achievements of Anglo-American experimental verse, however much they carried assumptions about history at odds with her own as a Marxist. Rukeyser, though she mixed in CPUSA circles, was a regular contributor to *New Masses* and appeared at the first Soviet-sponsored American Writers Congress, undoubtedly felt frustrations with the critical reception of experimental poetry on the radical left. Her review of John Wheelwright's *Rock and Shell* in 1934, for example, praises the collection's intertextual exploration of religious texts at the same time as predicting its neglect by other communist critics:

> Fine poetry which is not obviously propagandist has confused the critics again and again . . . Here is a book of fine poetry that must have an uneasy reception . . . [Wheelwright's] work cannot be dismissed as confused or confusing. Too many poets whose work might be exhibited as vital influences have been too faintly praised . . . Such writers are laying a base of literary activity and revolutionary creation . . .[18]

Wheelwright, dismissed as a follower of Eliot by Hicks, is here praised as a visionary poet because of his complex intertextual 'passing from religious preoccupation to activity in the revolutionary movement'. 'Faint praise', a kind of toleration, is perhaps the best way of describing the reception of such poetry in the pages of *New Masses*. Through her early work, I will claim, Rukeyser shows us how the apparently obscurant or mystical technique of writers like Eliot or Wheelwright might be a 'vital influence' in spite of their apparent incongeniality to Rukeyser's political concerns.

As I have suggested, the impulse to challenge phallocentrism and reactionary nostalgia combined with Rukeyser's commitment to the mythopoeic to give rise to a complex dialectic. On the one hand, particular patriarchal and reactionary narratives need to be combatted, but on the other there is a danger that the very act of revision will reinforce the primacy and privileged status traditionally reserved for myth per se. How, for example, can the feminist stop short of characterising myth as primal, primitive and therefore somehow the 'true', presocial version of human relations? Which is to say, how can the very *form* of myth be challenged at the same time its content is revised? Myth *revision* is not itself new: *The Book of the City of Ladies*, a fifteenth-century text by one Christine de Pizan, put what one might call a 'feminine slant' on Western myths about women to show the 'massive ingratitude of . . . men'.[19] Such works suggest that tinkerings fail to fully challenge what is fundamentally a patriarchal and conservative *form* that emphasises essential biological characteristics and timeless universals over historically determined and changeable agencies and identities. Rukeyser's mythical revisions are hardly of de Pizan's order, but they do focus their efforts on transforming mythical *content*. In *The Book of Dead*, Rukeyser's famous quasi-epic, documentary collage is used to adapt, revise and re-energise myth. Here Isis and the Egyptian Book of the Dead are used to establish female political agency in the context of public outrage (the poem concerns an industrial disaster in which 700 men died as a result of Union Carbide's opportunistic greed). The emphasis is on the appropriation and exploitation of certain myths to transform feminine lament into a spur to action and vitality, as Isis had, whose tears were said to flood the Nile each year after the death of Osiris. In one of the work's central poems, 'Absalom', the female speaker, assumes the phallus through a reworking of the central fact of the Osiris myth, his re-membering by Isis, placing all the work's agency with the living and present woman rather than the dead, lamented son – a reversal enforced, as it were, by the reportage of the poem, which sees the mother 'beg[ging] of X-ray money', taking on the court, and honouring the dead's memory.[20] In another, 'The Cornfield', Rukeyser gruesomely parodies the idea of natural fertility, associating the corn-gods Isis and Osiris with the corrupt undertaker who secretly buried black workers on arable land. What we witness at the start of and during the Second World War, on the other hand, is a questioning of the underlying assumption of the mythopoeic itself, an interrogation of the basic structure of an Eliotic 'return to the sources'.[21] The reasons for this shift will be my subject here.

2 'Atlantis buried outside': myths of occasion

World War Two was peculiarly double-edged for a poet who had until the war based her career on a poetics of witness,[22] but who now, as a woman, found the position of witness and the poetic authority of direct experience denied her. The revision of myths in the light of witness remains central to Rukeyser's poetics in her first-hand experience of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, the most famous episode of her career. Rukeyser's great poem about Spain, 'Mediterranean', retains the poet's central task of testimony evident in *The Book of the Dead* and other poems from *U. S. 1*. Indeed, 'Mediterranean' is premised on the responsibility of witness more than any other work in the collection. The war was the beginning of the end of Rukeyser's testimonial poetry, however, as it physically denied women any vantage of direct witness. The way in which the crisis of war forced Rukeyser into a different, more distant perspective regarding it, necessarily led her to a different concern with myth. Namely, the project to reframe certain myths with the concrete details of the occasional, makes way – partly as an accommodation for the unavailability of direct experience, partly as a response to the Nazi mysticism that had drawn myth-making itself urgently into question, and partly as a response to the *total* nature of a war whose occasions were used as propagandistic symbols in other political poetry of the period – to a concern with the mythopoeic itself.

The gender trouble of the war had especially profound implications for Rukeyser's work. At the broadest level, the paradigms of war poetry existing at the beginning of the war left no place for a female voice. There was deemed to be *no such thing* as women's war poetry. Rukeyser herself was excluded from all-male anthologies like Alan Calmer's *Salud! Poems, Stories and Sketches of Spain by American Writers*, despite the vastly superior quality of her work on the subject. This terrain is succinctly outlined by Susan Schweik:

> In the modern war poem as it is usually defined, the experience of the masculine soldier and the voice of the masculine author predominate. In 1941, when American editors and critics sough to answer that urgent and irritating question – 'Where are the war poets?' – they expected, and were expected, to seek out military men, men whose poems could engage the war with the effect of authenticity, of earned outrage and courage, which the poems of the famous Great War soldier poets, then again widely in circulation, possessed.[23]

The Great War poets' use of the body and direct experience to demystify war rhetoric made for a legacy that, as James Mersmann has shown,

dominated the American poetry of war at least up until the US inva-
sion of Vietnam, when its method became shorthand for 'the horror
of war'.[24] In its original incarnation, modern war poetry identifies that
bodily experience is obscured by an often versified jingoistic idealism
and that the poet should correct this. Since it is the man who experi-
ences war *directly*, this poet will be male. In the context of the First
World War, of course, such a focus on the material experience and
physical trauma of war had much to recommend it, and represented
a commitment that Rukeyser, a materialist pledged to the responsi-
bility of the author to know directly the material she treated, would
have taken for granted. The problem is that women are denied the
authority of experience by war. In the case of the Spanish Civil War,
as Rukeyser repeats many times, she wanted to stay and support the
fight but was forced into the 'exile' of evacuation and 'never allowed to
return' despite repeated attempts to do so.[25] The way the war distanced
women from its centre was a singular problem for Rukeyser since her
own poetics had been premised on an ethics of witness, and an insist-
ence that the poet address the most important political subjects of the
day.

Symptoms of concerns more fully explored in 'Mediterranean' can be
found in Rukeyser's news dispatches from Spain, where she had been
sent by *Life and Letters To-day* to cover the anti-fascist First People's
Olympiad. Three articles were published by Rukeyser, the most detailed
of which was in *Life and Letters* itself, with the other two in *The New
York Times* and, later, *New Masses*.[26] In each, the authority of the
reportage lies in Rukeyser's being a witness: the motif is of the survivor
'escaped to tell thee', with Rukeyser's evacuation from Spain mentioned
each time. Rukeyser accordingly insists on distancing herself from the
tourist, especially in the *Life and Letters* report. In Moncada, where
her train halts as war breaks out, she facetiously collages advice from
a travel guidebook: 'There is nothing in it that need detain the tourist.'
Tourists themselves, Rukeyser's fellow travellers, are the constant
butt of satire in the report, as with an 'English couple, on their way to
Mallorca [who] have it in for the man from Cook's, who should have
told them there was to be a revolution'.[27] The detachment of the tourist
to the crisis is repeatedly the subject of sarcasm: 'All during the hot
noon, the train waits for the attack. The tourists set up bridge games.'[28]
The inadequacy of bourgeois exoticism is summed up toward the end
of the article as Rukeyser's account of the war is juxtaposed with the
landscaping of travel literature, as 'all the cars armed and painted' and
'churches are burning all over the city' are set alongside Barcelona's
'*splendid situation opposite the Mediterranean*'.[29] Anxious to distin-

guish herself from such dilettantism, Rukeyser stresses her vocation. In a story that Rukeyser would tell again and again in various versions, the chief organiser of the Games tells a mass meeting attended by Rukeyser that evacuated foreigners 'will carry to their own countries . . . to the working people of the world, the story of what they see now in Spain'.[30] Rukeyser, in the unfolding of this 'story', is a witness with great responsibility.

Closely following this account, 'Mediterranean' is, on the surface, a paradigmatic occasional poem that can be placed in a tradition extending back at least to Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy'. Published as both a fundraising pamphlet for the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy and in *New Masses* shortly after the outbreak of the Civil War, and written, as it were, on the spot, the poem conceives of crisis in the classic sense of a 'turning point', just as with W. H. Auden's 'Spain 1936' had. Rukeyser's excitement at the immediate 'pulse of war' is part of the situation's urgency. The demands of testimony are made clear:

> Here is home-country, who fights our war.
> Street-meeting speaker to us:
>> '. . . came for Games,
>> you stay for victory; foreign? your job is:
>> go tell your countries what you saw in Spain.'[31]

The poem's relation to the events it describes, however, is far more complicated than this directive seems to require. The reportage central to *The Book of the Dead* is, in 'Mediterranean', problematised by the distance that has been forced on Rukeyser as an evacuee unable to fight in the war – a point made even in the news dispatches, where 'foreigners stand helplessly around the fringes'.[32] It is for this reason that the dominant theme of the poem is exile, the exile of a poet literally at sea, a theme announced in the opening lines: 'At the end of the July, exile. We watched the gangplank go / cutting the boat away, indicating: sea.' From the beginning of the poem, that is, Rukeyser is cut off from the event to which she would give witness. The war is 'home' for Rukeyser, but something to which she has been rendered 'foreign'.[33] As the metaphor of exile suggests, leaving the war occasions pain, not least because it is also a separation from a lover: 'I saw first of the faces going home into war / the brave man Otto Boch, the German exile . . .' As a 'brave man' with a 'strong square breast', the Boch is permitted to go 'home into war' in a way Rukeyser, a *female* foreigner, is not.[34]

The symbolic relations established in this first section of the poem are clear enough. Spain represents an ideal, a noble struggle and therefore a home to which the sea, the space of Rukeyser's evacuation, is exile:

> The Games had not been held.
> A week of Games, theatre and festival;
> world anti-fascist week. Pistol starts race.
> Machine gun marks the war. Answered unarmed,
> charged the Embarcadero, met those guns.
> And charging through the province, joined that army.
> Boys from the hills, the unmatched guns,
> the clumsy armored cars.
> Drilled in the bullring. Radio cries:
> To Saragossa! And this boat.[35]

The comfort of sea is ruefully compared with the action, guns and charging of war. The excitement and urgency of 'To Saragossa!' is pointedly contrasted to the unheroic evacuation, with the final sentence fragment serving as a resented shadow and afterthought. It is this relation between land and sea, between war and peace, home and exile, that informs the central myth of the poem, of Atlantis, which makes the coordinates of these symbols more complex and dynamic than they initially appear. Atlantis is first glimpsed, through mysterious Minoan ghosts, as Rukeyser revaluates her 'escape':

> Escape, dark on the water, an overloaded ship.
> Crowded the deck. Spoke little. Down to dinner.
> Quiet on the sea: no guns.
> The printer said, In Paris there is time,
> but where's its place now; where is poetry?
>
> > This is the sea of war; the first frontier
> > blank on the maps, blank sea; Minoan boats
> > maybe achieved this shore . . .[36]

Beginning as a trivial cruise diary, this account of the voyage is transformed by the printer's question. At this point the sea becomes 'the first frontier'. The sea, that is, emerges as the frontier of witness: it is the poem's testimony from it, away from the war proper, that can fill its readers in on what is currently 'blank on the maps'.

Why, though, is this role attributed to poetry, rather than the journalism Rukeyser was officially in Barcelona for? 'Mediterranean' intimates one key difference between these two forms of communication. Poetry, unlike the 'fact' of reportage, contains the mythopoeic, and therefore carries a projective quality absent in journalism. It is the myth of Atlantis that proves this for Rukeyser, and that is central to her negotiation of witness in a context of distance. As a space literally 'blank on the maps' and only available through the mediation of the sea, Atlantis is invoked and equated with the Spain Rukeyser has left behind. The underwa-

ter city is present throughout the poem as an absence, a no-place, a utopia:

> Frontier of Europe, the tideless sea, a field of power
> touching desirable coats, rocking in time conquests,
> fertile, the moving water maintains its boundaries
> layer on layer, Troy . . .[37]

Troy, lost like Atlantis, shows us the power of the sea to thrust forward as 'moving water' – a 'tideless' force that consigns Troy, and may consign the colonial powers of the last war, to what the poem calls 'the overthrown past'.[38] The sea, therefore, is a 'frontier' in the sense that it is incessantly at the forefront of the world's movement and change (as well as in the more obvious sense that Rukeyser is among the first to carry news of the war beyond the shores of Spain). At this point, Rukeyser's position as an exile on the sea takes on projective qualities:

> The wheel in the water, green, behind my head.
> Turns with its light-spokes. Deep. And the drowning eyes
> find under the water figures near
> in their true picture, moving true,
> the picture of that war enlarging clarified
> as the boat perseveres away, always enlarging,
> becoming clear.[39]

The movement of and through the sea is equated with clarification and enlargement here. The central factor in this enlarging clarification is the depth of the sea, with an obvious pun on the word itself and a reference to the phenomenon of magnification through water. Rukeyser now no longer sees as a direct witness, but with the clarifying vision of absence: 'Deep in the water Spanish shadows turn, / assume their brightness past a cruel lens, / quick vision of loss.'[40] The absent poet's vision represents loss, but not obscurity – rather, the war 'assume[s] brightness' at this distance. Looking down, that is, leads the poet to look up as the enlarged war now casts its shadow across the sea, beyond its borders, like a shadow orienting the vision toward what casts it. Depth here, then, is an illumination of surface. It is also, though, a realisation of blockage: of how the 'cruel lens' of distance necessitates vision at a remove.

This new, stranger sense of witness allows Rukeyser to invert the Atlantis myth in the poem's remarkable closing lines, which come after the boat has reached the relative, if temporary, safety of France:

>   Barcelona
> everywhere, Spain everywhere, the cry of Planes for Spain.
> The picture at our eyes, past memory, poem,

> to carry and spread and daily justify.
> The single issue, the live man standing tall,
> on the hill, the dock, the city, all the war.
> Exile and refugee, we land, we take
> nothing negotiable out of the new world;
> we believe, we remember, we saw.
> Mediterranean gave
> image and peace, tideless for memory.
>
> For that beginning
> make of us each
> a continent and inner see
> Atlantis buried outside
> to be won.[41]

The usual currency of Atlantis as a lost past to be found, a forgotten way of being to be remembered, repeated in modernist poems like Hart Crane's *The Bridge* and H.D.'s *Trilogy*, or even in Auden's more sceptical 'Atlantis', is subverted here to create a projective rather than archaeological myth. The utopian associations of Atlantis are retained from Plato, Francis Bacon and Thomas More, and indeed from the nineteenth-century pseudohistorian Ignatius Donnelly, responsible for the modern popularity of the myth. Rukeyser's utopia, however, is much closer to the etymology of the word, 'no-place', with the poem's conclusion rejecting backward-looking searches for exotic prehistory by instead insisting on a 'picture at our eyes, past memory' that we must 'daily justify'. It is for this reason that Spain is, ironically enough, termed 'the new world' and a 'beginning'. The myth is still at stake, remaining to be decided, paradoxically 'buried outside / to be won'.

The clearest indication of the strangeness of 'Mediterranean' as an occasional poem is in its revision for fundraising purposes, published in 1938 as a small pamphlet for the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy.[42] The shorter revised version excises almost all reference to problematic themes of exile and distance. The abridged poem removes the first section, for example, and so begins at the 'Frontier of Europe'. This version capitalises on precisely the sense of witness that the original poem troubles, with no reference to the gendered perspective so central to it. All reference to evacuation and the poet on the sea are removed to make it seem that Rukeyser is really still there, as an eyewitness. The demands of direct and immediate agitation called for quite a different poem, one less true to Rukeyser's experience. The revised poem's uncomplicated 'occasional' nature, of course, fits better with the urgency of the form in which it is published – as the pamphlet's back cover says: 'One hundred and thirteen surgeons, nurses and ambu-

lance drivers, with fifty-two ambulances and tons of medical equipment are saving hundreds of lives daily. What you contribute today, will receive the heartfelt thanks of a heroic people.' There is no suggestion Rukeyser did not believe in the pamphlet: it does reveal, however, that direct poetic involvement in such events, or the writing of conventional war poetry, would require a certain level of self-censorship. In the full version utopian myth has already, as it would more completely during the war proper, begun to qualify and stand in for testimonial access in a way that could not be introduced to the agitational pamphlet.

Self-censorship is one of two routes Rukeyser explores after the watershed of 'Mediterranean'. It is the more quickly abandoned, however, not least because of its lamentable result: 1942's pamphlet *Wake Island*, a celebration of the defence of its eponymous Pacific military base by US Marines. The poem, linking the US entry to the war with a worldwide struggle for 'Freedom', differs little in purpose from US propaganda poems for the war, like Edna St. Vincent Millay's 'Murder of Lidice', and therefore exhibits an uncomfortable relation to the State, far from in keeping with Rukeyser's earlier work. Where Rukeyser's earlier agitational work was rooted in particularity, *Wake Island* tends toward empty abstraction. One page reads:

> Proof of America in a fighting age—
> we see the face of the world, and its eyes are brave,
> the men and women we stand with fight to save
> our hope, our discovery, our unappeasable rage
> against the enemy cutting us apart.[43]

Were it not for its bathos the poem could seem dangerously jingoistic. It resembles the 'policy of the governments of English-speaking countries' criticised in *The Life of Poetry*, written in the war years, 'to win the war first, and work out the meanings afterward'.[44] *Wake Island* was rightly savaged by a range of critics, and though it was attacked most famously in a misogynistic *Partisan Review* piece entitled 'Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl', a review that would lead to a debate known as the Rukeyser Imbroglio, astute women poets were equally unimpressed, including Louise Bogan, who lamented its 'rhetorical hollowness and limpness'.[45]

Wake Island is an anomaly in Rukeyser's *Collected Poems*, however, especially in the context of collections appearing before and after it (it was in fact excluded from a previous Collected Poems). The evidence in the trajectory of Rukeyser's career suggests that she knew the shortcomings of the poem, and saw that its techniques were not an adequate

poetic response to the war. Indeed, she makes such a conclusion explicit later in the decade:

> One of the worst things that could happen to our poetry at this time would be for it to become an occasional poetry of war. A good deal of repugnance to the social poetry of the 1930's was caused by reactionary beliefs; but as much was caused, I think, because there were so many degrees of blood-savagery in it, ranging all the way from self-pity – naked or identified with one victim after another – to actual bloodlust and display of wounds, a rotten sort of begging for attention and sympathy in the name of an art that was supposed to produce action.[46]

The 'occasional' here is linked to the kind of graphic directness typical of the heroic suffering of the First World War poets – poets defined by their bodily, direct, 'naked' experience of the horrors of war. Rukeyser is not simply rationalising the rejection of a position that is in fact unavailable to her, or critiquing wound-display to compensate for her own lack of wounds. Rather, her point about the necessity of new forms of 'social poetry' is a response to the need to represent the experience of previously unrepresented constituencies and imagine new resistances to new forms of war and politics.

3 'the painted cave of dream': war and mythopoeia

It is, as I have been hinting, the total nature of the Second World War that forces Rukeyser's eventual rejection of the occasional. The war proper, unlike its prelude in Spain where Rukeyser thought of herself as at least indirectly involved, necessitates a move away from poetic attempts to affect immediate events. World War Two, that is, casts historical events in a totalised light that seemingly precludes such conceptions of direct poetical agency, where the Spanish Civil War had been a crisis in the sense of a turning point, an opening and opportunity for change in which the poet was explicitly called upon. The distinct phenomenon of the Second World War is discussed by Maurice Blanchot as

> the fundamental crisis . . . we do not know how to measure for lack of language . . . that keeps getting deeper and that literature also conveys according to its mode, war is always present and, in some ways, pursued . . . the Second World War was not only a war, a historical event like any other, circumscribed and limited with its causes, its turns, and its results. It was an *absolute*.[47]

Poetry as the *pursuit* of the war would become central to Rukeyser's work in what is perhaps her most powerful and complex collection, *The*

Beast in View (1944). Here, we witness a shift in the focus of Rukeyser's mythopoeia even further away from the use and revision of individual myths. Rukeyser moves away from the reframing of myth through documentary fact for three reasons: firstly, she observes fundamental problems with the poetics of the occasional in this period; secondly, she feels, as many writers did during the war, an urgent need to revisit myth in the light of problematic political manifestations; and thirdly, because myth critique functions as a necessarily indirect engagement with the war that is nonetheless penetrating, and can therefore respond to the blockage of witness while getting to the heart of the war's political issues.

Firstly, then, the Second World War means that particulars, central to the poetry of witness and occasion, have become absorbed into an all-embracing absolute that alienates and bewilders individuals. That is, the idea that the war can be *changed* through a focus on any of its single occasions is, in Rukeyser's words above, 'a rotten sort of begging for attention and sympathy in the name of an art that was supposed to produce action'. The war must be accepted, in Wallace Stevens's term, as the 'fact' for which a conception of poetry as direct agitation for action will ring hollow, as the most famous occasional poems of the period, like 'The Murder of Lidice' or Archibald MacLeish's *Colloquy for the States*, show. For Rukeyser, however, poetry can at least go some way to making the fact of the war less overwhelming, stepping in where a 'lack of language' currently fails us. One problem of language immediately evident to a poet like Rukeyser, committed throughout her career to the mythopoeic, was the dominance in political discourse and propaganda of a certain kind of myth. Rukeyser's shift is similar to the twentieth century's great philosopher of myth, Ernst Cassirer, who turned away from examining *mythology* to interrogate *mythopoeia* in the face of Nazism. Individual myths, Cassirer wrote, cannot be fought, however 'ludicrous' they might be: to 'combat' the adversary we must 'study the origin, the structure, the methods, and the technique of the political myths'.[48] To *pursue* the war, to understand it, an interrogation of mythopoeia is necessary, an interrogation that poetry, for Rukeyser, is uniquely positioned to undertake.

Before examining Rukeyser's response to these new demands, it is necessary to contextualise the nature of the problem by returning to Pound and Eliot, who were also transforming their relation to myth in the late thirties.[49] Both poets distance themselves from the mythical methods of the twenties in a manner that literalises myth. Where they could be seen to *use* myth in a relativistic way before the 1930s, as distinct from writers like W. B. Yeats or D. H. Lawrence, who seem rather to have placed myths at the centre of their whole belief system, the crisis of the

war gives rise to a need for more than 'fragments' to shore against ruin, and calls upon myth to establish conviction. What is important here is how Pound's and Eliot's renewed mythopoeia is figured as history in the late 1930s onward. Both poets construct a mythological history that, in appearing to *be* history, obscures its mythopoeic nature: both Eliot's 'dissociation of unified sensibility' and Pound's route through Dante to pre-Socratic thinking to the sources of *virtù* are mythical structures figured as historical truth. The picture is complicated in Eliot's case with the increased importance of Christianity, which does not fold easily into either category, but in Pound, the more worrying poetic voice of the Second World War, the conflation is more clear-cut. Pound's dogmatism was permitted by the belief that he had, by uncovering medieval, Confucian and other pre-modern energies, rid language of its metaphoricity. This supposed historical shift from a 'language beyond metaphor' to symbolic sensibility, encapsulated in the fact that Dante 'tends towards actual reproduction of life, while Shakespear [*sic*] tends towards a powerful symbolic art', is a mythical narrative of history pretending to non-symbolic objectivity.[50] Though Pound ignored its roots, what this claim to objectivity allowed for was the articulation of conviction. The implications of this trade-off are at the heart of attitudes toward Pound today.

For Rukeyser, there is obviously a great deal to recommend a poetry that reconciles myth and conviction. Her definition of poetry as a 'gesture of the imagination that takes its side' is on one reading compatible with the major Anglophone modernist 'mythopoets' (Yeats, Pound and Eliot) where myth is a means of access to the belief that modernity had made problematic, a route to the underground roots of conviction buried by the relativism of the modern world (Eliot's 'futility and anarchy that is contemporary history').[51] Equally, however, each of these poets publicly expressed at some point, and to varying degrees, fascist sympathies. In each poet's work myth is literalised from its original universal humanism, meaning what was formerly a plurality of worldviews is pressed into a singular mythical history that is, especially in Pound's case, not recognised as such. Again, the move away from myth as the embodiment of a supposedly universal human condition towards a use of myth to explain the processes of history is a progressive one that would have had considerable appeal for a poet like Rukeyser. Nonetheless, the application of myth to history is hardly likely to be straightforwardly compatible with the dynamic historical materialism Rukeyser and other Left poets were invested in, privileging as it does a lost past. The real problem, though, was in how Pound treated this mythical historiography literally. That Pound's sense of the past begins and ends in literary

history is no accident: the historical is to a great extent collapsed into the mythopoeic, as *virtù*'s battle with *usura* is retrenched to the point of dogma. In Pound's Chinese and John Adams Cantos (*Cantos LII–LXXI*, 1940), documentary form obscures the mythical historiography at work (indeed, the lack of imaginative work on the historical material seems to many a major shortcoming of these cantos): the apparent disappearance of the aesthetic from them can, though, be seen as the ultimate literalisation of myth, a claim to objectivity and truth that earlier modernist poems like *The Waste Land* were likely to express as fiction and imaginative exploration. Ultimately, the mythological is so thoroughly a *source* in Pound's thought, so absolutely the foundation of his poetics, that it becomes naturalised and effectively unnoticed. The link of such a dynamic to a wholly more sinister absolute is obvious enough.

Rukeyser's working definition of politically engaged mythopoeia is in opposition to Pound's in important ways. We see its outlines in the first words of her great book-length statement on poetics, *The Life of Poetry*, published in 1949 but mostly written much earlier in the decade:

> In time of crisis, we summon up our strength.
>   Then, if we are lucky, we are able to call every resource, every forgotten image that can leap to our quickening, every memory that can make us know our power . . .[52]

The notion of a forgotten underground has resemblances to the stereotypical modernist notion of myth as source, but Rukeyser's idea here, also the central motif of the book, is far richer than that. 'Strength' is a 'resource', not a source; remembrance is projective, 'quickening'; memory itself is primarily a reminder of 'power', of creativity, of potential – of what could once be *done* and could therefore be done again. The past here is not returned to as origin, but as a reminder that the past was once a present – that the present has the same powers of originality, creativity and agency we habitually think dead. Crucially, these resources are not the universals of a static humanism, but are there to be chosen:

> The silence of fear. Of the impoverished imagination, which avoids, and makes a twittering, and is still . . . Now we turn to memory, we search all the days we had forgotten for a tradition that can support our arms in such a moment. If we are free people, we are also in a sense free to choose our past, at every moment to choose the tradition we will bring to the future. We invoke a rigorous positive, that will enable us to imagine our choices, and to make them.[53]

Memory 'arms' us to bring this tradition to the future. As Rukeyser concludes this argument, in words surely in part addressed to other

modernist writers: 'The way is before us, and culture is the future as well as the past.'[54] The 'rigorous positive' provokes the freedom to create, to 'make' choices and to make; it refuses to rest, as Williams described Pound and Eliot, 'content with the connotations of their masters'.[55] Rukeyser reminds us that the past has always had a future, and that we, concerned with our own, may use that past to overcome the currently impoverished imagination that prevents us conceiving it.

The dynamics of this projective sense of memory – exactly how one might *do* the rigorous choosing to bring a tradition to the future – is dramatised in Rukeyser's capacious 1944 collection, *The Beast in View*. At the centre of the collection's many mythological scenarios is the figure of the eponymous 'beast', based on Dryden's lines from 'The Secular Masque':

> All, all of a piece throughout:
> Thy chase had a beast in view;
> Thy wars brought nothing about;
> Thy lovers were all untrue.
> 'Tis well an old age is out,
> And time to begin a new.[56]

As I will outline, this beast is the mythical figure of the minotaur but also a metonym for the mythical quarry of meaning more generally. The 'chase' for this beast is a symbol of predestination, of a mythopoeic process that cheats, making history 'all of a piece throughout' because of its duplicitous *design*. What is made to look like a 'chase', or search for history unfolding, is in fact a trick always directed to an end, 'a beast in view', that is resigned and reactionary: 'Thy wars brought nothing about; / Thy lovers were all untrue.'

Dryden's lines are directly referred to throughout the collection, but Rukeyser joins Dryden's critique best in the book's title poem:

> Configurations of time and singing
> > Bring me to a dark harbor where
> > The chase is drawn to a beginning.
> > And all the myths are gathered there.
>
> > . . . I came here by obscure preparings,
> > In vigils and encounters being
> > Both running hunter and fierce prey waring.
>
> I hunted and became the followed,
> > Through many lives fleeing the last me,
> > And changing fought down a far road
> > Through times to myself as I will be.

> Chaos prepared me, and I find the track,
>> Through life and darkness seek my myth—
>> Move toward it, hunting grow more like . . .[57]

This hunting is the corrective to what Dryden satirises. The chase here is a discovery: the 'myths are gathered there', but are not to be taken as authoritative – they must, indeed, be sought and chosen. Rukeyser is out to 'seek my myth'. The crucial revision of Dryden's 'beast in view' is that the hunter also becomes the hunted: the chase is self-constituting, the 'running' a form of self-invention, a 'changing'. The quarry here has not been earmarked in advance: our 'obscure preparings' are chaotic, and what we 'will be' is radically open and contingent on the hunt in which we determine ourselves. Rukeyser interrogates mythologies that tie the future to the past in endless self-fulfilling projection under the guise of investigation. By performing an actual 'chase', open-ended and without a predestined prey in view, she attempts to prove the final lines of her epigraph: ''Tis well an old age is out, / And time to begin a new.' The ambiguity of the beast as subject and object is intentional and crucial to the poem's enactment of the sincere hunt's process: seen and unseen, contingent, unfolding in a *now* that cannot be bracketed off so the mythical universals always known beforehand may be steadily recapitulated.

Rukeyser's methods for beginning anew are best shown in the collection's long opening poem (after a brief dedication to Otto Boch), 'Ajanta'. The title refers to Indian cave frescoes: Rukeyser describes these in the collection's endnotes as characterised by 'their acceptance of reality which may be filled with creation', noting, in the motif that is central to the poem: 'The wall is accepted; the air, the space between the walls and the observer, is filled with creation.'[58] The poem's first section, 'The Journey' stages the same distancing gesture as 'Mediterranean':

> Came in my full youth to midnight cave
> Nerves ringing; and this thing I did alone.
> Wanting my fullness and not a field of war,
> For world considered annihilation, a star
> Called Wormwood rose and flickered, shattering . . .[59]

Her 'nerves ringing' at the confusion of war whose star was Hitler (Wormwood) and that has the effect of 'denying all our words', Rukeyser searches for meaning in a world of otherness (she never went to the caves herself): 'Nothing was left among the tainted weather / But world-walking and shadowless Ajanta.' Though the imaginative journey to Ajanta represents 'a moment of peace' away from the war, its momentariness is just as important as its peacefulness, as the poem will demonstrate later.

Likewise, the motif of escape is further complicated by its figuring as a 'hollow behind the unbreakable waterfall' – which is to suggest a space of refuge, but nonetheless a space that allows one to *see* the waterfall, and close up. In the second section, now in the 'cave where the myth enters the heart again', Rukeyser qualifies this space further:

> Space to the mind, the painted cave of dream.
> This is not a womb, nothing but good emerges:
> This is a stage, neither unreal or real,
> Where the walls are the world, the rocks and palaces
> Stand on a borderland of blossoming ground.[60]

The cave is not a 'womb', not a return to infancy or primitivism, but a 'stage' that should be read as temporary in the manner of Thoreau's hermitage on Walden Pond, rather than as a permanent refuge from the 'real' world of the war. The mythical importance of the paintings is as resource rather than source: again here, the cave is defined as a 'space' rather than an originary destination. Such space is primarily an instrument for greater clarity: 'there is no frustration, / Every gesture is taken, everything yields connections', 'nothing leads away, the world comes forward'. The world is figured as present in the cave: 'the walls are the world', but they have been illuminated by the imagination of the paintings, made clearer by the 'space' this mythical art has created. Indeed, throughout the poem it is never the content of the myths (the paintings depict the Jataka tales of the Bodhisattva) but in the imaginative energy ('creation') they transmit to the present. They are *for use*.

Illumination is a crucial term for the poem, which constantly opposes the darkness of its contemporary moment to 'shadowless' Ajanta. The 'black blood' of history is placed outside the cave, but its 'acts' constantly cast a shadow over the poet's experience: 'I am haunted by interrupted acts, / Introspective as a leper, enchanted / By a repulsive clew, / A gross and fugitive movement of the limbs.'[61] The light of Ajanta is not so much undermined by such hauntings, but rather all the more necessary. At the beginning of the poem's final section a broken contemporary world is again invoked in its absence, but at this point Rukeyser gives an account of how the light of distant Ajanta may help us see it:

> No shadows fall. There is no source of distortion.
> In our world, a tree casts the shadow of a woman,
> A man the shadow of a phallus, a hand raised
> The shadow of a whip.
> Here everything is itself,
> Here all may stand

On summer earth.
Brightness has overtaken every light,
And every myth netted itself in flesh.
New origins, and peace given entire
And the spirit alive.
In the shadowless cave
The naked arm is raised.[62]

Ajanta brings clarity, 'no source of distortion'. Its brilliance displays a world as 'itself', without the shadows of contemporary oppression and deceit. The cave's display reminds of hope, and at this point the poem becomes projective: 'Here all may stand / On summer earth.' 'New origins' are invoked as the spirit again becomes 'alive'. Now the world may enter again, in all its shadowiness, in the lines immediately following:

Animals arrive,
Interlaced, and gods
Interlaced, and men
Flame-woven.
I stand and am complete.
Crawls from the door,
Black and my two feet
The shadow of the world.

World, not yet one,
Enters the heart again.
The naked world, and the old noise of tears,
The fear, the expiation and the love,
The world of the shadowed and alone.
The journey, and the struggles of the moon.[63]

Ajanta has given the poet the strength and completeness to confront the 'world of the shadowed and alone', to see 'the expiation and the love'. Rukeyser has come back up from the depths of myth and found the possibility of purity in resolve: as these lines remind us, even the moon has struggled for her purity and brilliance. The caves and the poem, then, ultimately come to offer hope. These closing lines are remarkably close to Rukeyser's *The Life of Poetry*'s comments on myth that opened this essay: 'We invented them to let us approach that life. But it is our own lives of which they remind us. They offer us a hope and a perspective, not of the past in which they were made—not that alone—but of the future.'[64] Rukeyser's interrogation of myth in 'Ajanta' has revealed a world incomplete, 'not yet one' and thereby open to the hearts and will of the living, to be struggled with and for. The cave paintings are there to remind us that now, as then, the world is full, still, of undecided life.

The quest of 'Ajanta' is imaginative in a conscious and literal sense, viewing its flight of fancy at a post-Romantic distance. This distance is what distinguishes the poem from Pound's war *Cantos*, which conceived of themselves as an interventionist discourse – as *proof* of the historical catastrophe of usury. Not only does such a method obscure the *mythos* at its centre, it is also a pose unavailable to Rukeyser, as we have seen: the blockage of her engagement with the material realities of the war, and the totalised nature of that war, forces interventions in imaginative language itself that are at once distancing and more thoroughgoing. 'Ajanta' therefore must also be, as an attempt at intervention, distinguished from the anti-Poundian mythopoeia of H.D.'s *Trilogy* in which, as she wrote, 'the outer threat and constant reminder of death drove me inward'.[65] Rukeyser's withdrawal is a strictly temporary measure for gaining perspective, a means through which her actual distance from war's occasions is given imaginative space, and where an engagement with that war's dangerous imaginative assumptions could still occur.

In *The Beast in View*'s most direct riposte to the modern war poem, 'Letter to the Front', an explicit revision of the usual authority of the 'letter from the front', Rukeyser begins: 'Women and poets see the truth arrive.'[66] It is a strange statement that only takes on meaning in the context of the whole collection. Both poets and women, that is, away from the 'blood-lust' of the masculine 'occasional poetry of war', see arrival through distance imposed on them. Rukeyser's great achievement in the war years is to make a virtue of this distance, to create from it a space able to look beyond crisis, in which poetry can project different futures and possibilities from the same sources constituting our current reality. Rukeyser's move from an aesthetics of witness into a poetics of the visionary is at the centre of her remarks toward the end of *The Life of Poetry*: 'To be against war is not enough, it is hardly a beginning . . . We are against war and the sources of war.'[67] In the thirties this may have read as Marxist common sense, but in the forties such 'sources' are explicitly psychic, in the structure of our symbols:

In a time of long war, surrounded by the images of war, we imagine peace. Among the resistances, we imagine poetry. And what city makes the welcome, in what soil do these roots flourish?

For our concern is with sources.

The sources of poetry are in the spirit seeking completeness. If we look for the definitions of peace, we will find, in history that they are very few.[68]

The tension here is obvious: our concern today is with sources, but there are 'very few' sources of peace. Rukeyser's answer to this is to rethink the idea of source itself: 'the sources of peace are everyday'.[69] Which is to

say they are, like modernist myth, foundational springs of creativity, but also forms of creation that must be constituted by ourselves. Rukeyser's beast in view is, as she wrote in a statement for a 1945 anthology, *The War Poets*, 'the living changing goal' of possibility: '[We] can work together for a wide creative life. I believe that poetry is part of that, of the means which is peace, and of the living changing goal.'[70]

Slipping the cog:
Charles Olson and Cold War history

In a key episode of his legend, Charles Olson was born as a poet when he died as a political organiser. Beyond this, the relation between Olson's two careers has gone unspecified in narratives of his creative development. The clean break described in Tom Clark's detailed biography has been countered only by perverse portraits such as Robert von Hallberg's otherwise shrewd account, which presents the poet as an uncritical politically centrist defender of US imperialism, unreconstructed from his days as a New Dealer – a view that has persisted to the present day, as in Heriberto Yépez's less incisive *Empire of Neomemory*.[1] All accounts either see Olson breaking from politics or continuing already established liberal-democratic convictions in the humanities. The key question regarding Olson, still, concerns what he considered himself to have left behind, and what aspects of the category 'political organiser' we might consider him to have pursued in poetry, prose and wider cultural practices where, famously, 'the affairs of men remain a chief concern'.[2] The argument of this chapter is that Olson abandoned what he called 'the trick of politics' being staged in an increasingly corporate and bureaucratic party-political system for a more meaningful sense of the political where his agency could register actively in a particular constituency.[3] Explaining his decision to become a poet in a letter to Ruth Benedict, Olson makes such a motive clear from the outset:

> 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 creative work.[4]

This early vision of *polis*, and of the role the poet might play in 'social action' from within it, gives us the germ of a concern that would occupy Olson throughout his writing career. This chapter will view Olson's

poetics and cultural activities generally as a project to imagine and enact political self-determination. Olson, that is, saw at the inception of the Cold War a dangerous separation of constitutions and constituents both within the US and as a result of its interventions overseas. In response to this, his poetry, prose and teaching attempted to articulate and advance forms of real constituent power in which communities constitute themselves.[5] This perpetually creative sense of the political and the historical sees direct participation and constituent action as both the form and content of politics. In what follows I will claim that we see in Olson's work – in its attempts to imagine a history determined by human agency, to resist fixed notions of the human and the historical, and to demonstrate practical action as a rhythm of the poetic – a project to celebrate collective self-determination, re-imagine forms of constituent power, and empower disenfranchised constituents.

1 Rising and acting

There are various ways of directing the abstract conception of power outlined above to Olson's particular preoccupations. On a general level, I will claim that the central antagonist in Olson's fight for constituent power was the post-war United States itself.

Don Byrd's contention that 'Olson is perhaps the first writer to produce a major body of work in full consciousness of the implications of modern totalitarianism' may be true, but its implied bracketing of the activities of the United States, which Olson insistently allied with totalitarianism, is misleading.[6] The US and the Soviet Union resembled each other, according to Olson, because of a shared alienation from populations equally viewed as victims of overbearing governmental forms – of what Olson termed, in this context, '"Conspiracy"'.[7] His experience within government is predictably central to a disillusionment generally unfelt by his contemporaries further from the action.[8] At the Office of War Information (OWI), from which he resigned in disgust in May 1944, Olson witnessed first hand how 'the popular front vision of the anti-fascist war was defeated by the corporate vision of an American century in the OWI'.[9] Clark's biography describes the deterioration of the OWI from a creative 'spur-of-the-moment' organisation run by its workers to a top-down, bureaucratic front for the 'petty businessmen's ideas of empire-building': a state of affairs alluded to in Olson's resignation letter, which claimed censorship and bureaucracy had 'hamstrung' his and colleagues' efforts. Generally, Truman's 'merchandise men', as Olson called them, represented a move away from limited democratic

forms to the 'courthouse politics' of manoeuvring and manipulation increasingly distant from the population it was supposed to represent.[10] 'Other Than', written in 1946, shortly after Olson's goodbye to politics, had urged its readers to 'beware // of permanence' in the face of US cold warriors 'who would run in, who . . . think to make the land'.[11] The attempt to 'repossess [man] of his dynamic' is figured in large part against the apparent permanence of imperial history, seeking to challenge the authority that entrenches such an invulnerability to human action.[12]

What Olson witnessed in the half-decade after Roosevelt's death in 1945 was the deterioration of the late president's ambitions for an internationalised New Deal. Roosevelt's 'one worldism', which envisaged the global creation of governments institutionalised by a US-led United Nations and driven by the allocation of financial aid, was instrumentalised and co-opted by a regime increasingly interested in global planning only as a means to military and financial power in the drive for Cold War supremacy and global dominance. As Franz Schurmann described it,

> For the first time in world history, there was a concrete institutionalisation of the idea of world government . . . What Roosevelt had the audacity to conceive and implement was the extension of this process [the birth of the US state] of government-building to the world as a whole. The power of that vision must not be underestimated, even as one looks at the shoddy reality that began to emerge even before the San Francisco Conference [of 1945].[13]

What was an ideal of patrician but egalitarian uplift in Roosevelt became under Truman, and in reality, a drive for national hegemony increasingly dominated by the use of violence, as in the establishment of a permanent network of overseas military bases 'without historical precedent', in the words of one commentator.[14] The ease with which the quasi-imperial idealism of Roosevelt's UN was adapted to a narrowly self-interested imperialism was a key occasion for Olson's disillusionment with (though occasional nostalgia for) the politics of beneficent oversight. Accompanying this disillusionment, Olson showed an increasingly radical preoccupation with self-determination and self-constitution among non-Western communities and civilisations, often figured as a struggle against the geopolitical activities of the United States.[15]

In the context of the early Cold War, Olson conceived of constituent power as a resistance to imperialist interference and the right of postcolonial self-determination. The problem was US foreign policy. As early as the mid-forties, Olson made a distinction between the 'little' wars in

which men fought for themselves, and the 'big, official war' waged by US leaders on behalf of business interests:

> If we, the people, shall save ourselves from our leaders' shame, if we, the people, shall survive our disgust, if we, the people, shall end our own confusion, we must see this big war for the lie it is become. Make no mistake: it is a lie. Unwrap the charters and pacts. Recognise the deals.
>
> Stomach the people's hope for security. Tighten the soil over the men, always little men, who are dead. Call the big war what it is: a defeat for the people.
>
> And take a look at the other war. You might call it little. It is, where Italians in the triangle of Milan, Turin and Genoa are fighting it. Little in Jugoslavia. Little in the night of France. Small like a seed in the undergrounds, wherever men of Europe stand up to the beast.[16]

Olson privileges little wars because they are fought *by* the people, not in spite of them; from Mexico in 1951, Olson considered himself 'angered and bored as much by the old answers of foreign policy as by the old answers of writing' for this reason.[17] US politics in the international field was ultimately harmful at home, as in this grim description of the political process in 1954: 'I sit in the midst of these dreary States, all atomic and anti-Russian events served up to people to kill them off with botulism before botulism.'[18] 'The Americanization of the world' that Olson observed in 1950 was for him a defeat for the people, in both the US and the rest of the world.[19]

A key influence on Olson's decision to abandon party politics, then, was the Democratic Party's rightward turn in foreign policy after the war. Henry Wallace, Olson's preferred candidate for the unwell Roosevelt's vice-president, had been dumped by the party in favour of Harry S. Truman, and after Truman ascended to the presidency in April 1945 he demanded and received Wallace's resignation from the cabinet after the secretary of commerce delivered a speech castigating American foreign policy, especially the hard-line position on the communist world. Olson, who had only recently helped to get the Party back into government, witnessed these developments with foreboding. Central to his concerns was the issue of China, in the grip of a civil war between the authoritarian Chang-Kai Shek government and Mao Zedong's communist People's Liberation Army after 1945. Clark argues that Olson's observation of the influence of the right-wing China lobby group was decisive in confirming his disillusionment with the Party:

> The pro-Chinese Nationalist lobby in Congress, [Olson] feared, was about to tip the balance of America's influence against the popular revolution of Mao

Tse-tung. In that historically momentous springtime when his own Eastern policy releases went to the White House for checking by presidential Asian policy advisors, he saw and heard things that caused him to grow increasingly dismayed.[20]

Clark tells a story of a gift of hybrid rice that was supposed to be given to both Mao and Chiang-Kai Shek, but only ended up with the latter, a 'decision [that] symbolized all that was myopic about the new breed of policymakers' for Olson.[21] Shek's wife came to Washington in 1943 while Olson was working there – a fact reported in *The Maximus Poems*, which asks why 'that international doll' is 'put up with'.[22] Olson was no doubt aware of US interferences in the Chinese revolution far more invidious than gifts of rice in the months and years leading up to Madame Shek's second visit in 1948, just before he began his most important work.

These questions of *realpolitik* are not peripheral for Olson. Asia is at the centre of Olson's view of history from the start, and especially his vision of America within it. In *Call Me Ishmael* the West's need to 'clear [itself] of the biases of westernism' is tied up with the fate of 'Pacific Man'. Olson writes: 'With the Pacific opens the NEW HISTORY . . . America completes her West only on the coast of Asia.'[23] It is tempting to hear Manifest-Destiny imperialism in such words, but *Call Me Ishmael* as a whole makes it clear that America completes itself only in its own abnegation. Olson proposes the transposition of Asia onto the US, not the other way around, and the job of the US is to facilitate that transposition: 'The basic exterior act is a BRIDGE,' Olson writes, 'we must go over space, or we wither.'[24] Indeed, 'Asia today', according to a 1947 notebook, is 'the only course'.[25] Though at this stage, before the success of the Chinese revolution, Asia represents an abstract newness as 'the FUTURE' or 'the end of the UNKNOWN', its changing society is enthusiastically heralded by Olson as 'the coming into existence of the MASSES. Pound and his kind want to ignore them. They try to lock them out. But they swarm at the windows in such numbers they black out the light and the air'.[26] It is after reading his friend Robert Payne's work on Mao, *The Revolt of Asia*, that Olson's feelings on the issue become decidedly concrete. In a letter to Frances Bolderoff he notes,

Man as object . . . is the buried seed in all formulations of collective action stemming from Marx . . . It seems also necessary to remind the western mind of Asia, to point out the persisting failure to count what Asia will do to collectivism, the mere quantity of her people leverage enough to move the earth, leaving aside the moral grace of her leaders of Nehru, Mao, Shjarir. The will of Asia is already dictating the shape of prospective man's society on earth.[27]

The 'enemy' to *Call Me Ishmael*'s 'FUTURE', an enemy described as 'quantity, materialism, the suave', now acquires a name: 'Chiang Kai Check'.[28]

These concerns inform Olson's first major poem, 'The Kingfishers'. The poem was originally published in *Montevallo Review*, edited by Payne, who was privy to its plans and development – appropriately enough, since most of Olson's knowledge of Mao (though he owned some Mao pamphlets) came through *The Revolt of Asia*. If we ask what picture Payne paints of the Chinese leader, it is easy to see the attraction of Mao for Olson. Payne's Mao is the amateur scholar of the West that Olson is of the non-Western – a man who 'read omnivorously', 'a scholar in [his] own right, with the historian's understanding of the political forces at work and the poet's sensitivity'.[29] Just as importantly, Mao was also a participant, in Payne's overstated opening words, in 'the greatest single event in human history'.[30] For Olson, a poet searching for an art that 'does not seek to describe but to enact',[31] Mao seems to merge imagination and practice: a fact encapsulated in Olson's use in 'The Kingfishers' of Mao's performative utterance, 'We must rise and act'.[32] Ultimately, according to Olson's high praise, Mao was 'a figure of action', the kind of creative man-of-action Olson was so obsessed with and later found more fully in 'that great successor to Shakespeare', John Smith.[33] As such a figure of action, and indeed of radical success by the time 'The Kingfishers' was completed in July 1949, Mao was the ideal representative of 'the will to change'. Olson's conception of truth, as expressed in 'The Human Universe' a year later, essentially repeats Mao's *On Practice*, a book in Olson's library. Where Mao says 'Whoever wants to know a thing has no way of doing so except by coming into contact with it, that is, by living (practicing) in its environment', we hear Olson repeat, 'definition is as much a part of the act as is sensation itself . . . we are ourselves both the instrument of discovery and the instrument of definition', adding that 'if there is any absolute, it is never more than this one, you, this instant, in action'.[34] Mao's phrase, 'we must rise and act', is not mere rhetoric but an expression of Mao's insistence on voluntary agency as opposed to the relative historical determinism of his ancestors, Marx and Lenin. In its emphasis on a cultural revolution, its stress on the ideological in class war and its optimism that the Chinese peasantry and proletariat would change the world by changing themselves, Maoism casts itself as the Chinese 'practice' of Marxist 'theory'. By the time Olson started 'The Kingfishers', Mao's Communist Party was already overrunning China and becoming, in Payne's words, 'the only party [putting] the social revolution in practice'.[35] Indeed, early plans for the poem included a section on the Long March, though in

the end it seems Olson was content to present the philosophy of praxis implied by Mao's words.

'The Kingfishers' contrasts Maoist action with two things: the kingfishers themselves and what Olson calls 'the Roman'. In the case of the former, the opposition is between nesting and acting, between the fetid mass of the Second World War, details of whose Holocaust and atom bomb had recently emerged, and the need to rise and act to change the conditions that had led to it. Such a reaction accounts for the relief we feel at Mao's interruption of the kingfisher's description:

> On these rejectamenta
> (as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.
>   And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish
> becomes
>   a dripping, fetid mass
>   Mao concluded:
>   nous devons
>   nous lever
>   et agir![36]

In sequence and syntax, Mao seems to draw his conclusion from a consideration of the kingfishers. His response is to project outward from the decaying nest, which is done in a literal, spatial sense that complements the expansive import of their semantic meaning. Mao's stance is also contrasted with the Roman who ends the poem, and in this opposition we see what truly constitutes an act for Olson: the Roman, as he says in the poem, 'can take no risk that matters'. Olson means something quite specific by this figure: in 'The K', his sign-off to party politics, the cynical and hypocritical American Cold War politicos are named as 'romans', while *Call Me Ishmael* makes this charge: 'the American has the Roman feeling about the world. It is his, to dispose of. He strides it, with possession of it. His property. Has he not conquered it with his machines?'[37] Roman and American imperialists may change in the sense that, as 'The Kingfishers' has it, 'they are fed and grow': the difference is that, unlike the 'courage' of rising and acting, the Roman takes no risks, but is a continuation and expansion of the mechanical status quo. If, as Olson wrote Robert Creeley in 1951, 'the substances of history now useful lie . . . anywhere but in the direct continuum of society as we have had it', the Roman is past use.[38] Mao and the Roman, then, respectively personify what the poem terms 'discrete' and 'continuous' 'events distributed in time'. The Chinese revolution is non-continuous change that refuses to go with the flow – in the words of Olson's plan for the poem, it is 'change, forward from what is rotted'. The Roman,

on the other hand, acts merely to prolong his own existence, his world changing only insofar as it continues, like the kingfisher's nest, to bloat and decay. His utility for the poet of 'feed-back', therefore, is exclusively as a warning of decadence, a representative of what Olson called 'those who clutch old answers in a new terrifying world . . . the middle-aged, the reactionary'.[39]

The poem's most singular difficulty is how we read Mao's 'dawn' in ethical and political terms – especially in relation to the poem's other protagonist, the Spanish Conquistador Hernán Cortés. A number of critics have used Cortés as a stick with which to beat Mao, assuming an identity between the two. Guy Davenport, for example, instructs us: 'Do not miss, out of ideological blindness, the fact that Mao, like Cortés, was exterminating a civilization, with comparable cruelty.'[40] This seeming parallel, however, is not clearly in evidence in the poem, though the two are obviously related in being so pointedly juxtaposed. But what is the relationship, precisely? At an obvious level, both Mao and Cortés represent violence and the action at the heart of watershed historical events. The key political question concerns what this violence acts against in the poem. The subjects of overthrow by Cortés, in Olson's version of events, are Aztec priests:

> In this instance, the priests
> (in dark cotton robes, and dirty,
> their dishevelled hair matted with blood, and flowing wildly
> over their shoulders)
> rush in among the people, calling on them
> to protect their gods

The priests, in their dirt and dishevelment, resemble the nest of the kingfisher. Unsurprisingly then, in a political sense they seem similar to the Roman or US Cold Warrior, detached from 'the people', clutching old answers in a new terrifying world (the final two lines here evoke the Cold War hysteria of the poem's immediate context). The blood in their hair, meanwhile, is of sacrifices, leading us to associate Cortés with Mao, who implicitly 'conquers' the Chinese cannibalism reported by Marco Polo in the poem. And yet, Cortés is also described as 'that other conqueror we more naturally recognize / he so resembles ourselves' – hardly a recommendation, since it links him directly to US imperialism. While the conquest of Mexico is certainly 'not accumulation but change', and is therefore different from the Roman imperialism critiqued in the poem, it remains part of the colonial history that Mao acts against. 'Mao makes Mexico certain,' Olson wrote in a letter to Creeley shortly after the revolution, suggesting that Cortés is a kind of intermediate

figure between the Roman and Mao, in a dialectical relationship to both.[41]

However, Mao differs from all of the other materials in the poem in that his specific nature, his 'leap', is in a strict sense abstract and unde-cided. His 'act' is purely projective – an imperative rather than a fact, a constitutive form insofar as its content will only be decided by the masses urged to act. Specifically, the poem warns against 'the too strong grasping' of change because it is insistent on the new as unmeasurable: this is what defines a 'risk that matters', and why the poem makes no discursive remarks on politics. Mao represents a birth rather than a rebirth – something new and therefore not describable per se. Olson's outline for an abandoned poem of the period, 'West', has plans for a 'figure, yet unnamed':

> the man who, like Ulysses for the West, carries in him the seeds of the way of life which shall replace the West, and in a dying world is restless to open the new; confused, harried, but breathing the air of another Indies while those around him stifle from the dead will.[42]

Though 'The Kingfishers' asks the question of how change, as distinct from flow, comes about, a condition of the question is that it can only be gestured at within the poem's formal convictions. A dynamic has begun to be named, here and in other poems of the period, as a rising or awak-ening. The truth of awakening, however, lies in the Heraclitean move-ment of becoming awake, not the contemplation of wakefulness. The seeds of a new social life are, therefore, yet to fully take form. The 'END OF WHAT WAS' is followed only by possibility, 'the BEGINNING OF WHAT CAN BE', as Olson states in 1950.[43] Mao is 'what stalks / this silence', but we are presented with a void, a silence, a presence dawning but not yet fully grasped.[44]

'The Kingfishers' brings together a number of concerns for Olson: Asia, popular revolution, colonialism, war, the death of old cultures and the birth of new ones. The poem is Olson's most successful attempt at an anti-Poundian use of history that gestures at futurity, summed up in *Call Me Ishmael*'s idea that 'the man of antiquity, before he did anything, took a step like the bullfighter who leaps back in order to deliver the mortal thrust'.[45] The urgency of the particular anxieties Olson felt about the West, the horror of its world war and its continuing chauvinism follow-ing it, made the poem's projective historiography, here tentatively titled 'feed-back', an almost instinctive form – something emerging from Olson's keenly felt sense of Cold War amnesia rather than a theoretically con-ceived mode into which such concerns were placed. The formal discoveries of 'The Kingfishers' would, however, lead Olson to a painstaking exami-

nation of the assumptions implicit in what he later called a 'post-modern' way of writing history, and a thorough investigation of the abstract and even universal relation between the old and new, the past and present. Olson's concerns in 'The Kingfishers', that is, take on a emblematic importance in his later work, prompting the 'special view of history' that has come to define Olson's contribution to the American long poem.

2 Breaking the egg of history

By the mid-fifties Olson had become an influential pedagogue in a burgeoning poetical counterculture. On leaving Black Mountain in 1956 he had published three full collections with some renown in the literary underground, was known for important expository prose including *Mayan Letters*, 'Human Universe' and the seminal 'Projective Verse', and exercised a more informal and direct influence on younger poets such as Robert Creeley, Cid Corman and a number of then Black Mountain students, including Ed Dorn and John Wieners. As the fifties wore on, Olson's work changed, developing deft personal responses to the war and its aftermath to give a more rhetorical and systematic account of the workings of change in human society. The immediate problems raised by the failure of Western ideas manifested in the war, and the escalation of such failure through an expanding US imperialism, are elaborated in these later works' capacious and comprehensive philosophy of the historical per se. By articulating a changing and ultimately changeable version of human history, Olson was also able to overcome vocational teething problems experienced in his apprenticeships to Pound, 'the snob of the West' who 'feared anything forward' and Williams, criticised as a poet who 'lets time roll him under'.[46]

Olson's key terminological distinction in this poetics of history is between life and death. Early in his career, in a series of repetitions, Olson pushes and pulls these terms to create variations on the basic theme of death as the past and life as the present. 'La Préface', Olson's first mature poem, placed 'The dead in via / in vita nuova / in the way'. Though emanations from Nazi concentration camps, Olson contends, these dead must not be claustrophobically mourned in an indulgent navel-gazing, but rather used to open up a new time:

> The closed parenthesis reads: the dead bury the dead,
>   and it is not very interesting.
> Open, the fissure stands at the door, horror his
> and gone . . .[47]

The poem warns us that we, 'the new born', must leave these dead buried, for there are present concerns, personified in 'the Howling Babe', that must take our attention away from mere lament: 'We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead.' 'La Chute', a poem written shortly after 'La Préface', takes on the persona of Gilgamesh to raise similar questions about the role of the artist in the aftermath of death:

> . . . my drum fell
> where the dead are, who
> will bring it up, my lute
> who will bring it up where it fell in the face of them
> where they are, where my lute and drum have fallen?[48]

The lute's fall from 'lustiness' to death is a primordial concomitant of the poet's own crisis in the aftermath of Buchenwald. The dead, that is, hinder the production of living art, inflecting it with their fallenness. This sense of contamination is most vividly described in 'At Yorktown':

> At Yorktown the church
> at Yorktown the dead
> at Yorktown the grass
> are live
>
> at York-town the earth
> piles itself in shallows,
> declares itself, like water,
> by pools and mounds[49]

Death here should not be equated with destruction, a living force in Olson's work, as 'The Kingfishers' makes clear: 'To destroy / is to start again // to let breath in', as he declaims in one of his very first poems, 'La Torre'.[50] In Yorktown's landscape, death is what lingers, what unnaturally continues to attach itself to life, what 'piles itself', endlessly repeating like the poem's incantatory lines. The decaying dead are anathema to the living landscape, where now 'only the flies / dawdle'. In short, 'the dead' drag us down: 'the long dead / loosen the earth, heels / sink in'.

Olson would eventually account for the seductiveness of such fatalism in addition to exhorting against it. The trace of the dead, that is, must be specified for Olson, and an explanation given for its continued existence. Such a project is tentatively outlined in a letter to Creeley at the time of these early poems:

> If you and I see the old deal as dead (including Confucius, say), at the same time that we admit the new is the making of our own lives & references, yet,

there is bound to be a tremendous pick-up from history other than that which has been usable as reference.[51]

This superfluous but unavoidable 'pick-up' is merely *resisted* in most of Olson's earliest poetry, but its problematic, unusable energy, especially following the death of his mother in 1951, persists in such a manner that *understanding* its workings becomes a necessary complement to resisting its temptations. One of Olson's most graceful poems, 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us', is crucial in this regard. Here, 'death in life (death itself)' is deconstructed with a distinctive intensity. A kind of anti-elegy, the piece urges a wakefulness, an awareness of a proper resting place for the dead that we currently and erroneously position 'in ourselves'. Though it seeks 'peace' from the dead mother, 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' was composed six years after the death of Mary Olson and, while the inspiration for the poem apparently comes from a dream, the extrapolation from this central theme is universalising in impulse.[52] The poem's desire, in Robert Duncan's gloss, 'to be released from the grievance and ache of the mother-flesh', establishes it as a drawn-out struggle of general dimensions rather than a personal dirge.[53] Its yearning to 'grow, and act, away from / the mother', should be read as a universal struggle between the past and the present and how 'the dead prey upon us' all.[54] One implication of this universalising tendency is that 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' should properly be read alongside Olson's 'special view of history' as a whole. Here I intend to give an account of the aesthetic experience of this 'view', before going on to explore it in the abstract.

Where 'A Newly Discovered Homeric Hymn', a shorter poem written around nine months earlier, is a warning to 'Beware the dead', 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' explores what we must do when we have inevitably become ensnared in its 'blackmail'.[55] The poem begins with a proposition followed by an imperative that we are also invited to read as an entreaty:

As the dead prey upon us,
they are the dead in ourselves,
awake my sleeping ones, I cry out to you
disentangle the nets of being!

I pushed my car, it had been sitting so long unused.
I thought the tires looked as though they only needed air.
But suddenly the huge underbody was above me, and the rear tires
were masses of rubber and thread variously clinging together[56]

The first question here concerns address: who are 'my sleeping ones'? The collective pronoun places the addressee in the camp of the living,

and yet the boundaries are blurred given that we ourselves seem to be halfway to death in our sleeping. This complication of living and dead is continued with the abrupt entrance of the car, whose exposed underbody resembles a laid-out corpse. Here, the vehicle is symbolic of the dead mother who enters immediately after – it imposes itself despite its 'long unused' lifelessness, with a 'huge underbody' ironically 'above' Olson.

The pun of 'dead souls in the living room' introduces the first revenants proper of the piece, and finesses the original confusions of living and dead. These wandering dead are in two places at once: 'in ourselves' and 'in hell'. The poem offers no heavenly habitation for the deceased, and yet its hell is peculiar, characterised above all by 'poverty' and 'tawdriness'. Though the dead lead a '*life* in hell', with Olson's mother 'alive as she ever was', it is a lifeless life in which people are 'poor and doomed / to mere equipments'. The poem at this point stages various attempts (visionary lyric, Buddhist philosophy) to escape from these remains, but still cannot evade the mother, 'as present' as when she was alive, with a body 'as solid'. The impasse leads to this frustrated self-castigation: 'The nets we are entangled in. Awake, / my soul, let the power into the last wrinkle / of being, let none of the threads and rubber of the tires / be left upon the earth. Let even your mother / go.'[57] So far, so similar to the injunction of 'A Newly Discovered Homeric Hymn': 'Greet the dead in the dead man's time.'[58] However, at this point in 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us', unsatisfied with the mere *statement* of rectitude, Olson introduces a new term with which to *imagine* letting go: the vent. This Shelleyan 'wind', in the face of 'the ugly automobile . . . the heaviness of the old house, the stuffed inner room', is offered as a force that 'lifts the sodden nets':

> The vent! You must have the vent,
> Or you shall die. Which means
> never to die, the ghastliness
>
> of going, and forever
> coming back, returning
> to the instants which were not lived

The meaning of the dead is fully described here: they are undead figures of backwardness whose net of ghastly, self-referential enclosure must be opened if the living are to become more than the mechanical repetition of 'instants which were not lived' by them but by their forebears. Olson sees agency in these articulations: since 'I am myself netted in my own being', he suggests, the living possess their own resources to, mixing metaphors, 'slip the cog'.

Section two unites the concerns of nets and circling in the figure of the knot. Here, it is the work of 'hands' that forms the action – a significant advance on section one's pleas to the dead mother or ascetic renunciations of living desire. This 'touch' is not content with the act of untying, which would approach the net, as it were, on its own terms, but rather causes each knot to catch fire:

> The death in life (death itself)
> is endless, eternity
> is the false cause
>
> The knot is other wise, each topological corner
> presents itself, and no sword
> cuts it, each knot is itself its fire
>
> each knot of which the net is made
> is for the hand to untake
> the knot's making. And touch alone
>
> can turn the knot into its own flame

Unlike the dead, the knot is there for use – it is the accessible ('presents itself') counterpart to the oppressive but unrecoverable dead. Its use, however, is as fuel for fire, and Olson's self-reflexive metaphor of the knot as its 'own flame' combines a sense in which the dead can both be consigned to their rightful place of non-existence and, in being so consumed, provide sustenance for vital existence. For though we are briefly, once again, returned to the mother, distracting Olson in a squabble with a neighbour, the poet gradually build up to this conclusion: 'We have only one course: / the nets which entangle us are flames.' The lesson is that the net cannot be externalised and must be taken as ourselves, living now: 'O souls, burn / alive, burn now // that you may forever / have peace, have // what you crave.' With a double meaning on 'comes through', Olson expresses both the provenance and the continuance of the net: 'let not any they tell you / you must sleep as the net / comes through your authentic hands'. It is finally the possibility and necessity of *doing* that provides the 'vent' of the poem:

> all knots are a wall ready
> to be shot open by you
>
>   the nets of being
> are only eternal if you sleep as your hands
> ought to be busy. Method, method
>
> I too call on you to come
> to the aid of all men, to women most
> who know most, to woman to tell

men to awake. Awake, men,
awake

In this, the poem's crucial statement, the parameters of existence are only unchangeable if self-determination is allowed to sleep 'as your hands / ought to be busy'. This agency cannot simply be directed in any manner: it must have 'method' appropriate to its responsibility for awakening man to his sovereignty. This method must itself 'slip the cog', repudiate the deterministic sway of the past on the present, and function as more than 'an ability – a machine', to quote the title of a later Olson piece.[59] Though 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' ends by returning us to the poet's personal frailties, these are presented within a framework of qualified success, in contrast to the poem's beginning: by the end the mother may 'sit in happiness', and the 'automobile / has been hauled away'.

Olson's ambitious 'hauling away' had an urgency of its own in 1956, when the dominant poetry of the US was fixated on ruins, as the likes of Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell used the past to construct historical scrapheaps, developing Eliot's reactionary 'historical sense' into a mood of full resignation at the absurdity of human history. Such glibness is not directly attacked in 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us', but the poem does intend to 'disentangle' the individual from the dead family, and to articulate the present outside of deterministic vocabularies dependent on the past, offers an alternative response to the ironic and defeatist mourning so prevalent in 'Middle Generation' verse, as well as, more generally, the 1950s' increasingly petrified sense of 'Americanness' that set its own constraining nets around what was historically authentic in the land of the free. I want now to define the 'method' of such 'venting' as we encounter it in Olson's speculative prose essays, and finally in its practical manifestations in Olson's cultural activism.

That Olson began this project by looking to a non-Western past is well-known. His thoughts on the Maya in his 1951 essay, 'Human Universe', though tinged with a peculiar kind of orientalism, give rise to a crucial methodological conviction:

[A] people different from himself – they will be the subject of historians' studies or tourists' curiosity, and be let go at that, no matter how much they may disclose values he and his kind, you would think, could make use of. I have found, for example, that the hieroglyphs of the Maya disclose a placement of themselves toward nature of enormous contradiction to ourselves, and yet I am not aware that any of the possible usages of this difference has been allowed to seep into present society . . . [Such history is offered] as decoration of knowledge upon some Christian and therefore eternal and holy neck. It is unbearable what knowledge of the past has become.[60]

Creeley distinguished Olson from a defeatist sense of history in which 'you're stuck in some inexorable manner and it grinds you out, you're always too late because it all happened last year'.[61] Here, Olson contends that we must look beyond the temporal imperialism of absorbing all past culture into the familiar categories of our own. Rather than opening self-knowledge through the recognition of different ways of thinking, the 'tourists' curiosity' hangs the past on an 'eternal and holy neck'. History's 'use' as difference, therefore, is lost in favour of a decoration to reinforce existing values. Olson's underlying conviction, of course, is that the US itself must strive to be radically different from what has gone before, to resist continuing a tradition that to him seemed intent on re-living the Roman Empire, European colonialism and the Second World War all in one. In a letter of the same year, Olson tells Vincent Ferrini: 'when traditions go, the DISCONTINUOUS becomes the greener place'.[62] Olson's most important prose work, *The Special View of History* (1956), would systematise these attacks on continuity. Though, as we will see shortly, Olson's discontinuous is most fully expressed in his own concrete acts of cultural intervention and communal constitution at Black Mountain, where he wrote the essay as a series of talks, his effort to 'repossess [man] of his dynamic' at the conceptual level forms a useful distillation of the wider project's motivations. *The Special View of History*, though itself an event that Olson performed at Black Mountain and around California, is Olson's most abstract and speculative meditation on the nature of the subject, alive in the becoming of history.

The work bases its notion of the discontinuous 'event' on a reading of A. N. Whitehead, whose 'cell-theory of actuality'[63] rested on the idea that continuity was something achieved by entities after their existence had first been secured in discontinuity – the idea of a 'next occasion' in a supposed continuum being only meaningful as such by the 'production of novelty'.[64] Olson develops this notion politically in *Special View*, where it is summed up in the essay's central but paradoxical statement, 'MAN IS A CONTINUOUS CHANGE IN TIME'.[65] In effect, Olson poses a sense of agency in continual discontinuity: 'the irresistible is usually only that which hasn't been resisted'.[66] Asking 'What are we to do but break the egg of history, and get outside', Olson answers with the 'act' of humans, with a distinct sense that continuity is an *issue* for man, against an unchanging 'history' that merely grinds him down.[67] Here we are returned explicitly to the question of constitutive power. Olson's contention is that history is 'what [man] does'. Olson terms such action the 'actual', which is alone 'determinative'.[68] 'History,' he asserts, 'is the *function* of any one of us': we act upon history rather than vice versa in

Olson's special view.[69] 'Man has the context of his own species for his self or he is a pseudo creature,' Olson writes, and within his notion of the human subject is an acknowledged post-humanism which allies his thought with more contemporary theories of revolutionary politics.[70]

The French philosopher Alain Badiou can help translate some of Olson's only apparently vague assertions regarding history into the vocabulary of 'social action' Olson had announced as a poetic concern at the very start of his career. Badiou's theory of the subject is tied up with his theory of the Event, which closely echoes Olson's 'act' as radically discontinuous. Indeed, for Badiou the event *is* an event because of its 'impossibility'[71] within the logics it displaces; it is a 'totally ab-normal' void in the structure of being.[72] Being absent, the Event is uniquely that which exists by being *chosen* by subjects, who in the act of this decision are constituted as such. For Badiou the subject is not given, but 'becomes' through the act of choosing and instituting the Event. Thus in his attempt to renew the notion of agency in the wake of poststructuralism, Badiou denies the category of subjecthood to any human lacking a precise, and probably revolutionary, social agency. Olson's notion of man as '[a]n active', opposed in *Special View* to rationalism's 'counsel of despair' in which 'Man is simply filling an empty space', likewise opens the notion of the human up to a future beyond what is made to seem necessary and consummate by the past.[73] The being of the subject for Olson is what he does (though not, as we shall see, without limit). 'Man is, He acts.' The two are identical and cannot, one suspects, exist apart for Olson: 'Actual wilful man,' he writes, 'has to do something about himself.'[74]

The immediate objection to such assertive self-determination is that it simply repeats Romantic ideals of the transcendent ego. To break the 'egg of history' could be taken to imply an escape from it entirely. That such a reading would be a mistake can be shown in two ways: firstly, by reading *Special View* back into the context from which it emerges, and secondly, by reading Olson's own counter to such Romantic soul-making in his concept of the 'limit'. For the former, we can trace Olson's conception of action as social participation back to his earliest essays. 'Human Universe' bemoans how

> The notion of fun comes to displace work as what we are here for . . . Spectatorism crowds out participation as the condition of culture. All individual energy is bought off—at a suggestion box or the cinema. Passivity conquers all. Even war and peace die (to be displaced by world government?) and man reverts to only two of his components, inertia and gas . . .[75]

Spectatorism and passivity are equated with representative and indeed global totalitarian government, where work and energy are 'bought off'. The consequence of inaction, he suggests, is domination, as in this later *Origin* letter:

> the spectatorism which both capitalism and communism breed—breed it as surely as absentee ownership . . . doth breed it, separating men from action 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.[76]

Absentee ownership is an issue for Olson for many reasons, not least of which is its role in destroying the link between community and place, but here it represents the absence of power in the people who are subject to it. The important 1953 *Maximus* poem, 'Letter 23', would more particularly pit itself 'against nascent capitalism except as it stays the individual adventurer and the worker on share – against all sliding statism, ownership getting in to, the community as, Chamber of Commerce, or theocracy; or City Manager' – an announcement that explicitly ties the acting subject ('individual adventurer') with the communal constituency ('worker on share').[77]

Charles Bernstein has criticised 'Olson's refusal to accept the limits of knowledge'.[78] As a post-humanist of sorts, Olson is rightly suspicious of such limits as a conservative naturalisation of the political status quo. There are other limits in Olson, however. Creeley speaks of his mistake in once taking Olsonian limits 'to be a frustration of possibility rather than the literal possibility they in fact must provoke'.[79] The limit is dialectical in Olson, as in *Special View*'s key distinction between two types of action:

> one gets two sorts of will, a will of power or a will of achievement. The first one is the one in which the will collapses back to the subjective understanding – tries to make it by asserting the self as character. The second makes it by non-asserting the self as self. In other words the riddle is that the true self is not the asserting function but an obeying one, that the actionable is *larger* than the individual and so can be obeyed to.[80]

Stephen Fredman has claimed that the Olsonian limit serves as a means to 'combat the pervasive American belief in unlimited possibilities' – this needs serious qualification, however, since Fredman also ties this combat with a resistance to change in Olson.[81] The American belief in unlimited possibilities is emphatically personified for Olson at the start of his career in the figure of Ahab. Olson's Ahab, the pure subjectivity seeking exclusive power through force of self-will, is the ultimate

ungrounded figure: without origin, without community, without place, without limit. His anti-social egotism, however, is itself a limit in historical terms: as Olson grandly declares in *Call Me Ishmael*, Ahab is the end of the project of Western Man, of humanism, of 'what we have had'.[82]

The true action or will, on the other hand, acknowledges the limits of 'the self as character', obeying a wider context of what is 'actionable'. This figure moves from a conventional humanist conception of freedom *from* to the Hegelian notion of freedom *to*, as Creeley recognised: in attending to the larger grounding and limits of the individual, one achieves a true self, and truly acts. There must be an 'END of individual responsible only to himself' represented by Ahab.[83] Only then is man responsible to 'history' conceived as 'the confidence of limit as a man is caught in the assumption and power of change' – a richly ambiguous statement akin to Marx's 'Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please'.[84] Man is caught in the power of change but he must also assume that power and institute change through action. This action is neither the negation of history nor resignation to determinism; it is, as 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' tells us, the application of 'method', of a special view of history in which we awaken ourselves and historical processes simultaneously. The 'nets of being' are limits, but they need not be escaped or transcended, but rather fired up, transformed and made transformative. In itself a performance in how we might 'slip the cog', Olson's poem is the enactment of this transformation. Its dramatisation of a mind thinking itself simultaneously through, out of and awake from the deadening effects of a culture obsessed with repeating its past represents one of the key articulations of Olson's radical projective poetics.

3 A live society

'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' and *The Special View of History* are both important episodes in a wider practice that had Black Mountain College at its centre. Though Olson initially came to the unique creative environment as a stranger, its symbiotic relation to his thinking during his years as Rector (1951–6), both informing and eventually informed by intellectual concerns worked out in the mid-fifties, is remarkable. 'It was a polis,' as Olson records in *The Maximus Poems*, placing Black Mountain at the centre of his thinking about poetics and history. The college was both a spur for Olson's writing, as his early letters from North Carolina demonstrate, and a stage for its dissemination. The link between expressing change and instituting constitutive forms must be considered as more an analogy, however, for there were precise

characteristics of Olson's rectorship that can be considered as concrete attempts to 'break the egg' and 'slip the cog' of history and changelessness. These qualities at once retain a continuity with Olson's ideas about history and action and represent their projection beyond the abstract.

At the centre of Olson's pedagogy was the notion of ritual. As we have seen, Olson rejects the view of myth as text, as a system of symbolism transporting the reader back to the originary moment or divinity. Through Cambridge Ritualist Jane Harrison, Olson understood myth as something done or performed, as existing in the flow of history rather than before its adulterations. For Harrison and the other Cambridge Ritualists who redefined the study of myth, myth is part of an activity: 'The primary meaning of myth . . . is the spoken correlative of the acted rite, the thing done.'[85] For Harrison, the meaning of myth is not only tied to its role in 'the thing done', however: it is also incantatory, having in its proper context an agency, an ability to *do* in itself. Far from an originary tale before history, myth has the ability, through 'collective sanction and solemn purpose', to act in the present as '*practically* a story of magical intent and potency'.[86] For Olson, likewise, 'The *mythological* was the way I had come, finally, to put the sense I had that each of us obeyed and acted in.'[87] This conception of myth expands into a practice of knowledge or learning in action generally. That is, just as the truth of myth was only to be found in its communal enactment, so learning in its fullest sense was to be seen as a continuing process of collaborative doing. If Princeton's Institute for Advanced Studies was 'a kind of assembly point of ideas', Olson claimed, Black Mountain would stand as 'an assembly point of *acts*'.[88] At Black Mountain, Olson recalled, 'the air was full of the droplets of *events*'.[89] The claim is obviously borne out in the activity for which Black Mountain was to become most famous: events involving Olson alone include the 'first ever happening', *Theatre Piece no.1* (1952), involving John Cage, David Tudor, Robert Rauschenberg, Olson and others; the performance of Olson's *Apollonius of Tyana*; dance-plays and dance enactments of Olson's own works; and the 'glyph gifts' episode in which faculty exchanged various artistic interpretations of Olson's poem, 'The Glyph'. There was much else Olson was indirectly responsible for besides.

Olson's sense of transmission is defined by the conviction that '[t]here is only one thing you can do about kinetic, re-enact it'.[90] Understanding this, Olson claimed, we arrive at the conviction, 'he who possesses rhythm possesses the universe'.[91] Movement and fluidity are central to Olson's ambition at Black Mountain, and return us to the concerns of 'The Kingfishers': Olson later recalled 'the enormous gracefulness, and the complete unsafety, or the lack of any Roman condition whatsoever.

I mean the total insecurity, founded, built in, created in its origin'.[92] This liberated self-constitution is the concomitant of myth as knowledge constantly reinvented and performed in a present, rather than the comfort and safety of an unchanging foundation of being. Olson also allies it with Mao's long march, and the medieval Chinese novel he says inspired Mao, *All Men Are Brothers*, which sees all the experts of the kingdom (dancers, scholars, swordsmen) turn itinerant after dismissal from their monarch.[93] Olson felt the outlaw status was preferable as a state in which a community *moved*, in which the polis was constantly self-constituting, self-employed and self-inventing. Black Mountain, he likewise claimed:

> was that kind of place where you could call – you announced concerts within three minutes, I would say, because it was one spot. You announced a coup d'état, you counteracted a coup d'état in two minutes. You equally, of course, were teaching in two minutes, you were painting or doing other things at the other end of the lake within two minutes. It was about a two minute walk from the dining hall to the studies building . . .[94]

It is this characteristic of quick fluidity, of a perpetually open process of social constitution in which coups d'état were a constant possibility, that made Black Mountain 'a live society, not something proposed – something that was done and was there'.[95]

There is a risk of marginality at the heart of Olson's Black Mountain. Ritual would take on disreputable, indeed dangerous forms in the 1960s, associated exclusively with underground or so-called alternative forms of community. Black Mountain can often appear as a retreat, and is in danger of being retrospectively defined as a place where society's discontents could 'opt out' of conventionality. This would be an error, but it informs an understandable uncertainty many have had with Olson's political poetics: whether he might not have been exactly the type of person the world could use *inside* the Democratic party machine or even government. Anne Waldman says:

> had he stayed, he could have been player . . . It's unfortunate [that he didn't] in a way because you want people like that 'inside'. I feel like this myself—sort of clamouring at the gates and wanting to be more effective. How do you become more effective . . . How do you get opportunities to make that radical shift?[96]

The question at this point becomes one of the nature of withdrawal: was Olson's move, as it were, from the Democratic party to Black Mountain, a move toward increased self-determination at the cost of diminished social impact?

Olson himself semi-facetiously thought of Black Mountain as 'the predecessor of the nation . . . the mute show before the main show'. For him, Black Mountain was not a commune but a 'city'. The distinction is crucial and precise. 'A city,' he said, in relation to Black Mountain, 'is a wonderful thing because you can walk in and out of it, yes? At the same time, it is a unit.'[97] There are two connected qualities, then, that keep Black Mountain from being cut off or merely 'self-sufficient': something is always coming in from the outside, and something is always going out. Managing what came *in* meant 'facing social fact' for Olson. In general terms, 'Black Mountain was always being fought for' in the shape of a constant battle to recruit students in competition with more conventional, accrediting schools (the issue of whether the college could or should award degrees was a constant one under Olson's leadership).[98] The 'social fact' extended, however, far beyond Black Mountain's place in the educational economy of the US. The phrase is used by Olson in a faculty meeting on 21 November 1951, where he discusses his visits to black schools, which are 'alert' and sympathetic to what Black Mountain has to say but nonetheless do not send students to the institution.[99] As the detailed minutes show, this problem leads to a lengthy discussion of Black Mountain's entire curriculum, teaching method, admissions policy and public image. Olson's point, almost unanimously repudiated by others according to the minutes, was that it is a virtue to cater to the 'marginal area' since such areas are often at the centre of a nation's hidden history. The question of 'breaking the egg of history' here literally means getting outsiders *in* in a clear political sense.[100] It hardly needs mentioning that the admission, let alone the active solicitation, of black students was no small gesture to make in a Southern state at the time. The college, that is, may have sealed itself in a different time zone to the rest of North Carolina,[101] but the marginal constituencies to which it often appealed were part of a wider struggle and a wider 'traffic of human society' to which it was uniquely open. The active engagement with this traffic is what Olson has in mind when he says, again distinguishing the college from other institutions, 'Black Mountain was always being fought for'.[102]

How Olson looked outward from Black Mountain's 600-acre plot of land, or the 'struggle to make Black Mountain a community in the social, purposeful sense', is in some ways much simpler.[103] For its tiny enrolment Black Mountain produced a truly prodigious quantity of talent in the arts, with students including Robert Rauschenberg, Cy Twombly, John Wieners, Jonathan Williams and Ed Dorn. Black Mountain's emanations cannot, however, be accounted for by merely what individual faculty and students later went onto achieve.[104] A particular episode

at the time is more instructive. When Olson was writing 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us' and *The Special View of History* Black Mountain was in serious financial straits, and would very soon close, leaving Olson responsible for winding up the institution. It is oddly at this point that Olson proposes a monumental expansion the 'spontaneous, irregular, guerrilla forms' he had recommended to Cid Corman in 1950 at the college.[105] Going far beyond previous public faces of the college (*Black Mountain Review*, Corman's *Origin* and Olson's lecture tours, as well as abortive attempts to put Black Mountain on TV, to create a Black Mountain Theatre in San Francisco, and publish anthologies such as *Black Mountain Poems*), Olson has two plans.[106]

The first is for a Black Mountain 'caravan', where Olson would use money from the sale of the college's remaining assets (estimated at $45,000) for a travelling road show, surely inspired by *All Men Are Brothers*, bringing an 'Institute in Pre-Homeric Texts and Literature' to people around the nation. These plans were shot down by the lawyer in charge of the college's winding up. Olson had a second, even more ambitious plan, however, which sought to rescue the college by making it ten times bigger and more ambitious. 'The Corporation of Black Mountain College' is at once a transliteration of Olson's intellectual concerns into an educational organisation and an explosion, graphically conveyed in Figure 1, of the college itself. The proposed corporation would not only have extended Black Mountain's activities to incorporate the breadth of the US, with operations in New York, San Francisco, Boston, Philadelphia and North Carolina: it would have turned the college into a fully fledged machine of liberal arts education with its own theatre, magazine, multiple academies, publishing house and celebrity advisory council encompassing almost all disciplines bar mathematics. If Olson's life work was 'to centralise cultural expression from an institutionally peripheral position', as Robert von Hallberg's study of Olson asserts, this is the diagram that reveals it.[107] The project attempts to break the egg of history, disciplinarity and indeed Black Mountain itself. Its goals, snuffed out because of the near-insanity of the project at a time the college was all but insolvent, would ultimately be realised in *The Maximus Poems*, for which Olson might have drawn a similar diagram. What is decisive, and distinctive about Olson as a poet, is the concern that cultural activity, and writing specifically, go beyond the word, become *extra-literary*. This was the observation Michael Boughn made, learning under Olson at Buffalo in 1963:

> All this work was implicated in a move away from what we think of as the 'literary,' finally claiming for poetry an altogether other range of importance

. . . The literary . . . as an institution, as institutionalized practices. Crucial to Olson's sense of a move beyond or around the literary is his notion that it's possible to reconnect with or recover energies that pre-exist their historical institutionalization into a specific, fixed grammar of social practices. And even more importantly, that to do that, to push one's self toward that connection, is to disrupt or alter that grammar, a profoundly political act.[108]

What Black Mountain and the texts Olson produced were marginal to was the institution of literariness, in its most quotidian sense, because Olson saw that celebrated institution as in itself marginal to political constitution and real knowledge.

Black Mountain was 'a live society' because it was self-constituted and self-constituting, a radical present in which institution and community were commensurate, in contradistinction to the 'absentee ownership' Olson felt was eroding political agency everywhere. It was also, more than this, a *polis* able to project beyond itself, to operate as a catalyst constituencies might pass through and into 'the nation'. Undoubtedly in both interrelated projects Olson becomes something quite different to
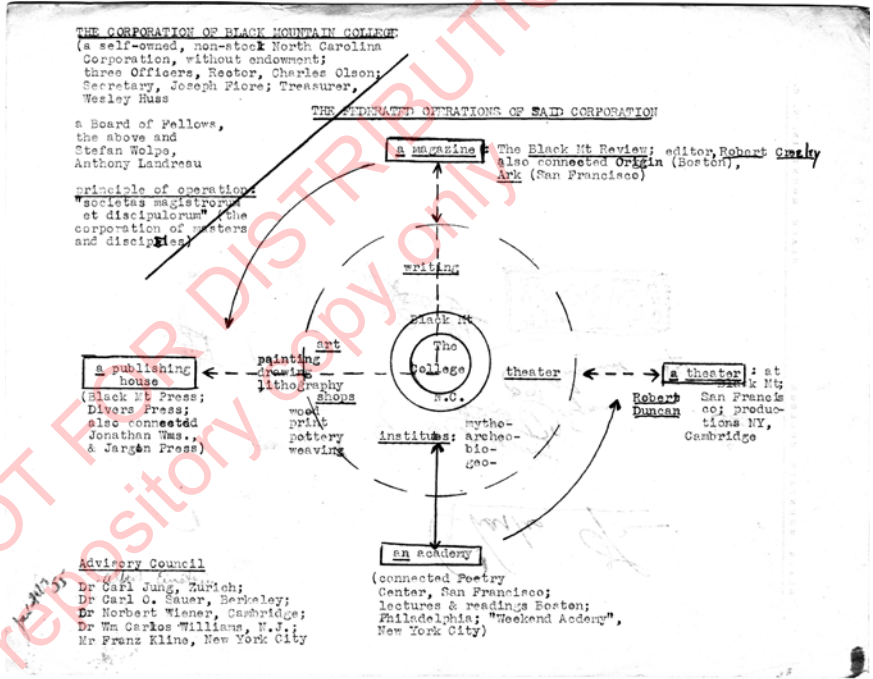

Figure 1 Charles Olson, 'Plan for the Corporation of Black Mountain College After 1956', c. 1954, Charles Olson Research Collection, Archives & Special Collections at the Thomas J. Dodd Research Center, University of Connecticut Libraries.

the 'ward and precinct man' he had been in his previous career, and this was undoubtedly a loss to electoral politics. Equally, however, to 'break of the egg' of history was never an attempt to transcend social forces, and Olson never became the *opposite* of the political man he once was. His was rather an ambitious negation of a particular kind of history, mechanical and cog-like, a negation that affirmed and projected – in poems, in ideas, in institutions – into a future, imagining a *polis* where society might be constituted by its subjects. As Olson himself put it, the issue was always 'the degree to which the projective involves a stance toward reality outside a poem as well as a new stance toward the reality of the poem itself'.[109]

Husky phlegm and spoken lonesomeness: poetry against the Vietnam War

Olson's positioning as a political poet was rare in the 1950s, even within the burgeoning avant-garde renaissance that became known as the New American Poetry. Events in Vietnam in the 1960s, however, at once a culmination of post-war foreign policy and a shock to the system of the body politic, would soon change attitudes to artistic political commitment. Olson's convictions on these issues would turn out to be prescient of what many Americans came to feel Vietnam represented: that US post-war internationalism was an imperial force all along. Nonetheless, the attempt by poets to work out a relationship with US imperialism in the wake of the war was a famously troubled episode. On the one hand, the uncritical patriotism implicit in Donald Allen's description in *The New American Poetry* of 'our avant-garde' no longer held water, but on the other the nature of the distance from the nation threatened to alienate poets from politics altogether. The late sixties' various enthusiasms for and disillusionments with politically detached and politically committed poetry raised questions about the priorities of the only recently rebegun experimental project in American poetry, making the event central for evaluating the post-war response of avant-garde aesthetics to political crisis. Evaluations of the period have tended to focus on the splitting effect the war had on poetics, and the damage a polarised poetic community did to poets' critical thinking about poetry's public function. Though antagonism was undoubtedly keenly felt, and a dominant note in arguments as they unfolded, I want also to explore here how apparently irreconcilable differences were exacerbated by agreement. That is, avant-garde poetry's response to Vietnam can show us the often uninterrogated premises on which argument about political poetry took place, such as the opposition between individual conscience and *realpolitik*, at a certain point in the history of vanguard poetics (and possibly its endpoint). I will begin by setting the scene of these assumptions, before examining the two poets most important for

understanding their limitations and possibilities, Denise Levertov and Allen Ginsberg.

1 Inside the psyche: some trends in poetry against the war

By the late sixties, poetry had a readership it had not seen since the Depression and was increasingly audible in public life. James Sullivan claims that 'the proliferation of poetry in all formats' showed a population 'writing and reading poems [as] an appropriate way to explore their own relation to the historical moment' – a claim supported by the concordant growth of poetry book and magazine sales and the explosion of anti-war poetry production, publicity and grassroots dissemination.[1] Audiences for poetry 'increased astonishingly' in the period, according to Robert von Hallberg.[2] Subscriptions to *Poetry* increased by 50 per cent from 1961 to 1969, as Robert Lowell adorned the cover of *Time* magazine and Allen Ginsberg appeared on prime-time network TV. *Winning Hearts and Minds*, meanwhile, an anthology of anti-war verse among dozens of others, finding itself rejected by major publishing firms, sold 20,000 copies at rallies and meetings under an independent imprint before being picked up by McGraw-Hill in 1972.[3] This atmosphere, combined with the fact that American poets were almost universally opposed to the war, fostered a new confidence in poetry's power as a radical force. 'Poetry is a matter of life and death,' announced Daryl Hine, editor of *Poetry*, in his 1972 call for poems for a special Vietnam issue of the magazine.[4]

If individual figures did not agree on the particular tactics by which the power of poetry was to be exploited, almost all poets were convinced that poetry was opposed to the war by its very nature. In 1966–7, for example, when John Ashbery and Louis Simpson argued vehemently about committed writing in the pages of *The Nation*, they were in agreement on the essentially emancipatory nature of poetry 'itself'. Ashbery, writing of Frank O'Hara shortly after his death, lauded his friend's poetry for its uncommitted power. Though requiring 'no further justification', O'Hara's work '*incites one to all the programs of commitment as well as to every other form of self-realization*' for Ashbery.[5] Simpson attacked such 'commitment' as vacant and a betrayal of poetry's political capacities, but Ashbery exonerates himself in equally politicised terms in reply: 'All poetry is against war and in favour of life, or else it isn't poetry.'[6] Many poets were of Ashbery's mind regarding these innate qualities. Denise Levertov claimed the poetic was 'inherently revolutionary'.[7] Lawrence Ferlinghetti had declaimed that 'The Poet by definition

is the bearer of Eros and love and freedom and thus the natural born non-violent enemy of the State.'[8] Robert Bly rejected a $5,000 grant from the Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities because it represented an unholy alliance of poetry with war: 'Since the Administration is maiming an entire nation merely to advance our national interest, I think it is insensitive, even indecent, for that Administration to come forward with money for poetry.'[9] The idea of poetry as the natural nemesis of state power may seem quaint, and even wilfully ignorant of literary history, but it should be noted that poetry's apparent natural energy for fighting the good fight imputed responsibility as well as bestowing laurels.[10] The sense of the imagination's unlimited potential also protected the period's most oppositional writers from despondency at their cultural marginality.[11] As Ashbery's description of O'Hara suggests, the New American Poetry's strength lay in its faith in poetry as public expression, a faith that galvanised opposition to the moribund autonomous poem the post-war years had otherwise entrenched.

Before Vietnam, most poets of the avant-garde, and certainly most included in *The New American Poetry*, wrote under the sign of what Charles Altieri has called an 'aesthetic of immanence' in his study of sixties poetry, *Enlarging the Temple*. There, outlining how the avant-garde predominantly conceived of poetry as 'the action of disclosure rather than of creating order' in opposition to the symbolist heirs of T. S. Eliot, Altieri typifies the philosophical convictions of the decade's experimental poetry as 'the insistence that the moment immediately and intensely experienced can restore one to harmony with the world and provide ethical and psychological renewal'.[12] However, Altieri suggests that this aesthetic radicalism, while a challenge to the synthesising and orderly imagination of Middle Generation verse at the level of form, was as a fundamental barrier to the articulation of political content. The immanent aesthetic, he writes,

> whose only ethical corollary is the command to let be and to recognize the fullness of what lies before one . . . might provide the goal for a transformed society, but it will not give much help in determining or propounding the means for creating such a society.[13]

The utopian poetics inherited by anti-war verse, that is, had invested in a certain impassiveness before the world, and as such raised problems for the human subject who would change rather than merely disclose it.

The dominant solution to these problems for anti-war poets was the figure of conscience, which carried an immanent form over to the fight against evil in the figure of inherent human goodness. By conscience, a poetics of disclosure could also be a poetics of opposition:

visions of the good behind the apparent evil of the current crisis would simultaneously assert moral strength. This inner light of righteousness, conscience, though it is religious for most writers in the 1960s, should not be conceived as blissfully hermitic, as in Thomas à Kempis's 'quiet conscience' that 'remains joyful in all troubles': poems responding to Vietnam insistently present a bad conscience in the grip of guilt and psychological suffering.[14] Conscience does, however, assume a sovereignty of self that is crucial to the particular modes of political poetry the 1960s produced. The historical reasons for the move selfward, as it were, are linked to Altieri's claims: realignments of radical politics toward self-awareness, free thinking, and the New Left discovery that 'the personal is the political', meant that poetry came to seem uniquely suited to politics, since it had the natural ability to publicly express the private. 'Our perception of politics,' the influential New Left organisation Students for a Democratic Society announced, 'is that personal liberation is an integral part of the revolutionary process in twentieth century America – personal liberation expressed in poetry, graphics, photography and joy in media.'[15] The public expression of conscience was often an announcement of the personal effects the very public war was having. The guilt felt at the private level, that is, became poetry's domain, with the implicit hope that sharing guilt would lead to a collective decision to act. The urge to turn 'politically' inward, therefore, permeates the poetics of the era. Simpson attacked Ashbery's position as 'sneering at other poets' consciences', for example, and privileged self-examination as the proper politics of poetry: '[the war] may serve to change the poet profoundly, so that in the future their poems will be political in the way that really counts'.[16] Bly makes similar remarks in his short essay, 'On Political Poetry' (1967), claiming: 'what is needed to write true poems about the outward world is inwardness'.[17] He urges poets to 'penetrate the husk around their own personalities', so that 'once inside the psyche' they may 'speak of inward and political things with the same assurance'.[18] Denise Levertov and Robert Duncan's famous argument about political poetry was constructed entirely around issues of conscience, simply of two different kinds, as Duncan neatly identifies: 'the conscience to take up arms against the war . . . *as against* the conscience to stand by the individual life'.[19]

From here, the question for most poets regarded the proper way to project the inner light of conscience outward to actual political opposition. Expressions of conscience alone will never be a sufficient condition for political change – as Samuel Johnson once warned: 'No man's conscience can tell him the right of another man.'[20] Basil Bunting's impetuous response to *Poetry*'s call for anti-war poems in 1972 is in frustration

at this focus on individual conscience, as though all that mattered was the poet's opinion: 'There's not a soul who cares twopence what I or any other poet thinks about the war, Nixon, Wallace . . . We are entitled to the same voice as anybody else with a vote, no more. To claim more is arrogant.'[21] Anti-war poetry did, however, have imaginative ways of extending or pushing conscience into political agency that went beyond a poetics of opinion. Central to these was the manoeuvre to make the fact of having conscience *in itself* an oppositional gesture that took a stand against in the State, near-universally portrayed as an inhuman machine impervious to the feelings and actions of individuals. The government's own language production around Vietnam undoubtedly contributed to the popularity and enthusiasm for the personal qualities of poetry: in reaction to both sanitised official language and the numbed psychological distance it created, poetry was seen to reconnect words to actions and directly express emotional response, however ambitious and problematic these aims were. The implicit link here between the crisis of individual liberty and Vietnam itself, that both the noncon-forming citizen or the non-aligned decolonising nation were opposed to the hegemon, should be noted but by no means taken on its own terms. Ambitions of interiority were in reality motivated by forces that preceded the war: the turn inward is also a turn away from the totalised State the US had become by the early sixties. The accelerated rises of the military–industrial complex, powerful mass media outlets like televi-sion and the unelected professional 'expert' represented for many an increasingly centralised, non-participatory, and alienating social order.[22] Globally, increased perception of what the darling of the New Left Herbert Marcuse termed the 'totally administered society' prompted, among other things, a shift in the focus of radical politics away from wresting the power of the State and toward the immediate enactment of 'alternative' political spaces.[23] Such enactments could challenge the fundamental forms of bourgeois politics, as was the case in France in 1968, but they could equally seek to transcend the forces of the State rather than confront them.[24] As far as poetry was concerned, the over-whelming tendency was to present the nation as a monolithic and total force, the Other of the humane and sensitive conscience. In Bly's poetry, for example, the US is the dangerous unconscious of which he and his fellow poets are the conscientious foil. Since the nation is the *daimon* of destructive and unbridled desire, the poet's function is to express the 'more or less hidden impulses in the American psyche'.[25]

One danger, then, with what Philip Metres has called a poetry 'pre-senting itself as an oppositional image for the Big Other' is that the poet essentially negates any sense that political situations and trajectories

might be open to change.[26] Though Bly is surely right to challenge the supposed novelty of the Vietnam War, he does so by flattening all US history into a single death drive. (Such gestures are not dissimilar to Vietnam films like *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now*, where history is equally in the shadow of metaphysics.) That the Vietnam War represented a legitimation crisis for US political forms was generally unnoticed by poets constructing apocalyptic visions of the nation itself as mad, violent and bent on destruction. The two are not, of course, necessarily mutually exclusive, and often prophecies of American destiny, such as Bly's 'The Mother Teeth Naked At Last' (1970), are coupled with the imaginative analysis of actual political actions.[27] Aggregating an irresistible, supernatural force is always a danger for political poetry, however, creating a conflict between what needs to be done and what can be done in response. Duncan's poem 'Up/Rising' (1968), a Jeremiad he describes as 'visionary', is remarkable for holding these tensions in balance:

> . . . the omnipotent wings, the all-American boy in the cock-pit
> loosing his flow of napalm, below in the jungles
> 'any life at all or sign of life' his target, drawing now
> not with crayons in his secret room
> the burning of homes and the torture of mothers and fathers and children,
> their hair a-flame, screaming in agony, but
> in the line of duty, for the might and enduring fame
> of Johnson, for the victory of American will over its victims,
> releasing his store of destruction over the enemy . . .[28]

The rhetoric here disintegrates as it echoes contemporary political falsehood, with long lines accumulating frustration and hysteria through rhythmic breathlessness. The disintegration of the form, the visionary excess, emerges from the poem's destructive content. Duncan, however, conceives of this disjunction as manifesting a universal state of being, as he tells Levertov: '"Up/Rising" is not [your] kind of witness; for it ultimately belongs to the reality of that poem and a vision of Man.'[29] Read as a vision of man's dualistic forces of contention, the 'black bile of old evils' versus 'our sense of our common humanity', the poem hardly allows for the possibility of change.[30] In other words, the 'crises of meaning' Duncan's poem so powerfully stages are presented as an eternal and universal state of being.[31] Duncan's three-phase schema for the poem outlines this dynamic in detail: 'actual experience of the war . . .; projective level] the deep lying inner need to destroy the world by fire; myth] Jehovah's destruction of cities by fire. The destruction of the Egyptians . . .'.[32] The self-destructive rhetoric of the poem, that is, performs the deep-seated 'inner need to destroy the world by fire', a

latent force in mankind or even the universe itself. Those who would stop the war have little place in such a narrative, as Duncan notes elsewhere: 'I feel that revolution, politics, making history is one of the great falsehoods.'[33] (In this, Duncan rightly notes 'crucial incompatibilities between Olson's poetics and view of myth and cosmos and my own'.[34]) Crises in speech, therefore, though singularly brought to the fore by Duncan's détournement of government rhetoric, are a window onto a timeless cosmos. As Duncan put it in the preface to *Bending the Bow*: 'In the War now I make / a Celestial Cave.'[35] Disjunction is *itself* the spiritual essence, and so Duncan's realisation of crisis, one of the most compelling of the war, is of its inevitability. One can obviously look beyond Duncan's intentions in reading his anti-war poems, which are extraordinary admonishments to change: my point is that conceptions of the nation as evil but irresistable inform an important strain in poetry against the war.

Without Duncan's ability to articulate strife in poetic form, some of the worst anti-war poetry can seem to be against power itself, opposing the war through a kind of pacifism of the mind. In such work, if the whole nation is marching into the fire, the best the poet and reader can do is prepare a clear conscience. More generally, the tendency of poetry against US foreign policy in the 1960s is toward rejection rather than confrontation. Again, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do require work to resolve their natural tensions. In what follows I will explore Levertov as exemplary of the attempt to maintain conscience through visionary imagination as the war was undermining poetic vision itself, before analysing Ginsberg's 1966 poem *Wichita Vortex Sutra* as a quite different, prophetic performance of the visionary, in which transcendent fantasy and the will to change weld.

2 'In the service of the transcendent': Denise Levertov's vision

Before the Vietnam War, Denise Levertov was a well-known poet of the visionary. Her deft but revelatory poems depended for their success on lyric completion and wonderment in repose. Levertov's early lyrics were, as James Mersmann put it, 'balanced and whole' because their vision found 'a stable centre' beneath impermanent surfaces: 'the eye that finds the poetry inside the flux is sane and confident'.[36] Levertov thinks through the visionary in her conception of 'organic form', in which the poet seeks out the 'inherent, though not immediately apparent, form' of the world.[37] In Levertov's poems, therefore, the form must primarily

encompass a process of revelation, of the poet's consciousness of imma-
nent value being disclosed. Indeed, her revision of the Creeley/Olson
mantra that 'Form is never more than an extension of content' with
'Form is never more than a *revelation* of content', makes the visionary
function of her work explicit.[38] The extent to which revelation is at odds
with a transformative political programme defines Levertov's struggle to
bring this aesthetic to a political poetry. She would eventually reconcile
the two in a religious sensibility, as she claimed later:

> an avowal of Christian faith is not incompatible with my aesthetic nor with
> my political stance, since as an artist I was already in the service of the trans-
> cendent, and since Christian ethics (however betrayed in past and present
> history) uphold the same values I seek in a political of racial and economic
> justice and nonviolence.[39]

Such a resolution was easier to formulate after Vietnam, and for the
most part wrongly implies a visionary finality in her responses to the
war. However, the structure of transcendence, of the poem as a vehicle
for another world, is at the centre of Levertov's 'political stances' in
poetry. I want to claim the war disintegrates Levertov's organic form,
as political crisis is dramatised through the very attempt to attain
transcendence.

At times Levertov's political visionary mode, her 'response to crisis . . .
unparalleled in all history' as she called it, is maudlin and self-defeating,
and supports Ron Silliman's claim that she 'sabotaged her writing and
her political credibility simultaneously' in poetry fundamentally at
odds with the radical political action she pursued outside of it.[40] 'What
Were They Like?', for example, is a classic of idealised and impassive
Vietnamese victimhood. In dialogic form, the poem asks and answers
six questions – below are the replies to '4) Did they use bone and ivory, /
jade and silver, for ornament?', '5) Had they an epic poem?' and '6) Did
they distinguish between speech and singing?':

> 4) A dream ago, perhaps, Ornament is for joy.
> All the bones were charred.
> 5) It is not remembered. Remember,
> most were peasants; their life
> was in rice and bamboo.
> When peaceful clouds were reflected in the paddies
> and the water buffalo stepped surely along terraces,
> maybe fathers told their sons old tales.
> When bombs smashed those mirrors
> there was time only to scream.
> 6) There is an echo yet

of their speech which was like a song.
It was reported their singing resembled
the flight of moths in moonlight.
Who can say? It is silent now.[41]

The Vietnamese are a simple specimen here: pastoral, idyllic and
without history, agency or subjecthood. Since 'fathers told their sons old
tales', 'their life / was in rice and bamboo', and 'their singing resembled
/ the flight of moths in moonlight', these Vietnamese are 'peaceful' but
helplessly doomed to oblivion. Both the inhuman force of the imperial
war machine and the Vietnamese non-subject are opposed to the poet's
subjectivity. Only Levertov's voice rises from a landscape devoid of
agency, where passive verbs dominate: 'the children were killed', 'the
bones were charred'. The political objective of such a poem is unclear at
best. Readers are to mourn the demise of this culture, but in order to do
so must resign themselves to its inevitability. 'What Were They Like?' is
prophetic in a Calvinistic sense, imagining a predetermined misfortune
that can only be elegised. Levertov's hope may be that mourning will
give rise to opposition, but the fundamental naturalness and indeed
natural beauty the poem celebrates can only represent the Vietnamese
and what they endure into manifestations of an immanent order in
which their self-determination is denied.

'What Were They Like?' is notable, however, as an attempt to break
free, formally, of the moorings of the short, epiphanic lyric. Levertov's
clunky Q&A necessarily fragments an otherwise meditational form.
The poem fails in this case because its answers are so clear-voiced and
patronising: there is no tension qualifying the poet's authority, which
conducts a catechism for the reader rather than any self-interrogation.
Levertov's most compelling work sees the poet questioning herself and
the form of her expression. The starting point of her much-maligned
'personal' focus is a conception of political activism as a disruption of
the self, a painful sacrifice of individuality. Echoing the period's direc-
tives for an inward-looking political poetry, Levertov repeatedly quotes
Ibsen in these years: 'The task of the poet is to make clear to *himself*,
and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions.'[42] The politi-
cal agent for Levertov is sovereign but compromised, vulnerable and in
pain; the private individual is 'smashed' in political struggle, occasioning
panicked attempts to reconstruct the self. Duncan felt Levertov needed
reconstruction as a result of her damaging political commitment because
his internalising of the war demanded poise: 'We are not reacting to
the war,' Duncan wrote to her, 'but mining images the war arouses in
us.'[43] Following Duncan's image, we might see that Levertov *sets out* to

'mine' and bring to light what she called 'man's potential, his capacity for goodness . . . however fallen into corruption', but that what her best anti-war poetry actually *reveals* is the unavailability of the grounding necessary to access such foundational energies, a still place from which to look behind political actions in which she felt herself responsible and called upon to act.[44] Levertov, I want to claim, seeks but openly fails to attain the grounding required for 'mining'. This fact may occasion failures on the poetry's own terms, but nonetheless accounts for the considerable interest readers concerned with political poetry have taken in her work.

What Levertov stages, then, is the attempt of the subject, straining at full stretch, to maintain poise and balance, and its failure to do so – the poet, as it were, constantly struggling against a limbo state. Describing Levertov's work as Romantic in these respects is correct but insufficient. If 'the task of the poet is to make clear to *himself*, and thereby to others, the temporal and eternal questions', then Levertov's poetry failed, but the evidence in the poetry is that she was acutely conscious of this failure. Hers is an experiment testifying the truth of Cary Nelson's description of unsuccessful anti-war poetry that 'tends to deflect all attention from the external event back to the poet's essentially romantic imagination [when] what the war called into question, for poetry, was precisely the ability of language to transcend anything'.[45] Levertov's best anti-war poetry shows a Romantic imagination denied transcendence in what Laura Quinney has called a 'poetics of disappointment': a 'bleak version of Romanticism' in which the poet's subjectivity demands unity but incessantly floats unredeemed.[46] Unlike what Quinney calls disillusionment, which 'still harbors some degree of pride and a respect for the intellect', disappointment is indeterminate, unmoored. Disillusionment, in 'proceeding rather than progressing', is tied up with a certain acceptance of an otherwise irresolvable disappointment, an ability to move on and accommodate 'a newfound acquaintance with the truth'.[47] Disillusionment is Levertov's *ambition*, and what Duncan arrived at in confining his anti-war politics to wearing a black armband, but disappointment is the *fact* of her poems.[48]

The war constantly introduces disequilibrium to Levertov's habitual poetic form, the short lyric of revelation and completion. 'Life at War' is an example of a Levertov poem that earnestly seeks, and indeed demands in its poetic form, 'a newfound acquaintance with the truth' that it is nonetheless unable to attain. Here, behind the 'gray filth' of the war the 'imagination' peeks through to see to see a fundamental human goodness:

the knowledge that humankind,

delicate Man, whose flesh
responds to a caress, whose eyes
are flowers that perceive the stars,

whose music excels the music of birds,
whose laughter matches the laughter of dogs,
whose understanding manifests designs
fairer than the spider's most intricate web,
still turns without surprise, with mere regret
to the scheduled breaking open of breasts . . .[49]

Here, in the middle of the poem, lies the danger Levertov constantly flirts with in her anti-war verse, as formal clarity and stillness threaten to undermine the conviction that Vietnam, 'rolling in the brain like pebbles', has made expression and understanding problematic. The discovery of innate human virtue is intended to show that redemption is possible from the war, but the danger is that it redeems the war itself. The poised tone in these lines can seem unreconstructed from her early work's wonderment at the natural world. The difference, however, is that 'the knowledge' here is constantly interrupted by the horror of the war. The poem's ending proves that Levertov only temporarily bars discomposure from the poetic form, whatever the tenacity with which the poem tries to keep it permanently at bay.

In this ending Levertov contends with the fact that the poem's function as revelation relies on the now doubtful belief in goodness behind evil. Committed to a poetics of unveiling, that is, the poem nonetheless confronts the war as 'mucous membrane of our dreams' and a fundamental violence to language and lyric vision:

Yes, this is the knowledge that jostles for space
in our bodies along with all we
go on knowing of joy, of love;

our nerve filaments twitch with its presence
day and night,
nothing we say has not the husky phlegm of it in the saying,
nothing we do has the quickness, the sureness,
the deep intelligence living at peace would have.

Revelation in epiphany, the central motif of her work, is the weapon Levertov wields here – but how can we read this in the context of opposition to the war? An unsympathetic reading would assert that Levertov may *speak of* a universal 'husky phlegm', but her own voice is above it in clear-throated assurance. Thomas Merton had said in his widely read

1969 essay, 'War and the Crisis of Language', that 'the language of the war maker is *self-enclosed in finality*', and these lines come close to suggesting repose in well-made form, even as they distance themselves from 'sureness'.[50] In this reading, 'Life at War' fraudulently resolves political complexity by overcoming ambivalent feelings in poetic form. There is evidence for this interpretation, but a more sympathetic reading can be also be proposed that would attribute value to the tensions between open wounds and closure, confusion and finality. The failure of the poem, that is, can be seen as acknowledged by the poet as it unfolds. The focus of the lines on absence and conditionality intimates doubt, for example; the ending can be read as intentionally anti-climactic, especially in its arrhythmic and prosaic last line; the overcompensating insistence on decision ('Yes, this is . . . nothing we say . . . nothing we do . . .') suggests both hesitance and the need for determination. Most importantly, 'Life at War' plays on an oscillation between the expectation of rhythmic climax and the failure of the poem to fulfil this expectation. The strength of the poem is that it neither surrenders to impotence nor assumes transcendent power. To me these final lines *know* they fail, and represent a poem that ends in exhaustion rather than rest – that expresses, as it were, the form reacting against itself. In Levertov's struggle with her earlier lyric form, disappointment reigns in a manner akin to the *crise de vers* described by Giorgio Agamben:

> [Some] poets seem conscious of the fact that there lies something like a decisive crisis for the poem, a genuine *crise de vers* in which the poem's very identity is at stake.

> Hence the often cheap and even abject quality of the end of the poem. Proust once observed, with reference to the last poems of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, that the poem seems to be suddenly ruined and to lose its breath ('it stops short,' he writes, 'almost falls flat . . . despite everything, it seems that something has been shortened, is out of breath').[51]

'Life at War' not only lacks the clinch of completion typical of Levertov's earlier poems, it ends cheaply, ruined, expiring, enacting the crisis of Vietnam as a crisis of the poem itself.

That Levertov herself realised the limitations of the lyric for political art is clear from what she would subsequently write, the long journalistic suite *Staying Alive* (1971), her largest statement on the war. The diary form of the work, developed from a much shorter poem, 'An Interim', allowed Levertov 'the opportunity to swing between extremes in diction . . . which short lyrics don't give', as she told Duncan.[52] The poem raises many questions about the poetics of crisis, but I want to focus finally

here on these extremes of diction and their role in Levertov's reclaiming of the poetic from the war, as it were. At root, then, *Staying Alive* is an attempt to consciously adulterate the lyric with externalities so that the poet may consciously encompass them, rather than, as in 'Life at War', articulating them in the poem's unconscious. This is primarily an attempt to work through conceptually what the lyrical anti-war poems had demonstrated formally: the usurpation of the poem, and even thought and subjectivity, by the war. To this end *Staying Alive* includes slogans and other activist material, letters and accounts of historical events. Here the poem gestures toward a collage form, but one in which Levertov seeks to 'pick out [her] own song from the uproar' by including a totally different kind of material in addition.[53] Alongside documentary passages, that is, half the work is made up of lyrics.

Compartmentalised in this way, Levertov's lyricism ceases to question its own value or adapt its form to crisis. The documentary sections, that is, simply give Levertov more rein for reflection and flights of fancy in the lyrics. Levertov brackets history from her lyric sensibility in order to rediscover the poise necessary for its epiphanies. Here is a full section, the last of Part I:

> Again to hold—'capture' they say—
> moments and their processions in palm
> of mind's hand.
>   Have you ever,
> in stream or sea
>   felt the silver of fish
> pass through your hand-hold? not to stop it,
> block it from going onward, but feel it
> move in its wave-road?
>   To make
>   of song a chalice
>   of time,
>   a communion wine.[54]

This is certainly more 'poetic' than the anti-climactic, strained quality of her individual anti-war lyrics, but it is also a great deal more irritating. The tone is triumphant, with victory comfortably achieved within the poem. The war's tensions are resolved through poetic language as the poem implicitly becomes the chalice of stillness it whispers of. The maudlin self-satisfaction on evidence here dominates the lyrical sections of *Staying Alive*, given licence as they are to soar by the apparent compensation of prosaic and 'didactic' verse placed around them.

Poetry and revolution, the relation between which the poem makes its theme, are often spoken of together in *Staying Alive*, as if the two were

interdependent. This is an understanding many readers have enthusiastically come to, like José Rodríguez Herrera: 'The poem was the place *in* and *through* which revolutionary convictions could be tested and fully realised.'[55] A revolution that can be fully realised in poetry is unlikely to stop napalm, however, no matter how many italics you use. What this reading, and the poem itself, really testifies to is the separation of politics and poetry, compartmentalised into two 'extremes of diction'. In the struggle between 'history' and 'song' that the poem stages, the final note is of the triumph of poetry. Levertov's self, 'smashed' in political struggle, is reconstructed in poetic language: 'Without a terrain in which, to which, I belong, / language itself is my one home, my Jerusalem.'[56] The metaphor of home, of a space in which to belong, was finally necessary for Levertov's visionary transcendence. 'To contemplate,' Levertov states, 'comes from "*templum*, temple, a place, a space for observation, marked out by an augur." It means, not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things in the presence of a god.'[57] In this sense the work's conception of the famous public/private dichotomy is more Robert Lowell than Muriel Rukeyser, to whom Levertov's poem is surely indebted but whose conception of self was energised by political struggle rather than suffering beneath its contingencies. The result is to divest *Staying Alive*'s otherwise interesting political thinking of potency, as in the final lines of its long 'Entr'acte':

> 'We must *not* be angry, we must
> L-O-O-O-V-E!' Judy Collins
> bleats loud and long into the P. A. system,
>
> but hardly anyone claps, and no one
> shouts *Right On*.
>   That silence cheers me.
> Judy, understand:
> there comes a time when only anger
> is love.[58]

Too concerned with poetic balance to perform the anger they speak of, these lines fall a long way short of the 'poetry of political anguish . . . both didactic and lyrical' that Levertov aspired to.[59] The phrase 'Judy, understand', the precious line breaks, the portentous manner in which the lines close a whole section, mannered verbs like 'bleats' and 'cheers' – all, quite intentionally, sacrifice anger for lyric deftness. Set against, for example, the self-help didacticism and ruthless charisma of her contemporary Diane DiPrima's *Revolutionary Letters* (1971), Levertov's sloganeering sounds apologetic and weak. In light of such lines, the idea that it would be 'productive to read *To Stay Alive* within the contexts

of such activist traditions of expression as leaflets, broadsides and rally chants', as one critic suggests, is patently absurd.[60]

The dominant tone of *Staying Alive*, as Levertov concedes, is elegy. Bly praised the work as a set of 'private poems', indeed as 'more private than her personalist poems'.[61] Levertov herself said: 'My emphasis was on asking oneself the questions, internalizing them, on coming to realize how much the apparently external problems have their parallels within us.'[62] In *Staying Alive* such an emphasis reduces historical events to The Human Condition and cuts conscience off from the non-poetic energies required to intervene in those events. The result is an anti-political poem. Indeed, *Staying Alive* seems the exemplary work fitting the minor poet R. D. Rosen's 1973 description of the 'disengagement' that had overtaken American poetry by that time:

> We used to be simply against American politics; but after so much unsuccessful counter-movement, we are paralyzed and forced to live outside of those politics. We used to write directly against the war. Now we can only get at the war by writing about everything else . . . A couple of years ago, poetry was still being exercised as a polemic against America; but now we content ourselves with the fact that poetry proves that at least the poet is still alive.[63]

The individual visionary lyric was not, then, abandoned by Levertov because it distorted the American citizen's experience of the war and the anger it provoked, but because it was a constraint on personal transcendence. If some of Levertov's best failed lyrics of the period – 'Life at War', 'Advent 1966', the 'Olga Poems' – are her constantly disturbed 'Residence in France', *Staying Alive* is her return to Grasmere, saddened perhaps, but home.

3 Spoken lonesomeness is prophecy: Ginsberg's agitational elegy

Contemporary with Levertov was a quite different poetics of the visionary. The writing and other activities of Allen Ginsberg do much to rehabilitate the visionary imagination for political ends, though in doing so they pose questions of the avant-garde project the 1950s had only recently rebegun. Since its appearance, Ginsberg's work has been read in one of two ways, both unable to fully encompass its power. One half of Ginsberg's commentators, both admiring and detracting, read his prophetic manner straight, taking the apparent 'function of the poet as priestly legislator', in Paul Carroll's phrase, at face value.[64] Here hagiographies of Ginsberg as a possessed mystic are joined by serious

reservations about his poetry, such as Altieri's misgivings that 'intense and dramatic religious emotion' comes 'at the cost of a considerable sacrifice of secular intelligence', and Paul Breslin's worries about religious 'surrender' in the work and therefore 'fatalism' in its outlook.[65] However, another group of commentators as various as Cary Nelson, Helen Vendler and Marjorie Perloff have sought to recognise the ambiguity and irony of the Ginsberg *rôle*. In general these readers have found less to value in Ginsberg's work of the 1960s, and have run the risk of emptying any affirmative statement from the work. In Perloff's opinion, for example, the 'touch of the Jewish clown in the makeup of this poet-prophet' sits uneasily alongside the 'on the whole, lesser' works of the 1960s, since these are more directly political.[66] Vendler was disappointed by this work because, unlike the 'naturally elegiac' mode of *Kaddish*, she found it to be 'pure will power', concluding: 'Sadness, and not his intermittent hysteria, underlies Ginsberg's most eloquent poems.'[67] Nelson, more thoughtfully, also overstates the anti-war work's dramatic irony, asserting that Ginsberg 'manages a gesture whose political significance is precisely its powerlessness'.[68] There is some important truth in this claim, but it limits too much: there equally is an enthusiasm in Ginsberg, a belief in and demonstration of the power of the individual will that stands in welcome contrast to the defeatist lament that came to dominate poetry about Vietnam.

Taking these two positions as starting points to explore *Wichita Vortex Sutra* we can consider anti-war poetry's tensions of irony and conviction, failure and ambition, elegy and transcendence at their most compelling. *Wichita Vortex Sutra* was written in February 1966, and stood therefore in the vanguard of the mass anti-war movement that would later emerge. We can see the link between the two in the nature of the poem's dissemination. Unlike Levertov's anti-war poetry, *Wichita Vortex Sutra* was published immediately, widely and in a number of forms. Ginsberg performed the work in his extensive reading programme of 1966, including a mass 'Read-in for Peace' at the University of Pennylvania in 1967, but in print the poem was disseminated even more rapidly. Before appearing as a City Lights pamphlet in the July of that year, the first poem came out 'to great fanfare' in the *Village Voice* in the April, and in a variety of publications shortly after, including the British pacifist newspaper *Peace News*; the widely distributed underground Californian weeklies, *Los Angeles Free Press* and *Berkeley Barb*; *Grist* magazine; and the anarchist periodical *Fifth Estate*.[69] Alongside this underground dissemination the poem appeared in the left-wing political monthly *Ramparts* and, excerpted, in *Life* magazine alongside a profile of Ginsberg, as well as in Walter Lowenfals's important 1967

anthology *Where Is Vietnam?* The work also existed as a poster in more than one form, including as a mimeograph insert in the poetry quarterly *Scrip*. Eventually it was included in Ginsberg's 1969 collection, *Planet News*, but had perhaps as much exposure as any poem of the 1960s even before this point. This publication history is important as a reflection of what I will go on to to discuss as the poem's mixed communicative modes.

Wichita Vortex Sutra is an account of driving through Kansas with the war from the car radio as an ideological background. Ginsberg alternates between transcribing broadcasts and responding to the changing landscape they effectively narrate.[70] In the course of this movement, the poem enacts a dialectical struggle between lament and triumph. Regarding the former, failure is implicit in the poet's 'lonesomeness' amid the continued carnage being waged in his name in Vietnam. The poem grieves over how, in the face of manifest wrong, guilt has led to atomised impotence rather than collective opposition. The poem begins by contrasting the vulnerable individual to the mass machine of America: Ginsberg's 'PERSON appearing in Kansas' finds itself in a vortex of 'telephone radio aircraft assembly frame ammunition / petroleum nightclub Newspaper streets illuminated by Bright EMPTINESS'.[71] At this register, the poem is elegiac, with the poet a 'lone man from the void' no less lonesome for the multiplicity of voices encircling him. From the jaws of isolation, however, Ginsberg claims communion. As the poet's vulnerability and desperation for sociability build, an address of sentimental openness emerges:

> As Babes need the chemical touch of flesh in pink infancy
> lest they die Idiot returning to Inhuman—
> Nothing—
> So, tender lipt adolescent girl, pale youth,
> give me back my soft kiss
> Hold me in your innocent arms,
> accept my tears as yours to harvest
> equal in nature to the Wheat
> that made your bodies' muscular bones
> broad shouldered, boy bicept—
> from leaning on cows & drinking Milk
> in Midwest Solitude—
> No more fear of tenderness, much delight in weeping, ecstasy
> in singing, laughter rises that confounds[72]

The 'Inhuman' here can be triumphed over by recognising its existence and seeking refuge, in a gesture self-exposure and need, in the 'innocent arms' of another. Fear is dispersed with weeping, but the poem insists

that such weeping can be turned to singing and laughter. From here Ginsberg's goes onto speculate 'how big' the prick of the president may be, a facetious attack on the logic of media images insisting on the noble masculinity of the war, but one that has its background in Ginsberg's own vulnerable yearning to be held. Perloff's comments are apt here: 'On the one hand, his sexual otherness calls into question the complacent "masculinity" of the straight men who are in power. On the other, it is a source of vulnerability, bringing the "famous poet" down to the reader's level.'[73] Fears of isolation create a connection with 'tender fellows' who all have such loneliness in common: 'What if I sang, and loosed the chords of fear brow? / What exquisite noise wd / shiver my car companions?'[74] In this, the poem predicts George Oppen's seminal 1968 poem, *Of Being Numerous*, which likewise clings to the paradoxically 'bright light of shipwreck' for its sense of community.[75]

The poem does not stop at sorrow and vulnerability, however. At its point of most despondency, *Wichita Vortex Sutra* starts to accumulate potency in spite of itself:

I'm an old man now, and a lonesome man in Kansas
     but not afraid
          to speak my lonesomeness in a car,
          because not only my lonesomeness
              it's Ours, all over America,
                   O tender fellows—
              & spoken lonesomeness is Prophecy
              in the moon 100 years ago or in
                the middle of Kansas now.
  It's not the vast plains mute our mouths
              that fill at midnite with ecstatic language
          when our trembling bodies hold each other
             breast to breast on a mattress—
    Not the empty sky that hides
            the feeling from our faces
  nor our skirts and trousers that conceal
          the bodylove emanating in a glow of beloved skin,
            white smooth abdomen down to the hair
                between our legs,
    It's not a God that bore us that forbid
          our Being, like a sunny rose
            all red with naked joy
          between our eyes & bellies, yes
 All we do is for this frightened thing
          we call Love, want and lack—
    fear that we aren't the one whose body could be
          beloved of all the brides of Kansas City,
          kissed all over by every boy of Wichita—

> O but how many in their solitude weep aloud like me—
> On the bridge over Republican River
> almost in tears to know
> how to speak the right language—[76]

At its simplest, the poem's rhetoric of naked sincerity is intended as an alternative for the reflexive duplicity of politicians 'speaking language'. Why, though, does Ginsberg claim that such 'spoken lonesomeness' is also an act of 'Prophecy'? Relevant here is Ginsberg's 'frightened thing / we call Love, want and lack', which carries an uneasy double meaning: we call on Love because we want and lack it, but also want and lack have become *synonymous* with Love in the current 'frightened' state of affairs. Spoken lonesomeness is prophecy because it invites us to fill this lack, and therefore opens into a future collective project. Ginsberg does not fall back on the comfortable thought that alienation, like the war itself, is an irrevocable consequence of modern social life. It is not, he writes, 'the empty sky that hides / the feeling from our faces' – 'not a God' that is to blame, but ourselves. *Wichita Vortex Sutra* persuades through the beauty of its enthusiasm, not the resignation of its elegy. '[L]ike a sunny rose / all red with naked joy', the poem strains in full view to transcend the lonesomeness of current political violence into a shared beauty. What is remarkable about these utopian imaginings is how they remain in suspension, held at arm's length, as it were between poet and audience as a possibility and invitation to realise them. Insisting on these images as fantasies, the poem refuses to allow its own sufficiency as a political act: Ginsberg is still, even as he proclaims his work as prophecy, 'almost in tears to know / how to speak the right language'. The poem strains toward visionary potency only to erase itself as a speech act, becoming in the failure but beauty of its dreams a motivational form agitating for their realisation outside the poem. As Ginsberg's friend Richard Howard wrote, his are 'prophetic books, then, in that they will attain the existence they seek only after the poet leaves off'.[77]

It is this utopian suspension that should frame the most famous part of the poem, Ginsberg's announcement of the end of the war. Here, having called 'all Powers of imagination', Ginsberg concludes a lengthy run of clauses awaiting syntactic completion with this ecstatic release of energy:

Sacred Heart my Christ acceptable
Allah the Compassionate One
Jaweh Righteous One
all Knowledge-Princes of Earth-man, all
ancient Seraphim of heavenly Desire, Devas, yogis

                    & holymen I chant to—
                        Come to my lone presence
                            into this Vortex named Kansas,
    I lift my voice aloud,
        make Mantra of American language now,
            I here declare the end of the War!
                    Ancient days' Illusion!—
            and pronounce words beginning my own millennium.
    Let the States tremble,
        let the Nation weep,
            let Congress execute its own delight—
    this Act done by my own voice,
                    nameless Mystery—
    published to my own senses,
                    blissfully received by my own form
        approved with pleasure by my sensations
            manifestation of my very thought
            accomplished in my own imagination
                    all realms within my consciousness fulfilled
        60 miles from Wichita[78]

Taken literally, these lines might be construed as the escapist bombast many readers feel Ginsberg typifies. The total music of the poem, however, of which this announcement is the crescendo, tells quite a different story. These lines are palpably not a *declaration* of the end of the war, but an indication that such a declaration might be possible if we take proper responsibility. Admitting that our 'own Being' as Americans is of a 'land which gave right of way / to the massing of metal meant for explosion in Indochina', the poem is not a plea to those in power or our better Christian selves, but a manifestation of self-sufficiency latent not in the poem but the constituency that hears or reads it: this is the site where Ginsberg's fragile utopian imaginings may be brought into being. The gamble of *Wichita Vortex Sutra* is to fantasise an alternate reality in the face of the war. Ginsberg performs in language what might be made to happen in fact, but this transcendence is never presented as a victory, only a possibility. Ginsberg's 'declaration' is, in its obvious excess, essentially a test of oneself – as he claimed:

[The government's] mantras are black mantras, so to speak. They pronounce [war] and then they sign a piece of paper, of other words, and a hundred thousand soldiers go across the ocean. So I pronounce *my* word, and so the point is how strong is *my* word.[79]

For Ginsberg, the poet's job is to test alternatives, not alone with his lyric conscience or in a temple of contemplation, but with those to whom the poem is so lovingly addressed, and in competition with gov-

ernmental speech acts.[80] His poem lacks the tone of homily dominant in Levertov's *Staying Alive* because it has the daring to *propose*.

Though going beyond an elegiac mode that has already admitted defeat, Ginsberg's utopian imagining of other orders is nonetheless rooted in the 'Vietnam vortex' of its emergence. In this sense, his Vietnam sutra echoes perhaps his most beautiful short poem, 'Sunflower Sutra' (1955), where the eponymous flower emerges from the 'smut and smog' of the tincan banana dock in a transcendent vision that is not a transport to an other-worldly bliss but an intensification of dirty social reality. This is a state of affairs even the harshest critics of Ginsberg's quasi-religiosity observe, as in Theodore Roszak's description of 'a mysticism neither escapist nor ascetic'.[81] Ginsberg does not merely dramatise defeat, but neither does he congratulate himself in an easy poetic transcendence of political struggle. As Michael Davidson says of *Wichita Vortex Sutra*: 'Prophecy no longer emanates from some inner visionary moment but from a voice that has recognized its inscription within an electronic environment, a voice that has seized the means of reproduction and adapted it to oppositional ends.'[82] Significantly, the poem does not end at his famous 'declaration', but continues to play off utopian imaginings against the grim reality of the 'military fear factory' for some pages. Indeed, insistences that 'The war was over several hours ago!' are made to sound desperate as they are heard alongside news that 'the Marines killed 256 Vietcong captured 31'.[83] To the end of the poem, the war rightly overshadows the utopian possibilities that are a response to it.

Wichita Vortex Sutra can help us mark the watershed moment the late sixties was for the concept of a post-war American avant-garde. An influential strain of critique posits Ginsberg as a writer whose avant-garde credentials hid a politics complicit with the system it opposed. For Mark Silverberg Ginsberg is, in effect, only quixotically avant-garde, since he fought 'black mantras' on the same ground as the establish-ment, a position he opposes to the 'neo-avant-gardism' of the New York School:

> [M]ostly, all Ginsberg's howlings made were more promotional opportuni-ties, more money for Moloch, more meat for the pavement . . . This dynamic, the spectacle of Ginsberg's recuperation, puts paid to the delusion . . . In fact, Ginsberg's giving his all, sticking it to America, is what made him *something* and someone: a celebrated posterboy for radical hip. In place of avant-gardist or modernist antagonism, the New York School poets produced what I have called a poetics of indifference.[84]

I cannot agree. Silverberg is quite right to claim that avant-garde strate-gies are anachronistic in post-war America, but the attack here is really

on any oppositional stance in post-war culture at all. The neo-avant-garde, according to him, more meaningfully negates the entire terms of the argument with indifference, but this was precisely the argument Ashbery made in 1966 when, even in that period's enthusiasm for the unaligned imagination, its unsatisfying equation of artistic and political freedom was recognised. It seems correct that Ginsberg's activities in the 1960s cannot qualify as avant-garde, entering the culture's *realpolitik* as they do. What Ginsberg shows, however, is that it is Silverberg's political apolitical, the mid-century politics of refusal, that represents the true attempt to apply a modernist sense of vanguardism to a social world to which its gestures are no longer effective. I want to argue finally that Ginsberg, putting his queer shoulder to the wheel, to quote his great poem 'America' (1956), creates a poetic space in which language can serve a purpose, instituting an anti-modernist instrumentalism *and* inhabiting a queer space of radical alterity.

A key aspect of Ginsberg's queer shouldering concerns address, and within this a rejection of the coterie poetics dominant in the 1950s. Paul Goodman's 1951 essay, 'Advance-Guard Writing, 1900–1950', had influentially promoted the notion of an avant-garde grouping as 'a small community' in which the alienation of American Cold War culture might be evaded:

> The essential present-day advance-guard is the physical re-establishment of community. This is to solve the crisis of alienation in the simple way: the persons are estranged from themselves, from one another, and from their artist; he takes the initiative precisely by putting his arms around them and drawing them together. In literary terms this means: *to write for them about them personally* . . .[85]

In the fifties, of course, such literary avant-gardes were already burgeoning in Berkeley, Black Mountain, New York and elsewhere. There can be no doubt that a key success of these avant-gardes was the way their mutual support structures, collaborative atmospheres and self-publishing activities fostered a robust and dynamic set of artistic practices. Goodman, however, saw such community as only a first step toward universal forms of liberation. The process toward a more 'intimate' society, he said, should only be seen as '*starting* with the artist's primary friends'.[86] One did not create a coterie merely to ensconce oneself from the hostile outside world, but as a grounding from which to overcome hostility in society. Many groupings of the New American Poetry vary in their placing between these two positions. As I have mentioned, Black Mountain under Olson had precisely the projective ambitions recommended by Goodman. The San Francisco Renaissance,

on the other hand, was more insular and protective of its existing group identity, making up what Michael Davidson, quoting Duncan, has aptly called a 'fraternity of despair'.[87]

What coterie meant for aesthetics is complex, but it can be sketched here. The death of the avant-garde had been heralded by American cultural commentators before Vietnam.[88] The absorption of avant-garde art into institutions, commodity culture and indeed Cold War policy in the 1960s, along with the burgeoning respectability of the word (being 'avant-garde', however misunderstood, become a corporate buzzword), is by now well known. However, the term continued to frame the practice of many artists, especially those who saw in avant-garde ubiquity further evidence of its power. Coterie was responsive to this in that it made no attempt to attack institutions that the avant-garde had taken over and had in turn been taken over by. It was, rather, better suited to extend the other half of the avant-garde project, the subsumption of art into life. In this, an emphasis was placed on accepting the world as it was, instituting an organic art moulded around the world as it existed rather than constructing symbolic orders to constrain it. This strategy was political in different ways: in Susan Sontag's anti-hermeneutical 'Against Interpretation' it aimed to release the sensuality and energy inhering in aesthetic form; in John Cage's insistence on a shift 'from making to accepting' the priority was a heightened attention to the everyday world.[89] By the time of the Vietnam War, however, in their diffuseness and emphasis on acceptance, such projects were inadequate as a response to the repressions of increasingly concrete and identifiable political enemies. Exercises in sensual liberation, simply translated to anti-war activity, became the equally personal and nebulous 'consciousness raising' of the counterculture. The central conclusion of anti-war verse was that politics could no longer rely on avant-garde immanence. A society that had absorbed avant-garde's historically subversive gestures but that nonetheless continued to pursue the imperialist goals of the pre-war period could hardly be responded to with more urinals dressed up as fine artworks. A new source of political expression was required and, in the event, sought.

Ginsberg's position within anti-war poetry's twin inheritances, coterie aesthetics and art's reintegration into life – must be sought in an abandonment of core avant-garde principles – an abandonment *Wichita Vortex Sutra* has in common with the other great political poems of the late sixties by George Oppen, Adrienne Rich and Amiri Baraka, the last of whom I will examine in the next chapter. My reading of the poem has described a poetic form at once porous, in the tradition of Sontag's, Cage's and Altieri's 'poetic of immanence', and resistant to

appreciating the world as it is. I have positioned Ginsberg at the centre of a sensibility moving from the self-defence of conscience to the projective art of political agitation. As the crisis of the Vietnam War brought the relevance of merely speaking to one's friends into question, Ginsberg wrote *Wichita Vortex Sutra* in an adulterated form open to 'life' and the mediated discourses of the present, exploiting political rhetoric to seek an alternative future.[90] These moves are all manifestations of a hybridity that went against the grain of an increasing tendency to specialisation in American avant-garde poetry, its growing desire to see politics as inhering in poeticness itself. (This is a trend, I will suggest in Chapter 6, that comes to fulfilment in Language writing.) Ginsberg institutes a hybrid aesthetic that ensures lyric imagination and political utterance coexist: where we overhear Levertov's private thoughts, Ginsberg institutes a properly public address. The triumph of that address is that it at once secures political commitment and denies itself domineering authority. Ginsberg's 'lonesomeness', and the vulnerability of his political statements, make sure of this. *Wichita Vortex Sutra*'s question, 'How little the prince of the FBI, unmarried all these years!', would sound like homophobic political mudslinging from the mouth of a politician; from the homosexual Ginsberg it is an attack but also an invitation into the fold of honesty and love, extended even to J. Edgar Hoover. Both needling and tender, the form here and throughout *Wichita Vortex Sutra* unifies subjective concerns regarding the limitations of lyric voice with the rhetorical expression of public desire. With the religious and occult inflection such a move assumes in Ginsberg's later career, the poetry becomes less compelling, and less vatic. For the crisis Americans faced in the course of the Vietnam War, however, Ginsberg's politicised lament was the most compelling of all poetic oppositions.

'You can be the music yourself': Amiri Baraka's attitudes, 1974–80

After Amiri Baraka died at the age of seventy-nine in January 2014 he was lauded or attacked for his output in the 1960s – variously for that work's wholly original conjoining of poetic voice and political expression, for its black potency in an era of increased persecution and dispossession, for its supposed inverted racism, for its male chauvinism and anti-Semitism. What is remarkable about the post-mortem on Baraka's career is that it paid no attention to the subsequent forty years of work that revised these positions and processes but mark an equally radical contribution to the power of poetry in the late twentieth century. All obituaries of Baraka effectively stop in 1974, the moment Baraka announced his turn to Marxism and moved away from the black cultural nationalism that had made him famous. The Poetry Foundation biography's ratio of 147 words on Baraka's output after 1974 in a 2,500-word article is typical, and mirrored in the focus of criticism on Baraka generally. Ignoring three-quarters of Baraka's considerable achievement is especially lamentable since his work from the mid-seventies onwards represents one of the first Marxist poetic responses to the post-war economic crisis, and one of the earliest projects for a vanguard art that explicitly rejected the claims of the traditional avant-garde. This chapter will explore these two related matters, suggesting we see both projects as developing Baraka's constant use of musical performance in poetic process, and the complex sense of audience related to it. The best commentary on Baraka's poetry has placed music at its centre, employing tropes in music to repudiate readings of the poet as didactic and dogmatic.[1] This is an important perspective on Baraka, best shown in work by Nathaniel Mackey and Kimberly Benston, who demonstrate how a musical, improvisatory cast of thought defines the restless energy of Baraka's poems, informing a poetic voice that is 'centrally an agon for utterance itself' in Benston's words, or preoccupied with 'resisting any effort to arrest . . . expressive vision' in Mackey's.[2] For both

writers, Baraka's rhythms are built on incompletion and becoming. These readings are a necessary corrective to dismissals of the poetry as anti-intellectual aggression or straightforward agitprop. They are, however, in Benston easily extended to celebrate 'a process of constant self-negation' in Baraka's work that rings less true:

> Baraka would reverse the process, endlessly repeated in post-Renaissance metaphysics of the text, by which representational abstraction detaches itself from communicative purpose . . . [D]esacralizing the word's relation to the truth its seeks [Baraka seeks a] self-consuming artefact that none the less presses the cause of an empowered, if migratory presence . . .[3]

This would make a Language poet of Baraka. I do not think reversing the 'metaphysics' outlined here is ever Baraka's intention, and the Language poets these claims best describe would never admit Baraka to their ranks. Benston never bridges the lacuna of her throwaway 'none the less' with anything but literary metaphors for real politics, subversions of literary convention becoming 'resistance' to 'oppressive "systems"'. This Baraka seems in danger of endless self-defeat, asserting nothing but the impossibility of commitment. My discussion here will centre around music as a foil to Baraka's initial poetic statements of Marxist certainties in a similar manner, but it will not ignore how he is, throughout his career, fundamentally a poet of conviction. My aim here is to chart how conviction is communicated in the early Marxist work, from the initial project of non-musical 'statement' in the mid-seventies to a reimagining of the role music might play in the Marxist poetics Baraka had first thought was incompatible with it. The result of this process, I will claim, is a regenerated committed poetics.

1 Music against hard facts

Music in Baraka needs to be thought through questions of audience. Baraka's writings about music constitute his theory of art; the earliest and most vital of these outline an aesthetic that is at once expressionist and anti-expressionist. This 1965 summative theory of black music, using terms borrowed from Olson, describes a complex emancipation from the self through expression, a liberatory art that finds political agency in the exhaustion of the desiring subject:

> The black rhythm energy blues feeling (sensibility) is projected into the area of reflection. Intentionally. As expression . . . where each term is equally respondent[:]

Projection over sustained periods (more time given, and time proposes a history for expression, hence it becomes reflective projection).
Arbitrariness of form (variety in nature).
Intention of performance as a learning experience.

These are categories which make reflection separate from expression . . . Expression does not set out to instruct, but it does anyway . . . if the objects of this mind-energy are so placed that they do receive. Reflection intends to change, is a formal learning situation.[4]

Baraka describes black music as 'An expression of culture at its most unself- (therefore showing the larger consciousness of a *one self*, immune to bullshit) conscious'.[5] Here, the osmotic relation of expressed desire and mimesis gives rise to projective representation, a species of art that can call for action at the same time it describes. In music the expressive source, the self, is articulated as the 'mind-energy' of agency, but then diffused among the various intelligences that are its object (first the other performers, then the audience). As Baraka concludes in this essay, again in terms again borrowed from Olson: 'New Black Music is this: Find the self, then kill it.'[6] The process of this search initiates a learning experience for performer and audience alike.

On the surface, Baraka's description of musical projection predicts James Baldwin's more lyrical statement on music in the 1970s:

Music is our witness, and our ally. The beat is the confession which recognises, changes and conquers time. Then, history becomes a garment we can wear and share, and not a cloak in which to hide; and time becomes a friend.[7]

For both Baldwin and Baraka, black music is essentially a collectivising form that moves outward from expression to history. However, collectivity for Baraka is never merely a ritual of sharing and utopian hand-holding. The 'we' Baldwin takes for granted is complicated in Baraka's work. Witness Clay's memorable description of Bessie Smith in *Dutchman*: 'Before love, suffering, desire, anything you can explain, she's saying, and very plainly, "Kiss my black ass." And if you don't know that, it's you that's doing the kissing.'[8] There is always something fascinating about Baraka's use of the word *you*. Throughout his career it has a strangeness resistant to the often easy dismissal of his poetry as didactic. Here it is a complex and combative thing: this is supposedly advice, but hardly friendly; we are told Smith addresses you, but you cannot answer back since her speech is 'before . . . anything you can explain'; she speaks 'very plainly', and yet there seems to be a strong chance you won't get it. She says to you, '"Kiss my black ass"', and in the captivating logic here, if you hear her saying it, she is no longer

saying it to you; but if you miss it, 'it's you that's doing the kissing'. Smith, who was a key figure in Baraka's 1960s histories of black music, is something stranger than a witness and an ally. In Baraka's central term for black music in the period, Bessie Smith has an *attitude* that only those in the know will be able to engage.

Baraka sometimes provokes his hearers in a similar way to Smith, but he also works estrangement in other ways. I will examine the work of the 1970s in a moment, but for perspective I want to briefly survey one of Baraka's most confrontational poems of the sixties, 'Poem for HalfWhite College Students' from *Black Magic* (1967). In early work like 'Notes of a Speech' or '*An Agony. As Now*' address is introspective: even the word 'you' stands for an alienated self, expressing the double consciousness of black experience described by W. E. B. Du Bois, 'this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others'.[9] We are closer to a *kiss my black ass* in the nationalist period, where *other* blacks are addressed. Accusation co-exists, however, with the earlier gestures of self-examination, which are developed rather than abandoned. 'Poem for HalfWhite College Students' is especially instructive because most readings single it out as an example of Baraka's supposed tendency to Manichean exclusions.[10] Its attitude or tone is far more complex. Opposition is central to the poem, but is not necessarily the opposition of the enlightened speaker against the feckless multitude. While 'Poem for HalfWhite College Students' has a clear sense of cultural authenticity and political commitment, it does not place the poet on one side of the fence and the audience on the other in any straightforward way. The poem's 'you' is both exhorted as an audience and addressed as the poet's self. This doubling is set out from the start: 'Who are you, listening to me, who are you / listening to yourself?' A poem wishing to simply 'contrast' the I with the you is unlikely to allow such slippage in its opening sentence.[11] The focus is undeniably on attacking young blacks' pretensions to white dilettantism, but this is a position Baraka was as likely to have been *self*-critical about in 1965, when he wrote the poem.[12] The poem bears this out: the 'I' is split and bleeds into the you: 'The ghost you see in the mirror, is it really / you. . .?', 'How do you sound, your words, are they / yours?' The line breaks here rhythmically suspend the addressee between audience and self. The poem, indeed, continues the self-listening project of Baraka's 1959 essay 'How You Sound??': '"HOW YOU SOUND??" is what we recent fellows are up to. How we sound . . .'.[13] The question of how Baraka sounds becomes important when listening to recordings of him reading the poem, where the delivery is restrained rather than aggressive. All this said, unlike in Baraka's earlier work, the 'me' is separate enough from the 'you' to articulate collective ambition,

to speak a political desire. The 'you' of half-white college students and the reflexive you representing part of the poet's consciousness are *both* urged to fulfil that ambition and potential. The needling address is partly *self*-motivating: the relation between the 'me' and 'you' is reciprocal in this sense, and the message to 'check yourself' is universal to half-white college students, the speaker himself and those already inclined to sympathise with his position. The poem may plainly say, 'Kiss my black ass', but by hearing it the reader can avoid doing the kissing – as Baraka puts it elsewhere in the collection, 'these are songs if you have the / music'.[14] The charisma of the poem lies in the salutary effect of a politics that has found a means of expression, of a self-searching that goes beyond introversion. There is an ideal striven for, a route out of self-division, a ground cleared for the articulation of conviction in which speaker and audience are given the potential to change.

In 1974, Baraka made a 'public notice to the world' of his conversion to Marxism, the culmination of 'a steady march in quick time to the left' he dates from 1972.[15] Readings of Third World socialists such as Kwame Nkrumah and Amilcar Cabral and a Marxist speech at the Sixth Pan African Congress in Nyerere's Tanzania followed the global recession of 1973 for Baraka, culminating in the withdrawal of his Congress of Afrikan People from the Kawaida ideology of black nationalism, and a programmatic commitment to Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. The political reasons for the shift are complex, and I will only address them here as they directly impact the poetry. In general terms, the confluence of a global economic crisis directly implicating imperialism in the falling living standards of working people, combined with the willingness of imperialism's 'black agents' in Africa to place the burden of this crisis on the poor, produced a reading of imperialism and racism that increasingly turned to class as its major interpretative tool.[16] Baraka's move from a cultural nationalism invested in essentialist solidarities and nostalgic cultural identity toward an ideology whose historical subjects are fluid and future-oriented, but whose cultural traditions were comparatively non-existent, required a major shift in artistic practice.

Though almost all academic criticism of Baraka dates from the mid-1970s, it is impossible to find any serious analysis of the poetry of the period. The work of the seventies has been variously dismissed as 'embarrassing . . . social realism', 'overshadowed by hammering political slogans', and 'hampered by the weight of ideological content for which they've had to efface themselves'.[17] *Hard Facts*, Baraka's first Marxist collection, cannot be reduced to this, though it does fail in important ways. The shift in poetic form is more pronounced than at any other moment in Baraka's career, and the poetry, for all its stridency, searches

for a style. 'A New Reality Is Better than a New Movie!' is exemplary of such a search:

> If you dont like it, what you gonna do about it. That was the question we asked each other, & still right regularly need to ask. You dont like it? Whatcha gonna do, about it??

> The real terror of nature is humanity enraged, the true technicolor spectacle that Hollywood cant record. They cant even show you how you look when you go to work, or when you come back.

> They cant even show you thinking or demanding the new socialist reality, its the ultimate tidal wave. When all over the planet, men and women, with heat in their hands, demand that society be planned to include the lives and self determination of all the people ever to live. That is the scalding scenario with a cast of just under two billion that they dare not even whisper. Its called, 'We Want It All . . . The Whole World!'[18]

The poem shows continuities with Baraka's earlier work. As always, the speaker's authenticity is achieved through self-identification with the audience addressed: motivation is infectious as well as pedagogical, and the speaker's authenticity depends on his own inclusion in the poem's address. Poetry 'reflects the sayers [*sic*] place', according to the collection's introductory essay – a reflection Baraka is careful to stress as the interdependence of an explicitly educational poetry and the poet's own education:

> we aim at an art that serves the great majority of the people, the working masses of people . . . that praises what helps the people and puts down mercilessly what oppresses or exploits them. That is why we should make a poetry, and art that speaks to, <u>after first learning from</u>, those same dynamic working masses . . .[19]

The revolutionary poet, Baraka says, gets his education from 'the inspired worker' only to 'give it back to inspire, educate, mobilise, persuade, involve, the people . . . but to do that we must start where they are which is on a much higher level than the majority of intellectuals and artists'. Within this, 'The question of the audience is key, is central to the work. "For Whom" is the problem as Mao Tse Tung sounded it.'[20] The essay does suggest, however, that Baraka has *already* learned from the working masses. For all their dynamism, that is, the poet does not learn from the people *as* he writes or speaks.

In the case of 'A New Reality Is Better than a New Movie!' the doubled 'you' is resolved in a way obscured by reprintings of poems from *Hard Facts*. In the Revolutionary Communist League edition the poem is followed by an untitled piece which could well be read as a con-

tinuation of 'A New Reality' rather than the separate poem it appears as subsequently, 'The Dictatorship of the Proletariat':

> The dictatorship
> of the proletariat
> > you need to say that
> > need to hear that
> > not be scared of that
> > cause that's gonna save your life[21]

Here we seem to get the answer to 'If you dont like it, what you gonna do about it', so excitingly left open in 'A New Reality'. In 'The Dictatorship of the Proletariat', that is, explosive answers to this question are narrowed to a single political idea. There is a move away from the rhythmic framing important to 'Poem for HalfWhite College Students', which encouraged speaker and audience to 'check out' how they sound, together. Most poems in *Hard Facts* do not rhythmically suspend the poet between speaker and listener. 'A New Reality Is Better than a New Movie!', in its varied rhythm and dynamic tone, is the exception that proves the rule. There are many examples of quite different, flatter inflections:

> > > > The proletariat in modern
> > dress. Who must lead the masses of us, with a revolutionary vanguard party
> > > at the helm
> > guided by science, guided by the science, the science of marxism-leninism-
> > > mao tse-tung
> > thought.[22]

Lines like these, assaulting poetic decorum with unwieldy Leninist jargon, often have their own incantatory, Whitmanian self-consciousness, but it does not undercut the sense of the poetry as knowledge imparted rather than rhythm experienced. The key to this distinction is in the conscious turn Baraka makes away from music to the essay in the period. Baraka said in the sixties, 'Poetry, first of all, was and still must be a musical form . . . poetry [is] supposed to be as musical as it [can] be.'[23] By the mid-seventies this had changed. In 1977, asked in interview whether his current poetry has similarities with 'the musician's craft', Baraka is clear:

> I think it's less interested in the overall *sound* of words and more interested in *what* it's saying . . . You mean trying to infuse my poetry with some particular sound? Well, at this particular time, I'm not focused on that as much.[24]

Undoubtedly, global politics informs this shift. Outlining his theory of 'projective' black music, Baraka writes: 'The people who make this

music are intellectuals or mystics or both.'[25] For Baraka in 1965, the difference between intellectuals and mystics was perhaps not important. By the mid-seventies, the horrifying anti-intellectualism of many African ruling elites made a distinction urgent. African magician-rulers such as Nguema in Equatorial Guinea, Bokassa in the Central African Republic, and perhaps most importantly Mubutu and his Africanisation of Zaire, all cloaked tyranny and mass murder in the garb (often literally) of an African cultural identity that often simply stood against democracy, human rights and other 'Western' corruptions.

The effect of Baraka's focus on the '*what*' of expression is to define art as an act of 'impression' where the poet exchanges mystic ambiguity for clear-cut statement: 'it affects you, it im-presses or *stamps* its image upon you'.[26] Baraka's turn to visual metaphors is in itself a sign that the poet is seeking artistic forms allowing for stillness and clarity rather than imposing rhythmic metamorphoses. Baraka would find the form for such impressive statement in the essay. The turn to the essay comes, as Baraka explains, from a reading of the Chinese writer Lu Hsun (1881–1936), especially his 'short essay form' (usually known as *zawen*) that 'combined poetry and revolutionary observation':

> **Benston:** Would you say that *Hard Facts*, and other of your works in the last few years, searches for that kind of form?
> **Baraka:** Yes, right, I think so. I think my own feeling now is closer to the short essay form, and reading about Lu Hsun made me realise why I felt more comfortable using it. . . . you can do a lot of things in it . . . it's *wider* than a poem, as far as I'm concerned. Because in poetry you usually have a rhythmic dynamic that you either try to force, if you don't have it with you, or, if you have it with you, it flows and has a life of its own. But in the short essay form the rhythm follows from what you want to say . . .[27]

The essay is 'a kind of struggle form'. Essays are perfect for 'daily struggle', Baraka says, because they can be written quickly and are immediately intellectually accessible, easily absorbed without the complications of a 'rhythmic dynamic' that adds nothing to the content of the 'revolutionary observation'. The formal welding of poem and essay is easily seen in *Hard Facts*. The resemblances of the poems above with Baraka's most important essay of the 1970s, 'Why I Changed My Ideology' (1975), are obvious:

> [W]e are determined . . . to liberate Black people and oppressed people all over this land, as part of the liberation struggles of oppressed people worldwide. Guided by the science of Marxism-Leninism-Mao-Tse-Tung Thought.
>   Speed the coming of the Vanguard Party!
>   Build revolutionary united fronts!

Expose the illusion of bourgeois democracy and rip the covers off their
lackeys!
Let the people find out armed struggle is inevitable!
Victory to Black people!
Victory to the strugglers!
Victory to all oppressed people![28]

If anything, these words seem positively expressive compared with the
weakest poem of *Hard Facts*, 'Red Autumn':

winter is yet ahead, we are readying to go to a women's conference and find
   ways

      to bring Marxism-leninism-mao tse-tung thought to black women.
   Some sisters
pushing a proposal to call a multinational women's front together, by
   spring. That's

      good, from the tactical to the strategic, build the whole structure
   that will
change the century, change the social system, change the way we live,
   change the peoples

lives and the future of the world.[29]

Baraka claims that such work can have a rhythm that 'follows from
what you want to say', but if rhythm is in these poems, it is not the
'energy blues feeling' intent on its own transformation that Baraka had
described in 1965. On the other hand, if 'now the essay is the most
relevant form', as Baraka says, it is not scholarly expository prose that
is meant, but the 'daggers and javelins' of short, pithy and commit-
ted statement – and stronger poems, such as 'Disorder', 'When We'll
Worship Jesus', 'A New Reality' all contain a singular energy even
though their rhythms are predetermined rather than exploratory.[30]

   Hard Facts has to be positioned as an experimental work in the strict
sense: it is consciously the beginning of a project to find a poetic language
for the mass communication of Marxism. Baraka defines the period
after the collection as a 'critical point': 'I have to try and develop my
own work so I can become more clearly and firmly a Marxist writer.'[31]
If the right form has not quite been found at this stage, what can we say
about its ambitions? In Baraka's cultural nationalist period, there is a
clear sense that to subvert artistic form is to subvert enemy institutions –
Black cultural forms are automatically an assault on White politics. This
is avant-gardism in Peter Bürger's sense, conflating as it does hegemonic
artistic traditions with institutions, and so non-traditional aesthetic form
with political action. Though Baraka's writing always co-existed with a

separate political practice, as a *cultural* nationalist, he felt an organic tie between new (or Black) artistic forms and political (Black) liberation. The aggressive resistance and anarchy of, for example, the recording of Baraka's 'Black Art' as a jazz track released on Baraka's Jihad Records summons much of its immense power from this belief. The experiment of *Hard Facts* is not of the same order. Baraka, as his interviews show, witnessed the co-optation of Black Art in the Blaxploitation of the 1970s, and this was his particular experience of the 'mainstream' hegemonic appropriation of avant-garde style felt by many artists of the period in different ways.[32] More generally, Baraka's shift represents a dissatisfaction with the political efficacy of a predominantly formal practice: as his comments on the essay show, his focus now is on content of art, being 'more interested in *what* it's saying'. How a poem can stress the *what* of its being is no simple question, of course, and this is why Baraka's forms, as we will see, are fluid and experimental in this period. There is, though, a move away from the idea that culture can be politics *in its very form*, an avant-garde inheritance Baraka never had felt comfortable with. The interest of Baraka's 1970s art is in how it continues to assert itself as vanguard but pointedly rejects the avant-garde, now called 'bourgeois art'. This process should at no point be equated with the social realism of the 1930s, however: Baraka still positions himself as culturally vanguard in the broad sense, still *inventing* new forms, and his call for a 'mass art' is not part of an official line on aesthetic form exploiting what people already know. I will argue below that Baraka's continued attempts to link directness with 'advanced understanding' do come to fruition. That is, his search for 'a kind of struggle form' exploiting direct address, when combined with an 'other kind of skill' only gestured to above, occasions some of his most important poetry.[33] Music, I think, is at the heart of this 'other kind of skill'. In *Hard Facts*, as Baraka himself admits, simplicity and directness have been established, but without the accompanying sub-tlety needed to engage audiences. The turn to the model of the essay as a way to 'combine the advanced and the popular' is in this sense a cul-de-sac: though it helps Baraka to conceptualise the aims of a black Marxist poetry in the 1970s, it does not in the end provide a compelling form for agitational poetry.[34] As we see Baraka reintroduce musicality, however, his aims and executions coalesce in compelling and unpredictable ways.

2 The return of music: *Poetry for the Advanced*

'Afro American Lyric', a poem eventually included as part of *Poetry for the Advanced* (1979), struggles with form.[35] It continues Baraka's previ-

ous efforts to directly communicate political content, but moves away from the essay mode in obvious ways:

> The ugliest ugly is the social ugly
> the horriblest horrible terriblest terrible
> Simple shit uh simple shit
> uh simple
> shit uh
> simple
> simple
> simple
> simple
> shit
>
>> society's ugly is the graspingclass
>> its simple
>> shit uh
>> see-imm-pull
>> see-impull
>> Seeeeeeeeeee-immmmmmmmmm
>>   pull
>
> Some See - im - pull
>>   shit
> Society's ugly, the ugliest ugly
> caused by the grasping
> class, exploiting
> class[36]

The poem's constant deconstruction of words like *simple* and *need* creates a simultaneous dissonance and clarity expressive of its subject: exploitation that hides in plain sight. The formal device is not political in itself but explicitly tied to a content: counterintuitively perhaps, the formal disjunction is there to make the poem 'simpler', to spell out its already obvious content, the straightforward violence of capital. Put another way, the argument has a music. Introducing the poem at a reading at Naropa Institute in July 1978, Baraka says it is 'influenced by Stevie Wonder and Al Green'.[37] The exact importance of the two musicians is not clear, but the materiality of Baraka's strained voice is decisive, making the poem very different from the potentially detached, declarative essay-poems of *Hard Facts*. The music is the opposite of eloquence: it is, as in Baraka's description of John Coltrane, 'like watching a grown man learning to speak'.[38] Baraka's stuttering and guttural recitation stages his attempts to articulate a subject that is firmly in his sights but that can only be enunciated at considerable effort. The 'uh' above, on Baraka's reading, is not merely a hesitation, but the cry of a body stretching for expression, an interjected grunt of determination.

The alternation of concentrated staccato and crescendos of self-belief make up the rhythm of the poem, which performs the classic Marxist-Hegelian dialectic of the marginal subject 'always on the point of revolt', the transparency of economic injustice versus the frustrations in overcoming it, the maddening convergences and divergences of simplicity and struggle.[39] In 'Afro American Lyric' the charisma, or indeed the aural pleasure of Baraka's highest achievements in the period do not register fully, but a key conviction has begun to assert itself: 'You can be the music yourself. You don't have to have a band.'[40]

Most followers of Baraka's career have felt the power of his performance, but describing that power, analysing *how* the aural qualities of the work acquire a political valence, is another matter. Even the most sensitive work on how Baraka sounds has fallen back on tired identifications of performance with action: 'Dancing is synonymous with political activism,' writes William Harris, because 'Marxism is a political manifestation of the jazz aesthetic process.'[41] Charles Bernstein, similarly, claims that Barakan performance 'works to spur the (silent, atomized) reader *into* performance – it insists on action; the page's apparent textual "lack" is the motor of its form' – another reading of Baraka as a Language poet based on the assumption that mere lacunas in meaning are motivating in themselves.[42] Baraka's performances clearly have a compelling relation to political action, but we do not need to collapse that into identity. A more helpful guide here is Paul Gilroy's notion of a black 'politics of fulfillment', a position he differentiates from a merely oppositional anti-capitalism and links to musical performance. This politics, he says, focuses attention on 'the notion that a future society will be able to realize the social and political promise that present society has left unaccomplished':

> Though by no means literal, it can be grasped through what is said, shouted, screamed or sung . . . it strives continually to move beyond the grasp of the merely linguistic, textual, and discursive. The invocation of utopia . . . emphasizes the emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors. It points specifically to the formation of a community of needs and solidarity which is magically made audible in the music itself and palpable in the social relations of its cultural utility and reproduction.[43]

For Gilroy, profoundly inspired by Baraka's own writing on music,[44] the 'content' of black consciousness may challenge capitalist social relations, but 'more complex' utopian desires are only invoked in extra-textual performance itself based in black cultural traditions dating from

the demands of slavery. *Words* in this tradition, Gilroy states, 'will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth': its politics, rather, 'must be played, danced and acted, as well as sung about'. Music is therefore affirmative and embryonically political, enacting in miniature 'the formation of needs and solidarity' and exciting the utopian desire for its implementation en masse. In this sense the *now* of music is far more readily connected to a 'future society' than the 'normative content' of more discursive modes like the essay, which may speak of the future directly but are formally, as it were, atemporal. Music, on the other hand, as in Baraka's description of John Tchicai's music, 'slides away from the proposed' since it is it extemporary, inventing itself as it goes.[45] We have glimpsed the complex temporality of such expression in 'Afro American Lyric'. The tension in Baraka's work between spontaneity and struggle, between self-constitution and vanguard projection, is embodied in these moments of visionary power that at once imaginatively overcome an enemy and stress that such victory is only imaginary. The strength of his performance is to spur real action – keeping in view Gilroy's 'politics of fulfillment', its achievement is to suggest that destruction, revolution, redemption are absent but imminent.[46]

'Dope' dramatises these potentialities, and goes beyond both *Hard Facts* and 'Poem for HalfWhite College Students' in its exploitation of sound. Baraka's first great poem of the seventies, 'Dope' is ostensibly a satirical monologue spoken by an exhortative preacher typical of the then emergent televangelism, with the beatific responses of an imagined audience intermixed. In the tradition of Blake's 'The Chimney Sweeper', the poem rehearses the capitulation to suffering and injustice in this life for consolation and redress in the next, drawing the conclusion of Marx: religion is the dope of the masses. The poem's content, then, seems simple, but its form is hugely complex: it relies on its own musical charisma throughout, but also it seeks to refute the equally charismatic style it mimics, to assault evangelism's ideological form as well as its well-known meaning. The aural pleasures of the poem, that is, cannot stray too close to the excitements of 'evangelical sanctify in heat', as 'Dope' has it. How are we to describe this distance? Can we speak of a shadowing, an inversion, pastiche? Where is the poet's point of view, the position from which he is able to critique, as he does so ruthlessly and bluntly? I want to suggest in the reading that follows that Baraka steps outside of the sermon as he steps into his audience – that the audience is the perspective, the place of observation and the launch pad of attack.

There are a number of recordings of Baraka performing the poem, most alike, but the most powerful is the reading with Ed Dorn at the Just Buffalo Literary Center in December 1978, which I will refer to here.[47]

In this and most other performances, 'Dope' is read after both broad-side attacks on the 'fragmentation' of 'bourgeois art' (either in opening remarks or in the poem, 'Against Bourgeois Art') and experimental vocalisation, such as imitations of radio interference ('Caution 3') or avant-garde saxophone ('I Love Music'). 'Dope' sits somewhere between these poles, its 'babbling, and wailing, jerking in pathocrazy grin stupor' is critiqued, but its expression intentionally bought at the cost of sense from the outset:

```
uuuuuuuuuu
uuuuuuuuuu
uuuuuuuuuu    uuu       ray light morning fire lynch yet
                        uuuuuuu, yester-pain in dreams
                        comes again. race-pain, people our people
                        our people
                        everywhere . . . yeh . . . uuuuu, yeh
                        uuuuu. Yeh
                        our people
                        yes people
                        every people
                        most people
                        uuuuu, yeh uuuuu, most people
                        in pain
                        yester-pain, and pain today[48]
```

'uuuuu' is voiced 'ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh-ooh' – a noise that simultaneously signifies impetuous religious enthusiasm, drug-induced stupor and the primate sound used for racial insult. At this point the evangelist's thoughts are disjointed, but he does recognise the key characteristics of Afro-American life (lynch, race-pain, pain). This recognition is precisely what makes the words dangerous: the preacher knows the suffering he assuages. In performance Baraka speaks these lines in a restrained, low voice – the *uuuuu* seems to enunciate an answer on the tip of the tongue but not yet available to the speaker. When the poem, as it were, awakes to interpret these phenomena, Baraka's voice assumes the fullness of exhortation:

ooowow! oooowow! It must be the devil
oooowow! oooowow!

  It must be the devil
  It must be the devil
  It must be the devil

At this point we are introduced to the dominant rhythm of the poem. 'Dope' is organised as a cycle of innocence and experience. Baraka

begins each hypothetical section with a straightforward, if heavily laid on, imitation of gullible Christianity – here, for example, 'It must be the devil' is said with the excitement of revelation. As the repetitions build and expand to account for other social reality, however, Baraka's voice changes to shout the lines with contempt for what is spoken as even as he continues to say it: 'i seed on channel 7, i seed it on channel 9 i seed / it on channel 4 and 2 and 5. Rich folks / good to us / poor folks aint shit, hallelujah, hallelujah'. After this the rhythm builds again from the start. We hear this transition from the voice of the *believer* to, as it were, the voice of *Baraka* in full here:

> it aint capitalism,
> naw it aint that, jimmy carter wdnt lie,
>   'lifes unfair' but it aint capitalism
> must be the devil, owow! it ain the police,
>   jimmy carter wdnt lie, you
> know rosalynn wdnt not lillian his
>   drunken racist brother aint no reflection
> on jimmy, must be the devil got in im, i tell
>   you, the devil killed malcolm
> and dr king too, even killed both kennedies,
>   and pablo neruda and overthrew
> allende's govt. killed lumumba, and is
>   negotiating with step and fetchit,
> sleep n eat and birmingham, over there in
>   'Rhodesia', goin' under the name
> ian smith, must be the devil, caint be vortser,
>   caint be apartheid, caint
> be imperialism, jimmy carter wdnt lie, didn't
>   you hear him say in his state
> of the union message, i swear on rosalynn's
>   face-lifted catatonia, i wdnt lie . . .

It is as if the evidence of hypocrisy builds to such a point that the pretence of another voice must be dropped. The conviction and emotion of Baraka's own sounding suggests he can no longer contain himself, with the lines 'caint be vorster, / caint be apartheid, caint / be imperialism' shouted with such acerbic determination that the poem seems to appropriate the sermon at the same time as destroying it.

Within these rhythms, however, or rather outside of them, is the audience. The poem recited alone in a recording room is unthinkable, and when read *with* music rather than having its own, the poem loses a good deal of its power. Unable to feed off an audience and generate its own rhythms, in the accompanied performance on *New Poetry, New Music*, for example, the poem is much closer to a naturalistic dramatic

monologue. In the unaccompanied Buffalo performance, however, it is clear that the changing tone and volume of Baraka's voice responds to a galvanising audience. Baraka's voice changes, rising in conviction as the audience laughs at the imitations of religious meekness, beginning the cycle again at intermittent applause. These two movements both accommodate and challenge the audience: Baraka accommodates in the sense of allowing his listeners to partly define the sections and rhythm of his poem, but challenges in that his response to audience reactions is often to move away from what has just won approval. And so, for example, when the audience laugh at the send-up of *Roots* where 'lazy niggers chained theyselves and threw / they own black asses in the bottom / of the boat', he tells how black Africans also helped, also sending away 'yo mamma, wife, and / you never seed em no more'. The laughter dissipates with this introduction of the 'yo' or you. The poem will not rest in the detached satisfactions of satire.

These observations are intended to show the effect of a renewed music on the 'struggle form' Baraka had been seeking since the mid-seventies. I will look at the more affirmative gestures in this mode with 'AM/TRAK' and 'In the Tradition' in a moment, but even functioning as pure opposition in 'Dope', rhythmic dynamism blurs the division between speaker and receiver. Where in *Hard Facts* a political education is *passed down* from the poet, in 'Dope' poetic form is fundamentally *shared* between writer and audience. This is Gilroy's 'emergence of qualitatively new desires, social relations and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation and resistance' in action. However, it would be a mistake to suggest Baraka does not know *what* he wants to say, however collaborative his manner may be. 'Dope', in the words of *Hard Facts*, 'puts down mercilessly what oppresses or exploits' the working masses. Put simply: 'Dope' is vanguard writing with a pedagogical function, looking to speak for others in a way the American avant-garde had increasingly refused to. On the other hand, the Third World Barakan rhythm also introduces *feeling* to this position. In this sense, Baraka does appropriate a kind of 'sermonic mode': unlike the ecstatic resignation of the preacher, however, this feeling is one of outrage, interrogation, determination. This is a shared feeling that evolves in performance, that moves with the audience. It is therefore fundamentally different from the agitprop verse of the 1930s, whose messages were so obligated and prefabricated that they had none of the emotional qualities necessary for poetry. A lack of music, of call-and-response rhythm means Baraka's *essays* continue to resemble these more authoritative speech-acts. In the poetry, however, the *you* includes an *I*: it shares feeling, and feels as it goes the discoveries and energies these acts of solidarity can give rise to.

3 Screams against reality course through him as sound: 'AM/TRAK' and *In the Tradition*

'AM/TRAK', issued as a sixteen-page pamphlet in 1979, continues this process of sharing.[49] At its most basic, the poem is similar to the dozens of poems elegising Coltrane written before it,[50] following the musician's career from its beginnings with Dizzy Gillespie, Miles Davis and others to the legendary sessions with Thelonious Monk at the 5 Spot, the achievements with 'the inimitable 4' (the John Coltrane Quartet), and the music's afterlife. The poem cannot be reduced to storytelling or hagiography, however: 'AM/TRAK', the culmination of Baraka's twenty years of writing and thinking about Coltrane, brings together a host of dichotomies Baraka had been trying to weld throughout his own career. On this occasion, Baraka lets someone else do the talking. His constant calls in the sixties to 'find the self, then kill it' were, as they had been in Olson, partly a fig-leaf for an expansive and imposing authority, or at least a symptom of that authority. In both 'AM/TRAK' and, later, *In the Tradition*, self-assertion is exchanged for the improvised expression of collective will. In 'AM/TRAK', the vehicle for this is Coltrane. The urgent question Baraka asks his listeners is 'are we gathered to dig this?', as he becomes just another witness to Coltrane's 'Convulsive multi orgasmic / Art / Protest' among them:

> hot vowels escaped the metal clone of his soul
> fucking saxophone
> tell us shit tell us tell us!

The poem's constant call and response is itself a refiguring of Coltrane, whose 'collective improvisation' Baraka had praised in the mid-sixties.[51] 'AM/TRAK' demonstrates how the openness of Coltrane's music allows for continual dialogue, for questioning and demand:

> Be
> Be
> Be reality
> Be reality alive in motion in flame to change (You Knew It!)
> to change!!

That such demands on the music can at the same time sonically imitate its sound embodies the organic linkage between audience and performer Baraka had always attributed to Coltrane's work: 'it reaches a point where it's very close, where it comes from the people, then goes into a form that is *advanced* but still drawn so much from the people that it

comes together'.[52] Coltrane's music is poetry for the advanced, drawn from the main guard.

Coltrane also forces a synthesis between another dialectic central to Baraka: expression and action. As the phrase 'multi orgasmic / Art / Protest' implies, Coltrane is a figure transcending the usual opposition of struggle and ecstasy. Though 'super-sane screams *against* reality / course through him', Coltrane is able to '*Be* reality . . . in flame', and the poem makes the two positions complementary. Such multi-tasking is an effect of aesthetic form. In Coltrane's work we hear 'all of it in it afire aflame talking saying being doing meaning': his music straddles onto-logical states in such a way that Baraka's earlier instrumental notion of art in *Hard Facts* no longer holds. The key figure for the poem's dialectic of form and content, 'doing' and 'meaning', is the scream. The word is standard both for the many poems written on Coltrane before 'AM/TRAK', and in Baraka's own thinking about the 'attitude' of contemporary black music. In Baraka's poem, however, the word encapsulates an entire aesthetics in dialogue with avant-garde art itself.

The scream returns us to Baraka's earlier description of Coltrane as 'a grown man learning to speak':

> But Trane clawed at the limits of cool
> slandered sanity
> with his tryin to be born
> raging
> shit
>
>   Oh
>   blow,
> yeh go do it
> honk, scream
> uhuh yeh—history
>   love
>   blue clipped moments
>   of intense feeling

Here the scream is the counter of Davis's 'cool', an anarchic force that 'slandered sanity'. It is also a metaphor for birth, with Coltrane figured as an unborn child, in his painful developmental phase playing for other musicians. The scream as signifier of both pain and rebirth is central to the poem generally. As pain, the scream is a reflex to 'reality':

> nigger absolute super-sane screams against reality
> course through him
> AS SOUND!
> 'Yes, it says

       this is now in you screaming
       recognize the truth
       recognize reality

The scream of Coltrane screams in his audience, as figured in the triply ambiguous phrase 'in you screaming'. This is the scream as an automatic reaction, reflex response, pained spontaneous noise. We hear the other sense of the scream, as 'raging' birth, when Baraka gives a summary of the career:

           Trane was the spirit of the 60's
       He was Malcolm X is New Super Bop Fire
       Baaahhhhh
       Wheeeeeee . . . Black Art!!!

Love
History
   On The Bar Tops of Philly
in the Monkish College of *Express*
in the cool Grottoes of Miles Davis Funnytimery
Be
Be
Be reality
Be reality alive in motion in flame to change (You Knew It!)
                           to change!!
               (All you reactionaries listening
               Fuck you, Kill you
               get outta here!!!)
Jimmy Garrison, bass, McCoy Tyner, piano, Captain Marvel Elvin
on drums, the number itself, the precise saying
all of it in it afire aflame talking saying being doing meaning

The scream here is a 'precise saying' because it at once undermines the present order as an irreducibly singular sound form and rails against it in emotional content. In form, then, the scream is disruptive, breaking the order of the referential system, but it nonetheless, in content, holds powerful political emotions. The closeness of form and content here, the way in which the form of a scream *is* in some sense its content, is what attracts Baraka to the figure: the dualities of change and reality, hope and pain, protest and orgasm can coexist in it. The scream at once rejects and engages 'reality', with a utopian impulse tied organically to the reality from which it emerges.

   In essence, the scream expresses a reality that is 'aflame'. Reality, through the scream, is transformed to energy so that its flame may spread to 'love' and 'history':

(I lay in solitary confinement, July 67
  Tanks rolling thru Newark
  & whistled all I knew of Trane
  my knowledge heartbeat
  & he was *dead*
  they
  said.

And yet last night I played *Meditations*
& it told me what to do
Live you crazy mother
fucker!
Live!
  & organize
  yr shit
  as rightly
  burning!

The burning scream is both a form that can *tell* (it has an instrumental quality that can hold and convey a content) and a *telling* form (the attitude, tone and sheer noise of the utterance is itself a message). Compared with the often practical communications of *Hard Facts*, the exhortation of Coltrane and 'AM/TRAK' is more abstract, but also more energetic. It is a call to carry the spirit of the music itself, to do what it does, simultaneously recognising reality and screaming against it, meaning and doing, burning and organising.

Coltrane is one among many figures in perhaps Baraka's greatest achievement, *In the Tradition*. First published in 1980, the poem writes large and 'in' an international tradition of 'america' populated by black poets, basketball players, musicians, political figures and others. *In the Tradition* is the culmination of Baraka's previous styles: the Poundian epic 'poem containing history', the incendiary racial 'shout', the revolutionary 'struggle form'. The poem, again, uses music to synthesise affirmation and opposition – Baraka's introduction to a reading of it on the album *New Music, New Poetry* (1982) sets out what the work will think through poetically and express with extraordinary power:

> I have a bunch of kids, and in the present period of America's move to the right, one of the manifestations of that is a programme called *The White Shadow*, so the negative inspiration for this poem is *The White Shadow*. The positive inspiration is Arthur Blythe, particularly a record he made called *In the Tradition*.

In *The White Shadow*, which sees a white basketball coach lead a mainly black inner-city school to glory, Baraka sees a denial of agency to black people – a denial which he, implicitly invoking Hegel's master/slave

dialectic in the poem, inverts and throws back at the white patriarch. The 'positive inspiration' that informs this riposte, Arthur Blythe's 1979 album revisiting earlier jazz styles, is not simply 'the tradition' of black culture, but the state of being '*in* the tradition'. Blythe, Baraka implies, does not simply present the achievements of the past, but inhabits black culture to renew its 'changing same'. The poem makes this last distinction clear:

> in the tradition thank you Arthur for playing & saying
> reminding us how deep how old how black how sweet   how
  we is and bees
  when we remember
  when we are our memory as the projection
  of what is evolving
  in struggle
  in passion and pain
  we become our sweet black
  selves[53]

Such a reminder is needed, the poem claims, because of white culture's insistence on 'denying with lying images / our strength & African / funky beauty'.

This dialectic of strength and beauty is central to the poem. Like 'AM/TRAK', *In the Tradition* strives to bring together 'sweetness' and 'struggle', and again the latter always folds into the former, with sweetness always finally an expression of struggle. If the poem is a 'tradition / poem, poem us together', then it must also speak of 'the tradition of those klanned and chained / & lynched and shocklyed and naacped'. The tradition may produce culture 'elegant as / skywriting', but it will always be grounded in history:

```
            In the Tradition
            of life
            & dying
centuries of beautiful
            women
            crying
In the tradition
            of screamed
            ape music
            coon hollers
            shouts
            even more profound
            than its gorgeous
            sound
```

Here, 'screamed / ape music' is a form whose meaning both is and goes beyond the 'beautiful' – indeed, its beauty only exists in the 'more profound' tradition of suffering. As we have seen, Baraka's word for this profundity in his earlier musical writings was attitude: music takes up a relationship with its historical moment, stands toward it in a certain way, has a certain fitness for it. *In the Tradition*'s attitude is akin to Bessie Smith's, whose suffering provides access to strength and knowledge. In the poem, since the 'flaming hatchet motion' of history is the preserve of those who *work*, be they Black, Latino, Irish, even Appalachian coal miners, so also is song, the poem's vital force. The White Shadow, who 'must coach / cannot shoot', is therefore in the humiliating position of holding black music as his only music: his reliance on servitude is so absolute, his distance from the sites of action such that, Baraka claims, he has not been able to 'come out of Europe' and create his own new artistic forms. The racist, therefore, is uniquely vulnerable to invitations to 'Kiss my black ass'.

The poem does not merely celebrate an aesthetic victory over such 'imperial dogs', however. The tradition is 'Basied on' (Baraka's pun on the jazz pianist Count Basie) the fact that, still, 'we Blue Black Wards struggle / against a Big White Fog'. As a 'struggle form', the poem still wants to galvanise its audience, renewing 'the tradition of gorgeous Africa blackness / [that] says to us fight'. Celebration is clearly part of this, since one of the poem's aims is to show that America is *already* African:

> our fingerprints are everywhere
> on you America, our fingerprints are everywhere, Cesaire told you
> that, our family strewn around the world has made more parts of that
>   world
> blue and funky, cooler, flashier, hotter, afro-cuban james brownier
>   a wide panafrican
>   world

Such lines are in the blues tradition of the boast, but the fact that America is still addressed as a 'you' shows a gap in the expressions of black culture and their fulfilment politically. The poem's means for addressing this, for linking the 'strength' of black culture to political empowerment, is music.

Music is both a vehicle of culture memory and a catalyst for resistance for *In the Tradition*. The musical technique of the poem has been described in Daniel Won-gu Kim's excellent essay, and it would be difficult to improve on this account. Kim describes the poem as improvisational jazz in words: 'Baraka plays the riff ["in the tradition"], "the

rips off something real mean," and then returns to the riff only to bridge from that into the next run.'[54] What is obvious about such a procedure, but that Kim does not draw attention to, is that it extends Baraka's *what* into how he *sounds*: 'the tradition' is returned to as a kind of launch pad for fresh creativity in the very rhythmic form of the poem. The tradition often literally manifests sound, made up as it is of names that Baraka combines into new musical forms:

> Musical screaming
> Niggers
> yeh
> tradition
> of Brown Welles
> & Brown Sterling
> & Brown Clifford
> of H Rap & H Box
> Black Baltimore sister blues antislavery singers

The improvisational model is clear on hearing Baraka read the poem, but is also evident on the page: the running together of long one-syllable words with faster multisyllabic clusters, the disordered but constantly interacting assonance and alliteration, the anaphora allowing extemporisation – all combine to give the impression of a freeform solo. That these names are able to co-exist within Baraka's loose, improvisational creativity is his testament to a tradition 'always new and centuries old'. Were it not for the music of the poem its subject would read like the same grand narrative of canonicity that typifies Eurocentric 'tradition'. But here, as Baraka wrote in 1966, 'music . . . summons and describes where its energies were gotten'.[55]

It is in these energies that we find the political power of the poem. *In the Tradition*'s music, that is, is capable of the incessant movement and responsiveness required of proper political action. The poem enacts the continuing potency of that tradition as a weapon in struggle at the same time as it insists on the continuing necessity of struggle itself. 'Hah, you bloody & dazed, screaming at me to stop yet, / NO, hah, you think its over' – Baraka's harangue of the white Eurocentric apologist here runs three meanings together in its 'it' to prove this point: what is not 'over' is simultaneously the continuing repression of white culture, the tradition that fights against it and Baraka's own explosive poem, the embodiment of that tradition now. The tradition, the black energy of the poem, encompasses all three at once. *In the Tradition* is a 'struggle form', at base responding to, humiliating and chasing out of town the continuing 'idiot chatter' of racism:

We are the artists
Dont tell me shit about a tradition of deadness & capitulation
of slavemasters sipping tea in the parlor
while we bleed to death in fields
tradition of cc rider
see what you done done
don't tell me shit about the tradition of slavemasters

The music of these lines is simply compelling. Sudden tonal changes emphasise the dynamic nature of the tradition Baraka is moving through: the shift from the staccato swiftness of the third line is deftly followed by the long monosyllables of the fourth, while the cc rider line (which Baraka loudly sings in performance) is a strident response to both. The slavemaster tradition is not comfortably in the past, however much it may be dead: the 'southernagrarians / academic aryans' of today demand Baraka's response.

It is the poem's responsiveness, premised on its tradition's dynamic ability to struggle with 'what is evolving' that best describes its immense charisma. At the end of the poem, *In the Tradition* attacks its greatest target, responding to the November 1979 Greensboro killings in North Carolina, which saw the death of five demonstrators on an anti-KKK march at the hands of Klan members:

              the tradition
    thank you langston/arthur
    says sing
    says fight
    in the tradition, always clarifying, always new and centuries old
    says
          Sing!
          Fight!
                Sing!
                Fight!
                      Sing!
                      Fight! &c. &c.
                                Booshee dooooo doo doooo dee doooo
                                dooooooooooo!
                                DEATH TO THE KLAN!

The poem ends on this note, it seems, because only now has its music built to the appropriate pitch. This is Baraka's earlier sloganeering brought to a compelling relation with poetic form. Here Baraka neither consigns political aesthetics to avant-garde formal disjunction nor collapses art into an instrumental vehicle for content: both rhythmic form and extortive message speak, as the poem urges us to sing *and* fight. This

vanguard poetics has its medium as its message in a manner resembling but strongly diverging from his new contemporaries, the Language poets. *In the Tradition*, like 'Dope' and 'AM/TRAK', is fundamentally an *attitude* that, as the word itself does, conflates form and content, demanding response to both. Through the 'collective improvisation' Baraka admired in Coltrane, his 'poem for us together' summons a collectivity that 'says fight', an articulation Baraka had sought since his conversion to Marxism.

Figures of inward: Language poetry and the end of the avant-garde

Language poetry was the first example of a self-professed Marxist avant-garde in the US since Objectivism, and the country's first nationally organised movement to overrun the institutions of poetry it assailed from its inception. Language writing continues to dominate Anglophone discourse around the politics of poetry, and its influence on the major current in political poetry today, the New Conceptualism, is direct and thorough. Its central figures (Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, Susan Howe, Ron Silliman, Bruce Andrews, Bob Perelman) have shaped poetic taste and practice, while its central ideas (the politics of poetic form, the materiality of language, the readerly production of meaning) remain important in the writing, reading and scholarship of poetry, in some cases becoming its naturalised *doxa*. But why did the 1970s give rise to a Marx-inflected, experimental poetics of Language? Why was Language the first example of a *movement* since the war, at a time when the idea of avant-garde grouping seemed moribund? Why has its effect on American poetry been so great? There are various keys to answering these questions: here I intend to examine the movement at its beginnings in the mid-seventies to its full emergence in Andrews and Bernstein's *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine, exploring why commodification was so important to the movement's avant-garde positioning, its strategies for countering commodification and, within this, its attitude to audience. I will finally detail how Language eventually, into the mid-eighties and nineties, extricated itself from projects of direct political activism and avant-gardism, and how its formal discoveries were put to their fullest use outside of such projects. This will, of necessity, involve generalising the commitments of individual writers and placing them in a grouping many now deny ever existed. As a movement that constantly declared its political and avant-garde credentials, however, it will brook no other approach. If the achievements and interest of particular poets or poems is glossed over in what follows, it is only to

throw the character of the wider phenomenon of 'Language poetry' into relief.

1 Commodities, vanguards and avant-gardes

In 1974–5 the US faced its worst recession since the Depression. Unlike the Depression, however, this economic downturn was accompanied by a crisis in the kind of left organisations that, in various guises, had been a potent force in shaping political upheaval since the 1930s. This double-edged crisis is crucial to Language poetry's self-positioning. The way in which recession in the 1970s was capitulated to and retrenched by the usual opponents of capitalism's worst effects makes the decade unique. The apparently permanent failure of mass labour organisations, mixed with the disappearance or decline of other previously mass political groupings like Students for a Democratic Society (split in 1969, dissolved in 1974), the decline of the anti-war movements against Vietnam in the early to mid-seventies, even the final dissolution of the once-president-running Socialist Party of America (1972) and many smaller social movements meant the 1970s saw a crisis in which, it seemed, substantial opposition and therefore meaningful opportunity for change was absent.

As Language poetry was establishing its group identity from about 1975,[1] the use of economic crises to assault working conditions and democratic freedoms – what would become known as neoliberalism – had just begun. The State had repeatedly abdicated to corporate and business forces throughout the 1970s, unemployment had nearly reached 10 per cent in 1975, and the preparations for the full restoration of class power and inequality in the 1980s were starting to be seen in attacks on trade union rights, enforced wage freezes, dismantlings of the welfare state, and other smaller but insidious measures to increase inequality. In New York, the centre of Language poetry's public formation through *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine (1978–81), a state of emergency had been installed in the wake of the city's fiscal crisis of 1975–8. The Emergency Act of September 1975 read:

> This situation is a disaster and creates a state of emergency. To end this disaster, to bring the emergency under control and to respond to the overriding state concern described above, the state must undertake an extraordinary exercise of its police and emergency powers under the state constitution, and exercise controls and supervision over the financial affairs of the city of New York, but in a manner intended to preserve the ability of city officials to determine programs and expenditure priorities within available financial resources.[2]

Crucially, this state of exception, which ensured an effective coup of elected government by a business elite (the Emergency Financial Control Board, EFCB), saw muted opposition from the organisations of the working class it attacked, and finally secured the collusion of these organisations' leadership. Such bodies were already weakening: in terms of numbers alone, national union membership had gone from a 'relative' decline since 1945 to an 'absolute' decline in the 1970s according to one economist, with membership falling from 35.5 per cent of the non-farm labour force to 23.6 per cent in 1978, the year of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*'s first issue.[3] Most important, however, was the assistance these traditional working-class organisations offered in establishing the political power of business and finance, and their capitulation to swingeing attacks on their members. In New York unions agreed to wage freezes, mass layoffs and attacks on welfare and other public services (including the introduction of tuition fees at CUNY), as well as committing to purchase city bonds with pension funds, thereby tying members to the financial security of the city and automatically curbing any demands on the public purse. By one historian's account, the agreement 'was a turning point for the unions – away from potential opposition to one of cooperation, a stance that would affect collective bargaining for years'.[4] That '[w]ithin a few years, many of the historic achievements of working class New York were undone' resulted from the explicit consent, and in some cases the enthusiastic sacrifice, of union leaderships, some of whom became personal friends with EFCB members.[5] The result was the immiseration of not only large swathes of the working population, but anyone who used public services: daily life in New York, according to one commentator, 'became grueling and the civic atmosphere turned mean'.[6] David Harvey places the events of New York, along with the overthrow of Allende in Chile, at the beginning of the US-led neoliberal assault on working classes the world over.[7]

Language poetry set out to fill this political vacuum, and to fight a now one-sided political crisis with a cultural formation. Put simply, the Language aesthetic aimed to do political activism through the writing of poetry and the creation of avant-garde poetic community, informed by the belief, in Oren Izenberg's words, 'that the reconstitution of "society" was a task not for politics but for poetics'.[8] Language poetry was an attempt by a group of experimental poets to, in Leon Trotsky's terms, 'substitute itself for the working classes'.[9] The core rationale behind this shift in the locus of political struggle was the conviction that society's primary oppressions occur in language: 'language control = thought control = reality control', in Bernstein's equation.[10] The most distinctive feature of Language theory is its insistence on mapping language

issues onto economic and political ones, as in Steve McCaffery's claim that 'conventional grammatical structure can be likened to profit in capitalism', or the movement's constant attacks on 'the tyranny of the signified', variously and imaginatively labelled.[11] Against this backdrop, as Douglas Messerli stated in his introduction to *'Language' Poetries* (1987), 'writing becomes for most of [the Language poets] political action'.[12] For accompanying the suggestion that conventional or 'mainstream' language works like capital is the sense that language, differently used, can directly attack the creation of surplus value: 'A language centred writing . . . diminishes the profit rate and lowers investment drives just as a productive need is increased.'[13] Furthermore, Language writing's conception of oppositional language was not posed as one political activity among others, but as *the* political action of its time. The label used in the movement's early days, 'language-centred writing', may be to understate the importance of language here, which often seems less central than it does absolute. Bernstein's send-up of the notion that 'language itself – everywhere conditioning our way of seeing & meaning – is an illusion', for example, in his important essay 'Stray Straws and Straw Men', is followed immediately by the sarcastic afterthought '(as if there were some thing outside language!)'.[14] These echoes of post-structuralism are not, of course, incidental: French 'Theory' itself, can be considered, in one of its dimensions, as a vanguard that removed political struggle to the realm of language in the wake of 1968's failures. The upshot is that Language poetry was very much to contain its politics within itself.

Crucial to this attempt to enfold *realpolitik* into avant-garde aesthetics was Marx's theory of the commodity fetish. It is strange that Language poetry is only ever read in the context the anti-war movement's demise rather than the collapse of anti-capitalism, since Language writing rarely engages with US imperialism but has a great deal to say about economics. The central tenet of early Language poetry, invoked incessantly in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, is that the use of words to signify other things (representation) perpetuates, through its elision of the processes and materiality of language itself, the deceit at the heart of capitalism – that its products are discrete and pristine commodities rather than the result of labour and exploitation. As Silliman elegantly puts it: 'The repression of the product (labour) nature of things is called the commodity fetish. In language it is a fetish of description'; or as Steve McCaffery states more strongly: 'the structural support of both literacy and capitalist economy is reference'.[15] The attack on the commodity quite readily translates into resistance to neoliberalism, at whose heart is the commodification of all areas of life. Though the commodity

is not new to the 1970s, that is, it is perfecting its colonisation of the social totality, and Language writing is uniquely responsive to this state of affairs. The nature of its response, however, is not to make the commodity poetry's subject-matter, but rather to *enact* the processes of commodification and the linguistic resources of opposition to it in the very fabric of the de-commodified poem. The ways in which this enactment took place, and the techniques put to its service, were various, but for now I am interested in how this attack on the commodity allowed Language poetry as a movement to pose as political activism and avant-gardism simultaneously.

Regarding political activism, the project of decommodifying the poem is crucial for equating writing with labour, an equation in turn decisive in confirming Language poetry's direct social force. That is, if language is a form of labour under the pressure of capital and commodifying processes, working in language to fight commodification is a form of industrial action. Language poetry can at once, according to Bruce Andrews, install a 'carnival atmosphere, therefore . . . workers' control . . . self-management', and, for McCaffery, 'reveal the human relationships involved within the labour process of language'.[16] The problems with identifying artistic praxis with other forms of labour have been constantly noted by readers of Language writing.[17] On Language writing's own terms, however, the claim is that poetry can *be* class struggle – a claim that, as we shall see, informs all of the movement's technical priorities. By this equation, the manoeuvre of substitution is hidden: if poetic labour is *already* labour, the formation of a trade union of militant poetry workers may shed suspicions of elitism and even political representation generally. Poetic labour nonetheless assumes a strategic importance, since it finds itself working in the same medium as society's dominant forms of 'reality control'. Poetry is, then, at once a form of labour *in* the world of economic relations like any other *and* at the vanguard of those relations by dint of its particular productive mode, language. In sum, Language poetry's solution to the problematic relation of poetry and politics is to equate the two. The two areas are so conflated by Barrett Watten, for example, that he uses the term 'avant-garde' for both, hoping by this sleight of hand to imply that the death of the avant-garde is the death of revolutionary politics. Describing the Bolsheviks as an 'avant-garde party' as though Lenin (though he used the French term himself from 1902, it has an utterly different meaning and context) were just another contemporary of Marcel Duchamp, Watten implies an easy continuity between artistic practice and political action.[18]

The other aim of resisting commodification is to renew avant-garde practice. Language poetry's commitment to avant-gardism as a natural

form of political vanguardism, that is, had to address the fact that the avant-garde had itself been aggressively commoditised in the 1960s, a process I outlined in Chapter 4. Seeking to continue a radical politics in an artistic sphere, the movement's earliest theorising in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is preoccupied with the construction of an avant-garde tradition for use, but central to it is the recognition that the historical avant-garde has itself been 'absorbed and commoditized', and that Language poetry itself must respond to the problem of 'Avant-garde as Commodity'.[19] (In some cases, such as Watten's, the defence of a living avant-garde would continue into the twenty-first century, again based on the initial recognition that '[t]he avant-garde dies . . . when its radical forms are reduced to commodities and collected by museums'.[20]) The attack on the commodity also, then, functions as an attack on the commodification of avant-garde practice, and the central refusal of Language writing to *be* a commodity claims to breathe new life into a project neutered by its absorption into mainstream culture. It can seem that saving avant-gardism is the primary motivation behind Language poetry's attack on the commodity, and that the extension of this gesture to the commodity form itself is an opportunistic attempt to equate avant-garde practice with class struggle. The extent to which this is the case will determine whether we see Language poetry as conforming to Peter Bürger's view of a post-avant-garde movement, as clarified some years after his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 2010. Continuing the thesis of his 1974 study, Bürger contends that movements posing as avant-garde today cannot escape the contradiction of an avant-garde tradition: that it can only exist *as* an artistic tradition because of its historical failure to change the world. The upshot of this failure is that all revivals of the avant-garde project are only able to repeat its successes, which, for Bürger, are in the realm of the institution. Thus, the 'neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the avant-garde as art and thus negates genuinely avant-gardist intentions' because it *internalises* historical avant-garde practice, bringing it back into the institution of Art it had once tried to transcend: 'A practice that aimed to have an extra-artistic impact turned into a practice internal to the institution and to art.'[21] In its revival, 'the [historical] avant-garde becomes an internal aesthetic phenomenon' since 'the failure of the avant-garde's aspirations to alter social reality and its internal aesthetic success (the artistic legitimation of avant-garde practices) are two sides of the same coin'.[22] It would be a mistake, that is, to assume that works revisiting avant-garde *practice* necessarily have avant-garde *ends* simply because they are 'in the tradition'.

I will discuss exactly how Language poetry adapts historical avant-garde models in the next section: the unavoidable fact of the whole

engagement, however, is that it must operate as an internal practice. Such a practice is consciously employed by the movement, and central in how it defines its goals and methods. How precisely we read such inwardness, and how we relate it to what falls outside the poetic, is crucial to assessing Language poetry. The movement's own sense of this relation, of a reflexive and even reflective relationship between inside and outside (in language, in form, in organisation, in universities) is at the centre of its attempt to stake claim to both political activism and vital avant-gardism, as we have seen already. To evaluate the success of this attempt and read Language writing's inwardness fully, however, we must turn to its understanding of poetic form itself. In the main, I will argue, the assumption of an outside to every inside compromises the fundamentally projective and indeed representative qualities of real political action and the avant-garde proper.

2 The politics of poetic form

Metaphors of interiority dominate the essays of Language poetry. These essays, of course, champion not 'the interior world of feeling' but the notion of entering the rigid structures of language itself to force openings, disjunctions and lacunae from within.[23] Each of the four essays in the first supplement of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* on *The Politics of the Referent* (published in 1980 from essays written in 1976), advocates a reflexive move to the linguistic interior. This move is partly tied to Language poetry's central attack on representation: 'the arrow of reference implies', according to McCaffery in 'The Death of the Subject', 'a destination outside of the domain of the signifier'.[24] This destination is a diversion away from the central fact of labour and toward the reification of the commodity fetish, whereas, by contrast, 'the signifier, when devoid of its signified (ie. cipher), is like an interiority without the drive to externalisation . . . no longer representing the world outside of itself'.[25] In 'Text and Context', Andrews likewise speaks of a contemporary 'phobia toward what is present' in poems, when in fact 'inwardness is the site of compression and density'. His advice is: 'Stay inside. It is all here. The non-imperial state: without need for the expansion of externalisation that comes from the refusal to redistribute the surplus at home.'[26] Silliman's 'For Open Letter' touches on his lapsarian history of 'the taking of the language out of the person', whose 'first step' was the invention of the book of poems in 1557.[27] Bernstein, meanwhile, as we have seen, goes further at this stage and denies there is 'some thing outside language'. Later, his is also a more tactical call for 'a sounding

of language from the inside': 'What is needed, now, is not the further dramatization of far-outness but the presence of far-inness.'[28]

The conviction underlying these metaphors, of course, is that language is *already* outside – and that it is precisely this 'fact of wordness' that is obscured by uncritically representational language. Inside is not intended to imply withdrawal, the claim being that language does not need to be wilfully made political because it is always already social – and Language poetry therefore, despite its interiority, retains the political ambition traditionally associated with avant-garde movements. 'The fight for language is a political fight. The fight for language is also a fight inside language,' as the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* had it, because surface was precisely the commodity characteristic Language opposed politically and wanted to get inside of the better to disrupt.[29] The Language project, therefore, 'is inevitably a social and political activity as well as an aesthetic one', according to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*'s editors, because 'language itself is a communality, a public domain'.[30] The 'inevitably' of this political aesthetics at times seems to conflate two quite different phenomena, however. Few would disagree that language is, in Bernstein's words, 'a matrix of social and historical relations', but this does not automatically make it *political* in the activist sense Language intends.[31] To be a social agent is not automatically to 'undermine the bourgeoisie', as Silliman so grandly declared in one essay for *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*.[32] Formulations such as Jed Rasula's, that 'Language is a Trojan Horse', or indeed Silliman's metaphor of mining here, imply that anti-capitalist language must protect its inside or underground nature to have oppositional power, a power apparently automatically secured by the exteriority of language at all times.[33] Indeed, according to Bernstein, 'Poets don't have to be read, any more than trees have to be sat under, to transform poisonous societal emissions into something that can be breathed.'[34] Where these metaphors of poetry's power leave readers is the all-important question for Language. There are two conflicting impulses defining Language poetry's attitude to reception, though the movement had a dynamic way of reconciling them. They concern, on the one hand, a desire to continue avant-garde practice in which, necessarily, the notion of artists as *in front* is definitive, and on the other a dissatisfaction with the author figure and what it implies about language and power. I will take these in order.

In a throwaway observation in his now notorious critique of Language poetry, Fredric Jameson deemed Bob Perelman's 'China' to be a political poem in 'some curious or secret way', before dismissing this aspect of the poem for what it really, perhaps unconsciously, reveals: the abandonment of political thinking for the euphoria of schizophrenic

fragmentation.[35] The latter, for Jameson, is what distinguishes such poetry from the modernist fragment. Language writers and their sympathetic critics have thoroughly rejected Jameson's analysis, which admittedly had little interest in the aims of such disjunction for the movement itself. Taken on its own terms, though, Language poetry still bears out Jameson's first observation that its politics is, in important ways, conceived as a *sub rosa* activity. I want to read such activity in relation to Surrealism as a tactical basis of Language writing's group identity. This tactical element is worth stressing: attempts to locate Language poetry's avant-gardism exclusively in its continuation of the historical avant-garde's formal characteristics, as in George Hartley's introductory chapter to the first critical book on Language poetry, *Textual Politics and the Language Poets*, miss the point. Though Language writing undoubtedly constructs a technical tradition from such models, these are too various to determine any consistent aesthetic from. Rather, it is Language's use of historical avant-garde *strategies* that characterises the movement. The difference between these two orders of poetics can be readily seen in the influence of Surrealism, the avant-garde that most informs Language poetry's theoretical positioning of poetry but least of all resembles it formally. In general terms, Language poetry is committed to characteristic avant-garde strategies: defamiliarisation, fragmentation, provocation, even a kind of primitivism. Such common or garden avant-gardism is sharpened when viewed through the Surrealist lens. David Arnold has detailed the Language debt to Surrealism at close quarters,[36] but here I would like to draw attention to two broader, and I think decisive, linkages for Language poetry's own avant-garde.

Firstly, then, Language borrows from Surrealism its poetics of crisis. Silliman's important claim for Language poetry in 'For Open Letter' runs as follows: 'The social role of the poem places it in an important position to carry the class struggle *for* consciousness to the level *of* consciousness'.[37] Like Surrealism, Language poetry is a struggle for consciousness – here, though it may not be his intention, Silliman's metaphor implies that the class struggle for consciousness is currently *unconscious*. Psychoanalytic terminology is also at the heart of the 'higher order of struggle' by which Silliman seeks to raise it: 'placing the issue of language, the repressed signifier, at the center of the program'. Like Surrealism's dream work, Language poetry attempts to make visible what is 'repressed', though its conception of what that is obviously differs in important ways. In both, however, the repressed is thought to be accessible through a *dérangement*: what Surrealism calls a 'crisis in consciousness' and Language a '*crisis of the sign*'.[38] The will-to-crisis in both movements is, necessarily, adversarial: Silliman's call for

poets to 'undermine the bourgeoisie', for example, is stated in a short essay establishing that Language poetry will be *read* by the bourgeoisie.[39] The reader is attacked from underneath. The formal devices used by the two movements clearly differ, but the aims are similar: the disruption of codified meanings and the shock of recognition. Language poetry is undoubtedly uncomfortable in such a position, and ultimately takes steps to avoid power relations that are difficult to separate from the authority of the poet-genius or the psychoanalyst. I will discuss these in a moment, but the similarities of Surrealism and Language poetry raise questions concerning the historical status of crisis in the 1970s. That is, in Surrealism, as in most avant-garde practice, crisis is sought as a means to disturb the rigid institutions of bourgeois taste, a project in which, in the short term, it was successful. In Language, similarly, crisis is sought as a remedy to the commodity and its hypostatising tendencies. What is not mentioned, however, is the commodity's own propensity, especially in Language's context, to dislocation. It is not self-evident that the dynamism of capital, the accelerating 'mobility' of labour, and the reduction of all value to that of fluid exchange, can be opposed by a sabotage of language in the form of alienation and fragmentation.

Secondly, Language looks to the image of Surrealist practice as a model. This is obviously not a focus that is surprising or unique to Language writing; however, unlike most other American poets for whom the Surrealism image was an important influence (John Ashbery, Charles Simic, Barbara Guest), Language writing ties the image directly to revolutionary politics. Surrealism is attractive to Language poetry as the twentieth century's key example of a collective artistic opposition to the middle class. Surrealism itself, however, was far more than an *artistic* opposition, and its activities extend well beyond the image – indeed, it seems that one reason the movement rarely used the term 'avant-garde' itself was because of its connotation of a specifically *aesthetic* way of being. Surrealism, famously, conceived of itself as an avant-garde way of *life*, and its attempts to demolish the distinction between art and life, most famously in its haphazard and unsuccessful engagements with the French Communist Party, is central to its character. Statements like the 27 January 1925 declaration's 'We have nothing to do with literature' may be primarily rhetorical and adversarial, but Surrealism showed a commitment to the non-artistic that was more than playful – advice on 'How to catch the eye of a women you pass in the street' and how 'To make speeches' are not merely facetious.[40] For Language, however, Surrealism's politics is most properly articulated through poetic technique. Watten, for example, conceding that in the beginning Surrealist 'methods were in a sense extra-literary, or "above the level

of the writing"', finally praises a 'private image [that] is revolutionary transformation in germ': 'The image travels endlessly; this is the substance of Surrealist internationalism, in fact.'[41] (The *substance*? In *fact*?) With a similar emphasis, Bernstein brackets the lifeworld of Surrealism's 'underlying psychologism' so that the movement may be

> credited with opening up new possibilities for images and perhaps more crucially for the transition from image to image (unit to unit) with the total organization of the poem – opening up, that is, the domain in which we now work.[42]

That Language poetry focuses on this 'domain' is surprising for a reading of the Surrealists as a *political* movement, but it gets to the heart of Language poetry's belatedness on the avant-garde scene. At its core, it is a reading that is literary-historical, exemplifying Bürger's neo-avant-garde and its preoccupation with internal questions of technique, however it attempts to make them the 'substance' of practical politics.

Continuing Surrealism's attempts to enforce crises in consciousness through fragmentation and unstable images, Language tries to repeat the historical avant-garde's tendency to undermine the rigid determinations of the status quo through non-rational and crisis-engendering technique. On the one hand, Language poetry wants to bring certain realities to 'the level *of* consciousness' by working at levels of unconsciousness, bypassing on a formal plane conventional argument, representation, and indeed any abstractions 'repressing' the signifier. On the other, however, because the death of the author and deconstruction of subjectivity is at the centre of the movement's convictions about language, such campaigns cannot be waged from the position of the enlightened vanguardist, dragging his audience into the future through shock and awe. Silliman's comments above on the need to raise consciousness, for example, are tied to a literature that 'provides [the reader] with experiences of that dialectical consciousness in which subject and object, self and other, individual and group, unite' and 'does not impose "reality" by fiat'.[43] Language's solution to the tensions of a poetics aiming at a hidden reality but not wanting to impose its conclusions, brings us back to the commodity in Language poetry. Both impulses can be satisfied, that is, by turning the poem into a site of ongoing labour. By this, the reader is invited into the work as a 'co-participant' while 'language itself' acts as a focus on labour, deconstructing commoditised completion into linguistic work.[44] This inclusive politics is also a potentially revolutionary one, according to Andrews: 'Altering textual roles might bring us closer to altering the larger social roles of which textual ones are a feature.'[45] How the one translates into the other is never made

explicit, but the politics *within* the gesture are clear: it has a power to '*functionally dislocate the reader*', in McCaffery's portentously italicised words, because, self-evidently, the reader is given a different function in such work.[46] The invitation, by its novelty, is also intended to be an awakening: 'Reference is no longer the promise at the end of the grammatical road, no longer the opiate of the reader.'[47]

I will forgo a reading of the success of such strategies to address the sincerity of the gesture. It can often seem in Language poetry's essays as though what masquerades as an open invitation is an underhand attempt at coercion. The nature of the work to be done in language, after all, is still decided by the writer, as Watten writes: '*technique* is the principle of construction in writing . . . technique is *predictive*; that is, it is capable of producing new meaning out of a stockpile of resources into a future, possible world'.[48] Michael Davidson's rejoinder to such principles is shrewd:

> If the terms for reading are already anticipated in the formal design of the poem, there is little room for the reader to interact with the actual pragmatics of literary discourse . . . The reader becomes a voyeur upon an artful attempt to seduce him or her into playing by the rules.[49]

In this sense, Language's 'readerly' poetics merely moves the site of the poet's authority to a higher ground. Linked to this shift in the site of authority is an unquestioned assumption that readers will automatically be drawn into the labour of the poem, that Language poetry's magic will simply be irresistible. Labour, though, requires coercion or desire: if Language poetry rightly resists the former, it must make efforts to arouse the latter (the reader must *want* to engage the poem). Such desire on the part of the reader will hardly be accounted for by '*technique*', however emphasised, which may mechanically produce poems as predictable and tedious as the workshop lyrics so tirelessly attacked by Language poets. The issue at this point is articulated in Rachel Blau DuPlessis's question to the Language poets: 'What do they do with pleasure?'[50] Neither *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine nor the earliest Language books (Watten's *Total Syntax* and Perelman's edited *Writing/ Talks*) have much to say about pleasure, but there is an answer implicit in Language's very conception of reader–writer relations. The Language poem, that is, can make desirable production relations that are unavailable in life available in poetry. The pleasure is in the utopia. Again, the politics is *in* the poem in a formulation that is elegant but hardly satisfactory: the notion of the poem as the site of shared, freely chosen labour feels rather like letting readers eat cake. And yet the rhetoric is always of an *enactment* of these relations, never as an analogy to them

that may work politically in more complex ways. DuPlessis's subsequent question, 'How do they negotiate specific rises of passionate feeling?' is therefore rendered moot – an agitation to act is not required, since the poem has already installed a utopia in language.[51]

The conflicting ambitions of working on and with the reader are determining for Language. What Language poetry assumes, in its assault on consciousness through the reconstruction of the reader, is a captive audience that the historical avant-garde, in the main, had, attacking bourgeois taste where it already lived. The effects of such an assumption are felt in the unfolding of these readerly relations into Language poetry's projection and establishment of itself in the culture at large, where a rhetoric of openness and collaboration often works in tension with an insistently marginal cultural status. I want to explore the effect of these tensions on the wider cultural transmission and effect of Language poetry, but also from this to investigate deviations in some of Language poetry's key 'avant-garde' principles, and hopefully to show how some of the movement's ideas were fulfilled in quite different spheres of activity and understandings of purpose.

3 A more 'general' public

Ron Silliman, in response to a request to writers for 'five non-poetry books . . . that have had a significant influence on their thinking or writing', expresses an impatience with the magazine's fixation on *books*.[52] In claims that run counter to the core principles of linguistically determined consciousness that $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$ contributors had put forward, including himself, Silliman replied:

> Important as books are, it is being that determines consciousness. Books can & do serve mediationally, presenting possibilities of structure where they might not otherwise be perceived. But, unless one is so trapped by the disease of one-sided development, the proposition's limits are its one truly interesting aspect. A *political* question wld have been: how has the necessity of earning a living (& perhaps supporting a family) affected the form and substance of your writing? Or: to what extent do writers functionally require a conceptual workplace, meaning not a room of one's own, but *other workers*? & to what extent can correspondence substitute for one? But this idea does not, *cannot*, exist, *at this present moment*, outside of a beingness wch is not bourgeois . . .[53]

Silliman continues the Language motif of writing as labour, but also shows misgivings at the movement's possible isolation from other sites of political struggle. The worry is that the movement's well maintained

limits within the aesthetic, however 'politically' conceived, and its potentially 'one-sided' focus on written language, may be likened to the writer in 'a room of one's own' who, not finding capitalism to his taste, goes underground, imagining he can merely escape it in language. How to negotiate a position that was not the mere fantasy of an *alternative* culture but a '*political*' (Marxist) struggle to change, a position that could collaborate with other constituencies without compromising the group's own avant-garde identity, became a key question of Language as the profile of the movement grew.

There were broadly two answers to this question, represented by Bernstein and Silliman respectively. Bernstein had become the most famous of all Language poets by the 1990s, appearing in primetime TV ads for the Yellow Pages and teaching at Buffalo, so his position on the matter of wider cultural impact is especially instructive.[54] What is surprising is how Bernstein, despite having come in from the margins, advocates a sense of poetry as separation, running alongside rather than counter to the dominant forms of the culture. Here he is on the poetry reading, for example:

> The reading is the site in which the audience of poetry constitutes and recon-
> stitutes itself. It makes itself visible to itself. And while the most attention
> had been paid to those moments when the poetry reading has been a means
> for poetry to cross over to a wider audience . . . the fundamental, social
> significance of the reading, it seems to me, has to do with infrastructure not
> spectacle. For this reason I would turn around the familiar criticism that
> everyone at a poetry reading is a poet to say that this is just what is vital
> about a reading series, even the essence of the poetry reading . . . This is not
> to say that reading series geared to a more 'general' public or to students are
> not valuable. Of course they are. But such events resemble nonpoetry per-
> formances in that their value is dissemination to an unknown audience more
> than creation and exchange. They are not the foundries of poetry that a more
> introverted reading series can be. Poetry, oddly romanticized as the activity
> of isolated individuals writing monological lyrics, is among the most social
> and socially responsive – dialogic – of contemporary art forms. The poetry
> reading is an ongoing convention of poetry, by poetry, for poetry. In this
> sense, the reading remains one of the most participatory forms in American
> cultural life. Indeed, the value of the poetry reading as a social and cultural
> form can be partly measured by its resistance, up to this point, to reification
> or commodification. *It is a measure of its significance that it is ignored.*[55]

For Bernstein, poetry's attempts to address extra-literary matters and audiences reduce the art form to spectacle. A central metaphor of purity can be made out: poetry that looks outside itself, that is not 'of poetry, by poetry, for poetry', is effectively 'nonpoetry', and any poem directed to a 'wider audience' for political ends is a 'reification or commodification'

of poetry. And yet, for Bernstein the reading is 'the most social and socially responsive' of all art forms, so long as everyone present is a poet. Doubtless responding to the rise in performance poetry, and increasing attempts from all quarters in the nineties to find a new and wider public for poems, Bernstein's comments are typical of a backlash '[s]peaking of poetry as a public event, which is to say as a commodity', in the words of another Language advocate.[56] Bernstein's attitude toward the poetry reading is part of a wider sense of poetry itself as a parallel activity to the 'reification or commodification' listed above: it carries social force as an *alternative* world, and so being 'ignored' by the mainstream does not diminish it. The 'social work' of poetry is to set itself fundamentally outside, as an alternative, as Bernstein says elsewhere:

> The power of our alternative institutions of poetry is their commitment to scales that allow for the flourishing of the artform, not the maximizing of the audience; to production and presentation not publicity; to exploring the known not manufacturing renown. These institutions continue, against all odds, to find value in the local, the particular, the partisan, the committed, the tiny, the peripheral, the unpopular . . .[57]

Political commitment may not be so easily reduced to refusals of audience and publicity, but the position is clear: poetry is truly or effectively political once it extricates itself from the publicity-seeking, spectacle-making and commodifying tendencies of the hegemonic mainstream. Poetry is 'an alternative system of valuation'.[58] Arguably Bernstein's position has not markedly changed from his early aspirations for a poetry at once 'exemplary' and 'broken off':

> So writing might be exemplary – an instance broken off from and hence not in the service of this economic and cultural – social – force called capitalism. A chip of uninfected substance; or else, a 'glimpse', a crack into what otherwise might . . .; or still, 'the fact of its own activity', autonomy, self-sufficiency, 'in itself and for itself' . . .[59]

Bernstein believes in a space for poetry, even if only a glimpse or crack, outside the rule of capitalism, and he believes this space constitutes the true agency of the art. It is for this reason that Bernstein was quicker than most to abandon and repudiate the notion of Language poetry as a movement or grouping: 'alternative forms' do not require organised schools, and indeed such organisation is likely to hamper the basic power of poetry as possibility.

Silliman's case is far more complex and demanding. In *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Silliman said there were two things defining Language poets: '(1) they place language at the centre of their work, (2)

they place their work directly into a program of conscious and active class struggle'.[60] Silliman's 'program' here is something outside of the work into which it can and must be inserted. The claim is again partly directed at the Language tendency to limit any political 'program' to its theories of language and poetry, which has little or nothing to say about class. Indeed, Silliman's mini-manifesto is really a call to action, since there is precious little evidence of Language poets 'plac[ing] their work directly' into such class struggle. Silliman's own early attempts to address issues of class are still limited to linguistic form, as in 'The New Sentence': '"Educated" speech imitates writing: the more "refined" the individual, the more likely their utterances will possess the characteristics of expository prose. The sentence, hypotactic and complete, was and still is an index of class in society.'[61] Even leaving aside the questionable veracity of Silliman's 'index', to claim that 'the new sentence' is a poetry of class struggle because it does not speak in full sentences is unsatisfactory to say the least. Silliman, however, more than any other figure in the movement, felt the need to go beyond such formal analogies, and to directly address the perception that Language poetry, in its focus on them, was an essentially hermetic collective whose claims to anti-capitalist activism made disturbingly little effort to step outside either its poetics or its artistic fraternity.

Silliman's famous statement regarding this problem, made in 1988, is partly consistent with Bernstein's hope that poetry might be an 'alternative', but goes on to place this alternative within a wider fight against oppression:

> Poetry . . . is a test case for the creation of alternate social formations. One political content of the poem is its constitution of a specific social subject out of multiple discourses, a subject that may be decentralized, destabilized or even fragmented. The ways in which this content manifests itself differs dramatically according to the author's (and the audience's) location in the larger social body. Progressive poets who identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history – many white male heterosexuals, for example – are apt to challenge all that is supposedly 'natural' about the formation of their own subjectivity. That their writing today is apt to call into question, if not actually explode, such conventions as narrative, persona and even reference can hardly be surprising. At the other end of this spectrum are poets who do *not* identify as members of groups that have been the subject of history, for they instead have been its objects. The narrative of history has led not to their self-actualization, but to their exclusion and domination. These writers and readers – women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the 'marginal' – have a manifest political need to *have their stories told*. That their writing should often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to whom is the subject of these conventions, illuminates the relationship between form and audience.[62]

It is not simply, then, that Language poetry cordons itself off from the *realpolitik* of the social and cultural: it is, by its class, gender and racial make-up placed in a strategic position of undermining our assumptions about what *is* social and cultural. This division of labour into narrating and deconstructing narrative does not exactly create a complementary set of activities. Under the guise of self-deprecation and strategic self-sacrifice, Language poetry's role is always the universal one. Silliman had made a similar argument about 'black American poetry' in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*. He says black poetry 'is not language writing' simply because the two do different things in the struggle against capitalism – but since Language poetry's own task was to 'undermine the bourgeoisie', they were hardly equal forms of activism. It is difficult to improve on Eleana Kim's evaluation of this hierarchy:

> Silliman's statement could be construed as investing the white male heterosexual with a more legitimate claim to 'avant-garde' practices, and with a monopoly on the 'decentered' subject . . . aesthetic categories spatialize and hierarchize the literary field in which those 'marginal' constituencies are placed on a lower rung of the literary evolutionary ladder . . . In terms of the Language project, Silliman's vocalization of these concerns could construe that project as an abstract high-brow aestheticism which has removed itself from any real possibilities of social transformation by discounting the inclusion of so-called special interest groups.[63]

Ultimately, for both Bernstein and Silliman, the Language project could not brook being placed, despite its preoccupation with capitalism, 'directly into a program of conscious and active class struggle', because its modernist and avant-garde commitments, coming mainly out of Adorno, naturally viewed the politicisation of poetry (as opposed to the creation of an always already political poetics) as a surrender of the power of artistic, post-representational language to the neutering structures of political representation and instrumentalist rhetoric.

   Most histories of the movement written by its members have reflected the simple fact that it was more successful at forging links with the academy it originally attacked than the forces of anti-capitalism it extolled.[64] Silliman's attitude, which still seeks a political locus for the poem beyond its poeticness even if it struggles to find it, is inflected by, and in turn inflects, his attitude toward the academy, which he never professionally entered. Language poets that accommodated and were accommodated by universities, such as Bernstein and Perelman, have generally relaxed their commitment to avant-gardism as a going concern (Perelman wrote an essay in 2010, 'My Avant-Garde Card', that compared the term 'avant-garde' to phlogiston). I take Silliman's position

to be truer to the ambitions of Language poetry: an avant-garde in a university is a contradiction in terms. That said, those writers whose commitment to the avant-garde has moderated, or who never had such a commitment in the first place, have produced the more historically pertinent writing. Put simply again, since the 1970s anti-capitalism has had no need of avant-gardes.[65]

This is not to label Language poetry a failure, but is an evaluation that goes against the movement's own sense of itself as a political poetics of crisis. The other valences of Language writing are outside the subject of this book, but it is important to say that the most interesting, and finally the most politically meaningful Language poets were those not involved in its avant-garde insistences. That is, I do not want to claim that writers like Susan Howe, Lyn Hejinian and Rosemary Waldrop are the most important poets of their generation in spite of Language theory, but that they, in eliding the quixotic avant-garde rhetoric of poetic form as political activism, represent the true home of its key formal principles. Though all three of these writers, for example, write their most famous work outside of, and even at odds with, the classic forms of Language poetry (epic, biography and lyric respectively) from a perspective not explicitly allied with neo-avant-gardism, their work may be seen to employ the formal discoveries of Language poetry in a way that best fulfils the underlying aesthetic.[66]

Howe's work, for example, articulates the materiality of language through the written word's fragility and contingency, in contrast to the muscular objectivity of the male poets who were more central early on. The reflexive nature of Language process also takes on a different guise in line with this fragility. Howe's preoccupation with the document is a concern for what language hides: where early Language poetry some-times slipped from the discovery that language does not naturally mirror the world to the conviction that there is nothing outside the text, Howe's great achievement is to leave this outside simultaneously unspoken and intimated, secret and manifest, expressing at once the continued inacces-sibility of history's suppressed agents and their agency beyond what may be made explicit. That this is a function of an certain kind of interior-ity, a digging down inside of history, can be easily seen in comparison with her great influence Charles Olson; where *'istorin'*'s projective turn at times led to a lack of awareness of the silenced voices of the archive, Howe questions the document, the language of history. In this, Howe's work is related to the labour behind the commodity fetish of Language orthodoxy, but not identical with it: for her, what language hides is not simply itself again, in less polished form, but the real people of the past without a language. However, to 'tenderly lift from the dark side of

history voices that are anonymous, slighted – inarticulate' is partly an academic undertaking: the blurring between poetry and scholarship in much of her work gives the lie to the notion that Language poetry was appropriated by or sold out to the academy, since it was obviously there from the beginning.[67] The reframing of literary canons has been central to Howe's poetics, from retreatments of Jonathan Swift to hagiographic reconstructions of Emily Dickinson.[68] Getting Language poetry out of the way to claim the New York School as 'the last avant-garde', David Lehman wrote in 1998 that 'the Language School looks modern but smells of the museums. It could not exist outside the university'.[69] This may be to dismiss the smell of museums too readily, since its phallogocentric underpinnings continue to shape our own practices and understanding of history, agency and cultural expression: Howe's occupation of discursive sites within the academy does not preclude an attack on them, though it may limit the boundaries and terms of poetic opposition generally. Howe continues Language poetry's attack on the institution, which in the event ensured the most significant reclamation and continued accommodation of women poets in the history of the American university. This is a more modest proposal than 'undermining the bourgeoisie', to be sure, but it has been the most fruitful action for the formal reflexivity and innerness that defined Language poetry from the start.

Attempts to undermine the bourgeoisie, however, have not been abandoned by American poets; rather, this bourgeoisie has been more precisely understood and less nostalgically invoked by other recent poets. The most persuasive of these writers have sought to open spaces for cultural formation and formal aesthetics outside of avant-garde models, from Language poetry's contemporaries like Eileen Miles and Amiri Baraka, to more recent committed poets writing in response to neoliberal crisis today, as varied as Mark Nowak, Ammiel Alcalay, Jackqueline Frost, the Canadian Stephen Collis, and many others. Other 'post-Language' poets, notably Peter Gizzi and Juliana Spahr, have turned to the more indirectly political poetics of the lyric. These are all poets for whom, directly or otherwise, Language poetry has been important. All show, however, especially when juxtaposed with the avant-garde caricature that is Conceptualism, the beginnings of new imaginings of political art and a refusal to rest on the laurels of avant-gardism. Indeed, the title of a major international gathering of poets and readers at Berkeley in 2013, *Poetry and/or Revolution*, provocatively shows an interest in the *limits* of poetry's political efficacy for the first time in decades. In line with this, the global recession since 2008/9 has seen responses to crisis less interested in Ezra Pound or Russian Futurism than the particular class and cultural dynamics of its own contemporary existence, or with

the demands and possibilities of, say, taking up a writing residency at an urban occupation. The avant-garde is now increasingly providing lessons through its failures and historical distinctness, rather than imposing its technical and strategic models in the shape of a tradition to be endlessly continued. The shift is to be welcomed.

Notes

Introduction

1. Joshua Clover, interview with Ian Beattie, *Maisonneuve*, 9 May 2012, <http://maisonneuve.org/article/2012/05/9/interview-joshua-clover/> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
2. Joshua Clover, in correspondence with Keston Sutherland in *The Claudius App*, <http://theclaudiusapp.com/5-clover-sutherland.html> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
3. Ron Silliman, 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 3 (October 1981), 11.
4. It is not alone. Chris Nealon's excellent *The Matter of Capital* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011) has attempted a similar corrective.
5. See Gerald Raunig, *Art and Revolution: Transversal Activism in the Long Twentieth Century*, trans. Aileen Derieg (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2007).
6. The redoubtable T. J. Clark, for example, asks these rhetorical questions in a recent lecture on the English riots of 2011: 'Isn't capitalism always in crisis? . . . Isn't modernity the life-form of permanent crisis? Doesn't capitalism depend on, thrive on moments of social overreach and massive destruction of its productive powers? . . . Isn't one main function of modernity to make crisis liveable, make it a natural habitat, make crisis the individual's lifeworld?' (T. J. Clark, 'Capitalism without Images', The Smart Lecture, Logan Center, University of Chicago, 30 November 2012.)
7. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 32: Notebooks 12–15 of the 1861–1863 Economic Manuscripts (New York: International Publishers, 1989), 128.
8. Wallace Stevens, 'The Immense Poetry of War', *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1997), 251.
9. Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1975), 72. Habermas really means 'rational debate' when he says politicisation, and so of course his analysis can only take us so far with regards to poetry.
10. It is this characteristic of crisis that Paul de Man, in a quite different context, noted: 'In periods that are not periods of crisis, or in individuals bent on avoiding crisis at all cost, there can be all kinds of approaches to

literature . . . but there can be no criticism. For such periods or individuals will never put the act of writing into question by relating to its specific intent' (Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight* [Abingdon: Palgrave, 1989], 8). Crisis foregrounds intent.

11. Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 88.

12. These conclusions are mirrored in more empirical research. Recent economic historians have reached similar conclusions about the loci of crises of capitalism, with a tendency to place capitalism at a fundamentally different level to the *market* – in Fernand Braudel's words, 'the zone of the anti-market . . . is the real home of capitalism' (Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation and Capitalism: 15th–18th Century*, vol. 2: The Wheels of Commerce, trans. Siân Reynolds [London: Collins, 1982], 229–30). Giovanni Arrighi's epic study of 'The Long Twentieth Century' applies this claim to the US hegemonic period, which he describes, contrary to ideological preconceptions of the American enterprising spirit, as tending to world crisis precisely because of the increased (and increasingly threatened) state control over the economy, global and domestic (Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* [London: Verso, 2010]).

13. André Breton, 'What Is Surrealism?', lecture delivered in Brussels, 1 June 1934.

14. Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 124.

15. Peter Bürger, 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*', *New Literary History* 41:4 (Autumn 2010), 712.

16. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 140.

17. Alain Badiou, 'Destruction, Negation, Subtraction: On Pier Paolo Pasolini', Seminar, Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, 6 February 2007. Transcribed at <http://www.lacan.com/badpas.htm> (last accessed 26 November 2014).

18. See especially Marjorie Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1983).

19. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 112. The conflict was most seen, of course, in those moments when the avant-garde tried hardest to overcome it in moves that were usually an abandonment of movements to political parties that often signalled the end of the original movements themselves, Surrealism being the classic case.

20. See Virginia Woolf, 'The New Biography', in *Granite and Rainbow: Essays* (New York: Harvest, 1975), 149–55.

21. Herman Spector, *Bastard in the Ragged Suit: Writings of, with Drawings by, Herman Spector* (Sacramento: Synergistic Press, 1977), 104.

22. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge, 1984), 196.

23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Boston: MIT Press, 1997), 32.

24. Joshua Clover, Chris Nealon and Juliana Spahr, 'Poetry & Politics Roundtable', *Evening Will Come: A Monthly Journal of Poetics* 6 (June

2011), 2, <http://www.thevolta.org/ewc6-politicsroundtable-p1.html> (last accessed 26 November 2014).

25. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Reconciliation Under Duress', in *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), 164.

26. Bruce Andrews, 'Text and Context', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 1 (June 1980), 24.

27. Spirituality has hitherto dominated discussions of poetry and crisis, from Martin Turnell's *Poetry and Crisis* (London: Sands, The Paladin Press, 1938) and M. H. Abrams's *Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), to *Crisis and Confession: Studies in the Poetry of Theodore Roethke, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath*, by E. V. Ramakrishnan (Delhi: Chanakya Publications, 1988).

28. Harold Bloom, *Wallace Stevens, the Poems of Our Climate* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 404.

29. Of course, in a longer view, and in reality, he does not. The restlessness of Wordsworth's political wavering in *The Prelude* itself comes to be continued in Wordsworth's rewritings of the poem, never satisfied and with a poetic self still in a state of becoming.

30. Robert Lowell, *Collected Prose* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1987), 252; Jerome J. McGann, '*The Cantos* of Ezra Pound, the Truth in Contradiction', in *American Modernist Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Learning, 2011), 86.

31. *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 608.

32. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 79.

33. Lisa Robertson, *Nilling* (Toronto: BookThug, 2012), 84.

34. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 255.

35. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 30–1; *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock, 1970), 157; *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. Hubert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 209.

36. Foucault, *Beyond Structuralism*, 206.

37. Wilfred Owen, *The Complete Poems and Fragments*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Norton, 1984), 535.

Chapter 1

1. Hugh Kenner, *A Homemade World* (London: Johns Hopkins, 1989), 169.

2. To give a few examples: Kenneth Rexroth would become a founder-member of Soviet-sponsored League of American Writers; John Wheelwright, editor of the self-consciously revolutionary pamphlets *Poems for Two Bits* and *Poems for a Dime*, would found the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party; Harry Roskolenkier (real name Roskolenko) was a leftist poet and hack also associated with the SWP; Zukofsky's later infamous university friend Whittaker Chambers was a communist fiction writer 'discovered'

by *New Masses* and on its staff by 1931, following his editorship of the *Daily Worker*; and Norman Macleod was the most published of all poets associated with the political vanguard, whose poetic figurehead he briefly became in the 1930s.

3. Eric Mottram, '1924–1951: Politics and Form in Zukofsky', *MAPS 5* (1973), 77, 97.

4. Robert Hass, 'Zukofsky at the Outset', *The American Poetry Review* 34:5 (September/October 2005), 69; Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 87.

5. Susan Vanderborg, '"Words Ranging Forms": Patterns of Exchange in Zukofsky's Early Lyrics', in *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 201.

6. Barrett Watten, 'Tests of Zukofsky', talk at Wayne University, 29 March 2004, <http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac_pages/ewatten/posts/post03.html> (last accessed 10 May 2012).

7. Ibid.

8. Charles Bernstein, 'Introduction' to Louis Zukofsky, *Selected Poems* (New York: Library of America, 2006), xx–xxi.

9. Zukofsky writes of his involvement in *New Masses* to Pound, in a letter dated 10 June 1936, and defends the Purges to him on 9 September 1936.

10. Bernstein, 'Introduction', xx.

11. Eric Homberger, 'Communists and Objectivists', in *The Objectivist Nexus*, ed. Peter Quartermain and Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 124.

12. See Al Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attacks on Modern Poetry, 1945–1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 3–54; *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties & Literary Radicalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

13. *New Masses* had a circulation of 100,000 at its peak in December 1936 – just as Zukofsky was beginning to get involved at an organisational level.

14. See Mark Scroggins, 'The Revolutionary Word: Louis Zukofsky, *New Masses*, and Political Radicalism in the 1930s', in *Upper Limit Music*, 55–61.

15. The examples are too manifold to go into here: the briefest search of radical publications in the index to both the Pound and Williams letters will provide ample evidence of Zukofsky's deep intellectual commitment to the literary movement they were, one way or another, part of.

16. The bastards, nitwits and shitheads are the editors of *The Symposium*, *New Masses* and Mike Gold respectively.

17. Mike Gold, 'Notes of the Month', *New Masses* (September 1930), 5.

18. Ezra Pound, 'Pound Joins Revolution!', letter to *New Masses*, 2 (December 1926), 3.

19. Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions: The Collected Critical Essays* (London: Rapp and Carroll, 1967), 64, 71.

20. Ibid., 63.

21. Paul Smith, *Pound Revised* (Beckenham: Croom Helm, 1983), 134.

22. Letter to Pound, 18 January 1936.
23. See especially Zukofsky's letters to Pound dated 7 June 1935, 11 July 1936 and 12 March 1936.
24. Letter to Pound, 29 October 1933.
25. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), 8. The coexistence of these conflicting impulses was not unique to Zukofsky – indeed, one of the main anxieties of the revolutionary left itself was to shake off a reputation as the destructive enemy of 'bourgeois' tradition and re-cast itself, in Joseph Freeman's words, as 'militantly fighting for the preservation of culture through the triumph of the working class' in the face of fascist, anti-intellectual barbarism (cited in Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1992], 286).
26. Louis Zukofsky, 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931', *Poetry* 37:5 (February 1931), 268, 274.
27. Louis Zukofsky, '"Recencies" in Poetry', in *An 'Objectivists' Anthology* (Le Beausset, France: TO Publishers, 1932), 25; 'Sincerity and Objectification: With Special Reference to the Work of Charles Reznikoff', *Poetry* 37:5 (February 1931), 276.
28. Zukofsky, '"Recencies"', 12.
29. The typescript of the *Workers Anthology* is available at the Basil Bunting Poetry Archive, housed in the University of Durham.
30. Ezra Pound, 'Paris Letter', *The Dial* 74 (August 1923), 273–80.
31. Undated letter to Kenneth Burke, Isidor Schneider and Edwin Berry Burgham; qtd in Mark Scroggins, *The Poem of a Life: A Biography of Louis Zukofsky* (Emeryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2007), 170.
32. Blau DuPlessis and Quartermain, *Objectivist Nexus*, 3.
33. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 142.
34. Zukofsky, '"Recencies"', 15.
35. See Tim Woods, *Poetics of the Limit: Ethics and Politics in Modern and Contemporary American Poetry* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002), 45–51.
36. Louis Zukosfky, *"A"* (London: University of California Press, 1978), 4.
37. Ibid., 2–3.
38. Ibid., 5.
39. Quentin Skinner, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* 8:1 (1969), 52.
40. Zukofsky, *"A"*, 6.
41. Zukofsky, 'Program', 268.
42. Zukofsky, '"Recencies"', 16; 'Program', 268; 'Sincerity', 273; 'Program', 269.
43. Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Living* (New York: Harper, 1948), 432.
44. Alain Badiou, 'An Essential Philosophical Thesis: "It Is Right to Rebel Against the Reactionaries"', trans. Alberto Toscano, *positions: east asia cultures critique* 13:3 (Winter 2005), 670.
45. Zukofsky, 'Program', 268; Gold, 'Notes of the Month', 5.
46. Morris Schappes, 'Historic and Contemporary Particulars', *Poetry* (March 1933), 343.
47. Sol Funaroff, review of *An 'Objectivists' Anthology*, *Dynamo* 2:3 (Summer 1934), 27.

48. Herman Spector, *Bastard in the Ragged Suit: Writings of, with Drawings by, Herman Spector* (Sacramento: Synergistic Press, 1977), 104. Spector, himself criticised in radical quarters for his affinities with the 'thin, emaciated verse' of Zukofsky, would later publish a scathing 'Dirge for the Objectivist Poets' in *Exile*, where 'objectivists stuff cotton into ears, / disdain the clear emphatic voices of revolt' (Herman Spector, 'Sadly They Perish: A Dirge for the Objectivist Poets', *Partisan Review* 1:3 [June–July 1934], 32).

49. Louis Zukofsky, 'Objectivists Again', *Poetry* (May 1933), 117.

50. Zukfosky, '"Recencies"', 18.

51. Zukofsky, 'Sincerity', 278.

52. Ibid., 274. My italics.

53. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 54.

54. Zukofsky, '"Recencies"', 25. This dialectic is exhaustively explored by Charles Altieri in his important essay, 'The Objectivist Tradition', where he succinctly describes how 'Objectivist poetics creates an instrument sufficiently subtle to make attention and care – to the world and to the corresponding energies the world elicits – ends in themselves. Attention, care, and composition become testimony to levels of fit between the mind and the world in rhythmic interactions that require no supplementary justification in the form of abstract meaning' (in Blau DuPlessis and Quartermain, *Objectivist Nexus*, 32).

55. Louis Zukofsky, 'Mantis' and 'Mantis: An Interpretation', *All: The Collected Shorter Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1966), 67–73.

56. See Woods, *Poetics of the Limit*, 39–42.

57. See Bernstein, 'Introduction', xviii–xxi. Both Woods and Bernstein want to link organic form to the reactionary poetics of the New Criticism, but it is equally applicable to the New American Poetry, based on Charles Olson and Robert Creeley's famous statement, 'Form is never more than an extension of content' (Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *The New American Poetry 1945–1960*, ed. Donald Allen [New York: Grove Press, 1960], 387).

58. Letter to Pound, 14 November 1934.

59. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, in *The Karl Marx Library*, vol. 1, ed. Saul K. Padover (New York: McGraw Hill, 1972), 246.

60. T. S. Eliot, 'War-Paint and Feathers', *Athenaeum* (17 October 1919), 1036.

61. Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry* (Stanford: University of California Press, 2010), 3, 52.

62. Zukofsky, '"Recencies"', 11.

63. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 18.

64. See Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (London: Faber, 1951), 13–14; Zukofsky, 'Program', 268.

65. Zukofsky, 'Program', 268; *Prepositions*, 17.

66. Louis Zukofsky, *A Test of Poetry* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1952), vii.

67. Qtd in Scroggins, *Poem of a Life*, 145.

68. Pound, *ABC*, passim; Zukofsky, *Test*, xi.

69. See Ezra Pound, 'A Retrospect', *Pavannes and Divagations* (New York: Knopf, 1918); Zukofsky, *Test*, 87.
70. Zukofsky, *Test*, 60.
71. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 45.
72. Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998), 38.
73. Zukofsky, *Test*, 56, 60.
74. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 19.
75. Ibid., 49.
76. See letter to Pound, 7 December 1931. Zukosfky writes, 'I can see or hear when [notes] move up or down, & linger or proceed', but little more.
77. Zukofsky, *Test*, 65.
78. Zukofsky, *"A"*, 156.
79. Zukofsky, 'Program', 268.
80. Zukofsky, *"A"*, 130.
81. Richard Parker, 'Canto 75 vs. "A"-24', *Golden Handcuffs Review* 1:14 (Winter–Spring 2011), 276.
82. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 28.
83. Louis Zukofsky and Celia Zukofsky, *Catullus* (London: Cape Goliard, 1969), n.p.
84. Ibid., n.p.
85. Ron Silliman, 'Composition as Action', *Poetics Journal* 3 (May 1983), 74.
86. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 214–23, and Paul Mann, 'Translating Zukofsky's Catullus', *Humanities Working Paper* 102 (Pasadena: California Institute of Technology, 1984), <http://authors.library.caltech.edu/17090/1/HumsWP-0102.pdf> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
87. Mann, 'Translating Zukofsky's Catullus', 13. The unusual syntax is transcribed as is.
88. Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 17.
89. See Mark Scroggins, 'Music and Poetic Form in the Pound/Zukofsky Era', in *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1998). Williams also saw, and lamented, the Poundian roots of Zukofsky's notion of music, writing to the latter: 'What the hell do you know about music? I think, very little. You know something of the effects music achieves, but that's all. Don't for God's sake the Poundian stupidity in that Pound who can't know music and therefore keeps dragging it in' (letter dated 19 May 1943).
90. Ezra Pound, 'How to Read', in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1954), 25.
91. T. S. Eliot, *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 38.
92. T. S. Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), 118–19.
93. Ibid., 155.
94. Archibald MacLeish, 'Ars Poetica', in *Collected Poems 1917–1982* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985), 106–7.
95. Bernstein, 'Introduction', xviii.

96. *John Cage: In Love with Another Sound*, film, directed by Miroslav Sebestik, 1992.

97. Ronald Johnson, 'L.Z.', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 294.

98. Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001), 14.

99. Bernstein, 'Introduction', xviii.

100. John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978), 130.

101. Ibid., 3.

102. Qtd in Michael Kirby and Richard Schechner, 'An Interview with John Cage', in *Happenings and Other Acts*, ed. Mariellen Sandford (New York: Routledge, 1995), 43. Clearly Cage is a composer, but the applicability of his writings to other art forms is fully borne out in their influence on US culture at large, especially on the poetry of the New York School, whose poets have made similar claims about music and the everyday.

103. Cleanth Brooks, *Community, Religion, and Literature: Essays* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), 26.

104. Qtd in interview with L. S. Dembo, in *The Contemporary Writer: Interviews with Sixteen Novelists and Poets*, ed. L. S. Dembo and Cyrena N. Pondrom (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1972), 221.

105. Louis Zukofsky, 'Peri Poietikes', in *Anew: Complete Shorter Poetry* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 213.

106. Letter from Pound to Zukofsky, 18 November 1930.

107. 'Faster Between the Lines', interview, *Sunday Times* (6 October 1966).

108. Zukofsky, *"A"*, 511.

109. See Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1947).

110. As, for example, in a letter of 1959: 'Poetry, whatever the "subject" isn't political—and it wouldn't make sense to me to appear under that standard. People can read me as they wish—and that's another matter, but I can't think or see myself a "member" or affiliated under a slogan. It all sounds like classification of literature into social, religious, nationalistic, etc. I'm just orthodox: poetry is poetry. As for politics, Mrs. Lee in Adams' Democracy said: "I have got so far as to lose the distinction between right and wrong. Isn't that the first step in politics?"' (Louis Zukofsky, *Selected Letters*, ed. Barry Ahearn, <http://www.z-site.net/selected-letters-of-louis-zukofsky/> [last accessed 26 November 2014], 262).

111. Zukofsky, *"A"*, 182.

Chapter 2

1. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), 480.

2. Muriel Rukeyser, *The Life of Poetry* (Ashfield, MA: Paris Press, 1996), 41.

3. Ibid., 213.

4. Ibid., 91.

5. Ibid.,183, 213.

6. See Charles Olson, *Additional Prose* (Berkeley: Four Seasons, 1974), 40.

7. Jane Caputi, 'On Psychic Activism: Feminist Mythmaking', in *The Feminist Companion to Mythology*, ed. Carolyne Larrington (London: Pandora, 1992), 428.

8. Cited in ibid., 431.

9. See Ezra Pound, 'I Gather the Limbs of Osiris': a sequence of twelve articles in *The New Age* from 7 December 1911 to 15 February 1912.

10. Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 31.

11. Ibid., 33.

12. Ibid., 8.

13. Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment', trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor, *New German Critique* 56 (Spring–Summer 1992), 109.

14. Mike Gold, *Daily Worker* (13 June 1934), 5.

15. D. S. Mirsky, 'The End of Bourgeois Poetry', *New Masses* (13 November 1934), 17, 18.

16. Rolfe Humphries, 'Eliot's Poetry', *New Masses* (18 August 1936), 26.

17. Ibid., 26.

18. Muriel Rukeyser, 'With Leftward Glances', *New Masses* (10 July 1934), 28.

19. Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1982), 3.

20. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 84.

21. T. S. Eliot, 'War-Paint and Feathers', *Athenaeum* (17 October 1919), 1036.

22. The term is Rukeyser's own. 'Witness', she says, is a preferred term due to its 'overtone of responsibility' (Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 174–5).

23. Susan Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut: American Women Poets and the Second World War* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 4.

24. See James F. Mersmann's introduction to *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974).

25. Muriel Rukeyser, *Barcelona, 1936: Selections from Muriel Rukeyser's Spanish Civil War Archive*, ed. Rowena Kennedy-Epstein (New York: CUNY, 2011), 14, 5.

26. Muriel Rukeyser, 'Barcelona 1936', *Life and Letters Today*, 15 (Autumn 1936), 28–35. The other articles appeared as 'Start of Strife in Spain as Told by an Eyewitness', *The New York Times* (29 July 1936), and 'Death in Spain: Barcelona on the Barricades', *New Masses* (1 September 1936). All citations to the *Life and Letters* article refer to *Barcelona*, where it was reprinted.

27. Rukeyser, *Barcelona*, 12.

28. Ibid., 15–16.

29. Ibid., 19.

30. Ibid., 22.

31. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 147.

32. Rukeyser, *Barcelona*, 15.
33. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 145.
34. Ibid., 145.
35. Ibid., 146.
36. Ibid., 146.
37. Ibid., 145.
38. Ibid., 148.
39. Ibid., 149.
40. Ibid., 149.
41. Ibid., 151.
42. The pamphlet can be seen in the New York Public Library's Berg Collection.
43. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 203.
44. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 20.
45. Anon., 'Grandeur and Misery of a Poster Girl', *Partisan Review* 10 (1943), 471–3. Louise Bogan, review of *Wake Island*, *New Yorker* (31 October 1942), 68.
46. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 210–11.
47. Maurice Blanchot, 'War and Literature', in *Friendship* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 109.
48. Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 296.
49. My analysis here is heavily indebted to, though also at odds with, Michael Bell's brilliant discussion of Pound and Eliot in *Literature, Modernism and Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 120–47.
50. Ezra Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (London: J. M. Dent, 1910), 26, 166–7.
51. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 14; T. S. Eliot, *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1975), 177.
52. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 1.
53. Ibid., 21.
54. Ibid., 31.
55. William Carlos Williams, *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams* (New York: Random House, 1954), 21.
56. John Dryden, *The Poems of John Dryden*, *Volume Five: 1697–1700* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 605.
57. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 238–9.
58. Ibid., 611.
59. Ibid., 207.
60. Ibid., 208.
61. Ibid., 209–10.
62. Ibid., 210–11.
63. Ibid., 211.
64. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 41.
65. Cited in H.D., *Trilogy* (New York: New Directions, 1998), viii.
66. Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 239.
67. Ibid., 213.
68. Ibid., 209.
69. Rukeyser, *Life of Poetry*, 213.

70. Oscar Williams (ed.), *The War Poets: An Anthology of the War Poetry of the 20th Century* (New York: John Day, 1945), 4.

Chapter 3

1. See Tom Clark, *Charles Olson: The Allegory of a Poet's Life* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 1991), 94–5; Robert van Hallberg, *Charles Olson: The Scholar's Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 10–14; Heriberto Yépez, *The Empire of Neomemory*, trans. Jen Hofer, Christian Nagler and Brian Whitener (Oakland, CA: ChainLinks, 2013).

2. Charles Olson, *The Collected Poems of Charles Olson (Excluding the Maximus Poems)*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 14.

3. Cited in Clark, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 77.

4. Charles Olson, 'Letter to Ruth Benedict (12 Jan 1945)', in 'Key West I', *OLSON 5* (Spring 1976), n.p.

5. I take the phrase 'constituent power' from Antonio Negri, who describes it as 'the project of the multitude, a creative force, a living god', stressing its permanently creative character: 'the constituent process never closes. . . the revolution does not come to an end'. Antonio Negri, 'Constituent Republic', in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, ed. Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 222.

6. Don Byrd, *Charles Olson's Maximus* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1980), xiii.

7. Charles Olson, *Letters for Origin*, ed. Albert Glover (London: Cape Goliard, 1970), 102.

8. David Herd notes: 'When in 1952 *Partisan Review* ran a symposium entitled "Our Country Our Culture", it was clear that in so far as writers thought about foreign policy, their thinking was almost exclusively within the limits of Cold War opposition, turning on the question of how American artists might articulate the more defensible aspects of American culture. Olson's reach was more troubling. He sought in his early poetry and prose to establish a background of internationalised space as the arena within which to imagine human suffering' (David Herd, '"From him only will the old State-secret Come": What Charles Olson Imagined', *English* 59:227 [2010], 381).

9. Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), 82.

10. Clark, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 84.

11. Olson, *Collected Poems*, 165.

12. Charles Olson, *Collected Prose*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander, intro. Robert Creeley (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1997), 160.

13. Franz Schurmann, *The Logic of World Power: An Inquiry into the Origins, Currents, and Contradictions of World Politics* (New York: Pantheon, 1974), 71.

14. Michael Krasner, 'A Trade Strategy for the United States', *Ethics and*

International Affairs 2 (1988), 21. Also qtd in Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 2010), 21.

15. Olson's thinking here, of course, fits with a wider trend among the political thinkers that were his contemporaries, such as Hannah Arendt, to figure the nation-state itself as having irrevocably lost its status as the kind of guarantor of freedoms and agency. For an account of this see David Herd, '"In the Dawn that is Nowhere": *The New American Poetry* and the State of Exception', in *The New American Poetry: Fifty Years Later*, ed. John Woznicki (Lanham, MD: Lehigh University Press, 2014), 155–70.

16. Charles Olson, *Charles Olson and Ezra Pound: An Encounter at St. Elizabeths*, ed. Catherine Seelye (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1975), xix–xx.

17. Qtd in Herd, 'What Charles Olson Imagined', 387.

18. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 200.

19. Ibid., 66. The phrase also appears in *Collected Poems*, 472.

20. Clark, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 84.

21. Ibid., 84.

22. Charles Olson, *The Maximus Poems*, ed. George F. Butterick (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1983), 39.

23. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 109.

24. Ibid., 106.

25. Qtd in Ralph Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading: A Biography* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 57.

26. Olson, *St. Elizabeths*, 53.

27. Charles Olson and Frances Bolderoff, *Charles Olson and Frances Bolderoff: A Modern Correspondence*, ed. Ralph Maud and Sharon Thesen (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 256.

28. Charles Olson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Ralph Maud (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 85.

29. Robert Payne, *The Revolt of Asia* (New York: John Day, 1947), 4.

30. Ibid., 1.

31. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 162.

32. In the original these lines carried quotation marks that were removed from the final version.

33. Olson and Bolderoff, *Charles Olson and Frances Bolderoff*, 422; Charles Olson, *Muthologos*, vol. 1 (Bolinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1978), 142.

34. Mao Zedong, *Collected Writings of Chairman Mao*, vol. 3, ed. Shawn Connors (El Paso: Norte Press, 2009), 26; Olson, *Selected Writings*, ed. and intro. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 53, 55.

35. Payne, *Revolt of Asia*, 147.

36. Olson, 'The Kingfishers', *Collected Poems*, 86–93.

37. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 66.

38. Olson, *Selected Writings*, 84.

39. Qtd in Clark, *Allegory of a Poet's Life*, 124.

40. Guy Davenport, 'Scholia and Conjectures for Olson's "The Kingfishers"', *boundary 2* 2:1/2 (Autumn 1973–Winter 1974), 255.

41. Olson, *Selected Writings*, 78.
42. Qtd in Maud, *Charles Olson's Reading*, 54.
43. Olson and Bolderoff, *Charles Olson and Frances Bolderoff*, 422.
44. Ibid., 422.
45. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 27.
46. Olson, *St. Elizabeths*, 53, 83; Olson, *Selected Writings*, 82.
47. Olson, *Collected Poems*, 47.
48. Ibid., 83.
49. Ibid., 127.
50. Ibid., 189.
51. Charles Olson, *Mayan Letters*, ed. Robert Creeley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1968), 5–6.
52. For an account of the poem's genesis in a dream Olson had, see Michael Rumaker, *Black Mountain Days* (New York: Spuyten Duyvil, 2012), 175.
53. Robert Duncan, *The H.D. Book*, ed. Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 218.
54. Olson, *Collected Poems*, 431.
55. Ibid., 363.
56. Olson, 'As the Dead Prey Upon Us', *Collected Poems*, 388–95.
57. Ibid., 391.
58. Olson, 'A Newly Discovered Homeric Hymn', *Collected Poems*, 364.
59. See 'I have been an ability—a machine', in Olson, *Maximus Poems*, 495.
60. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 163.
61. Qtd in Charles Olson, *The Special View of History*, ed. Ann Charters (Berkeley: Oyez, 1970), 12.
62. Charles Olson, letter to Vincent Ferrini, 7 November 1950, *Origin* 1:1 (Spring 1951), 6.
63. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1978), 290.
64. Ibid., 21.
65. Olson, *Special View of History*, 33.
66. Ibid., 18.
67. Ibid., 26.
68. Ibid., 34.
69. Ibid., 17.
70. Ibid., 25.
71. Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 78.
72. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 507.
73. Olson, *Special View of History*, 47–8, 17; *Mayan Letters*, 67.
74. Olson, *Special View of History*, 58.
75. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 159.
76. Olson, *Letters for Origin*, 103.
77. Olson, *Maximus Poems*, 105.
78. Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 328.
79. Robert Creeley, *A Quick Graph: Collected Notes and Essays*, ed. Donald Allen (San Francisco: Four Seasons Foundation, 1970), 71.
80. Olson, *Special View of History*, 45.
81. Stephen Fredman, *The Grounding of American Poetry: Olson and the*

Emersonian Tradition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 38.

82. Olson, *Mayan Letters*, 67.
83. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 105.
84. Olson, *Special View of History*, 26.
85. Jane Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 328.
86. Ibid., 330. My italics.
87. Charles Olson, 'The Area, and the Discipline of, Totality' in *OLSON* 10 (Fall 1978), 97.
88. Charles Olson, 'A Letter to the Faculty of Black Mountain College', *Olson: The Journal of the Charles Olson Archives* 8 (Fall 1977), 28.
89. Charles Olson, 'On Black Mountain', in *Muthologos*, vol. 2 (Bolinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation, 1979), 74. My italics.
90. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 162.
91. Ibid., 162.
92. Olson, 'On Black Mountain', 57.
93. Ibid., 78.
94. Ibid., 68.
95. Ibid., 74.
96. Qtd in Ammiel Alcalay, *A Little History* (New York: UpSet Press, 2012), 112.
97. Olson, 'On Black Mountain', 69.
98. Ibid., 67.
99. The minutes of Black Mountain are available in the State Archives of North Carolina, Western Regional Office, box 506.1.10.
100. This was misconstrued in the meeting by Victor Sprague, who said: 'Olson thinks Black Mountain [is] a college set up to take care of aberrant personalities.'
101. On 2 May 1952, a motion was carried that put BMC two hours ahead of local time to save daylight.
102. Olson, 'On Black Mountain', 67.
103. Ibid., 74.
104. Ibid., 74.
105. Charles Olson and Cid Corman, *Charles Olson & Cid Corman: Complete Correspondence 1950–1964*, vol. 1 (Orono: National Poetry Foundation, University of Maine, 1987), 45. Duncan comments on this aspect of the college in day-to-day terms in relation to Olson: 'Olson accepted the chaotic environment as part of an artist's "coming to crisis" . . . [Black Mountain was] exactly what Charles was in many ways looking for, <u>a person who will never be away from his crisis</u>, whose crisis is seemingly catastrophic, and who remains an intact person' (qtd in Mary Emma Harris, *The Arts at Black Mountain College* [Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002], 178).
106. Olson, 'On Black Mountain', 64; Olson, *Letters for Origin*, 70.
107. van Hallberg, *The Scholar's Art*, 15.
108. Qtd in Alcalay, *A Little History*, 142.
109. Olson, *Collected Prose*, 246.

Chapter 4

1. James Sullivan, *On the Walls and in the Streets: American Poetry Broadsides from the 1960s* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 2.
2. Robert van Hallberg, *American Poetry and Culture 1945–80* (London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 145.
3. See Caroline Slocock, 'Winning Hearts and Minds: The 1st Casualty Press', *Journal of American Studies* 16:1 (1982), 108–10. Other notable anthologies include *A Poetry Reading Against the Vietnam War* (1966), *Where Is Vietnam?* (1967), *Poems of War Resistance* (1968), *Out of the War Shadow* (1968), *Campfires of the Resistance* (1971), and most successfully of all, *Winning Hearts and Minds* (1972).
4. See Abigail Deutsch, '100 Years of *Poetry*: The Magazine and War', Poetry Foundation, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/245104> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
5. John Ashbery, 'Frank O'Hara's Question', *Book Week* (25 September 1966), 23–4. His italics.
6. John Ashbery, letter to editor, *The Nation*, 29 May 1967, letters.
7. Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov, *The Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, ed. Robert J. Bertholf and Albert Gelpi (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 692.
8. Lawrence Ferlinghetti, *Poetry as Insurgent Art* (New York: New Directions, 2007), 65.
9. Robert Bly, 'Protest', *New York Review of Books* 9:11 (21 December 1967), letters.
10. Though Scott Bates's 1969 anthology *Poems of War Resistance from 2300 B.C. to the Present* (New York: Grossman) was a notable attempt to consciously reframe poetic tradition in such liberatory terms.
11. There were notable exceptions, of course. Jack Spicer, in a lecture entitled 'Poetry and Politics', told his audience: 'you're not going to be able to do a good goddamn thing about Vietnam—that's absolutely out', and attacked poets like Ginsberg for attempting to write anti-war poems.
12. Charles Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple: New Directions in American Poetry During the 1960s* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 24, 78.
13. Ibid., 232.
14. See Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2005), Book 2, Chapter 6, 'On the satisfaction of a clear conscience', 53–4.
15. Qtd in Blake Slonecker, *A New Dawn for the New Left: Liberation News Service, Montague Farm, and the Long Sixties* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).
16. Louis Simpson, 'Dead Horses and Live Issues', *The Nation* (24 April 1967), 522.
17. Robert Bly, 'On Political Poetry', *The Nation* (24 April 1967), 522.
18. Ibid., 522.
19. *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 608.
20. James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Henry Baldwin, 1791), 410.

21. Correspondence in *Poetry* (September 1972), 362.
22. See David Farber, *The Sixties: From Memory to History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 1–4.
23. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964). Jameson makes similar observations about transformations of social movements at large through the sixties as move away from a Marxist vanguardism setting out to influence the actions of others, toward the communitarian spirit of dissent toward opposition simply *lived* and *enacted* in self-protective coteries, and then, significantly, back again. (See Fredric Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', *Social Text* 9/10 [Spring–Summer 1984], 178–209.)
24. Jameson roots this shift in the First World in the apparent success of 'alternative' (i.e. not conventionally Marxist-Leninist) political movements in the Third, the disappearance of communist forces in America around 1956, as well as the more general lesson of the non-transparent nature of political practice, now veiled behind the 'impersonal logic' of a newly powerful media apparatus. His 'Periodizing the 60s' remains the most incisive charting of the changing political logic of the decade.
25. Robert Bly, *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 98.
26. Philip Metres, *Behind the Lines: War Resistance Poetry on the American Home Front Since 1941* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), 108.
27. Robert Bly, *Selected Poems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 76–86.
28. Robert Duncan, *Bending the Bow* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 81.
29. *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 563.
30. Duncan, *Bending the Bow*, 82.
31. *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 661.
32. Ibid., 696.
33. Ibid., 660.
34. Ibid., 701.
35. Duncan, *Bending the Bow*, 120.
36. James F. Mersmann, *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1974), 77–8.
37. Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 7.
38. Denise Levertov, *New and Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1992), 73.
39. Ibid., 243.
40. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 115; Ron Silliman, in interview with Gary Sullivan, *Readme* 3 (Summer 2000), <http://home.jps.net/~nada/silliman.htm> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
41. Denise Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 123.
42. Levertov refers to this as 'my Ibsen quote' in *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 316–17.
43. *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 530.
44. Ibid., 684.

45. Cary Nelson, *Our First Last Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 9.

46. Laura Quinney, *The Poetics of Disappointment: Wordsworth to Ashbery* (London: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 137.

47. Ibid., 2.

48. See *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 563.

49. Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972*, 121–2.

50. Thomas Merton, 'War and the Crisis of Language', in *The Critique of War: Contemporary Philosophical Explorations*, ed. Robert Ginsberg (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1969), 113. His italics.

51. Giorgio Agamben, *The End of the Poem: Essays in Poetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 113.

52. *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 683.

53. Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972*, 150.

54. Ibid., 147.

55. José Rodríguez Herrera, 'Revolution or Death: Levertov's Poetry in Time of War', in *Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov: The Poetry of Politics, the Politics of Poetry*, ed. Albert Gelpi and Robert J. Bertholf (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2006), 156. His italics.

56. Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972*, 142.

57. Denise Levertov, *Selected Criticism*, ed. Albert Gelpi (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), 270.

58. Levertov, *Poems 1968–1972*, 165.

59. Levertov, *Selected Criticism*, 154.

60. Michael Bibby, *Hearts and Minds: Bodies, Poetry, and Resistance in the Vietnam Era* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 175.

61. The review is quoted in *Letters of Robert Duncan and Denise Levertov*, 588.

62. Levertov, *The Poet in the World*, 45.

63. R. D. Rosen, 'James Tate and Sidney Goldfarb and the Inexhaustible Nature of the Murmur', in *American Poetry Since 1960: Some Critical Perspectives*, ed. Robert Burns Shaw (Manchester: Carcanet, 1973), 182.

64. Paul Carroll, '"I Lift My Voice Aloud . . ."', in *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Lewis Hyde (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 310.

65. Altieri, *Enlarging the Temple*, 131; Paul Breslin, *The Psycho-Political Muse: American Poetry Since the Fifties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 24, 31.

66. Marjorie Perloff, *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990), 203, 215.

67. Helen Vendler, 'Review of *The Fall of America*', in Hyde, *On the Poetry of Allen Ginsberg*, 209.

68. Nelson, *Our First Last Poets*, 15.

69. Michael Schumacher, *Dharma Lion: A Critical Biography of Allen Ginsberg* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 469.

70. The poet literally recorded both *in situ* on a tape machine given to him by Bob Dylan.

71. Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2009), 402, 403.

72. Ibid., 403.

73. Perloff, *Poetic License*, 215.
74. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 405.
75. George Oppen, *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), 167.
76. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 413.
77. Richard Howard, *Alone with America: Essays on the Art of Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Atheneum, 1980), 183.
78. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 415.
79. Allen Ginsberg, *Composed on the Tongue*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Grey Fox Press, 1980), 43.
80. And not merely the poet's, as Ginsberg's 'Demonstration or Spectacle as Example' states explicitly: 'We have to use our *imagination*. A spectacle can be made, an unmistakable statement OUTSIDE the war psychology which is leading nowhere (Allen Ginsberg, *Deliberate Prose: Selected Essays, 1952–1995*, ed. Bill Morgan [New York: HarperCollins, 2000], 10. His italics.)
81. Theodore Roszak, *The Making of a Counterculture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 29. Roszak, as editor of *Peace News*, was one of the original publishers of *Wichita Vortex Sutra*.
82. Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 206.
83. Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*, 417, 416.
84. Mark Silverberg, *The New York School Poets and the Neo-Avant-Garde: Between Radical Art and Radical Chic* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 201–2.
85. Paul Goodman, 'Advance-guard Writing 1900–1950', *The Kenyon Review* 13:3 (Summer 1951), 375–6. His italics.
86. Ibid., 375–6. My italics.
87. Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 40. The phrase is taken from Duncan's 'Ode to Dick Brown'.
88. See Irving Howe, 'The Idea of the Modern', in *Literary Modernism* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett, 1967); James S. Ackerman, 'The Demise of the Avant-Garde', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 11:4 (October 1969), 371–84; Leslie Fiedler, 'Death of Avant-Garde Literature', in *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. 2 (New York: Stein and Day, 1971), 454–61.
89. See Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation* (London: Vintage, 2001); John Cage, 'Lecture on Something', in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (London: Marion Boyers, 1978), 129.
90. I take this position to be intimately related to the issue of coterie: Olson is a similar case to Ginsberg since in both his poetry and activities at Black Mountain College, the aesthetic and political are radically mixed; whereas hermitic writers like Duncan and Spicer hold faith in a pure sense of the poetic object.

Chapter 5

1. Notable examples, beyond the two I go on to describe here, include: Houston Baker, '"There Are Songs If You Have the / Music": An Essay on

Imamu Baraka', in *Afro-American Poetics: Revisions of Harlem and the Black Aesthetic* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 111–39; William J. Harris, *The Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka: The Jazz Aesthetic* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1985).

2. Kimberly Benston, *Performing Blackness: Enactments of African-American Modernism* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 191; Nathaniel Mackey, 'The Changing Same: Black Music in the Poetry of Amiri Baraka', in *Contemporary Poets*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1986), 400.

3. Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 202–3. The historical context of Baraka's work also goes unmentioned by Benston, with *Preface to a Twenty-Volume Suicide Note* (1961) and *In the Tradition* (1982) discussed together as if they had identical political contents and motivations.

4. Amiri Baraka, 'New Black Music', in *Black Music* (New York: Akashic Books, 2010), 174–5.

5. Amiri Baraka, *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, ed. William J. Harris (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1991), 186. His italics.

6. Baraka, 'New Black Music', 175.

7. James Baldwin, 'Of the Sorrow Songs: The Cross of Redemption', in *The Picador Book of Blues and Jazz*, ed. James Campbell (London: Picador, 1996), 330. Originally published in *Views on Black American Music* 2:12 (1979).

8. Baraka, *Dutchman*, in *LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 35–6.

9. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Bantam Classics, 1989), 2–3.

10. See, for example, Philip Brian Harper, *Are We Not Men?: Masculine Anxiety and the Problem of African-American Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 44–6, and 'Nationalism and Social Division in Black Arts Poetry of the 1960s', in *Is It Nation Time?: Contemporary Essays on Black Power and Black Nationalism*, ed. Eddie S. Glaude (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 181–6, which see the supposed binary structure of 'me' and 'you' as typifying the Black Arts movement in general; or Patrick Johnson, *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 24–6; or again Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 160–1.

11. Harper, 'Nationalism and Social Division', 182.

12. The often muted and restrained delivery of the poem, such as at San Francisco State University on 4 March 1965, supports such a claim.

13. Baraka, *LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 16.

14. Amiri Baraka, *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow, 1979), 99.

15. Amiri Baraka, *The Autobiography of LeRoi Jones* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill, 2012), 445. See also Komozi Woodard, *A Nation within a Nation: Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 219–54.

16. See Amiri Baraka, 'Why I Changed My Ideology', *Black World/Negro*

Digest (July 1975), 30–42, for Baraka's most comprehensive, contemporary account of this. The article was adapted from a speech given to the Congress of Afrikan Peoples in March 1975.

17. Jerry Gafio Watts, *Amiri Baraka: The Politics and Art of a Black Intellectual* (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 459; Werner Sollors, *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a 'Populist Modernism'* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 237; Alex Houen, *Powers of Possibility: Experimental American Writing since the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 102.

18. Amiri Baraka, *Hard Facts: (Excerpts)* (Newark: Revolutionary Communist League, 1975), 29.

19. Ibid.: the short introduction to the book is unpaginated.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., 30.

22. Ibid., 31.

23. Baraka, *Black Music*, 244.

24. Amiri Baraka, *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*, ed. Charlie Reilly (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994), 112.

25. Ibid., 174.

26. Ibid., 115.

27. Ibid., 111–12.

28. Baraka, 'Why I Changed My Ideology', 41–2.

29. Baraka, *Hard Facts*, 23.

30. Baraka, *Conversations*, 141, 244.

31. Ibid., 118.

32. For a brief account of this see Aldon Neilsen, *Black Chant: Languages of African-American Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 188–90.

33. Ibid., 111.

34. Ibid., 142.

35. This set of poems was only ever published at the end of Baraka's 1979 *Selected Poetry of Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones* (New York: William Morrow), 275–340.

36. Baraka, *Selected Poetry*, 323.

37. Recording of a reading with Amiri Baraka, Diane diPrima and Robert Duncan: Naropa Institute, 26 July 1978.

38. Baraka, *Black Music*, 70.

39. G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (Mineola: Dover 2003), 305, 372.

40. Sascha Feinstein, 'Better You Say It First: An Interview with Amiri Baraka', *Brilliant Corners* 4 (Winter 1999), 77.

41. Harris, *Poetry and Poetics of Amiri Baraka*, 106, 110.

42. Introduction to *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word*, ed. Charles Bernstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 8.

43. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 37.

44. Gilroy has noted Baraka's influence on his own cultural studies explicitly (in, for example, his keynote address at the 2014 Baraka retrospective at the ICA), but I am thinking here particularly of the place of Baraka's

notion of black music as a 'changing same' in Gilroy's work. See Baraka, 'The Changing Same', in *Black Music*, 205–44.

45. Baraka, *Black Music*, 160.

46. Benston's work is articulate in describing this dialectic: see Benston, *Performing Blackness*, 193–4.

47. The most different versions are those on recording released on *Poets Read Their Contemporary Poetry* (Smithsonian Folkways, 1980), and, accompanied, on 1982's *New Music, New Poetry*.

48. The text here is that from *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader* (263–6) rather than the very different version in *Selected Poems*, since the former's layout resembles Baraka's speech patterns much more closely.

49. Amiri Baraka, *AM/TRAK* (New York: Phoenix Bookshop, 1979). The version quoted here refers to the text in *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 267–72.

50. For an account of these poems see Chapter 5 of Sascha Feinstein's *Jazz Poetry: From the 1920s to the Present* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Press, 1997).

51. See Baraka, 'The Changing Same'.

52. Werner Sollors interview with Baraka, in *Amiri Baraka/LeRoi Jones: The Quest for a 'Populist Modernism'*, 256.

53. Text from *The LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka Reader*, 302–10.

54. Daniel Won-gu Kim, '"In the Tradition": Amiri Baraka, Black Liberation, and Avant-Garde Praxis in the U.S.', *African American Review* 37:2/3 (Summer–Autumn 2003), 357.

55. Baraka, *Black Music*, 186.

Chapter 6

1. Some notes on periodisation are necessary here. I am placing *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine at the centre of the movement's emergence because it is in its pages that the political thinking of the movement appears, and therefore the most coherent articulation of its poetics. *This* magazine, which started in 1971, is often placed as the movement's genesis, but at least in its early years the magazine contained far too diffuse a collection of writers and no systematic aesthetic, the movement's most influential quality, that could be likened to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* – though the magazine is, in the latter half of the seventies, along with Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press and Silliman's 1975 mini-anthology of Language poetry in *Alcheringa* (New Series 1:2 [1975], 104–20), influential in establishing a canon of Language poets. *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine's editors speak of the publication as in itself vanguard, as indeed creating the movement. Bernstein says in retrospect that Language poetry 'looks like more of a pre-existing group, but I would say [*L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*] was more of an editorial and territorial project, that brought things together that were disparate, but that had certain aspects of a shared aesthetic' (Charles Bernstein, interview with David Wilk, WritersCast (12 April 2014), <http://www.writerscast.com/index.php?s=bernstein> [last accessed 26 November 2014]).

2. *Reports of Selected Cases Decided in Courts of the State of New York other than the Court of Appeals and the Appellate Division of the Supreme Court: Miscellaneous Reports* (New York: Williams Press, 1976), 699.

3. Michael French, *US Economic History Since 1945* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 94.

4. Kim Moody, *From Welfare State to Real Estate: Regime Change in New York City, 1974 to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2007), 45.

5. Joshua Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), 256.

6. Ibid., 256.

7. See David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43–55.

8. Oren Izenberg, *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 144.

9. Leon Trotsky, *Our Political Tasks* (1904), <http://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1904/tasks/ch03.htm> (last accessed 26 November 2014).

10. Charles Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979), 9. Many essays printed in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* were later printed elsewhere in essay collections of individual writers, but since the entire run of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* is available for free at eclipsearchive.org, references are to the magazine, with page numbers to the originally unnumbered issues supplied for convenience.

11. Steve McCaffery, 'From the Notebooks', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979), 31; Ron Silliman, *The New Sentence* (New York: Roof, 1987), 93.

12. Douglas Messerli (ed.), *'Language' Poetries: An Anthology* (New York: New Directions, 1987), 3.

13. McCaffery, 'From the Notebooks', 32.

14. Charles Bernstein, 'Stray Straws and Straw Men', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 1 (June 1980), 39–40.

15. Ron Silliman, 'For Open Letter', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 1 (June 1980), 31; Steve McCaffery, 'Death of the Subject: The Implications of Counter-Communication in Recent Language-Centred Writing', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 1 (June 1980), 8.

16. Bruce Andrews, 'Text and Context', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 1 (June 1980), 23; Steve McCaffery, 'Intraview', in *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, ed. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), 189. The piece never appeared in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine.

17. The most impressive of these, which also trenchantly introduce a number of the other most common criticisms of Language, include: J. H. Prynne, 'A Letter to Steve McCaffery (2nd January 1989)', *The Gig* 7 (November 2000), 40–7; Geoff Ward, *Language Poetry and the American Avant-Garde* (Keele: British Association of American Studies, 1993); Charles Altieri, 'Without Consequences Is No Politics: A Response to Jerome McGann', in *Politics and Poetic Value*, ed. Robert van Hallberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 301–7.

18. Barrett Watten, *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Politics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 46.
19. For examples in *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* see James Sherry, *A, B, $* (9/10, 41–3); Silliman on the 'narrative fetish' of Surrealism (Supp. 3, 130) and in 'Benjamin Obscura' (6, 14–16) and throughout the 'Pacifica Interview' of Bernstein, Andrews and Susan Howe (Supp. 3, 25–34).
20. See Watten, *Constructivist Moment*, 46–64.
21. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1984), 58; 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*', *New Literary History* 41:4 (Autumn 2010), 706.
22. Bürger, 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde', 707.
23. Charles Bernstein, *Content's Dream: Essays, 1975–1984* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 29.
24. McCaffery, 'Death of the Subject', 9.
25. Ibid., 11.
26. Andrews, 'Text and Context', 24.
27. Silliman, 'For Open Letter', 31.
28. Charles Bernstein, introduction to 'Language Sampler', *Paris Review* 86 (Winter 1982), 75; *Content's Dream*, 29.
29. McCaffery, 'From the Notebooks', 31.
30. Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein (eds), *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), x; Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, 81.
31. Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, 408.
32. Ron Silliman, 'If By "Writing" We Mean Literature (if by we mean poetry (*if . . .*)) . . .', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 9/10 (October 1979), 45.
33. Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum: Reality Effects, 1940– 1990* (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 399.
34. Charles Bernstein, 'Comedy and the Politics of Poetic Form', in *The Politics of Poetic Form: Poetry and Public Policy*, ed. Charles Bernstein (New York: Roof, 1990), 236.
35. Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review* 146 (July–August 1984), 53–92.
36. David Arnold, *Poetry and Language Writing: Objective and Surreal* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007).
37. Ron Silliman, 'Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* Supp. 3 (October 1981), 11.
38. André Breton, 'What Is Surrealism?', lecture delivered in Brussels, 1 June 1934; McCaffery, 'Death of the Subject', 2. His italics.
39. Silliman, 'If By "Writing" . . .', 45.
40. André Breton, *Manifestos of Surrealism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1972), 30–1.
41. Barrett Watten, 'Method and Surrealism: the Politics of Poetry', *Open Letter* 5:1 (Winter 1982), 126, 139.
42. Bernstein, *Content's Dream*, 392.
43. Silliman, 'Disappearance of the Word', 10.
44. McCaffery, 'Death of the Subject', 8.
45. Andrews, 'Text and Context', 24.

46. McCaffery, 'Death of the Subject', 12.
47. Andrews, 'Text and Context', 24.
48. Watten, 'Method and Surrealism', 129.
49. Michael Davidson, '"Skewed By Design": From Act to Speech Act in Language-Writing', *fragmente* 2, 48.
50. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, correspondence included as part of 'Davidson and Weinberger on New Language Poetry', *Sulphur* 22 (1988), 190.
51. Ibid., 190.
52. Ron Silliman, response to 'Non-Poetry', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 7 (March 1979), 18.
53. Ibid., 27–8.
54. The *Yellow Pages* ads can be seen at <http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Yellow-Pages.php> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
55. Charles Bernstein (ed.), *Close Listening: Poetry and the Performed Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22–3. His italics.
56. Rasula, *American Poetry Wax Museum*, 379.
57. Charles Bernstein, 'Provisional Institutions: Alternative Presses and Poetic Innovation', in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Urbana: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 153–4.
58. Ibid., 144.
59. Bernstein, 'The Dollar Value of Poetry', 7. His ellipses.
60. Silliman, 'For Open Letter', 33.
61. Silliman, *New Sentence*, 79. Silliman's sentiment is echoed satirically in Bernstein's 'Style', *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* 6 (December 1978), 26–7.
62. Ron Silliman, 'Poetry and the Politics of the Subject', *Socialist Review* (September 1988), 65. His italics.
63. Eleana Kim, 'Language Poetry: Dissident Practices and the Makings of a Movement', *Readme* 4 (Spring/Summer 2001), <http://home.jps.net/~nada/language6.htm> (last accessed 26 November 2014).
64. See, for example, Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).
65. This is not to say the academy can necessarily foster other forms of cultural resistance, however: indeed, Language poets often gave up anticapitalism at the same time as the avant-garde.
66. Hejinian, for example, theorised Language-based aesthetics as a rejection of avant-garde practice, saying it 'has less in common with modernist avant-garde movements than with aesthetic tendencies grounded in marginalized cultural communities' (Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 171), while Howe, Waldrop and other female Language poets have silently elided the grandstanding statements in the avant-garde style typical of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, typically written by men.
67. Susan Howe, *The Europe of Trusts* (New York: New Directions, 2002), 14.
68. There are examples of literary revision or scholia in all of Howe's books. Being reductive, one might list Swift in *The Defenestration of Prague* and *The Liberties*, Dickinson in *My Emily Dickinson*, Melville in *Melville's Marginalia*, Thoreau in *Thorow*, Shakespeare in *The Defenestration of*

Prague and *The Midnight*, and many other examples besides as all subject to Howe's distinctive literary *'istorin*.

69. David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 370.

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