

THE SONG IN THE MACHINE: ORGANIC FORMS OF AMERICAN POETRY

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In breaking from dominant poetic forms, American poets writing in free verse have themselves produced a rich tradition of aesthetic formalisms. This dissertation argues that their innovations, rather than mere freaks of fancy, have harnessed the machinery of capitalist development toward poetic ends. William Carlos Williams' "machine made of words" is continuous with Walt Whitman's organicism in *Leaves of Grass*, as both sought to transform capitalist social relations and machinery into aesthetic experiences that foreground human capacities and imagination. Free verse, though, is not inherently more radical than traditional verse forms, and the fetishization of technique is often part and parcel of an exclusionary politics of white, masculine labor. In their confrontations with capital these poets have crafted a variety of organicist forms, transforming social conditions toward both liberatory and reactionary ends.

Chapter One considers Whitman's confrontation with industrial capitalism and slavery, elaborating how the "hum" produced by his loafer in the grass transforms the abstract equality inherent in wage labor toward poetic song. In Chapter Two Williams takes up this hum through his automobile's confrontation with an electric power plant in *The Great American Novel*, pitting poetic self-possession against the alienating forces of technology. His objectivism inscribes the experience of the car—its thrills and dangers—into the distinctive lineation of poems in *Spring and All* and elsewhere. Ezra Pound, for his part, seeks to surpass the contradiction between machine and man in his vision of an absolute technê. Like Williams, Charles Olson struggled with the automobile as a symbol for poetic autonomy, the contradictions of which inhered in the Fordist social compact. In Chapter Three we see how Frank O'Hara inherited Olson's time signals in the crafting of his own "I do this I do that" style, while providing a critique of the valorization of machines as a means to personal immediacy. In the final chapter Ron Silliman's long prose-poem *Ketjak* is read against the grain of his poetics in *The New Sentence*, showing how rather than simply jettisoning capitalist reification, his cascading and repetitive sentences ironize post-Fordist realities, including hyper-financialization and eclipse of the programmatic workers' movement.

*for my folks*

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## INTRODUCTION

In 1968 Richard Brautigan gave away a collection of poems entitled *Please Plant This Book*, which consisted of eight seed packets with a poem printed on each one, along with planting instructions. Brautigan's suggestion that free verse be metamorphosed into organic plant life literalized a trope that Walt Whitman had made full use of in his 1855 preface to *Leaves of Grass*. There Whitman claimed that "perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears" (*Poetry* 11). For both Whitman and Brautigan, free verse, like plant life, is determined by an organic rather than a traditional order. In positioning their verse as organic life itself both poets seek to provide authority for innovations that by definition break against prefabricated forms, especially those of meter and rhyme, but even of presentation and circulation.

Claiming that poems are organic does not, though, necessitate eschewing high technology. Indeed, in modern American poetry the organic and the machine have continually gone hand in hand. Consider Brautigan's 1967 collection *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, of which he gave away 1,500 copies (Barber). Here is the book's title poem:

I like to think (and  
the sooner the better!)  
of a cybernetic meadow  
where mammals and computers  
live together in mutually  
programming harmony  
like pure water  
touching clear sky.

I like to think  
(right now, please!)  
of a cybernetic forest  
filled with pines and electronics  
where deer stroll peacefully  
past computers  
as if they were flowers  
with spinning blossoms.

I like to think  
(it has to be!)  
of a cybernetic ecology  
where we are free of our labors  
and joined back to nature,  
returned to our mammal  
brothers and sisters,  
and all watched over  
by machines of loving grace.  
(*Pill 1*)

It comes as a small, slightly humorous surprise that the *o* and *s* sounds of “forest” rhyme with those of “electronics,” and the *os* of “ecology” with those of “our labors,” the *r* sound of which rings out in “nature.” The inventiveness (or budding, in Whitman’s phrase) of these rhymes dovetails the double-edged tone of the poem, which offers a vision of the future as improbable as it is sonically pleasing. On the one hand there is every reason to believe that Brautigan took part in the enthusiasm for cybernetics that infused aspects of 1960s counter-culture, such as Stewart Brand’s *Whole Earth Catalog*, and which underlies the poem’s projection of an ecological and technological utopia where no one has to work. Yet the self-consciously wishful refrain “I like to think,”

followed by exclamatory phrases in parenthesis that become ever more strained—“(it has to be!)”—suggest as much ironic distance as endorsement of this ultimate melding of human-made technology and nature. That the “mutually / programming harmony” of “mammals and computers” is “like pure water / touching clear sky,” establishes, furthermore, how the realms of the organic and the machine reflect one another, while their “touching” remains fantastical.

Between plant book and cybernetic idyll Brautigan rearticulates a foundational complex of American free verse, which itself has a long pedigree. Romantics in Germany, England, and then America are responsible for our conception of artistic production as akin to the growth of a natural organism. Organicism proposes, contra *mechanistic* conceptions of causality, that the artwork is a self-perpetuating form of creation linked to unconscious genius. Instead of conceiving aesthetic, and specifically poetic, production as rule-governed in the same way empiricists had conceived the universe, Romantics saw life and art as burgeoning forth from vital sources that exceeded empirical verification. In 1808 Friedrich Schlegel lectured:

Form is mechanical when it is imparted to any material through an external force, merely as an accidental addition, without reference to its character. [...] Organic form, on the contrary, is innate; it unfolds itself from within, and reaches its determination simultaneously with the fullest development of its seed. (qtd. in Abrams 213)

In articulating form as inherent to content, rather than given and eternal, Schlegel and later Romantic thinkers forwarded what Charles I. Armstrong has “dubbed ‘radical organicism,’ a thinking of structure that does not merely coordinate form and matter (or subject and object), but tries to collapse these opposites into an immediate and

undifferentiated unity” (4). Indeed, the “immediacy” of innovative forms is, as we shall see, at the heart of the organicist poetics of American free verse.<sup>1</sup>

In his 1844 essay “The Poet,” Ralph Waldo Emerson both inherited and troubled the European distinction between organic and machine forms. In affirming a break with European verse traditions, which Whitman took up in *Leaves of Grass*, Emerson famously declared that “it is not metres, but a metre-making argument that makes a poem,—a thought so passionate and alive, that, like the spirit of a plant or an animal, it has an architecture of its own, and adorns nature with a new thing” (*Essays* 450). For Emerson and Whitman the American poet is to be generative rather than imitative, and this generation means adhering to what is actual rather than imposing outworn forms on creative expression. In turning to what was actual in antebellum America, though, the Transcendentalists found factories and railroads as much as pastoral retreats. Rather than reject mechanical forms, then, it became the American poet’s task to integrate machine forms into their work, reforming them toward higher ends:

Readers of poetry see the factory-village, and the railway, and fancy that the poetry of the landscape is broken up by these; for these works of art are not yet consecrated in their reading; but the poet sees them fall within the great Order not less than the beehive, or the spider’s geometrical web. Nature adopts them very fast into her vital circles, and the gliding train of cars she loves like her own. Besides, in a centered mind, it signifies nothing how many mechanical inventions you exhibit. (455)

In a sense all the poets I write about share this confidence in their ability to transform machine technology and other forms of capitalist development such as financialization into their own metre-making argument, “put[ting] eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object” (456). As even Emerson recognized, though, not every object is

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent survey of Romantic organicism see Gigante.

either dumb or inanimate, and this becomes explicit in the twentieth century, when poets have to struggle even harder to assert the primacy of their craft over ever more dynamic and ubiquitous machines.

Organic metaphors for artistic growth such as those propounded by Emerson and Schlegel are especially ripe in Whitman's defense of free verse as innate, democratic foliation, a vision for art that continued to hold sway for later American thinkers such as John Dewey. Because of the enduring effort by Romantics and later humanists to distinguish "genuine forms" (Dewey) of art and life from mechanical determinations, it can still appear radical that modernists such as William Carlos Williams would assert a poem to be a "machine made of words" (256). Modernists' fascination with machinery of all kinds, from cars to factories and military technology, seems to fly in the face of the organicist tradition. Indeed, metaphors for poetry as either a natural organism, or as machinery, appear to be historical and conceptual antinomies, with organicism hemmed in from one side by a mechanistic conception of causality, and from the other by a machine-age modernism.

Yet the play between nature and machines—not without profound ambivalence—that is evident in Brautigan has imbued American free verse across two centuries, spanning both Romantic poetry in organic form and modernist poetry of the machine age. Already with Emerson and Whitman the burgeoning of American industry, which Whitman linked to the emergence of a uniquely American idiom, was partner rather than foe to the organic growth of free verse. Indeed, as M. H. Abrams pointed out in *The Mirror and the Lamp* (1953), any hard and fast distinction between the organic and the machine is untenable:

Since both mechanism and organicism (implicitly asserting that all the universe is like some one element in that universe) claim to include everything in their scope, neither can stop until it has swallowed up the archetype of the other. In consequence, as the extreme mechanist claimed organisms to be higher-order machines, so the extreme organicist, in his philosophical counter-attack, maintained that physical things and processes are simply more rudimentary forms of organism. (186)

While the metaphors of organic or machine art morph into each other at their respective extremes, the development of this antimony is itself inseparable from the emergence of industrial capitalism. The turn to nature for European Romantics and later American Transcendentalists is at least in part a response to the mechanization of bodies, enclosures of land, and the upending of artisanal forms of self-possession wrought by the spread of wage labor. As Perry Miller put it, “we may [...] see in the Transcendentalist not so much a collection of exotic ideologies as the first outcry of the heart against the materialistic pressures of a business civilization” (ix).<sup>2</sup>

That the organic and the machine come to mirror each other is no accident of conceptual thought. Organicism was meant to both encompass and humanize a burgeoning industrial order, offering a holism where no moment of existence could definitively be severed from another. As Laura Dassow Walls puts it, “organicism quite literally ‘rationalizes’ mechanism—re-creates mechanism by a sweeter name, a kinder, gentler machine, a machine that effects change not by outer force but by inner power” (111). This complex of a totalizing machinery of organic form, driven by human creative powers is, as Walls points out, at the heart of modernity. Dissent to this complex has, though, been consistent. Herman Melville, for example, consistently threw into question

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<sup>2</sup> Leibniz and Kant already noted the complicity between the organic and the mechanical as this complex emerged. See Armstrong 182, note 1.

the self-affirming holism of organicism, acutely attuned as he was to the necessary complicities of capitalist production and circulation. In his diptych, *The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids* (1855), the aesthetic pleasures of metropolitan office workers are imbricated with the deadly exploitation of New England mill girls producing paper. The story's narrator visits the mill, which is hidden amidst snowy mountains, because he needs paper for seed packets, since his business in seeds has exploded. "It need hardly be hinted," he writes, "how paper comes into use with seedsmen, as envelopes," offering a curious foreshadowing of Brautigan's use of such packets for his poems (229). The story's seeds are linked to an uncanny sexual politics, where celibate London bachelors and virgin New England maids are brought into contact through a machine that—as the narrator's tour guide, Cupid, shows him—turns pulp ("white, wet, woolly-looking stuff, not unlike the albuminous part of an egg, soft boiled") into foolscap in exactly nine minutes (236). The factory is itself described thus:

Not a syllable was breathed. Nothing was heard but the low, overruling hum of the iron animals. The human voice was banished from the spot. Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings, who served mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan. The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheels. (233)

Here we have a quintessential lament over the alienation of workers before the forces of industry. But instead of turning toward organic humanism in his critique of industry, Melville shows with deadly wit how the refinements of a "natural" humanity are constituted by de-humanizing exploitation. Melville's elaboration of this complex attends, furthermore, to the imbrication of machine sounds and human voices. While the workers are silent, the machines hum. The hum of machines, and poets' attempts to harness this sound as lyric song, will be an abiding theme of this dissertation. While poets

make ample use of organic metaphors to justify their break from more traditional verse forms, it is decisive that rather than merely figuring their poetry as returning to the pastoral, they seek again and again to inhabit and harness the very sounds and forms of capitalist development toward their poetic innovations.

In his diptych Melville crafts an exceptionally self-reflexive moment for American literature, where the aesthetic itself (for what do nineteenth-century authors write on, if not paper?) is shown to be of a piece with its purported opposite—machinery and the degradation of human nature and the natural environment. Indeed, it is precisely the apparent autonomy of the story’s respective spheres—consumption and production—that seals their mutual imbrication. Whereas Melville is deliciously dour, Whitman, by contrast, is cosmically confident. In what we now know as “Song of Myself” (1855)—published the same year as Melville’s story—Whitman’s loafer in the grass emanates a “hum” from his “valved voice” (30), signaling freedom from both technology and labor. Yet, as with the pleasures of the bachelors of London, the loafer’s hum is inseparable from machinery. In Chapter One, “Whitman’s Organic Hum-anity” I show how this organic hum, meant to be available to all who will “loose the stop from your throat” (30), is at once—in the only other use of the word in the 1855 *Leaves*—the sound of a girl working the Spinning Jenny. The sound of Walt’s organic body and voice was, in short, being uttered by machinery. One of the things that is striking about Whitman is just how openly he allows that the poet is constituted by the forces from which he seeks to stand apart. This standing apart—this “presumed autonomy”<sup>3</sup>—is key, as “loafing” is the

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<sup>3</sup> I take this phrase from the title of a conference I participated in at Stockholm University: “Presumed Autonomy: Literature and the Arts in Theory and Practice,” 10-13 May 2016.

antithesis to exploited labor, and signals a communal receptivity free from social domination. While Melville's metaphors of slavery hint at the geopolitics his story shies away from making explicit—that cotton cultivated by enslaved African-Americans provided the raw material for England's workshop of the world—Whitman crafts his cosmic egalitarianism, as well as his proprietary self-possession, out of his confrontation with slavery. Nevertheless, Whitman's poetics are modeled on the politics of free white, male labor, an exclusionary form of self-possession that spans the period from industrialization in antebellum America to deindustrialization in the 1970s.

Whitman's figuring of human song as organic sound, and likewise his book as organic foliation, is at root a bid for authority by an aesthetic modernizer who risked being disregarded and worse in his upending of prevailing traditions. As Stephen Fredman has elaborated in *The Grounding of American Poetry: Charles Olson and the Emersonian Tradition*, the need for self-grounding has been especially acute in the United States: "since it has been a 'modern' undertaking from the outset, American poetry lacks grounding in a unified tradition" (vii). Organicism, then, is a method of grounding employed by American poets "which seeks to reinvent context" (vii), bringing into question the naturalness of dominant poetic modes. In *From Romanticism to Critical Theory*, Andrew Bowie shows just how widespread this need for self-grounding was. Bowie persuasively argues that the category of the aesthetic has to be seen as a bid for inherent value, analogous to Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative, against the endless regress of mechanistic system, whether as language or (capitalist) value. The artwork's claim to autonomy demands what Bowie terms a "hermeneutic imperative" on the part of critics: because works of *poesie* have no definitive ground, interpretation must extend the

meaning of the work rather than absolutely determining it. The very resistance of great works of art to such determination speaks of their truth content as transcending a merely functional vocation. Such un-grounded or rather self-grounding truth, which demands interpretative extension, is for Bowie the very nature of modern aesthetics and is a complex born with the German Romantics' resistance to totalizing system, as well as nihilistic regress. That such resistance can itself become totalizing in its organic aspirations troubles, as we shall see, artists' claims of autonomy from capital.

In this dissertation I elaborate how the modern and postmodern attempts to transform the machinery of capital into poetry carry forward the Romantic preoccupation with organic form. Whitman's singing of the machine is an act of self-grounding that seeks to determinately negate the imperatives of capital accumulation by subordinating its materials to human, poetic ends. In the United States—as Whitman's work attests—the Romantic distinction between the organic and the mechanical was especially unstable. That later modernists sought to distance themselves from Romantic and Victorian effusiveness by turning to the strictness of the machine as an image of self-containment should not be read—as critics most often have—as a definitive break with the past. Rather, in promulgating machine metaphors for their art, modernists ended up furthering nineteenth-century aesthetic preoccupations with vitality and solidified the imperative to ceaselessly innovate. In their haste to “make it new” modernists most often missed how for Whitman, Melville, and others in the American Renaissance, the organic was itself enlivened by machinery (Pound, *New* 194).

For my purposes the machine-character of modern art began being theorized most saliently by Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno in the 1930s, culminating with Adorno's posthumously published *Ästhetische Theorie* (1970).<sup>4</sup> There Adorno writes:

Modern works [...] must show themselves to be the equal of high industrialism, not simply make it a topic. Their own comportment and formal language react spontaneously to the objective situation; the idea of a spontaneous reaction that is a norm defines a perennial paradox of art. Because there is nothing that can avoid the experience of the situation, nothing counts that purports to have escaped from it. In many authentic modern works industrial thematic material is strictly avoided out of mistrust of machine art as a pseudomorphism. But in that this material is negated by heightened construction and the reduction of the material tolerated, the industrial returns with a vengeance, as in the work of Paul Klee. (33-34)

When Whitman's loafer/reader looses the stop from their throat to utter a spontaneous hum, free verse shows itself to be the equal of industrialism. While Adorno has high modernism in mind, the perennial spontaneity he refers to also accords with nineteenth-century organicism. This dialectical logic of spontaneous construction is especially acute in lyric poetry. In his famous radio address, "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957), Adorno proclaims, "the lyric reveals itself to be most deeply grounded in society when it does not chime in with society, when it communicates nothing" (43). The non-communicative "hum" that American poets continually utter as a metonym for their verse elucidates this contradiction: while a bid for autonomy and self-possession it is at once the sound of capitalist society. Lyric's very attempt to remove itself from the social necessarily marks it as socially determined. Similarly, in *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno shows how in attempting to avoid its subordination to industrial technology, the modern artwork becomes an austere construct.

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<sup>4</sup> See Kaufman, "Frankfurt School."

Like later critics of avant-garde poetry such as Charles Altieri and Marjorie Perloff, Adorno argues for the distinctiveness of modern art by taking modernist claims for a definitive break with both Romantic symbolism and realist representation at face value. Referring to the Romantic cult of unconscious genius, Adorno writes, “in emphatic opposition to the illusion of the organic nature of art, the material concept of the modern implies conscious control over its means” (*AT* 35). In an even more stringent formulation he asserts, “only through their polar opposition, not through the pseudomorphosis of art into nature, are nature and art mediated in each other. The more strictly artworks abstain from rank growth and the replication of nature, the more the successful ones approach nature” (*AT* 77). In hewing to the letter of the high modernism of the early twentieth century Adorno misses the essential continuity between organicist and modernist construction. Indeed, this continuity is perhaps easier to see in the United States than in Europe. Whitman’s poetry is more “rank growth” than austere technique, yet contemporary critics were quick to point out its constructed quality, namely how his cataloging of the activity of Americans made him sound (as Emerson put it to Thomas Carlyle) like he was offering “an auctioneer’s inventory of a warehouse” (Carlyle 251). In seeking to sing the universal humanity of all Americans—including, significantly, slaves—Whitman deployed the abstract and formal equivalence of the capitalist marketplace. The prolific growth of his *Leaves* is, in short, inseparable from that of capitalist social relations. Adorno is right to point out that nature is in this sense a construct, but Whitman’s constructions evince conscious control rather than mere foliation. Just as he takes high modernists too much at their word, Adorno assumes organicists are lacking in control, and thereby represses an essential continuity between

nineteenth- and twentieth-century artworks, which is especially apparent in their respective constructions of nature from the machinery of capital.

Adorno is more consistent in his thinking than actually fits the history of aesthetic production. For him, the artwork rivals the constructions of industry only in its attempt to remove industry from the picture. Likewise, artworks are only natural in so far as their unity leaves the theme of nature behind. One wonders what Adorno would have made of Whitman, who unashamedly thematized both nature and technology. Perhaps Adorno's silence on nineteenth-century American literature speaks for itself. But his schema in *Aesthetic Theory* nevertheless provides the model for my conception of how the organic becomes machinery, and how machine sounds are rendered in organic form. More compellingly than any other critic of art, Adorno elaborates how successful artworks bear the scars of their effort to weave toward authentic self-expression between the Scylla of commodification and the Charybdis of irrelevance. Artworks that respond to their necessary imbrication with the capitalist value-form acknowledge their complicity while modeling an as-yet unrealized relation of (human) nature. In demanding to be interpreted not merely through society, but through their own concept, such works suggest the possibility of a (human) nature that is likewise self-determining.

In a study closely related to mine thematically, *Poetry at Stake: Lyric Aesthetics and the Challenge of Technology*, Carrie Noland reveals "the existence of extensive ties, both practical and epistemological, linking capitalist development and its corollaries, modern industrialization and electronic information processing, to poetic forms of subjective expression" (7). Adorno is crucial for Noland in her consideration of modern French and postmodern American poets, and she even goes so far as to read him as a

confessional poet in his *Negative Dialektik* (1966). In a formulation that is apposite to my readings of American poets, Noland writes that Adorno “remains an important source of inspiration for a cultural approach to poetry because for him an autonomous work of art is only autonomous in so far as it is free to confront, confess, and even thematize its profound heteronomy” (14) Whitman, for example, explicitly embraces the heteronomy of society—“the contingent forces responsible for shaping instances of individual expression” (Ibid., 9)—and thereby seeks to transform it into something profoundly personal: “every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you” (Whitman, *Poetry* 27). His humanist “hum” is not only, if at all, a dupe of the machine. By integrating that which stands apart from lyric expression into his *Leaves* Whitman situates his poetic voice as both product of and antidote to capitalist modernity.

Adorno inherited his conception of the aesthetic from Kant, for whom creative genius—especially of poets—forges a second nature in their imaginative transformation of empirical nature.<sup>5</sup> In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790) Kant writes:

The imagination (as a productive faculty of cognition) is a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature. It affords us entertainment where experience proves too commonplace; and we even use it to refashion experience, always following, no doubt, laws that are based on analogy, but still also following principles which have a higher seat in reason (and which are every bit as natural to us as those followed by the understanding in laying hold of empirical nature). By this means we come to feel our freedom from the law of association (which attaches to the empirical employment of the imagination), with the result that the material can be borrowed by us from nature in accordance with that law, but be worked up by us into something else—namely, what surpasses nature. (143)

The working up of natural materials into a new, second nature, is a bid for creative freedom from the empirical world. Since Kant this world has, of course, come to be

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<sup>5</sup> See Kaufman, “Red Kant.”

increasingly defined by machines. Indeed, as many of the poets I discuss recognize, the machine itself is its own second nature reforming what is empirically given. This raises the stakes for art, as poets attempt to surpass even this second nature, leading to the creative conflict with industrialism that Adorno describes, and that this dissertation elaborates.<sup>6</sup>

My title is, in part, a play on that of Leo Marx's seminal *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (1964). Marx's discipline-defining study documented "a hybrid genre, the American pastoral romance" which, surprisingly perhaps, shares the dialectical logic Adorno enumerated between the organic and the machine. The narratives that constitute this genre display a threefold movement according to Marx: First, "in the face of the established order's growing complexity and power [...] the pastoral figure retreats from this alienating situation to a terrain marked by fewer signs of human intervention" where he experiences "a moment of ecstatic fulfillment, perhaps shared with a companion or lover, when the protagonist enjoys a feeling of transcendent harmony with his surroundings" (378). For my purposes this is Walt loafing in the grass, where he enjoys what Michael Moon has fittingly described as a "'cosmic' orgasm" (49). This experience "is of course fleeting" and leads to "the pastoral figure's thrilling, tonic, yet often terrifying encounter with wildness" (Marx 378). The Pequod's confrontation with the white whale immediately comes to mind in this regard. Finally, and decisively, there is "the sudden appearance of the machine in the landscape" (378). This is the locomotive reaching Walden Pond, which Thoreau calls an "iron horse," "breathing fire and smoke from his nostrils" (Walden 97). As in Adorno,

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<sup>6</sup> For a detailed study of Kant's organicism see Mensch.

the very technological forces that led to pastoral retreat in the first place reemerge, Marx shows, in the heart of the wilderness.

While Marx, in his capacious and detailed study, comes to elaborate a structure that parallels Adorno's emphasis on how concepts like the organic are dialectically mediated through their opposites, thinking in these terms is not necessarily natural to American critics. As Fredric Jameson noted in his Preface to *Marxism and Form* (1971), our own tradition is dominated by "that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and logical positivism which we know as Anglo-American philosophy and which is hostile at all points to the type of thinking outlined here" (x). Even someone as critical of both the capitalist division of labor and mechanistic thought as John Dewey rested his vision for art on profoundly normative ground: "The real work of art is the building up of an integral experience out of the interaction of organic and environmental conditions and energies" (67). In terms wholly apposite to many of the poets considered here, Dewey's organicism—influenced by Whitman, and influencing Olson<sup>7</sup>—is instantiated not in the self-enclosed work but rather the dynamic experience, where the artwork is both a vital expression of, and is in turn useful to, a society alive to human meaning. With Dewey it becomes clearer still how American organicism is a creative reaction against mechanistic thought and activity, conferring upon itself a more fundamental, and deeply humanistic, legitimacy. The normative terms of this tradition, though, have already decided what art—and human society—is and should be, and thereby risk foreclosing what is most radical about artworks. Again, it is in positing the not-yet existent through their constitutive distance from what is actual—and indeed immediately possible—that

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<sup>7</sup> On Dewey and Olson see Fredman, "Art as Experience."

artworks might be deeply critical of the world as it is. Only through a dialectical apprehension of how artworks function both within and against the existing machinery of capitalist social relations can we meaningfully situate them historically.

While I aim to vex the claims of American avant-garde poets to immediacy through organicism, I also seek to sublate the deeply instructive, but at this late date often tired, debate about whether art is autonomous or is socially determined. Figures as diverse as Mathew Arnold and Adorno have emphasized the autonomy of artwork from the imperatives of capital, while since the New Historicists it has become *de rigueur* to show how artistic production is imbricated in social domination. Following the lead of critics such as Bowie, Simon Jarvis, and Robert Kaufman, I aim to undermine this distinction through my close-readings of poems and statements on poetics. As Adorno recognized, the very act of seeking distance from capital leaves its indelible scars on the artwork, as its autonomy becomes a direct reflection of that of the commodity-form. This does not, though, in itself make the artwork a party to domination. Rather, the artwork's bid for autonomy, its *telos* to determine its own determinants—to be a world unto itself—leaves open the possibility that the world from which it emerges could itself be something else.

New Criticism's conception of the organic work emphasized the internal relations of elements that can be read without recourse to supposedly external determinants. This sense of the organic is the dominant one for thinking about poetry, but is not exactly what the Romantics had in mind in their use of the term, which had more to do with the direct relation between the author's genius and the work's production than with the work in and for itself. As my discussion of Adorno has shown, the lyric poem seeks autonomy in

constructing the heteronomy of the world through its own logic. And what is this logic if not “organic”? As Walls puts it,

an inquiry into the anatomy of organicism shows that its coherence is of a very special kind: turned on itself, single in the way of a Möbius loop, each half covering and yielding to the other in a totality that defies inspection as a whole—the whole of modernism in the palm of the hand. Organicism presents a technology for integration of a very mixed world, while itself being mixed to the core. (110)

Autonomy, in my reading, is one side of this mixture, where the organic assimilation/construction of the world as poem creates an aesthetic experience presumed autonomous from what is already existent. This presumptive autonomy, rather than in fact escaping the actual, holds forth the possibility that things could be otherwise—it is a necessary fiction that poets commit themselves to in a myriad of ways. Organicism, in short, is not one thing. The chapters of this dissertation present the variety of ways poets have articulated this complex, from valorizing technique as the means to poetic immediacy, to foregrounding the pathos of personality in struggles with technology.

Taking the complex of organicism and aesthetic autonomy for granted will seem outmoded to many. Hasn't Bruno Latour shown us the ruse of such purified totalities as “capitalism,” which was conceived out of the fevered brains of Marxists seeking a total revolution, which has itself totally failed (*Modern* 126)? Shouldn't we, as he suggests, give up on the “crime [...] of believing that we are radically different” (127)? If this dissertation shows anything, it is the illusoriness of any absolute difference between the human and capital, between organic poetic song and machines, as each continually posits the other. But for the poets I consider here there is always something in excess of what is actual, a form of immanence that their poetry struggles to issue forth through its confrontation with the forces that both make verse possible and threaten its existence.

Isn't, finally, the posthumanist "network" itself premised on totality, in much the same way that Marx's critique of political economy was, which showed just how hybrid the commodity had become? Jettisoning the idea of totality does little to mitigate the reality of a discernable system called capitalism, through which the human has indeed been inaugurated—the figure that these poets have mobilized to utter truths both immutable and speculative, such as "happiness." If such truth isn't to current taste, my final defense is that it is what motivated many of these poets to write what and how they did.

I have already been putting to use an older term for hybridity, namely dialectic. It is a term that attends to the way poets continually articulate the machine as human, while at once critiquing machinery for being dehumanizing, in a way that concepts like networks or hybridity fail to grasp. This doesn't mean, though, that all the poets in this dissertation end up in the same place. In my second chapter "Words Made of Machines: Williams and Pound," Pound's fantasy in "Machine Art" (1927-1930) of orchestrating the noise of machinery into poetry is coupled to Williams Carlos Williams' *The Great American Novel* (1923), where the "hum" of the electric power plant is figured as a primal, new born, word. Williams' automobile is a primary protagonist in this novel, as well as in his mash-up of poetry and prose from the same year, *Spring and All*, and indeed throughout his corpus. I show how the car provided a condition for Williams' collages, where associative perceptions wheel around a mobile center, often while the poet is driving. The lauding of American technology was a problem, though, for Pound and Williams. While Williams attempted an at-times awkward symbiosis between industrial machines and his "machine[s] made of words," Pound sought to sublimate their difference by imagining factory production and song as one and the same. Pound's

poetics here are, I argue, of a piece with his fascist politics, while Williams is always in part concerned that the logic of American industry is at odds with that of native cultural production.

The claims by Romantics, Transcendentalists, and modernists to organic expression are at once assertions of authority for their innovations. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing puts it in *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry*, which was an early goad to my own thinking on this topic, “Romantic and modernist organicism alike figure poetic language as incarnational, an aesthetic synthesis embodying in concrete terms the union of linguistic meaning and phenomenal reality” (9). For Blasing the problem with this synthesis is that it represses the rhetorical character of all utterance, reaching its logical conclusion in the fascism of Pound. When poets reify technique (8) in their bid for authority, thereby promulgating “technological and scientific values” (2), they also undermine the autonomy of poetry from the demand of social utility. Indeed, poets’ often vexed thematization of technology in their poetry attests to this constitutive wound of organicism, where their very means of poetic mastery reveal the vulnerability of their art to machine logics.

The paradox of poets employing high-tech innovations in an effort to win autonomy from capitalist society is pervasive in American free verse. A century after Whitman, Charles Olson found in the typewriter the ultimate means for carrying over the poet’s bodily exhalations-cum-lineation to the reader. Olson’s typed “composition by field” is meant to provide an immediate connection—which commerce and mass culture obscures—between the bodies of the poet, typewriter, text, and reader (*Prose* 245). Yet he asserts autonomy from commercial culture by means of a masculine authority that is

instantiated in machines like the typewriter and the automobile. These machines also index the opposite of personal freedom, namely that men have increasingly become moving parts both on the assembly line and through the mass consumption demanded by mass production. The freedom that Olson's poetic constructions are meant to instantiate risks becoming its opposite if the terms of such constructions aren't interrogated.

For Blasing, and for this dissertation, this is when anti-organicist figures like Frank O'Hara begin to look especially interesting. To begin with, O'Hara, like other postmodernists Blasing considers, decouples the association between technique—which in this case usually comes down to free verse—and politics, where experimental forms are supposed to embody radical politics. Even more importantly for my purposes, O'Hara never sought to distance himself from the society of capital to begin with. As he puts it in "Meditations in an Emergency" (1957):

I have never clogged myself with the praises of pastoral life, nor with nostalgia for an innocent past of perverted acts in pastures. No. One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes—I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or a record store or some other sign that people do not totally *regret* life. (CP 97)

O'Hara's embrace of commercial culture and urban camp turns, though, continually to the theme of death. In Chapter Three, "Frank O'Hara Drives Charles Olson's Car," I show how O'Hara's immersion in the quotidian life of commodities, time, and cars, rather than blankly affirming the spurious, reveals the finitude and contingency of personal experience structured by Fordism. O'Hara, I argue, both inherits and targets Olson's bid for immediacy through machines and time signals. Indeed, in ironizing the politics of immediacy O'Hara ends up counterbalancing the seemingly endless proliferation of organic machines that populate the rest of this dissertation.

If organicism is a Möbius loop, then “the machine” often serves in this dissertation as a metonym for capital. In Chapter Four, “Ron Silliman’s *Ketjak* Beyond Programmatisms,” I place Silliman’s groundbreaking work in its context during the restructuring of Fordism in the 1970s. Here the machinery Silliman sings and ironizes is that of hyper-financialization and the unmooring of the supposed organic relation between production and consumption that underpinned Fordism. He nevertheless seeks autonomy in claiming that his gestural, poetic labor impedes the reification of capital he considers inherent to realism. Silliman clings in his poetics to a conception of direct relation between sign and referent that inherits Emerson’s conception of language as constituted by natural symbols, a preoccupation Pound also shared through his mobilization of Chinese characters. Yet it is precisely this givenness of language and values that his “new sentences” in *Ketjak* so stunningly undermine.

It is not incidental that white men have been the ones to foreground the organic in their bids for authenticity. Whitman, in the famous frontispiece of himself in the 1855 *Leaves*, inherited his insouciant and inviting posture from his description of the black drayman, just as his Christ-like lyric persona is crystallized in the slave on the auction block.<sup>8</sup> Authentic experience has consistently been figured as black in America, leading both to affirmations like Whitman’s, and to anxious denials of the humanity of blacks as in Olson’s poem “As the Dead Prey Upon Us,” which I discuss in Chapter Three. Silliman in many ways expresses this problematic best, as his anxiety around the burgeoning of identity politics leads him to affirm his own identity as a white, working-class, heterosexual male. Not unlike Whitman’s Free Soil politics, which envisioned

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<sup>8</sup> See Jay Grossman 177-180.

slavery and blacks as a threat to self-possessed white labor, Silliman is at pains to assert the autonomous quality of his gestural labor during the eclipse of the programmatic labor movement. The universality of labor often presumes, in short, whiteness. Again and again throughout this dissertation the rhetoric of autonomy is meant to support claims to authenticity by white, male poets who presume Afro-Americans to be more authentic than themselves, leading to either recuperation or dismissive disdain, and sometimes both at once.

For well over a century American poets have confronted and channeled capitalist developments through their formal poetic innovations. In the chapters that follow I provide close-readings of these innovations in their dynamic relation to the machinery of capital. Organicism, we learn, is no mere retreat from society, but a powerful means that poets have used to figure the machine as in the service of human self-realization. This self-realization is by no means a given, though, as poets struggle with their relation to capital in poems about slavery, warrantee-deeds, cars, shopping, and living on the clock, and in poetics statements about factories, labor, and typewriters. Experimental American poets have consistently articulated human meaning and capacities as emerging in dynamic relation to historical developments. That human autonomy from capital remains a fiction is apparent in the anxiety and violence these poets grapple with in their struggle for a free verse.

## CHAPTER ONE

### WHITMAN'S ORGANIC HUM-ANITY

*New slaves fulfilled the poet's dream,  
Galvanic wire, strong-shouldered steam.*  
—Emerson, from “Wealth”

“What is essential to art is that which in it is not the case, that which is incommensurable with the empirical measure of all things.”  
—Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 335

When Walt Whitman came out with *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 not everyone was sure it was decent, or even that it was poetry. Whitman was, in effect, responding to Emerson's lament in “The Poet” that “we have yet had no genius in America, with tyrannous eye, which knew the value of our incomparable materials, and saw, in the barbarism and materialism of the times, another carnival of the same gods whose picture he so much admires in Homer” (*Essays* 465). In his *Leaves* Whitman provided both new materials and new (or no) meters to affirm how “America is a poem in our eyes” (*Ibid.*, 465). He sought to forge a democratic verse that was as organic as he imagined the American compact between states to be. In turning to what was quintessentially American, though,

he lauded its industry and commerce, its factories and agriculture, as well as playing on more pastoral themes. Whitman's commerce between the organic and the machine is at times explicit, but can also be read in more subtle formal choices, such as in his deployment of particular words like "hum," his famous catalogs, or the proliferation of ellipses or dots in the first edition of his book. The very rhetoric of organicism that Whitman used to authorize his radical departure from traditional verse forms allowed him to poeticize the developments of industrial capitalism, but in ways that sought to humanize, and thereby critique, mechanical forces that threatened individual self-possession and integrity.

Whitman's poetics and politics were born out of his confrontation with chattel slavery in the antebellum United States. Walt imagines that as poet of the soul he can level all distinctions, so as to promulgate what he calls the "divine average" (182).<sup>9</sup> In a watershed moment in *Leaves* he presents slaves on the auction block as cosmic progenitors of humanity, affirming their transhistorical worth. Whitman saw slaves on auction during his visit to New Orleans in 1848, and as Ed Folsom and Kenneth M. Price note, "he never forgot the experience of seeing humans on the selling block, and he kept a poster of a slave auction hanging in his room for many years as a reminder that such dehumanizing events occurred regularly in the United States" ("Walt Whitman" in *Archive*). Whitman imagines usurping slavery in America through universalizing a proprietary form of self-possession guaranteed by "warrantee deeds," which is homologous with the ascendance of wage labor. As I argue, Whitman's organicism is in part an attempt to suture the difference between artisanal forms of self-possession and

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<sup>9</sup> Unless otherwise attributed all Whitman quotations are from *Poetry and Prose*.

chattel slavery, but in doing so it tarries with the abstract equality of wage labor. His poems are available to everyone, and are themselves full of equivalences between people and things, proposing an organic community that is both premised on and seeks to contest the logic of the marketplace. Whitman, finally, has something in common then with his contemporary Karl Marx, who likewise proposed an immanent community at once transcending and made possible by capitalism.

My reading of Whitman goes against the grain of prevailing critical trends, which themselves seek to trouble the idea of Whitman as a progenitor of liberalism. Queer theorists, in particular, have provided some of the most compelling readings of Whitman in recent decades, and Michael Warner's essay (and then chapter) "Whitman Drunk" (1996) is exemplary in this regard. Here Warner harangues the "long tradition of Whitman criticism" for which "Whitman has been regarded as a prophet of 'the liberal self,' a self that regards itself as universal, that does not 'recognize difference'" (40). It strikes me, though, that "the liberal self" Warner seeks to critique is in an important sense only nominally the same as the self-authorizing subject I will argue that Whitman universalizes. Warner's liberal self is an empirical one, substantiated through distinct individuals bearing "content, action, choice," and of course heterosexuality (40). The self-authorizing subject I am concerned with isn't falsifiable, but is rather ideal, abstract, and finds its dialectical opposite in the kind of "spectral" selves both Warner and Michael Moon (61) are so apt at refracting through Whitman's corpus. Ed Folsom is also attuned to this difference from another vantage point, when he shows how "a spectral black presence both haunts and energizes Walt Whitman's work" (in *Wilson* 3). In a sense Whitman is a failed liberal, who shows up in tantalizing fashion the cleavages within a

form of selfhood purported to be universal. Simply discounting Whitman's universality, though, causes us to miss some of his most strange, wonderful, as well as troubling invocations to both the cosmos and particular readers and things. Walt's spectral selves, I want to suggest, are the remains of a universality he leaves it to his readers to inhabit and vocalize.

### **"I celebrate myself"**

Whitman signals the organicism of his book through its very title, the ornate foliage on its cover (see Figure 1)—where his words are themselves organic growth—, and by providing a frontispiece of himself as everyman rather than offering his name.

Unmistakably signaling foliation, "grass" is also a printer's term for the novice's experiments, which Whitman would have been familiar with from his days as a journeyman printer in Brooklyn. Here organic growth is improvisatory and the product of free labor, rather than pre-determined and hierarchical. This spontaneity, though, is presented in his untitled Preface to his poems through market metaphors:

The poetic quality is not marshalled in rhyme or uniformity or abstract addresses to things nor in melancholy complaints or good precepts, but is the life of these and much else and is in the soul. The profit of rhyme is that it drops seeds of a sweeter and more luxuriant rhyme, and of uniformity that it conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight. The rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems show the free growth of metrical laws and bud from them as unerringly and loosely as lilacs or roses on a bush, and take shapes as compact as the shapes of chestnuts and oranges and melons and pears, and shed the perfume impalpable to form. (11)

Whitman stakes claim to an organically generative form in this passage, which transcends the melancholy complaints of a weary Romanticism. The organic growth he sees as indicative of American free verse is rendered, though, with metaphors that invoke

capitalist production and trade, as he seeks “the free growth of metrical laws.” For him “the rhyme and uniformity of perfect poems” emerges as organically as fruit does—first “loosely,” then “compact”—and rather than being marshaled it reaps an immediate “profit.” “The perfume impalpable to form” is perhaps distinct here from that which Walt denies himself in “houses and rooms” and on “shelves” in line six of “I celebrate myself” (which we now know as “Song of Myself”) (27). This excretion from “perfect poems” is essential rather than decorative, while this essence is nevertheless imbued with the energies of antebellum American capitalism.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On Whitman’s free trade politics and their influence on *Leaves of Grass* see Lawson, “Chapter 1: Sex, Class, and Commerce” 1-28.

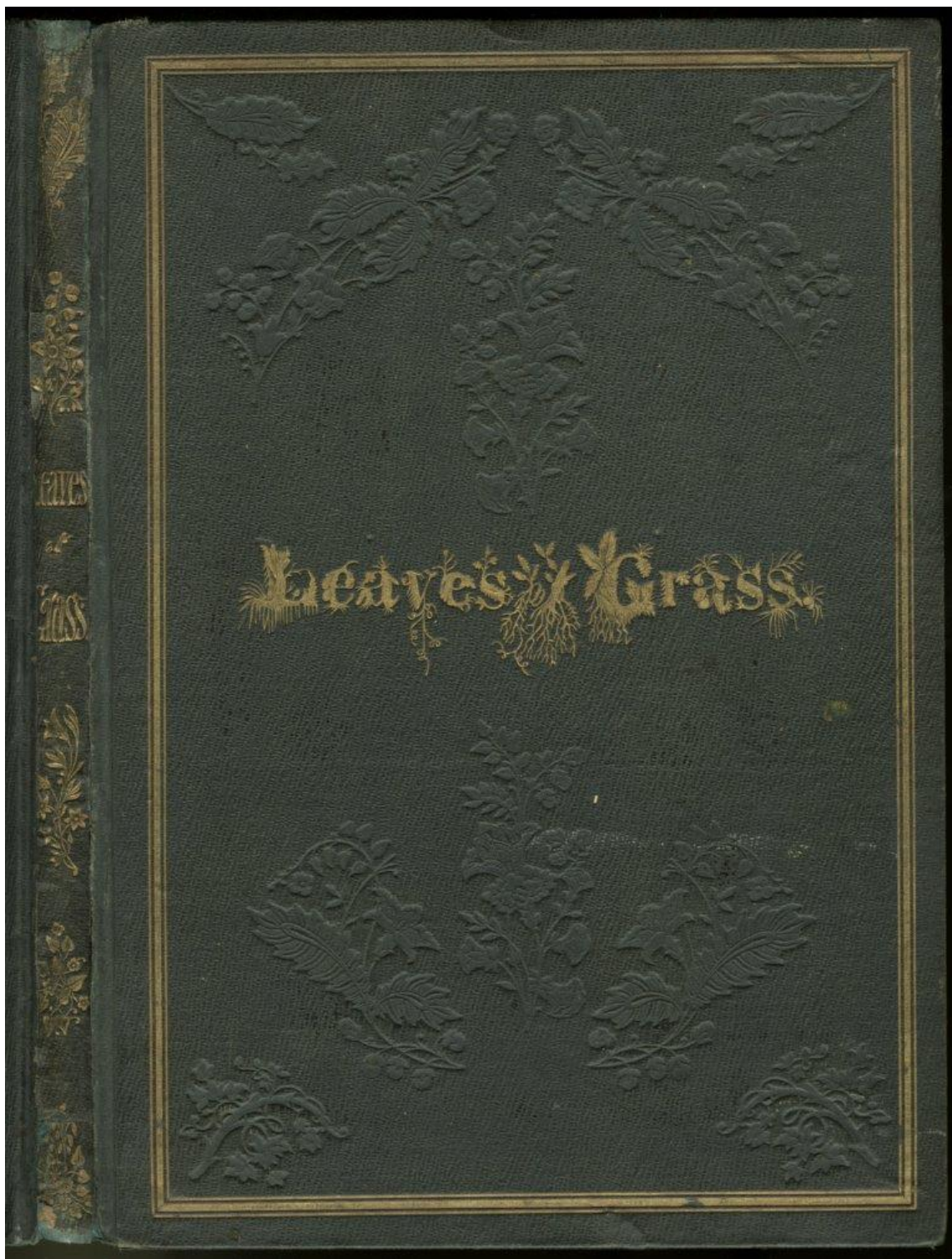


Figure 1. Cover of the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass*.  
(Whitman Archive)

Whitman attempts a distinction between the energies guiding his poetry and those of the marketplace, a kind of “presumed autonomy” that he just as soon abandons. He purports to match the excesses of the metropolis, which might be made up of so much domesticating perfume, with a more organic atmosphere out of himself, as proof of an inner wealth and self-made profit. A few pages later in the preface he writes:

The American bards shall be marked for generosity and affection and for encouraging competitors . . . They shall be kosmos . . . without monopoly or secrecy . . . glad to pass any thing to any one . . . hungry for equals night and day. They shall not be careful of riches and privilege . . . they shall be riches and privilege . . . they shall perceive who the most affluent man is. The most affluent man is he that confronts all the shows he sees by equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself. (15)

The poet’s work is affirmed as authentic here in that bards continually recognize their individual wealth in the shows of the metropolis, while outbidding or superseding them. Walt the cosmos, rather than retreating from the market, or being determined by it, seeks to match “the barbarism and materialism of the times” (as Emerson had it) with the powers of poetry. The affluent afflatus of the American bard is inherent, sprawling, and open, Walt suggests, and produces “stronger wealth” than anyone conventionally “careful of riches and privilege.”

Whitman relates to “riches and privilege” not only thematically; his claims for the freedom of poetry from social constraint imbue some of his more idiosyncratic formal choices as well. Unique to the 1855 *Leaves* is Whitman’s use of ellipses, or dots. There are about 1000 sequences of these dots throughout the collection, and the dots almost always appear as groups of four. These dots first appear in the poetry five lines into “I celebrate myself,” where Walt presents himself as the quintessential loafer:

I loafe and invite my soul,  
I lean and loafe at my ease . . . . observing a spear of summer grass.  
(27)

Whitman's class-allegiance to loaferism ("I had serious thought of getting up a regular ticket for President and Congress and Governor and so on, for the loafer community in general") is compelled by the depression of the late 30s and early 40s, as well as the panic of 1854, and the concomitant dearth of stable wages for young workers (Reynolds 330, qtd. on 65). Loafing in these opening lines provides for the observation of "summer grass," a primary metonym for the poems. That Walt's dots extend from the word "ease" is significant, and the poem changes when (as in Reynolds 326) they are left out. Dots extend these lines, I want to suggest, as the product of an active leisure, structurally imposed by economic crisis. They are a signal of active receptivity to experience beyond the constraints of the market economy, and provide for the conceit that the lines of the poem are themselves organic expressions of human activity (as grass is later figured) available to whomever is open to receiving them.

The lines that for me best exemplify the prosodic possibility held forth by Whitman's dots appear immediately before the famous passage that Michael Moon has aptly described as a "'cosmic' orgasm" (49), which begins "I mind how we lay in June."

The passage I am interested in here reads:

Loafe with me on the grass . . . . loose the stop from your throat,  
Not words, nor music or rhyme I want . . . . not custom or lecture, not even the  
best,  
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.  
(30)

Again, loafing here signals the occasion of human receptivity, indeed the very emergence of song free from social domination. The "lull" of these lines functions at once by

accretion and deferral—the sounds of “loafe” and “grass” join and echo in “loose,” as though the sound of grass has given way to what is loose, only to find finality in “your throat,” the repeated long vowel hitting a hard *t*. This is the same “stop” implied in the scene of cosmic orgasm that follows. The alliteration of “lull” and “like,” and the continual assonances as in “lull” and “hum,” resonate in the deliciously sonorous “valved voice,” which also repeats in “voice” the pattern of a long vowel arrested by a consonant heard in “throat,” only now, with the soft *c*, we can also hear the swishing reemergence of “grass” definitively articulated as human song. The organic emergence of the secular scripture Whitman enunciates here puts the human voice on display as though it were an organ in a church: “My head evolves on my neck, / Music rolls, but not from the organ . . . folks are around me, but they are no household of mine” (75). Whitman’s dots in the “valved voice” passage signal an autonomous, open space, receptivity to which will let the “grass” of the soul sing. Rather than words, music, rhyme, custom, or lecture, it is the lull of receptivity allowing accord between the cosmos and the voice that of itself hums.

Allen Grossman writes, “Whitman’s policy was to establish a new principle of access that would effect multiplication, or pluralization (the getting of many into one), without the loss entailed by exchange—the glory of the perfect messenger” (192). But this policy is far from guaranteed success, with the exchangeability of the marketplace inherent in Walt’s figuration of openness. As we have seen, the distinction between human and financial wealth is unstable for Walt. As Emerson wrote in “The American Scholar” (1837), “it came to him, business; it went from him, poetry” (*Essays* 56). While Whitman’s dots signal receptivity beyond the constraints of the market, they also propound the abstract and formal equality of the life of commodities. As Betsy Erkkila

has noted, “Whitman’s use of ellipses points for pause and emphasis serves both to particularize and to equalize objects and prepositional phrases on a horizontal plane” (90). The use of dots, then, figures an equality between objects and activities that mirrors the reducibility of all things to a price that can be exchanged on the market. We shall return to considering this homology shortly. But let us first linger over the loafing passage, and another instability between human and financial wealth, made apparent in the very word “hum.”

In a fascinating short article entitled “The Hum of Literature: Ostentation in Language,” Paul H. Fry makes the case that “it is solely in the suspended time of reverie that poets and the rest of us too are aroused from blankness by the humming of the world, with no way or wish to decide whether it is in fact the world or our own circulatory system that hums” (179). Fry attends here to how humming transcends any ready distinction between world and self. He continues, “this moment cannot occur except as a suspension of labor, of historical agency” (179). For Fry the human whose silent leisure hums is in essence transhistorical, rather than constituted in relation to a historically specific world: “we refer to the freedom from history that is human, not something else, solely because, when it is not lost, it is knowingly shared with the unknowing bees” (182). But does Whitman have bees in mind? And is Whitman’s humming, and our conception of universal humanity, in truth transhistorical? Fry’s focus on Emily Dickinson’s “I heard a fly buzz – when I die” misses the peculiar referent, at least in *Leaves*, of the sound of industry.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Whitman provides us with the workers-as-warrior-bees metaphor in *Drum-Taps* (1865): ‘A Shock electric, the night sustain’d it, / Till with ominous hum our hive at daybreak pour’d out its myriads. // From the houses then and the workshops, and through all the doorways,

In his only other use of the word “hum” in 1855 Whitman describes, in “I celebrate myself,” how “The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel” (39). Here it is the sound of the spinning jenny that determines the motion of “the spinning-girl,” producing a hum which was often presented as foreboding by Whitman’s contemporaries. As we saw in the Introduction, the “hum” Melville inscribed in 1855 was “a low, overruling hum,” which inverted the natural order of things (the *lowly* machine being made to *rule*) so that “machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here stood menially served by human beings.” The Oxford English Dictionary has the first usage of the word in reference to machinery as “the hum of the mill,” from Emerson’s *English Traits* of 1856. In invoking “the hum of your valved voice” Walt is harnessing a machine sound toward human, poetic ends. As he put it in one of his columns on “Manly Health and Training,” published under the penname Mose Velsor in 1858: “the throat, with its curious and exquisite machinery” (241). As Fry would have it, Walt’s hum is indeed meant to signal a transhistorical humanity, emergent with the suspension of labor. But his universal human song is at once premised upon the sound of an emergent industrial order. It is as though Walt had harnessed and humanized these sounds in order to figure a human song available to all the poem’s auditors.

Whitman later came to emphasize the American idiom as central to American identity. While the word “hum” is not unique to America, it nevertheless serves as an onomatopoetic metonym of American productive capacities as well as poetic utterances free from traditional strictures. The melding of throat and machine sounds is indicative of

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/ Leapt they tumultuous, and lo! Manhattan arming” (416). Whitman variously figures “hum” in the 60s as wind through the trees—which is once used as a simile for the “shrieking” of grape shells as they pass—and thunder.

the mutual constitution of the machine and the organic that Whitman propounds. For the Emerson of *Nature*, by contrast, “words are signs of natural facts” which, because “nature is the symbol of spirit,” makes the content of those words more or less immutable (*Essays* 20). Emerson’s conception of a picture language holds to essential signifiers: “As we go back in history, language becomes more picturesque, until its infancy, when it is all poetry. The same symbols are found to make the original elements of all languages” (*Essays* 22). Offering an etymology of choice words, Emerson writes in *Nature* that “*right* means *straight*, *wrong* means *twisted*. *Spirit* primarily means *wind*; *transgression*, the crossing of a *line*; *supercilious*, the *raising of the eyebrow*” (*Essays* 20). In *November Boughs* (1888) Whitman more or less plagiarizes Emerson: “the term *right* means literally only straight. *Wrong* primarily meant twisted, distorted. *Integrity* meant oneness. *Spirit* meant breath, or flame. A *supercilious* person was one who raised his eyebrows” (1190). Yet in their framing of this etymology Whitman’s emphasis is distinct from Emerson’s. While in *Nature* “every word which is used to express a moral or intellectual fact, if traced to its root, is found to be borrowed from some material appearance” (*Essays* 20), in *November Boughs*, by contrast, “it is certain that many of the oldest and solidest words we use, were originally generated from the daring and license of slang” (1190). For Whitman words arise organically from popular use, from the street, while Emerson hopes for a language that will hold to essential truths.

For Whitman the organic signals a democratic common, while Emerson transmutes what for his generation were eternal moral truths onto organic nature. As Mary Kupiec Cayton has shown, Emerson’s natural organicism was an outgrowth of the “conservative social organicism of Federalism” that saw itself as protecting natural law in

a natural hierarchy (12). Whitman, on the other hand, in his writing on words wholeheartedly embraces the mutable world of the urban marketplace and American industry. In contrast to Emerson's *Nature*, the quintessential figure of which is solitary Man before a landscape ("you cannot freely admire a noble landscape, if laborers are digging in the field hard by" (*Essays* 42)), Whitman's emblem of organicism is the human body: "Language is more like some vast living body, or perennial body of bodies" (1194). In Whitman's notes that Horace Traubel published as *An American Primer* in 1904, he is compelled to find in words "the mass shades of a joint nature" (2):

Geography, shipping, steam, the mint, the electric telegraph, railroads, and so forth, have many strong and beautiful words. Mines — iron works — the sugar plantations of Louisiana — the cotton crop and the rice crop — Illinois wheat — Ohio corn and pork — Maine lumber — all these sprout in hundreds and hundreds of words, all tangible and clean-lived, all having texture and beauty. To all thoughts of your or any one's mind — to all yearnings, passions, love, hate, ennui, madness, desperation of men for women, and of women for men, — to all charging and surcharging — that head which poises itself on your neck and is electric in the body beneath your head, or runs with the blood through your veins — or in those curious incredible miracles you call eyesight and hearing — to all these, and the like of these, have been made words. — Such are the words that are never new and never old. (3-4)

Whitman's language for describing the human body here is clearly taken from "The bodies of men and women engirth me" (later "I Sing the Body Electric") and elaborates the constitutive contradiction of his organicism: American words, actually growing from American industry, are also meant to be ahistorical—"never new and never old." As he writes in a subsequent passage: "*factories, mills, and all the processes of hundreds of different manufacturers grow thousands of words*" (original italics) (23). For Whitman factories and mills "grow" and "sprout" words, evincing the mutual constitution of the organic and the machine. Whitman's organic nature is meant not only to encompass the

growth of industry and technology, but emerges from their mutual development—the body *becomes* electric, or rather “that head” that is in the body does.<sup>12</sup>

Whitman says as much in his August 1856 letter to Emerson:

Poets here, literats here, are to rest on organic different bases from other countries; not a class set apart, circling only in the circle of themselves, modest and pretty, desperately scratching for rhymes, pallid with white paper, shut off[...] American poets and literats recognize nothing behind them superior to what is present with them—recognize with joy the sturdy living forms of the men and women of These States, the divinity of sex, the perfect eligibility of the female with the male, all The States, liberty and equality, real articles, the different trades, mechanics, [...] California, money, electric-telegraphs, free-trade, iron and the iron mines—recognize without demur those splendid resistless black poems, the steam-ships of the sea-board states, and those other resistless splendid poems, the locomotives, followed through the interior states by trains of rail-road cars. (1357-1358)

One might wonder here whether “organic different bases” implies that “other countries” have their own distinct forms of organicism, or whether for Whitman the organic is unique to American democracy. Whitman imagines Emerson, whom he refers to as “dear Friend and Master,” as wholly receptive to this form of organicism (1350). Both Emerson and Thoreau allow that the railway, for example, can not only be integrated into the ambit of Nature, but also brings with it unique powers. But Whitman is distinctive in seeing America’s productive capacities as a primary basis for what he refers to as the “organic compacts of These States” (1354), which aren’t merely to be tolerated by “a centered mind” (as Emerson put it), but are rather what make possible America’s supersession of Europe. He boasts in his letter that “of the twenty-four modern mammoth two-double, three-double, and four-double cylinder presses now in the world, printing by steam,

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the significance of this *electric* body see “Chapter Four: Mad Filaments: Walt Whitman’s Aesthetic Body Telegraphic” in Paul Gilmore, *Aesthetic Materialism: Electricity and American Romanticism* (2009), 143-176.

twenty-one of them are in These States” (1353). Quite literally, then, it is American productive capacities that make possible Whitman’s poetry.

In contrast to Whitman, there is no industrial “hum” in Emerson’s organic nature: “What was is it that nature would say? Was there no repose in the valley behind the mill, and which Homer and Shakespeare could not re-form for me in words?” (*Essays* 15) Emerson’s imagined repose is essential and ahistorical. But it is instructive that nature is figured here as “behind the mill,” providing that “the hum of the mill” is never far off. What Whitman, in effect, shows us, is the historical particularity of our poetic loafing, or repose, which Emerson articulated as innate and unvarying. Ben Lerner writes in *10:04: A Novel*, “Whitman is always ‘loafing,’ always taking his ease, as if leisure were a condition of poetic receptivity” (168). As I have shown, this loafing is done in the face of the machine. The point here is that Walt’s marriage between the machine and the organic remains an uneasy one because, following Fry, the hum of your valved voice is realized in the cessation of labor, not its activation by machinery. The organic articulations of *Leaves of Grass*, whether as loose dots or cosmic music, inhabit the sounds and social relations spread by industry. Whitman’s book thereby seeks to transform its own conditions, creating a work of presumed autonomy that inscribes its struggle with the machinery of capital in its very articulation of poetic song as free, luxuriating verse.

### **“Come closer to me”**

While Walt’s imperative to his reader to “loose the stop from your throat” imagines direct commerce between him and us—indeed for us to ourselves make his song—this organic equality is also problematically related to another kind of *abstract* equality, that between

commodities for sale on the market, not least of which is labor power. In “I celebrate myself” it is not the spinning-girl herself that sets the rhythm of her labor but rather “the hum of the big wheel.” While the hum of loafing signals freedom from social domination, “the hum of the big wheel” is more ambiguous. Even in the amalgamation “spinning-girl” the girl is defined by what she produces, rather, we might suppose, than expressing herself through such activity. The spinning-girl, though, does not appear alone, as she is inscribed within a catalog of activities where all are created equal by virtue of what Whitman calls “soul.” Whitman’s articulation of the equality of souls is inseparable, this section will show, from the abstract equality between things that Marx elucidated as at the heart of the capitalist value-form. For Whitman such equality, inscribed in “warrantee deeds,” is also the primary means of protecting people from being literally enslaved *as things*. In his struggle with slavery Whitman advances an entrepreneurial form of self-possession, which he nevertheless attempts to contrast to the contingencies of the marketplace.

In “Come closer to me,” which we now know as “A Song for Occupations,” Whitman mocks the determination of human activity by things, proclaiming instead:

We consider the bibles and religions divine . . . . I do not say they are not  
divine,  
I say they have all grown out of you and may grow out of you still,  
It is not they who give the life . . . . it is you who give the life;  
Leaves are not more shed from the trees or trees from the earth than they are  
shed out of you.

(93)

Here the individual is the progenitor of organic growth, and is themselves the origin of all life and religion. Walt continues: “All music is what awakens from you when you are

reminded by the instruments” (94), providing that beauty requires recognition and enactment by its auditors, just as the loafing hum does. The poem ends:

When the psalm sings instead of the singer,  
When the script preaches instead of the preacher,  
When the pulpit descends and goes instead of the carver that carved the  
supporting desk,  
When the sacred vessels or the bits of the eucharist, or the lath and plast,  
procreate as effectually as the young silversmiths or bakers, or the  
masons in their overalls,  
When a university course convinces like a slumbering woman and child  
convince,  
When the minted gold in the vault smiles like the nightwatchman’s daughter,  
When warrantee deeds loafe in chairs opposite and are my friendly  
companions,  
I intend to reach them my hand and make as much of them as I do of men and  
women.  
(98-99)

The repeated subjunctive mood of these lines before the final one indicates Walt’s somewhat ironic skepticism toward the organic life of things; he seems to be saying “as if!” these things could perform such activities. And yet there is reverie here as well in the power of objects, a power endowed with human capacities, where gold “smiles” and psalms “sing,” not unlike the “resistless” poems of steam-ships and locomotives.

It has often been noted how closely Whitman’s imagery at the end of “Come closer to me” resembles that in Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism in Chapter

One of *Capital*:

It is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find analogy we must take flight into the misty realm of religion. There the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own, which enter into relations both with each other and with the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men’s hands. I call this the fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labor as

soon as they are produced as commodities, and it is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (165)<sup>13</sup>

Whitman likewise sees such fetishism in religious terms, where divinity would be attached to the external objects of communion, rather than the life of individuals themselves. In his poem the objects that are given the privileged status of loafing are “warrantee deeds.” One might read various valances in these fellow loafers, not least being an association with Whitman’s real-estate activity between 1848 and 1855, when he managed the building and selling of houses in Brooklyn, which would have doubtless required warrantee deeds.<sup>14</sup> It is also the case that when Andrew Rome printed *Leaves of Grass* in 1855 his firm specialized in legal forms, which is the most likely reason for the large page size of the original *Leaves* (Folsom, *Making* 8-9). It is as though at the end of “Come closer to me” Walt imagines reaching out his hand to his own poems sitting across from him, which are perhaps also representatives of the real estate profits allowing for his active leisure. Indeed, in 1856 a new line appears between those on the carver and the eucharist: “When I can touch the body of books, by night or by day, and when they touch my body back again” (*Whitman Archive*). Walt’s own poetic activity is objectified

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<sup>13</sup> I would like to highlight here Marx’s emphasis on the process of production as the locus of this fetishism, where human activity, instead of being self-determining, is animated by the imperative of value to expand itself through the exploitation of labor. This emphasis is wholly distinct from the way Marx’s term “commodity fetishism” is often taken up in English and Cultural Studies and conceived as a critique of consumerism, especially of brand-name products. The assumption implicit in the latter usage is that fetishism is a problem of consciousness whereby individuals falsely invest commodities with value(s) they don’t actually have. Marx, by contrast, is attempting to describe an ontological inversion of species-being that inheres in the very production of commodities for sale as such. This inversion can be understood as the animation of human bodies in the process of production by the *real* abstraction of value, for ends (the wealth of capitalists) wholly alien to laborers’ own being.

<sup>14</sup> See Riley for a stunning analysis of the relation between Whitman’s real-estate activity and his poetic persona.

in this passage and stands apart, on equal terms with him. He is by no means simply offering us a send-up of commodity fetishism in these lines, then, but is also elevating the objects of his own poetic making. There is, in short, a paradox where Whitman's critique of fetishism includes figuring his own books as the means to physical immediacy with his readers.

In his notebooks Whitman also marshals "warrantee deeds" toward contradictory ends. Here he explicitly links proprietary self-possession and warrantee deeds as guarantors against slavery (a theme we shall return to), but he also decries warrantee deeds as part of "the madness of owning things":

The ~~world~~ ignorant man is demented with the madness of owning things—of having ~~like~~ by warranty deeds and ~~lawful possession, and with perfect~~ court records, the right to mortgage, sell, ~~dispose with~~ give away or raise money on certain possessions.—But the wisest soul knows that ~~nothing in the vast universe~~ no object can really be owned by one man or woman any more than another. (NUPM 59)

It is striking how the very means of securing the real estate profits that provided Whitman and his family with habitation are here denounced as a "demented" false pretense. As M. Wynn Thomas has argued, because artisans were either becoming proletarians or entrepreneurs in this period, "anyone who tried to voice the artisan experience was almost bound to end up speaking with a forked tongue" (28). Warrantee deeds may never be able to actually loafe as Walt's "friendly companions," but his assessment of them is far from wholly negative. He also conceives such deeds as ensuring the "primal right" of self-possession that protects against slavery. Moreover, he does so while imagining a cosmic, inter-stellar equality, rather than a merely earthly one. His house-building language also emerges in his notebooks:

The rights of property! Why what build ~~foundation~~ substance is there ~~for the~~ in any other right of property than that which is built on the primal right – the first-born. deepest broadest right – the right of every human being to his personal self.

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Every man who claims or takes the power to own another man as his property, stabs me in ~~that~~ the heart of my own rights [...]

If every man and woman ~~upon this which~~ riding in this huge huge round car that ~~wheels~~ whirls us through the universe, be not ~~interested in~~ touched to the vitals, by the ~~discussion~~ question whether another of the passengers, ~~can can safely~~ [?] shall be made a slave, tell me O learned lawyer or professor – tell me what are they interested in? What does touch them? – What comes home to a man, if the principle the right to himself does not? – Is there in the wide world any ~~principle~~ thing, that so evenly and so universally bears upon every individual of our race, in all ages in/tongues and colors and climates, and conditions. – Is there any thing that stands us in hand—all of us without exception, ~~are so~~ to keep the rats and ~~wolves~~ moths so carefully away from, as this – the warrantee deed, the original charter of the very feet ~~we stand on?~~ that bear us up (*Daybooks* 761)<sup>15</sup>

Made explicit here is how warrantee deeds become for Whitman guarantors of individual self-possession, the universal principal seeking to usurp slavery. It is the same guarantee that his *Leaves* are the instantiation of, which in their cosmic song exude the foundations of a universal order based on the right of a luxuriating and organic self-possession. His *Leaves*, though, cannot substitute for this possession: “It is not to be put in a book . . . it is not in this book” (91). The self-possession that would usurp slavery must be recognized and enacted by Whitman’s readers to become reality. Just so the music played on instruments awakens that in its hearers, while remaining “nearer and farther than” (94) those instruments, both cosmic and inimitably intimate.

While Whitman seeks a form of immutable self-possession beyond the vagaries of the marketplace, such possession is nevertheless figured as related to the rights of property. The universal and innate quality of persons proposed by Whitman prefigures,

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<sup>15</sup> I am indebted to Ed Folsom for directing me to this passage.

furthermore, the universalization of wage labor and its usurpation of chattel slavery. As Jason Stacy writes,

In attacking the institution of slavery for the pretense of owning another's labor, Whitman embraced the contemporary argument that workers had a right to their ability to work freely. For Whitman, this was enough to establish their inherent worth, value, and equality. (122)

Such “worth” though, if it depends on the fluctuations of capitalist value, is anything but inherent. This dialectic between capitalist price and inherent worth is active throughout Whitman's corpus, and is indeed constitutive of Enlightenment thought.<sup>16</sup> Adorno writes in “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” “the shadow-side of the elevation of the liberated subject is its degradation to something exchangeable, to something that exists merely for something else” (42). The republican conception of universal human equality depends in short on its contrast to the marketability of men, which in a dialectical about-face it nevertheless enshrines as property-rights, one form of which—as we are about to see—is possessing whiteness.<sup>17</sup>

It is crucial, though, that the “hum” of poetry is available to anyone's “valved voice,” rather than being inscribed in a hierarchical order. Other formal choices, namely Whitman's catalogs, which his contemporaries were quick to remark upon, also put in play the relation between political equality and exchangeability on the market. While “the spinning-girl” may instantiate a lack of self-possession, Whitman nevertheless figures her as equal to her contemporaries through her inclusion in a catalog:

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<sup>16</sup> In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) Immanuel Kant offers a conception of innate worth similar to Walt's, and indeed Marx's, when he writes, “In the kingdom of ends everything has either a *price* or a *dignity*. What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity” (42).

<sup>17</sup> On the historical (un)coupling of slavery with enlightenment values see Buck-Morss.

The pure contralto sings in the organloft,  
 The carpenter dresses his plank . . . the tongue of his foreplane whistles its wild  
     ascending lisp,  
 The married and unmarried children ride home to their thanksgiving dinner,  
 The pilot seizes the king-pin, he heaves down with a strong arm,  
 The mate stands braced in the whaleboat, lance and harpoon are ready,  
 The duck-shooter walks by silent and cautious stretches,  
 The deacons are ordained with crossed hands at the altar,  
 The spinning-girl retreats and advances to the hum of the big wheel,  
 (39)

Sound as well as silence are some of the animating qualities of the activities in this list, so much so that a foreplane has a “tongue” and a “lisp.” With the “pure contralto” opening this list, the sounds that follow are aspects of Walt’s song, so that again the “hum of the big wheel” can be read as an expression of lyric powers, rather than thwarting them. As with Whitman’s dots, the implied equality of the catalog, as well as the organic communion of sounds, cannot be disassociated from the abstract equality of the marketplace, though. As an anonymous reviewer of the 1881 *Leaves of Grass* put it: “The chief question raised by this publication is whether anybody—even a poet—ought to take off his trousers in the market place” (*Whitman Archive* ID: anc.02002).<sup>18</sup>

The universal soul Whitman seeks to exemplify through his catalogs of America is inextricably bound with the commodification of human labor power. As Allen Grossman provocatively puts it, “what is created, paradoxically, is a new slave culture. The Whitmanian voice, like the slave, is uncanny—a servant of persons, but not itself personal—a case of delegated social death” (195). This soulless equality is inseparable

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<sup>18</sup> An anonymous review in *The Literary Examiner* makes the point even more forcefully, going so far as to contrast an actual auctioneer’s inventory with Whitman’s poetry, and wondering if the former isn’t better (1856 *Whitman Archive* ID: anc.00023). To boot, Whitman was supposedly “maddened” (*Ibid.*) into writing this way through reading Emerson and Carlyle, a supreme historical irony considering Emerson’s compatible criticism of Whitman’s catalogs as sounding like “an auctioneer’s inventory of a warehouse,” pronounced as it was in a letter to Carlyle (Carlyle 251).

from the development of machinery and the usurpation of artisanal forms of labor. As Marx put it in 1858, “The hand tool makes the worker independent – posits him as proprietor. Machinery – as fixed capital – posits him as dependent, posits him as appropriated” (*Grundrisse* 702). But in his or her appropriation as “wage-worker” the proletarian individual has something fundamental in common with all other proletarians. This common humanity, figured in Whitman’s catalogs, can only be affirmed once it has been posited negatively through the sociality of capital. The catalog subsumes particular individuals, and in this sense is “social death,” but it is a death premised on universal, abstract equality, and so considering it a “new slave culture” is metaphorical in relation to actual chattel slavery.

Strikingly, in *Leaves*, the soul that is inherent to all is also that which is absolutely unique. The second section of “Come closer to me” begins, “Souls of men and women!” and after sixteen lines continues:

I bring what you much need, yet always have,  
I bring not money or amours or dress or eating . . . but I bring as good;  
And send no agent or medium . . . and offer no representative of value—but  
offer the value itself.  
(91)

That he brings us “as good” is a striking understatement, with the vowel-sound of “good” echoing the “or”s that tie contingent values together. Here, in short, is what’s essentially binding. After five lines he continues:

You may read in many languages and read nothing about it;  
You may read the President's message and read nothing about it there,  
Nothing in the reports from the state department or treasury department . . .  
or in the daily papers, or the weekly papers,  
Or in the census returns or assessors' returns or prices current or any  
accounts of stock.

The sun and stars that float in the open air . . . the appleshaped earth and we

upon it . . . surely the drift of them is something grand;  
I do not know what it is except that it is grand, and that it is happiness,  
And that the enclosing purport of us here is not a speculation, or bon-mot or  
reconnaissance,

And that it is not something which by luck may turn out well for us, and  
without luck must be a failure for us,  
And not something which may yet be retracted in a certain contingency.  
(92)

As he writes toward the end of the poem: “Happiness is not in another place, but this place . . . not for another hour, but this hour” (98). Walt’s happiness of soul is meant to transcend “assessors’ returns or prices current or any accounts of stock,” yet the distinction between an immutable soul and the contingencies of the marketplace is an unstable one. Inherent value—“the value itself”—is meant to stand in contrast to the vicissitudes of prices and stocks, and yet this promulgation of essential human value wholly depends for Whitman on its contrast to a chaotic marketplace.

Walt’s equality of souls mirrors, in short, that inscribed in the capitalist value-form. While for Marx capitalist value is a “real abstraction”—that is, a concretely intangible content that nevertheless determines social life—for Whitman happiness is an ineffable grandness that can be found everywhere and nowhere. Whitman’s soul is immutable and decidedly not contingent, but this immutability only gains its content negatively—against the fluctuations of politics, language, and “census returns or assessors’ returns or prices current or any accounts of stock.” Soul becomes, in Whitman’s verse, the negative imprint of capital’s abstract universality—the signal, that is, of a universal humanity free from social domination and contingency, which is more immanent than actual. As Marx put it in his notebooks, the universality of exchange value “produces not only the alienation of the individual from himself and others, but also the

universality and the comprehensiveness of his relations and capacities” (*Grundrisse* 162). The sound of a common humanity freed from exploitation can be heard in the loafer’s “hum,” which must be actuated by Walt’s readers. While Whitman’s assessment of the virtue of capitalist value remains ambivalent, both he and Marx have a normative conception of human worth at odds with the demands of capital.

**“I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters”**

Marx famously opens his analysis in *Capital* (1867) by narrating the constitutive contradiction between exchange-value and the concrete value or use of particular objects. As Marx’s exposition moves from considering commodities to the labor process itself, he shows how wage labor demands a formal and abstract equality between diverse kinds of labor:

Equality in the full sense between different kinds of labor can be arrived at only if we abstract from their real inequality, if we reduce them to the characteristic they have in common, that of being the expenditure of human labor power, of human labor in the abstract. (166)

This reduction of qualitatively diverse labors to a common quantity is not a mere act of mind, but is rather predicated by the exchange of diverse objects in terms of a more or less universal equivalent, namely money.<sup>19</sup> As Marx suggests, our historical experience of a universal humanity founded on abstract equality depends for its content on the universal exchangeability of the products of people’s diverse labors, and the rendering of

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<sup>19</sup> My emphasis on abstract labor as the content of capitalist value is inherited from Christopher J. Arthur.

those labors as quantitatively (and thereby, ultimately, qualitatively)<sup>20</sup> commensurate through the wage:

Aristotle himself was unable to extract this fact, that, in the form of commodity-values, all labor is expressed as equal human labor and therefore all labor of equal quality, by inspection from the form of value, because Greek society was founded on the labor of slaves, hence had as its natural basis the inequality of men and their labor powers. The secret of the expression of value, namely the equality and the equivalence of all kinds of labor because and in so far as they are human labor in general, could not be deciphered until the concept of human equality had already acquired the permanence of a fixed popular opinion. This however becomes possible only in a society where the commodity-form is the universal form of the product of labor, hence the dominant social relation is the relation between men as possessors of commodities. (151-2)

Couldn't one such commodity be "warrantee deeds," which for Whitman are guarantors of freedom from slavery? For many historians of slavery, such as Walter Johnson, this passage will raise at least as many questions as it does answers, as Marx appears to be eliding just how much the values of commodities during his own lifetime *were based* on the labor of American slaves.<sup>21</sup> Nevertheless, the consonance between abstract political equality—"fixed popular opinion"—and the equivalence of the value-form is no accident. Marx, justifiably or not, universalizes a particular form of white labor, just as Whitman comes to figure a particular form of entrepreneurial self-possession as the basis for universal equality.

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<sup>20</sup> Marx grasps this transformation of quantity into quality in terms of the labor process through his analysis of formal and real subsumption. See *Capital* 1119-38.

<sup>21</sup> See Johnson, "The Pedestal and the Veil: Rethinking the Capitalism/Slavery Question." Elsewhere, though, Marx is canny about precisely this historical imbrication: "Direct slavery is the pivot of bourgeois industry as well as machinery, credit, &c. Without slavery you have no cotton, without cotton you cannot have modern industry. It is slavery which has given their value to the colonies, it is the colonies which have created the commerce of the world, it is the commerce of the world which is the essential condition of the great industry" (*Poverty* 121).

As Sean Wilentz has pointed out in his study of the period—which bears the title of a Whitman poem—the terms journeyman and slave will lose their significance with the eclipse of both by wage labor: “The United States changed, between the late eighteenth century and 1870, from a nation of independent producers, slaves, and slaveholders to one in which most gainfully employed persons worked for wages” (18). Whitman’s organicism is in no small part an attempt to suture not only the rampant sectionalism of his day, but also the inequalities of class and the brutality of slavery. Whitman’s draft of “I celebrate myself” reads:

I am the poet of the body  
And I am the poet of the soul  
I go with the slaves of the earth equally with the masters  
And I will stand between the masters and the slaves,  
Entering into both so that both shall understand me alike.  
(*Collected* 67)

Walt is figured here as Christ the mediator, imbuing all with universal love. This doesn’t prevent Walt, though, from styling himself as “boss” in “I wander all night in my vision” (later “The Sleepers”):

Well do they do their jobs, those journeymen divine,  
Only from me can they hide nothing and would not if they could;  
I reckon I am their boss, and they make me a pet besides,  
And surround me, and lead me and run ahead when I walk,  
And lift their cunning covers and signify me with stretched arms, and resume the  
way.  
(108)

As David R. Roediger has shown, usage of the Dutch-derived “boss” rose to dominance among American workers in the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a replacement for “master.” Just as white wage laborers began to rhetorically compare their condition to that of slaves with terms like “white slavery,” the semantic shift to “boss” strove to solidify and accentuate their ontological difference from blacks (Roediger 50-54). Here

we have, then, a form of white supremacy, with its non-pecuniary “wages,” which took for granted the degraded condition of slaves in order to articulate a critique of wage labor. Indeed, Andrew C. Higgins has argued that the slave metaphor is abandoned in the published version of the poem because “he never intended to refer to chattel slavery in the first place,” but rather wage-slavery, with the implications of his rhetoric dawning on and troubling him after he wrote it (63). This assessment fits uncomfortably, though, with Whitman’s publication of his poem “Blood-Money” over a decade earlier, which I will soon discuss. It is true, though, that in employing the term “boss” Whitman effectively obviated any confusion between the labor of white workers and slaves.

While the term “boss” obscures the commonalities between historical forms of exploited labor, it fittingly signals a new regime of social labor from that of chattel slavery. Walt’s mediation between slaves and masters is inseparable, then, from his jocular styling of himself as boss, whether of journeymen or of slaves. As he ironically asks in “Come closer to me,” “Were I to you as boss employing and paying you, would that satisfy you?” (89) Wages, Walt jousts, are no guarantee of humanity. Walt’s boss style offers a camp critique, then, of the new terms of domination that his language at once evinces.

Anyone reading Whitman’s prose or the critical literature surrounding his work will quickly realize that he was no abolitionist. This can be a confounding discovery after reading “I celebrate myself,” where Whitman goes so far as to declare that “I am the hounded slave” (65). Politically, he is more concerned with the national union as an organic compact between states than he is with the emancipation of slaves. In *The Eighteenth Presidency!*, his unpublished pamphlet of 1856, he opposes the Fugitive Slave

Law of 1850 as redundant to Article IV of the U.S. Constitution, one of the primary documents, for Whitman, enunciating the compact between states. Under the heading “Must Runaway Slaves be Delivered Back?” he writes, “They must. Many things may have to go-by, but good faith shall never have the go-by” (1344). Granted, in *Leaves Walt* has no hesitation in coming to the aid of the runaway slave. Although his idiosyncratic stance amounts to opposition to the Fugitive Slave Law, Whitman’s priorities are nevertheless clear, as when he asks, “Shall no one among you dare open his mouth to say he is opposed to slavery, as a man should be, on account of the whites, and wants it abolished for their sake?” (1345) For Whitman, and for Free Soilers more generally, new territories for free white laborers promised to alleviate their degradation from artisans to mere wage-earners and unemployed in industrializing Eastern cities. It was presumed that slavery and free white labor could not coexist in the same geographical area, and Free Soilers didn’t for the most part want to labor in proximity to blacks at all, whether free or no. White supremacy and opposition to the expansion of slavery could thereby go hand in hand. The fact that Whitman never chose to publish *The Eighteenth Presidency!* should give us cause for pause, though. While this text clarifies his commitments in some respects, it is also a rhetorical performance for a particular audience, just as *Leaves of Grass* was.

Many abolitionists, for their part, were incensed by the equation in the labor movement of wage labor with slavery, as expressed by the still current term “wage-slave.”<sup>22</sup> For William Lloyd Garrison the two had nothing in common: slavery was a

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<sup>22</sup>Roediger has pointed out that “white slavery” and “slavery of wages” were in fact much more common terms in antebellum America than “wage slave” (72), a term which nevertheless “rose like a phoenix from the ashes of the Civil War” (qtd. in Foner 76). For a powerful critique

social evil, whereas inequality is in the nature of things. As early as 1831 Garrison virulently opposed “this pernicious doctrine . . . where the poor and vulgar are taught to consider the opulent as their natural enemies” (qtd. in Foner 63). Other abolitionists, though, had no trouble critiquing the factory system, as Thoreau did in his first chapter (“Economy”) of *Walden* (1854):

I cannot believe that our factory system is the best mode by which men may get clothing. The condition of the operatives is becoming every day more like that of the English; and it cannot be wondered at, since, as far as I have heard or observed, the principle object is, not that mankind may be well and honestly clad, but unquestionably, that the corporations may be enriched. (21)

Apologists for slavery came to share this critique of wage-labor as well, as in the following anecdote from 1831 provided by Eugene D. Genovese, which while unusual in the relation it portrays between master and slaves, is an example of a common argument among slaveholders:

W. W. Hazard of Georgia ran the risk of telling his slaves about their legal rights and of stressing the legal limits of his own power over them. He made it clear that he had an obligation to take care of them in their old age, whereas free white workers had no such protection, and argued deftly that their being whipped for insubordination represented a humane alternative to the practice of shooting soldiers and sailors for insubordination. (31)

Whipping itself came to replace capital punishment in the British navy in the 1830s, and in Germany young mine workers suffered the same form of discipline. (Genovese 63-4)

Thoreau’s striving for organic self-possession in *Walden* highlighted the degraded condition of industrial labor, and as Lance Newman puts it, “announces the familiar idea that one must start at home to change the world” (157). From his own home(s) in Brooklyn, Whitman offered a class analysis of the precarious condition of white laborers

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of wage labor as slavery by a fledgling Transcendentalist see Brownson’s “The Laboring Classes” (1840).

in an emerging capitalist economy. But on the question of the slave's equality he extols, as Garrison does, the abstract equality of the slave's humanity with whites, while being willing to retain at once natural and economic inequality.

Peter Coviello has argued that Whitman's contradictory figuring of self-possession—his “forked tongue” as Thomas put it—was prevented from splitting apart by a utopian (for some) white supremacy:

So conclusively has white masculinity been identified with the self-authorizing rigors of possession—with a civically compelling self-relation—that by the 1830s and 1840s the puzzling and arcane requirements of real estate property can simply pass away, to be replaced by a social semiotic [of whiteness] whose utter transparency is one mark of its broad “democratic” appeal. (54)

The impersonal equality of self-possession that emerges in Whitman is inseparable from the social semiotic of whiteness, a non-pecuniary property bearing material benefits that are hard to overestimate. That in *Leaves* the dignity of the human person is presumed to be universal reveals its fictive quality:

Neither a servant nor a master am I,  
I take no sooner a large price than a small price . . . . I will have my own  
                    whoever enjoys me,  
I will be even with you, and you shall be even with me.  
(89)

Walt imagines himself as the leveler of values, while he is also at pains to vaunt an immutable quality, which is beyond money and the contingencies of the marketplace. His roving first-person pronoun continually settles at opposite ends of the line to “me,” accentuating their evenness. In rejecting the roles of servant and master this “I” becomes boss. Walt's immutable quality of soul will allow each particular individual, from slave to artisan, to be translated into a universal value. But his is a universality that assumes the rigors of a white, entrepreneurial form of self-possession.

Marx argued that the impersonal universality of the value-form is based on “actually reducing the different kinds of labor embodied in the commodity to their common quality of being human labor in general” (*Capital* 142). In other words, rather than the artisan or the slave attached to their particular trade, the wage-laborer is forced to sell their labor power to whichever capitalist they can find, and are in this sense made indifferent to the content of their work. Marx remarked, “we can see this versatility, this perfect indifference towards the particular content of work and the free transition from one branch of industry to the next, most obviously in North America, where the development of wage-labor has been relatively untrammelled by the vestiges of the guild system” (*Capital* 1034).<sup>23</sup>

Yet within the indifference of wage-laborers toward their work is inscribed the possibility of not only their freedom from fixed social roles, but moreover their ability to move freely between different forms of activity without becoming any one of them—without the predicate dominating the subject, as the activity of spinning dominated the “spinning-girl.” This vision of an immanent universal humanity was common to Marx, Whitman, and Emerson. To emphasize these similarities I have delayed identifying the authors of the following three quotations:

Other writers (poets) look on a laborer as a laborer, a poet as a poet, a President as a President, a merchant as a merchant—and so on. He [the great poet] looks on the President as a man, on the poet and all the rest, as men.

Man is not a farmer, or a professor, or an engineer, but he is all. Man is priest, and scholar, and statesman, and producer, and soldier. In the *divided* or social state, these functions are parceled out to individuals, each of whom aims to do his stint of the joint work, while each other performs his. The fable implies, that the

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<sup>23</sup> Sean Wilentz corroborates Marx’s assessment here (5). See also Marx’s comments to the same effect in his “Introduction” to *Grundrisse*, 104-5.

individual, to possess himself, must sometimes return from his own labor to embrace all the other laborers. But unfortunately this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, has been so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered. The state of society is one in which the members have suffered amputation from the trunk, and strut about so many walking monsters,—a good finger, a neck, a stomach, an elbow, but never a man.

Man is thus metamorphosed into a thing, into many things.

For as soon as the distribution of labor comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is hunter, fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. This fixation of social activity, this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.

The first quotation is from Whitman (*Complete Prose* 38-39), the second Emerson (*Essays* 54), and the last from Marx and Engels (*German Ideology* 53). The affirmation of humanity beyond the determinations of fixed social roles was held in common by all of them. This conception of the state of man is immanent, premised as it is here on the universality of capital. Whitman signals this immanence in his contradictory assessment of the nature of warrantee deeds, which are ultimately meant to serve a self-authorizing humanity that will eclipse slavery, while they remain at once associated with the contingencies of the real-estate market, and an entrepreneurial form of self-possession historically inseparable from whiteness. Likewise, the soul of his catalogs is dependent upon a depersonalizing logic—a soul that Walt is nevertheless at pains to figure as absolutely unique and essential. This bid for human autonomy from capital, in its very attempt to separate itself from capital, shows itself to be inherently bound to it.

**“A slave at auction!”**

Whitman's cosmic organicism and his reckoning with the abstract equality of the marketplace come to a head in the fifth poem from the 1855 *Leaves*, which he referred to in his early notes for the book as "Slaves," and which we now know as "I Sing the Body Electric" (Folsom, "Lucifer and Ethiopia" 47). The slave's humanity is vaunted here as the culmination of earthly and cosmic development. Yet in imagining the slave's exalted status, Whitman by no means removes him from the institution of slavery. Rather, it is through inhabiting the voice of the auctioneer that Walt is able to extoll the slave's universal qualities:

A slave at auction!  
I help the auctioneer . . . the sloven does not half know his business.

Gentlemen look on this curious creature,  
Whatever the bids of the bidders they cannot be high enough for him,  
For him the globe lay preparing quintillions of years without one animal or  
plant,  
For him the revolving cycles truly and steadily rolled.

In that head the allbaffling brain,  
In it and below it the making of the attributes of heroes.

Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . . they are very cunning in  
tendon and nerve;  
They shall be stript that you may see them.  
(123)

The slave is not worth so many dollars Walt exhorts us, but rather reflects the accomplishment of revolving cycles of the globe. In “I celebrate myself” Walt also displays his penchant for bidding for humanity:

Magnifying and applying come I,  
Outbidding at the start the old cautious hucksters,  
The most they offer for mankind and eternity less than a spirt of my own  
                seminal wet

(73)

While in the fifth poem of *Leaves* Walt outperforms the “sloven” auctioneer, here he outbids “the old cautious hucksters” with semen, signaling human progeny. Humanity’s inherited and transcendental qualities are again figured as inextricable from their contrast with the valuations of the marketplace. What is striking about Whitman’s tableau is precisely how the equality of the slave is expounded from the auction block, his or her humanity exultant upon the pedestal of the market. Whitman thereby invites us to imagine the human equality of the slave as intimately related to the equivalencies of price, especially the price of labor power.

Two stanzas after those quoted from the auction block passage above, the poem continues in its enumeration of the slave’s qualities: “Within there runs his blood . . . the same old blood . . . the same red running blood” (123). Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes how “Whitman evokes blood as a physical equalizer: something of the body that is, nevertheless, not implicated in the bodily differences of skin ‘red, black, or white’” (57). Blood in this reading becomes Whitman’s human “universal equivalent”—the term Marx used to describe the role of precious metals as the guarantors of value.<sup>24</sup> As Emerson (1860) put it, “money is another kind of blood” (*Essays* 1010).<sup>25</sup> But for Walt it is more than this—of the Civil War soldiers he nursed he wrote: “their priceless blood reddens the grass the ground” (444). Blood, as we’ve seen with the soul, was also for Walt

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<sup>24</sup> “In the same proportion as exchange bursts its local bonds, and the value of commodities accordingly expands more and more into the material embodiment of human labor as such, in that proportion does the money-form become transferred to commodities which are by nature fitted to perform the social function of a universal equivalent. Those commodities are the precious metals” (Marx, *Capital* 183).

<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting that Marx considered the analogy between blood and money erroneous (*Grundrisse* 162).

immutable and beyond price. Another prominent character in “The bodies of men and women engirth me” is “a common farmer,” who like the slave is the progenitor of future generations: “he was the father of five sons . . . and in them were the fathers of sons . . . and in them the fathers of sons” (119). The farmer’s blood is present not only figuratively, but literally: “He drank water only . . . the blood showed like scarlet through the clear brown skin of his face” (120). And yet while we all have it, blood, in the context of slavery, conjures other images than that of human equality, such as whipped backs, as Sánchez-Eppler points out (57).

We might attempt to employ a shorthand distinction between a spiritual equality and a political equality for squaring the exalted humanity of the slave in *Leaves of Grass* against Whitman’s occasional indifference to the condition of blacks in his prose.

Whitman’s slave on the auction block is Christ-like in his universal absorption of history, just as Walt’s lyric persona is.<sup>26</sup> The auction block bares, furthermore, the ghost of a crucifix. In Whitman’s 1843 poem “Blood-Money,” which his most recent biographer Jerome Loving (1999) claims “is probably Whitman’s first free-verse poem” (153), he writes:

Of olden time, when it came to pass  
That the beautiful god, Jesus, should finish his work on earth,  
Then went Judas, and sold the divine youth,  
And took pay for the body.

Three stanzas later Whitman continues:

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<sup>26</sup> See also Whitman’s draft for “Song of Myself”: “In vain were nails driven through my hands, / I remember my crucifixion and bloody coronation / The sepulcher and the white linen have yielded me up / I remember the mockers and the buffeting insults / I am alive in New York and San Francisco, / Again I tread the streets after two thousand years” (*Collected* 78).

And still goes one, saying,  
“What will ye give me, and I will deliver this man unto you?”  
And they make the covenant, and pay the pieces of silver.

The poem ends:

Witness of anguish, brother of slaves,  
Not with thy price closed the price of thine image:  
And still Iscariot plies his trade.  
(1155-56)

The image of man, this early poem informs us, cannot be sold, and is in excess of any price. As Klammer glosses this poem: “Here for the first time, Whitman not only publicly expresses sympathy for the fugitive slave, but even portrays that slave as a second Christ, captured and tormented by Southerners with ‘devilish spite’” (79). Indeed, Whitman’s draft for the auction block passage ends:

For him all sentiments  
In his appointed day he becomes a God  
In his appointed time he reaches his ecstasy  
He is the one loved  
He is the master  
(NUPM 147)

The slave becomes master here, in a transformation echoing Whitman’s drafts for “I celebrate myself” where he will himself mediate between masters and slaves. Whitman forged this Christ-like persona in his confrontation with slavery, where blood is what is common to all.

Using a shorthand distinction between a spiritual and a political equality in assessing Whitman’s attitude toward slavery risks missing, though, the politically liberatory content of the original *Leaves*. As Klammer persuasively argues, the fervor in the North in 1854 over the extension of slavery to the new territories with the Kansas-Nebraska Act, as well as the dramatic arrest, trial, and return of the fugitive slave

Anthony Burns, provide Whitman with an audience for his most sympathetic rendering of the slave's humanity ("An Audience at Last"). Of course Whitman was himself audience to these events. Yet his rendering of the slave's full humanity in his verse almost never translates into advocating full political equality for blacks. In fact he is more likely to imagine that blacks will somehow be washed away through incorporation into a stronger white America, just as he imagines the Indians have been ("Lucifer and Ethiopia" 81).

That Walt's interlocutor is often figured as an aspect of himself ("I believe in you my soul" (30)) does not prevent "you" from becoming radically other. As early as 1859, in an article serialized in the *Anglo-African Magazine*, "A Statistical View of the Colored Population," the anonymous author quotes Whitman's auction block passage preceded by the comment that the sale of "the thousands who went out from Virginia and Maryland in 1810-20 must be considered not to have gone alone" (99).<sup>27</sup> They went, if not with Walt, then with their cosmic ancestors and "teeming" future offspring. Here we have an early example, in a tradition that has continued ever since, of black writers recognizing themselves in Walt's universality, and thus actualizing for themselves the form of self-possession that was, in its emergence, inseparable from white supremacy. This legacy has not been unequivocal, though, and many have rightly castigated Whitman for his racism.<sup>28</sup>

Walt-the-auctioneer provides an immanent critique of the slave economy. In asserting the slave's equal humanity against purported evidence to the contrary he

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<sup>27</sup> I am indebted to Ivy Wilson, who provided the relevant page of the *Anglo-African Magazine* as a handout during his seminar at the Sixth Annual International Walt Whitman Week held at Northwestern University, June 24-29, 2013.

<sup>28</sup> See Wilson for a collection of compelling essays on Whitman and blackness, many charting the continuing inheritance by black authors of Whitman's poetry, poetics, and politics.

authorizes his own judgment of human beauty, which depends for its truth on the organicism of his verse. Likewise, this truth depends on each of our judgments, as when Walt asks us to “not look through my eyes either, nor take things from me, / You shall listen to all sides and filter them from yourself” (28). The slave’s immutable humanity is a fiction that doesn’t prevent it from being true. Whitman “describe[s] a certain state of affairs as already existing, in order to bring it about or avert it. In this as in all magnanimity there is a hidden cost” (Jarvis 17). That cost, as I’ve been arguing here, comes in figuring equality in accord with the social domination inherent in wage-labor. Behind Walt’s mock-bravado in “Slaves” we might hear Whitman’s harangue of slave-holders from *The Eighteenth Presidency!*:

Calhoun, disunionist senator, denounces and denies, in the presence of the world, the main article of the organic compact of These States, that all men are born free and equal, and bequeaths to his followers, at present leaders of the three hundred and fifty thousand masters [of slaves], guides of the so-called democracy, counselors of Presidents, and getting-up of the nominations of Buchanan and Fillmore, his deliberate charge, to be carried out against that main article, that it is the most false and dangerous of all political errors. (1340-41)

Whitman imagines an organic compact usurping the slave power, offering testament to the power that also provides for his poetry. His poetry cannot serve as an ultimate guarantee though, and its readers must enact its organicism.

Do the three hundred and fifty thousand expect to bar off forever all preachers, poets, philosophers—all that make the brain of These States, free literature, free thought, the good old cause of liberty? Are they blind? Do they not see those unrelaxed circles of death narrowing and narrowing every hour around them? (1346)

As we are about to see, for Whitman the whirlpool of death turns after the Civil War into “the labor question,” threatening to sink the ideal course of the nation (1014).

According to Loving's biography, the conflation of price and dignity comes for Whitman straight from Emerson's lecture on "Natural Aristocracy." Loving speculates that Emerson may well have read Whitman's poem "Blood-Money" on the front page of the Friday free supplement to the *New-York Tribune* on March 22, 1850, before giving his lecture in Newark that evening where, in the middle of his discussion on the natural and immutable qualities of true gentlemen, Emerson states:

Slavery had mischief enough to answer for, but it had this good in it,—the pricing of men. In the South a slave was bluntly but accurately valued at five hundred to a thousand dollars, if a good field-hand; if a mechanic, or carpenter or smith, twelve hundred or two thousand. In Rome or Greece what sums would not be paid for a superior slave, a confidential secretary and manager, an educated slave; a man of genius, a Moses educated in Egypt? I don't know how much Epictetus was sold for, or Æsop, or Toussaint l'Ouverture, and perhaps it was not a good market-day. Time was, in England, when the state stipulated beforehand what price should be paid for each citizen's life, if he was killed. Now, if it were possible, I should like to see that appraisal applied to every man, and every man made acquainted with the true number and weight of every adult citizen, and that he be placed where he belongs, with so much power confided to him as he could carry and use. (*Complete Works* 48-49)

As Loving conjectures, "this sentiment may have helped to lay the foundation for Whitman's similar thoughts in 'I Sing the Body Electric'" (159). Emerson fancifully imagines the price of slaves equated with stable human values, but avers, "in the absence of such anthropometer I have a perfect confidence in the natural laws" (*Complete Works* 49). Rather than the value of Whitman's divine average, what is affirmed here are Garrison's natural distinctions. Emerson's vaunting of these distinctions in the teeth of a fluctuating price, which might not recognize the value of a Toussaint L'Ouverture, echoes Walt's immanent critique of the disembodied metaphysics of price on the auction block.

When Whitman titles his poem "I Sing the Body Electric" in the 1867 edition of *Leaves*, he links it with his appreciation of the "electric-telegraph," evinced both in his

1856 letter to Emerson and his notes for *An American Primer*. The connection between electricity and the body is never made explicit in his revisions to the poem, though. Rather, Whitman presents us with an association between the powers of electricity and the universal equality and integrity of humanity. Christopher Hanlon has written how Whitman's 1860 poem "A Word out of the Sea" (which in the 1871-72 edition of *Leaves* became "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking"), figures words coming from the sea in the wake of "the deployment of telegraphic cable between Britain and the United States two years earlier in 1858" (195). As Hanlon puts it, "part of Whitman's purpose is to bring into scrutiny not only the alien quality of telegraphic noise, but also the underlying noise of all communication systems, including poetry" (211). Including, of course, a "hum": "one of the many poems entitled 'Song of the Telegraph'—this one published in April 1851 in *The Dollar Magazine*—begins by alerting the reader: 'Hark! The wires are humming, boys!'" (202). Globalization is inherently democratic for Whitman, and he hopes increased connectivity will wash away old hierarchies. "The hum of your valved voice"—an at once intimate and universal invitation—has something in common with the telegraph's universal intimacy. Whitman's repetition—especially in his catalogs—of the transhistorially human, whether as old farmer, glorious slave, or spinning-girl, has itself a kind of formal insistence akin to electricity.<sup>29</sup> Our hum, we might surmise, is the sound of an organic equality of bodies, which re-imagines machine powers, whether of factories or telegraphs, as human, lyric ones.

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<sup>29</sup> My sense of Whitman's catalogs as themselves humming is taken from Sianne Ngai on Melville's repetitions (while she is herself following Tenney Nathanson on Whitman): "the overwhelming of analogy by anaphora could be described as a shift from *logos* to *pherein*, from ratiocination to "bearing," which produces an increase in resonance in *The Confidence-Man* as a whole—a novel-wide 'vibration' whose disruption of signifying communications at the local level is marked by the presence of 'hum' or 'bubble' in speech" (67).

The slave's humanity is decidedly not contingent for Whitman, but like Emerson's price for slaves is rather dramatically transhistorical and immutable. Whitman's lyric conjuring offers us this humanity as immanent to, rather than equivalent with, the sale of the slave for a price, which he has already shown is the antithesis of happiness. "I help the auctioneer," he triumphantly tells us, as if thereby to show what the slave is really worth. To the souls of men and women in "Come closer to me," Whitman writes, "it is not you I call unseen, unheard, untouchable, and untouching; / [...] I own publicly who you are" (90). And as auctioneer he exclaims: "Examine these limbs, red black or white . . . they are very cunning in tendon and nerve; / They shall be stript that you may see them," just as he wants to lift the "cunning covers" of "those journeymen divine" in "The Sleepers." The slave's soul and body appear on the auction block because of his price, which is distinct from, but enough like the white laborer's wage to be considered by Whitman in *The Eighteenth Presidency!* a threat to the latter's value, as when he worries: "Shall the future mechanics of America be serfs? Shall labor be degraded, and women be whipt in the fields for not performing their tasks?" (1340) Yet the commensurability between slave and white labor as human labor in general, which he fears in his prose, is precisely what Whitman provides us in his verse through his affirmation of a universal and immutable soul.

Jay Grossman points out that in 1856 "A slave at auction!" is changed to "A man's body at auction!" This new version of the poem includes an even more precise catalog of the body's parts. And in the 1860 poem "Enfans d'Adam 2," which immediately precedes "Body Electric," we have "The slave's body for sale—I, sternly, with harsh voice, auctioneering, / The divine list" (qtd. in Grossman 195). The slave's

body is itself a “divine list,” a catalog of divine averages sung by a “harsh voice,” inhabiting the imperative of abstract personhood. The “valved voice” with its sonorous hum invites us, by contrast, to loafe beyond the demands of machines and markets. Both are essential registers for Walt, where the harsh necessity of the first gives way to the transcendent possibility of the second. As I have shown, the racialized separation of these registers is an abiding legacy of the self-possession presumed to be inherent to whiteness. Walt’s extolling of the equality of the slave as emerging from his price is no accident stemming from hearing Emerson’s lecture, which itself resonates to the logic of Whitman’s “Blood-Money.” The terms through which Walt vaunts the humanity of the slave on the auction block in 1855 foresee black Americans’ eventual entry into the ambit of wage-labor and the abstract conception of equality it relies upon. His verse becomes the vehicle through which he imagines an end to the degradation of slavery and, in turn, the supersession of the distance between artisanal and slave labor. But the logic of wage labor can also be the object of Whitman’s transformative inversions. Assuming, that is, that we recognize in his verse an illusive guarantee of humanity that the market cannot uphold, the sound of which can be found in everyone’s throat.

**“who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan?”**

Whitman’s forked ideal of an abstract, universal, and impersonal soul, at once self-possessed of individual happiness, is intimately linked to his ideal of national union. He wrote in his notebooks, “Only Hegel is fit for America—is large enough and free enough” (*Collected Writings* 2011), a sentiment he expands upon in reflections on the Civil War:

It is certain to me that the United States, by virtue of that war and its results, and through that and them only, are now ready to enter, upon their genuine career in history, as no more torn and divided in their spiritual requisites, but a great homogenous Nation—free states all—a moral and political unity in variety. (1023)

The historical irony is that Whitman's exalted unity of "a great homogenous Nation" is in truth consonant with the evisceration of the artisanal, self-possessed labor he imagined as the basis for American political equality. As Charles Post has elaborated, the U.S. Civil War, "almost alone among the 'bourgeois revolutions' identified by the historical-materialist tradition, actually fits the classical schema." Although Post considers the classical schema "highly problematic," it is nevertheless the case that the North was "led by a self-conscious class of capitalist manufacturers and commercial farmers [organized in the Republican Party] struggling to remove the obstacle posed by the geographic expansion of plantation-slavery" (245-51). In his own way Whitman recognizes the definitive terms of exploitation after the war when in *Democratic Vistas* (1871) he imagines "that problem, the labor question, beginning to open like a yawning gulf, rapidly widening every year" as "a dangerous sea of seething currents." Anxiously, he worries, "pride, competition, segregation, vicious willfulness, and license beyond example, brood already upon us. Unwieldy and immense, who shall hold in behemoth? who bridle leviathan?" (1013-14) The victory of the Union promises for "these States" a national unity in variety, while in the same moment a behemoth beneath the sea, which in his notebooks he figures as "that ~~black~~ and huge lethargic mass" (*Daybooks* 763), threatens to sink the ideal course of the nation. Whitman writes of this doppelganger to his ideal unity: "The magician's serpent in the fable ate up all the other serpents; and

money-making is our magician's serpent, remaining to-day sole master of the field" (961).<sup>30</sup>

Tragically, Whitman imagines the leviathan that will sink the nation as both lethargic *and* black and huge, echoing the white supremacy he put on display in *The Eighteenth Presidency!* Yet it is not black laborers who are figured as the cause of the "yawning gulf" in the newly unified nation, where traditional chattel slavery is to be no more. Rather, it is competition and money. We find another ontological inversion here—alongside that of Whitman's lyric universality negating the abstract universality of capital—where his ideal, Hegelian conception of national unity appears to be both underpinned by, and about to go under from, the machinations of capitalist accumulation. It would be interesting to reflect on the "lethargy" of Whitman's leviathan mirroring the loafing of his lyric, with both at once harkening back to a pre-industrial past and threatening to undermine the current social order. The suggestion of a black loafer is never absent here, reminiscent perhaps of William Sidney Mount's 1835 romantic genre painting *Farmers Noonning*, as well as the racist nostalgia of minstrelsy.<sup>31</sup>

Not a few have demurred from Whitman's verse precisely because it seems both too huge and somehow lazy in its endless enumeration of stuff. I wonder though if many of his lines would have the same force if divinity did not emerge from the wonder and

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<sup>30</sup> Erkkila notes that "it is to literature, and to the poet in particular, that Whitman looked for the power that would bridle the gilded monsters to which America, and perhaps the theory of America, had given birth" (251).

<sup>31</sup> Matt Sandler has suggested that "Whitman depicted the Creole women [of New Orleans] as offering predecessors to his own 'loafing'" (in Wilson 63). On Whitman, Mount, and *Farmers Noonning* see Reynolds 291-2. On black workers as loafers see Roediger 19, 180-181. On the contradictions inherent in minstrelsy see "Chapter 6: White Skins, Black Masks: Minstrelsy and White Working Class Formation before the Civil War" in Roediger 115-131.

strain of the objects and persons of these catalogs, which are both closer and further than truth. And what is the truth? Whitman suggests that it is in us. We must recognize and realize the music, the possibility, of his lines in order for them to fulfill their mission. The slave is figured in Whitman's *Leaves* as commensurate not only with all his fellow inhabitants of the nation, but indeed with the cosmos itself. Whitman's Christ-like lyric persona models itself on the condition of slaves, assuming the trope of an at once individuated and universal subject. And in vaunting the abstract equality of the slave, which becomes Whitman's pedestal for his free verse, he also presages the leveling of all labors to an exchangeable wage. This leveling may yet be something else, as heard in the "hum" to which he asks us to leisurely open ourselves. The terms through which Whitman founds the authority of his verse and its inhabitants as organic and universal reveal at least as much about the commitments of his poetry as considering the vicissitudes of his explicit politics does. Indeed, following the quotation from Adorno that opens this chapter, these terms are perhaps Walt's most compelling fiction.

## CHAPTER TWO

### WORDS MADE OF MACHINES: WILLIAMS AND POUND

“In the America of 1908 the most authentic aesthetic experience was widely sought and found in the contemplation of mechanical tools and devices, when intellectual energies were bent to discover by precise analysis of vital motion the means of bringing organic processes within the compass of technical means.”

—Marshall McLuhan, “Pound’s Critical Prose” (1950)

“The association of art and machinery suggests all kinds of problems. What will be the relation to the artist and the engineer? [...] Besides the interest in machinery itself, you get the attempt to create in art, structures whose organization, such as it is, is very like that of machinery.”

—T. E. Hulme, “The New Art and its Philosophy” (1914)

In his 1944 “Author’s Introduction” to *The Wedge* William Carlos Williams famously wrote that “a poem is a small (or large) machine made of words” where “there can be no part, as in any other machine, that is redundant” (*CP II* 54). It is instructive to read Williams scholarship through the import accorded to this statement, as the scholarship is curiously divided between those emphasizing Williams’ place in a Romantic organicist lineage, and those emphasizing his modernist break with the nineteenth century, via the

machine. Donald W. Markos, in his 1994 study *Ideas in Things*, draws out Williams' connection with not only Coleridge and other Romantics, but the Platonic tradition more generally, and for him the analogy Williams makes between machine and organic poem is merely that, an analogy. As he puts it, "Williams uses a machine metaphor to say something about organic form" (120). By contrast, writers such as Charles Altieri emphasize Williams' break with Romantic symbolism, which accords with Cecilia Tichi's view of Williams from her study *Shifting Gears*, where she writes that Williams' "essays, poems, and fiction chart his escape route from the archaic romanticism of the late nineteenth century" (258). For these anti-Romantic critics, the poem as a machine made of words illustrates a productive, if conflicted, collision of art and machines unique to the early twentieth century.

I agree with those who argue that the machine is no merely convenient metaphor here, but rather a model for Williams' poetic aspirations. As he writes in the same introduction, in a phrase that adroitly, if subtly, melds the machine age with aestheticism: "there is no poetry of distinction without formal invention" (55). Poetry, like technology, is constituted according to Williams by the imperative to innovate. Yet the emphasis most critics put on a modernist break with the nineteenth century misses essential continuities. These are continuities that, as Markos shows, have to do with ideas about organic unity, but are also, as he wholly misses, bound up with machinery. Stephen Tapscott, in *American Beauty: William Carlos Williams and the Modernist Whitman*, circles the same territory as Markos, with particular attention to the melding of organic form with industrialism. Tapscott insightfully registers how Williams "associates the Romantics' description of the imagination as 'organic' with the modernists' interest in mechanical

forms. The imagination frees both the organic private imagination (like Wordsworth's) and the mechanized public modern world" (136). Both the personal and the mechanical are transformed by the poetic imagination from external impositions into the objective material of the poem; Williams' "objectivism" frees words from being mere description and affirms them as facts. Tapscott's appreciation of Williams' sublation of the dialectic between self and society through a liberated form doesn't, though, include substantial consideration of the machinic quality of his poetry and prose. Ultimately, Tapscott agrees with Markos: "a poem is identical with a machine only in a metaphorical sense" (138).

Altieri, one of the most prominent critics of twentieth-century avant-garde poetry, emphasizes the distinctiveness of modernism, along with its abstract—which is to say, ahistorical, aspect. His *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry* positions itself as a riposte to postmodernist as well as new historicist criticism. Altieri derides the "critique of Modernist art or poetry as formalist evasions of the gritty realities that a 'materialist' historical perspective musters the courage to face" (12). By contrast, Altieri asks us to think through the work, rather than to perform "superficial readings that immediately locate [particular works] in desired historical or moral contexts" (12). In this chapter I will be reading constitutive historical particulars, mainly machine technology such as power plants and cars, through the work of Williams and Ezra Pound. Rather than offering "easy complaints about Modernist formalism and antihistoricism," I am adopting Altieri's later evaluation of modernism as "the new realism" by reading these poets' aesthetic means of inhabiting the machine age (*Art* 11). This does indeed require comprehending Williams' work in terms of historical particulars, which Altieri considers of little concern.

The argument I want to make, then, is two-fold. Firstly, I aim to show how the organic and the machine are mutually constituted by Williams in two works from 1923: his first extended work of prose, *The Great American Novel*, and a mash up of poetry and prose, *Spring and All*. It is undeniable that Williams' attention to machine technology—especially the automobile—in these works distinguishes them from poetry of the middle of the nineteenth century, when there were no electric power plants or mass produced cars in America. But—and this is my second argument—when modernists harness the productive powers of the machine, rather than destroying organic form, they are furthering an aesthetics of organic vitality. For modernists both the poem and the machine are organically generative rather than descriptive, with the self-propulsion and potential threat of machines offering poetry a powerful metaphor for how to advance immediate experience over inherited genres. Not unproblematically for American artists, machine inventions are the most compelling and complex of indigenous creative products. But the link between machine technology and poetic innovation is simply not new with modernism. Williams finally helps us read Whitman's figuration of the "hum" of lyric repose. In inheriting that hum, and explicitly linking it to machinery, Williams adds ebullient and absurdist humor to Whitman's attempt to naturalize the ground of poetic song. The human nature of song, Williams affirms, is a nature shared by machines, an affinity causing anxiety as much as it authorizes formal and thematic innovations.

I will end by turning to Ezra Pound's essay "Machine Art" (1927-1930), unpublished in his lifetime, which imagines orchestrating the factory as music. Pound seeks a total artwork where function and design are inseparable. This requires him to repress the rhetorical character of this ultimate organic machine, which aspires to be

completely shorn of personality and ornamentation. Rather than Williams' ironic adoption of Whitman, Pound presents another possible outcome of the organic artwork as machine, which is totalitarian in its demand for efficiency. Thus Pound's "Pact" with Whitman—a poem I will consider along the way—appears menacing indeed.

### *The Great American Novel*

As with Whitman, for Williams organicism refers to the growth of poetry in the American grain, including its usually inherently democratic masses and their speech. The energies of American development and expansion, furthermore, have often been encapsulated in machine technology, which these writers don't shy away from incorporating into their poetry. Yet how to do so? As Lisa M. Steinman has argued in *Made in America*, while Williams was attracted to and utilized machine culture for his modernist aesthetics, he also found "modernist defenses of a machine technology [...] problematic in a country that appeared to value actual machinery over aesthetics" (10). This was part of Duchamp's point with his "Fountain:" "The only works of art America has given are her plumbing and her bridges" (252). Williams hopes, though, that the same attention and inventiveness behind American industrial innovations will also spur poetry to make it new. Echoing Duchamp, in 1921 he writes:

It has been by paying naked attention to the thing itself that American plumbing, American shoes, American bridges, indexing systems, locomotives, printing presses, city buildings, farm implements and a thousand other things have become notable in the world. Yet we are timid in believing that in the arts discovery and invention will take the same course. And there is no reason why they should unless our writers have the inventive intelligence of our engineers and cobblers. (*Selected* 35)

Bill Brown has pointed out how "Williams first wrote his dictum—'no ideas but in

things’—as part of an early lyric, “Paterson,” in the year 1926, when Henry Ford published his (ghost written) article on “Mass Production” in both the *New York Times* and the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, thereby transforming his industrial success into a new American ethic” (8). Williams didn’t need to read Ford, though, to appreciate the power of American industrial products; as he had already figured the rush of “the wheels / of motor cars” in *Al Que Quiere!* (1917) (*CP I* 81). By imagining “attention to the thing itself” as a peculiarly American virtue—in contrast, as we shall see, to European erudition—he positions American inventiveness as immediate and primal. The poem as a “machine made of words” is an organic thing on par (he hopes) with actual machinery.

Yet Williams struggles with the problem of how to produce an art responsive to his native climate when that climate appears so hostile to modernist poetry. Engaging with the energies of machine technology doesn’t—ironically—do the popularity of his art among the mass of his contemporaries any favors. As Steinman points out, “comparing poems with automobiles might call attention to America’s creativity, and it might associate poems with products that had captured the public’s imagination. Yet not being material objects with obvious uses, poems were not easily defended to practical American consumers” (49). The liability of comparing poetry to machines accounts for a dynamic contradiction in Williams’ conception: machines are both evidence of American organic growth, and expressive of the same utilitarian culture that has created a deficient American avant-garde—a source of bitterness throughout Williams’ career. He navigates this double bind by conceiving the automobile’s utility as a vehicle for imaginative writing.

In *The Great American Novel*, first published in 1923 in Paris, our doctor narrator is brooding: “Tell me, wet streets, what we are coming to, we in this country? Are we doomed? Must we be another Europe or another Japan with our coats copied from China, another bastard country in a world of bastards?” (*Imaginations* 176) What is new in America, asks the novel’s narrator? “If there is progress then there is a novel. Without progress there is nothing. [...] Words progress into the ground. One must begin with words if one is to write” (158). Such new words, both innovative and primal, screech forth from a car ride in the early pages of the novel: a little Ford car passes an electric power plant on the way to tend to a woman in labor, whose screaming drowns out the sound from the plant. “Turned into the wrong street seeking to pass the power house from which the hum, hmmmmmmmmmmmmmm—sprang. Electricity has been discovered forever. I’m new says the great dynamo. I am progress. I make a word. Listen! UMMMMMMMMMMMMMM—” (162). This “hum,” the doctor suggests, is more inventive than all of James Joyce’s intelligence, which goads our narrator on to further creation.

Williams reaches for, as he puts it in *Spring and All*, “the pure products of America” to find the double-edged roar of machines. The primal hum of American machinery provides a native, and dynamic riposte to Joyce’s European erudition. But this awesome dynamism might, in turn, threaten the imaginative life of poetry itself. In *The Great American Novel* we are told, “But Joyce. He is misjudged, misunderstood. His vaunted invention is a fragile fog” (168). This is the same fog the doctor has to drive his car through:

The fog lay in deep masses on the roads at three A.M. Into the wrong street turned the car seeking the high pitched singing tone of the dynamos endlessly

spinning in the high banquet hall, filling the house and the room where the bed of pain stood with progress. Ow, ow! Oh help me somebody! said she. UMMMMMM sang the dynamo in the next street, UMMMM. With a terrible scream she drowned out its sound. He went to the window to see if his car was still there, pulled the curtain aside, green—Yes it was still there. (162)

In navigating the fog associated with European modernism the doctor-poet encounters the generative and overpowering forces of machinery. The “UMMMM” and “hmmm[.]” that machinery express become the source for a new, generative birth. At once primal and machine, the baby of American literature is—as I will show—the doctor’s own poetic automobile. Indeed, while the baby is born and the mother is screaming for help, the doctor is checking on his car.

The birth of a child calls to mind another kind of creative invention for the doctor, accounting for his negligence. The automobile is both the scene of Williams’ labor as a doctor and his labor as a poet. As Tichi has written, quoting Williams: “To ‘write going’ or ‘write while running’ is to be the American writer at work in the twentieth century” (247). When Williams wrote “running” he meant driving: “I am alone only while in the car,” he says. “What then? Take a pad in the car with me and write while running” (246). This is no mere biographical detail, as the dramatization of the life of his little Ford car in *The Great American Novel* bespeaks Williams’ appreciation of machinery as a living source for poetry. Indeed, it is this source we hear in the hum, both human and mechanic, which provides new words for American poetry. Williams follows Whitman in finding what is distinctive about America in its words. As we saw in the previous chapter, already with Whitman those words arise from industry and agriculture: “Geography, shipping, steam, the mint, the electric telegraph, railroads, and so forth.” Indeed, Williams provides Whitman’s hum with an explicitly industrial provenance.

Yet Tichi has contrasted Williams' "writ[ing] while running" with Whitman's "[portrayal of] the American Literatus as a figure in repose. 'I loafe and invite my soul,' he wrote in *Song of Myself* (1855). 'I lean and loafe at my ease.' (247)" Tichi writes that "there was precious little leaning and loafing in the rapid-transit age, and Williams, in apparent response to Whitman, provided the new image" (247). There is, indeed, a contrast to be made between Williams and Whitman in terms of the hum each one harnesses. Tichi, though, misses an essential continuity, namely how the hum loosed from the loafer's "valved voice" is also the sound emanating from the industry of the 1850s. It is also worth remembering that Walt is very much on the move and on the make in *Leaves of Grass*: "Shoulder your duds, and I will mine, and let us hasten forth; / Wonderful cities and free nations we shall fetch as we go" (82). And amidst the teeming cities Walt moves with "Stavemachines and plainingmachines . . . the cart of the carman . . the omnibus" (97). We might read Williams' self-deprecating humor—of which we will see more—as in part a recognition of the mechanical source for poetic utterance. This is a source of anxiety as well as pride. Can the artist, Williams appears to be asking, harness the energies of the machine age while not letting them get the better of him?

After checking to make sure no one has "come up from the meadows and take[n] the spare tire" of his car, the doctor supposes, "I had better see how things have progressed" (163). By which he means with technology, not the mother in labor.

And so he backed out into the main street and turned up another block. And there he was. The great doors were open to full view of the world. A great amphitheater of mist lighted from the interior of the power house. In rows sat the great black machines saying vrmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm. Stately in the great hall they sat and generated electricity to light the cellar and stair with. To warm the pad on Mrs. Voorman's belly. To cook supper by and iron Abie's pyjamas. Here was

democracy. Here is progress—here is the substance of words—UMMMM: that is to say meat or linen or belly ache.—Three A.M. To be exact twenty-eight minutes past three. (163)

The doctor is impressed by machinery's ability to meet human needs, such as medical care. The precision of these machines, not least the precise marking of time (which I will return to in the next chapter) is implicitly coupled to the precision of modernist art.

Instead of a European tradition, the generative force of machines is imagined as providing “the substance of words” in the new world. There is nevertheless something menacing in this display of machine force, which the doctor's comical negligence of his patient dramatizes: does the logic of production have its own designs on human actors?

In *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*, Sara Danus writes, the “cultural practices that we know as modernism might then be seen as forms of ‘crisis management,’ not exterior to but already immersed in those conditions—technological, economic, social—it sought to go beyond” (54). Williams seeks to inhabit those conditions with innovative poetic forms influenced by machine technology, while thematizing the possibilities and crises such technologies give rise to. For Williams, organicism means inhabiting American technology while exceeding its utilitarian ends. As he puts it in “The Basis of Faith in Art” (1937): “Don't forget that in a scientific era like the one now passing, the artist's protest that his art is wholly nonutilitarian has a certain amount of truth to it. It's a wonderful picture of us all. The uselessness of it might constitute its principle use, sometimes” (*Selected* 179). Williams does not provide an easy marriage between machine and art, but rather mutually constitutes the machine and the artwork as an organic, internally divided whole, which is anything but hermetically

sealed off from history. The bravado and humor of his writing attest to a “crisis management” where innovative art risks failure and incomprehension.

Williams’ hum attests to an imagination struggling to assert itself above the din of a machine age. As April Boone has noticed in her article on *The Great American Novel*:

The dynamo, a machine for converting mechanical energy into electrical energy, reminds us of how our mind converts sounds into meaning in the form of words. Significantly, the dynamo’s hum sounds like the noise “um,” which we often make when our minds are actively in the process of transforming our ideas into the sounds that make words. (13)

It is interesting in this regard that the first recorded usage of the word “hum,” from the fifteenth century, is coupled to a “ha” “uttered with closed lips in a pause of speaking, from hesitation, embarrassment, or affectation.”<sup>32</sup> If the hum, as Boone suggests, signals imaginative productivity, it can also be the response to a failure to be articulate, a failure that Williams worries describes the condition of avant-garde culture in America.

Boone points out how Williams is playing on Henry Adams’ chapter of his autobiography, “The Dynamo and the Virgin,” where the force of the dynamo at the Paris Exhibition of 1900 rivals that of religion:

The planet itself seemed less impressive, in its old-fashioned, deliberate, annual or daily revolution, than this huge wheel, revolving within arm’s-length at some vertiginous speed, and barely murmuring—scarcely humming an audible warning to stand a hair’s breadth further for respect of power—while it would not wake the baby lying close against its frame. Before the end, one began to pray to it; inherited instinct taught the natural expression of man before silent and infinite force. Among the thousand symbols of ultimate energy, the dynamo was not so human as some, but it was the most expressive. (Adams 318)

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<sup>32</sup> I am indebted to Joel Calahan for pointing this out to me when we shared a panel at The 44th Annual Louisville Conference on Literature & Culture Since 1900 in 2016. V. Joshua Adams chaired the panel, and his comments highlighted for me how Williams’ humor contrasts with Whitman’s earnestness.

Here, in the scantily inhuman and barely articulate humming of the dynamo, Williams finds his inspiration. Throughout this chapter Adams appreciates the sexual force of the Virgin Mary, which he claims has been domesticated in America, and so the speculative baby at the feet of the dynamo that he prays to signals a new religiosity for Adams. (It is worth noting that the only American artist whom Adams deems to have appreciated the force of sex is Whitman [322]). For Williams this sexual energy is realized in the automobile, which Adams also saw as at once deadly. Adams learns of

the astonishing complexities of the new Daimler motor, and of the automobile, which, since 1893, had become a nightmare at a hundred kilometres an hour, almost as destructive as the electric tram which was only ten years older and threatening to become as terrible as the locomotive steam-engine itself, which was almost exactly Adams's own age. (317-318)

For Adams this force only threatens art, though, rather than providing for it, as the Virgin did. Artists of "German and English stock," Adams writes, "felt a railway train as power; yet they, and all other artists, constantly complained that the power embodied in a railway train could never be embodied in art. All the steam in the world could not, like the Virgin, build Chartres" (324). It is as though Williams made it his task to take up this challenge to embody the force of the dynamo as art, even while the assumption that machines were superior to any American forms of artistic expression vexed him.

Thirty-five years after its publication Williams reflected that *The Great American Novel* was "a travesty on what I considered conventional American writing. People were always talking about the Great American Novel so I thought I'd write it. The heroine is a little Ford car—she was very passionate—a hot little baby" (*Imaginations* 155).<sup>33</sup> Here

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<sup>33</sup> In what was originally published as simply *The Autobiography*, Williams writes that *The Great American Novel* is "a satire on the novel form in which a little (female) Ford car falls more or less in love with a Mack truck" (237).

Williams manages to couple the generative energies of the car and the birthing mother into one, ambiguously sexualized image. The “hot little baby,” we might surmise, encapsulates the novel forces he hopes his book will express. This image, though, is also cute. Indeed, there is something infantile about the humming sounds of the automobile, as well as the doctor-poet’s attachment to them.

In *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*, Sianne Ngai has written incisively about the complex reversals between power and powerlessness that are at play in cuteness. In her chapter on “The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde” she writes:

cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject, appealing specifically to us for protection and care. As [Lori] Merish puts it, the cute “always in some sense designates a commodity in search of its mother,” thus “grafting commodity desire onto a middle-class structure of familiar, expressly maternal emotion.” (60)

The doctor’s automobile is at once infantile and “hot,” inviting protection and eliciting anxieties of abandonment. The sexual energies that both the car and the mother implicitly embody are at once galvanizing and threatening, but it is the car-commodity that is anthropomorphically cute, while the mother’s birth pangs harass the doctor. The cuteness of the doctor’s automobile is one means of aestheticizing it, of making machinery that is threatening in and of itself, as well as for its supremacy as an American product, serve poetic, personal ends. While the machine is an attractive model for Williams, fictionalizing the car is one means of assuring poetic mastery.

As we will see in turning to *Spring and All*, Williams recognized the danger inherent in cars and by extension all machines, which Adams’ himself highlighted, albeit humorously. As Jacques Attali has noted,

noise control was first implemented in relation to an individual sound object—the automobile. Simultaneously noisemaker, mask, and instrument of death, it is a

form of individualized power. The automobile is thus doubly powerful: the noise it makes is a form of violence, and its camouflage guarantees it impunity. (123)

What saves the doctor's car from threatening death, though, is its cuteness. In comparison with the electric power plant, the sound of which it mimics, it is diminutive. Indeed, it is the car that turns "into the wrong street" while "seeking the high pitched singing tone of the dynamos," which fill the room where the mother is giving birth. The little Ford seems in search of its own sonic mother, while the narrative jumps to confront us with the actual pain of a mother's birth pangs, which are harrowing by contrast. The doctor, as Merish would have it, must tend to and protect the car first and foremost, and so he himself becomes the mother figure here.<sup>34</sup>

Ngai compelling shows how the avant-garde's dalliance with an aesthetics of cute objects is a confrontation with its own powerlessness:

The commodity aesthetic of cuteness is thus a kind of commodity fetishism, but with an extra twist. For while Marx's account emphasizes the phantasmatic intercourse of commodities with other commodities ("confronting" not their human producers but one another in exchange), cuteness revolves around the phantasy of a commodity addressing its "guardian" in the one-to-one, intimate manner associated with lyric poetry. The cute commodity flatteringly seems to want us and only us as its mommy, as Merish underscores; conversely, in a perfect mirroring of its desire, as if we had already put ourselves in its shoes, we as adoptive "guardians" seem to "choose" it. The cute commodity, for all its apparent powerlessness, is thus capable of making surprisingly powerful demands. (*Categories* 64)

Putting this analogy between cute commodities and cute lyrics to work in Williams' novel, the doctor's car becomes a metonym for poetry, which he anxiously guards, and of which he hopes his medical work won't cause him to lose sight. Just as in the last chapter Walt was beckoned by his own warrantee deeds in "A Song for Occupations," which

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<sup>34</sup> For a reading of this scene in terms of progressive ideas about maternity and breastfeeding see Siraganian 103-105.

stand in for his book, Williams confronts us with the marriage between his writing and a commodity. Through his car the language of commodities and machines finally speaks poetry.

Ngai emphasizes how “the desire for intimacy with the cute object is linked to a fantasy of rescuing the commodity’s phenomenological side and the concrete, differentiated acts of labor that its ‘use-value’ encodes” (*Categories* 66-67). The doctor’s guardianship of the sensuous life of his Ford is reminiscent of his attempt to protect poetry and art from being reduced to utilitarian ends. As Adorno argues in *Minima Moralia* (1951), though, art separated from rationalized production is ultimately contradictory:

Every work of art has its irresolvable contradiction in the “purposefulness without purpose” by which Kant defined the aesthetic; in the fact that it is an apotheosis of making, of the nature-ruling capacity that, as a second creation, postulates itself as absolute, purpose-free, existing in itself, whereas after all the act of making, indeed the very glorification of the artefact, is itself inseparable from the rational purposefulness from which art seeks to break away. The contradiction between what is and what is made, is the vital element of art and circumscribes its law of development, but it is also art’s shame: by following, however indirectly, the existing pattern of material production and “making” its objects, art as akin to production cannot escape the question “what for?” which it aims to negate. The closer the mode of production of artefacts comes to material mass-production, the more naively it provokes that fatal question. (226)

As we shall see in the final part of this chapter, Pound attempts to resolve this contradiction in his valorization of art as *technê*, that is, as purposeful making which, as Adorno would have it, “succumb[s] to fetishism in driving out all fetishes” (*MM* 227). Adorno is concerned with kitsch here, which cute poetry, according to Ngai, doesn’t disavow, and is thereby itself “a kind of fetishism that protects against fetishism” (103). While Williams affirms art’s purposelessness, he also binds poetry to mass-production. The cuteness of his automobile acknowledges the powerlessness of poetry in a

technological world, while at once inviting us to imagine technological development cared for by poets as mothers.

This is no happy role for the poet, though, and Pound's edict to modernization hounds Williams to the very end of his novel. New artistic products can seem a joke in an America that only appears to understand commerce and the utility of technology.

Williams offers a pastiche of business acumen at the end of *The Great American Novel*, where we learn of the production of "shoddy" wool from spent rags:

And what is your business?  
Rag merchant.  
Ah yes. And what does that mean?  
Our main specialty is shoddy.  
Ah yes. Shoddy is made from—  
From woolen rags. The whole mass is put into a vat and the cotton dissolved out.  
It comes out in a great wet heap of stuff that has to be washed and dried. (226)

Boone highlights the pun in shoddy, which is "a product woven from other materials and a product that is inferior" (20). She also writes eloquently on the dual implications of this parable-like vignette at the end of the novel: "On the one hand, the description provides an implicit critique of some literary works created like the shoddy cloth" (20), namely commercial pulp. "On the other hand, there is a sort of admiration for the ingenuity of the method of producing shoddy, which breaks up the old and patches it together into something new, like the hard edges of modern art" (20-21). Boone views this ambiguity as Williams wrestling with "the prison house [...] that is language" (23). More to the point, though, Williams' appears to be affirming the method of collage, while recognizing its affinity with mass production.

*The Great American Novel* was, in Williams' own estimation, shoddy. As he wrote to Pound on August 16, 1922, "haphazard as it is, it still has something of the

nature of the mass that engages my attention here and so better be printed as it is—or destroyed” (qtd. in Mariani 204). He had written to Pound only the previous day, August 15<sup>th</sup>, with this assessment of Joyce: “Just finished *Ulysses*. I am satisfied to put it away for the moment. Yes, I’ll risk one comment. It encourages me to champion my own particular form of stupidity – or knowledge or intelligence or lackknowledge. It is the first of the return from the desert” (Witemeyer 65). As we know from Williams’ novel, his stupidity is contrasted favorably, if defensively, with Joyce’s erudition. The “mass” of his own work might not measure up to the latter’s finesse, but he decides to print it whole hog. In the novel the narrator derides American Transcendentalists along the same lines as he does Joyce: “We care nothing at all for the complacent Concordites? We can look at that imitative phase with its erudite Holmeses, Thoreaus, and Emersons. With one word we can damn it: England” (211). Williams affirms his own pulp as authentically American, and finds support for this view among the mass-produced products of the machine age: “You know the army coats the boys wore. They were 70% shoddy. It’s all wool but the fibre has been broken. It makes a hard material not like the soft new woven woolens but it’s wool, all of it” (226). All wool, and all American.

American art, according to the narrator of *The Great American Novel*, must begin by inhabiting the mass-produced assemblages of both American identity and the country’s industrial products. T. Hugh Crawford writes compelling of the novel as “*bricolage*”:

Williams’s machine made of words is inefficiently designed. It bumps, shakes, grinds, screeches, and halts. This is not to say that it does not produce, but that there is waste. Its lines are not clean or stream-lined, making problematic any assertions that Williams whole-heartedly embraced a machine aesthetic. [...] He denies the overarching view of technological utopians or social engineers and celebrates local precision. (94)

The shoddiness of the novel defamiliarizes the premises of realism while implicitly critiquing the supremacy of utility associated with American machines. Williams indeed appears to be troubling even the premise of modernism, with its dogma to “make it new.” Innovation, the parable that closes the novel shows, is also recycling, and the new product might only be a shadow of the original quality of the old. Curiously, it is just this residual skepticism toward any inherent superiority of the new that allows him to linger over “the thing itself.”

The imperative to “MAKE IT NEW” was also a call to break from the Romanticism of Wordsworth, and the floweriness of the Pre-Raphaelites and Victorians (Pound, *New* 194). For Pound, as he wrote in Canto LXXXI, “To break the pentameter, that was the first heave” (*Pisan* 96). Williams likewise admonishes his readers to break with the traditional refinery associated with Victorian poetry. But his ambivalence over the result (“shoddy”) stems from the necessary association between organic, generative form and commercial culture and industrial production. American organicism is premised on the authenticity of demotic speech and the inhabitation of a social ground of presumed equality. The most powerful expression of everyday American energy in the first decades of the twentieth century, though, is its machinery, as well as its entrepreneurial and commercial culture. Williams has made a mockery of genteel realism in *The Great American Novel*, while also deriding European modernism for being too erudite—in itself too traditional—to account for the organic roughness of American experience. But organic, American products can themselves be variously stunning aesthetic achievements or mere coarse knock-offs. Indeed, as we’ve seen, the two evaluations are intertwined, for it is the coarseness of American culture that accounts for its industrial accomplishments.

Twenty-three years after *The Great American Novel*, in *Paterson: Book III* (1949), Williams offers another, even more Whitmanic, hum. In a several part poem entitled “The Library,” Williams recounts the tornado that swept through Paterson on July 22, 1903:

A tornado approaches (We don’t have  
tornados in these latitudes. What, at  
Cherry Hill?)  
It pours  
over the roofs of Paterson, ripping,  
twisting, tortuous :

The poem continues as a catalog of mayhem:

The church  
moved 8 inches through an arc, on its  
foundations —

Hum, hum!

— the wind  
where it poured its heavy plaits (the face  
unshowing) from the rock’s edge

This hum of wind and the destruction of buildings appear, at first, to have no reference to machinery. But this section of the poem ends a few lines later:

and the poor cotton-  
spinner, over the roofs, preparing to dive  
. looks down  
Searching among books; the mind elsewhere  
looking down .

Seeking.

(112)

Is it the “hum of the mill” that is evoked by the cotton spinner’s, and the scholar’s, searching, where a storm’s violence and that of industry, along with that of the falls themselves, become indistinguishable? The Paterson Rolling Mills were indeed heavily

damaged by the storm (Graf). Williams consistently figured the hum as destructive and erratic, a hum that for Whitman—whether emanating from machine or voice—was rhythmic and regulating. But in linking the imagination of the scholar with the desperate condition of the cotton-spinner, Williams still allows that this hum is also a resource for poetry.

Williams' hum has the same provenance as Whitman's; for both the sound enunciates a common social ground provided by industry and the market. While Whitman affirms the American words emerging from native industry, he does not clearly link his hum to the factory, but rather inscribes this hum in a scene of pastoral loafing. In *The Great American Novel* Williams gives this hum a concrete industrial provenance: the electric power plant. Here the production of electric energy is inseparable from human reproduction, with the mother's moaning even drowning out the sound of the plant. The doctor, though, is distracted by his humming automobile. The self-deprecating humor Williams employs here reflects the problematic implications of venerating science and industry as the organic expression of American life. With the transformations of the Gilded Age well established, Williams is ambivalent about the virtues of capitalist development, just as Whitman was in his later years. Williams inherits Whitman's constitution of organicism as encompassing machinery and the market, but distances himself from full-throated affirmation of this complex. His self-consciously "shoddy" deconstruction of realism lays bare the contradiction inherent in producing imaginative art that embraces the logic of rationalized production. Pushing this contradiction to its extreme, *The Great American Novel* realizes itself in its downfall. Williams in effect reads Whitman's organicism as a mechanical construct, which includes the pernicious

effects of industry, and thereby defamiliarizes it. Rather than naturally given, the organic becomes a conscious construct for Williams, which he presents as desperate, humorous, and awe-inspiring.

### *Spring and All*

Williams, as we've seen, was a driver. He drove to the homes of his patients, and his driving infused his writing throughout his career. One of his earliest poems to take place wholly within the perspective offered by the automobile is "The Young Housewife" from 1916. The car and organic life find themselves at odds here in a predictable fashion.

At ten A.M. the young housewife  
moves about in negligee behind  
the wooden walls of her husband's house.  
I pass solitary in my car.

Then again she comes to the curb  
to call the ice-man, fish-man, and stands  
shy, uncorseted, tucking in  
stray ends of hair, and I compare her  
to a fallen leaf.

The noiseless wheels of my car  
rush with a crackling sound over  
dried leaves as I bow and pass smiling.  
(*CP I 57*)

Rachel Blau DuPlessis has attended to this poem's striking enactment of the "mechanism of 'the [male] gaze'" (33), while Marjorie Perloff has written interestingly about its parodic typography (*Dance* 99-100). What interests me here, though, is the curious kind of self-possession provided by the poet's car. To begin with, the young housewife is kept within "the wooden walls of her husband's house" while the poet drives by, "solitary" but free in his machine. Unlike "the ice-man" and "fish-man," the poet has no discreet

function to perform. Nevertheless his final action is to “bow and pass smiling.” Why is he bowing, and how does one bow while driving? This minute formality indexes a difference between the violence of “the noiseless wheels of my car,” which “rush with a crackling sound over / dried leaves,” and middle-class propriety. The social relations this poem puts on display are figured, quite self-consciously, as a relation between things: such as “wooden walls,” “negligee,” “ice” and “fish.” Rather than describing the housewife’s beauty as triumphant, the poet will “compare her to a fallen leaf.” It is a self-consciously poetic simile, evoking Whitman’s gaze specifically. Yet it is a trite, ornamental, comparison—as trite perhaps, as the doctor’s attraction—which the car’s wheels “noiselessly” crush. That crush also allows us to gain purchase on the gender politics of *The Great American Novel*, with its violent machines and screaming woman.

As mentioned previously, the “rush” of the automobile returns in *Al Que Quiere!*, published a year after “The Young Housewife”:

Leaves stir this way then that  
on the baked asphalt, the wheels  
of motor cars rush over the,—  
                    gas smells mingle with leaf smells.  
(CP I 81)

The organic and the machine “mingle” here in a way that is indicative of Williams’ poetic output as a whole. Again bucking modernist dogma, personality continually makes itself felt in Williams’ work, sometimes all the more so for its sly “smile.” The automobile in particular is constitutive of Williams’ poetic bricolage, which layers its materials through lines that splay outward from a “solitary,” but moving center. Often these edges are themselves compared to machinery, but then again might resemble shells. Curiously, it is through Williams’ attack on ornamentation—just as his car crushes leaves—that his

personality makes itself apparent. Williams allows for the commonness of machines while also attending to their strangeness, and indeed implicit separateness from himself: like his poems they are made, rather than given. As we are about to see his cruising provides for a paradoxical experience: the car is self-contained, and solid, but the perspective it offers is fragmentary, sometimes cubist.

Published in the same year as *The Great American Novel*, and also in Paris, *Spring and All* (1923) melds the energies of the automobile with those of growth in spring. In *The Great American Novel* the doctor's car is a source for a new, generative sound. The poems, by contrast, inhabit the perspective of the automobile, which is inseparable from Williams' professional vocation. As Crawford notes:

The opening poem of *Spring and All*—"By the road to the contagious hospital"—is a twofold paradigm [...] in which the narrator catalogs the symptoms of the coming spring as he witnesses them through the window of his car. Thus the automobile (and other transportation and communication technologies) not only lets physicians see things hidden from view but also constructs those objects as symptoms or details by bringing to bear the medical gaze as part of the theatre of proof. (89)

This is the age of the house call, and being a county doctor was both a mode of intimacy and isolation for Williams, part science and part craft. The gaze of the driving doctor is on display throughout *Spring and All*, and accounts not only for the content in view, but also the poems' lineation. In section XI of the book the car's perspective becomes the basis for the poem's cascading syntax, where individual lines, while syntactically linked to one another, each assert the priority of its own subject.

In passing with my mind  
on nothing in the world

but the right of way  
I enjoy on the road by

virtue of the law —  
I saw

an elderly man who  
smiled and looked away

to the north past a house—  
a woman in blue

who was laughing and  
leaning forward to look up

into the man's half  
averted face

and a boy of eight who was  
looking at the middle of

the man's belly  
at a watchchain—

The supreme importance  
of this nameless spectacle

sped me by them  
without a word—

Why bother where I went?  
for I went spinning on the

four wheels of my car  
along the wet road until

I saw a girl with one leg  
over the rail of a balcony  
(*Imaginations* 119-120)

Williams' signature line breaks are put to stunning effect here, offering a host of actors taking up and transforming the driver's vision. The shifting ground of the poem's perspective might cause us to ask if it is the driver's mind, the right of way, the law, the boy of eight, or the woman in blue, which is the dynamo of its progression? There is a centrifugal logic to this movement, which is imaged in the "four wheels of my car" and is

counterpoised by the “watchchain” holding the boy motionless. In the chapter that follows I will consider the interrelation of time and cars, but my aim here is to show how the car in *Spring and All* is enclosed and careening, obscure in its method while employing quotidian language and direct description, thus offering a compelling metaphor for Williams’ work as a whole.

Williams wrote in his 1948 essay “The Poem as a Field of Action” that “money talks, and the poet, the modern poet has admitted new subject matter to his dreams—that is, the serious poet has admitted the whole armamentarium of the industrial age to his poems” (*Selected* 282). In *Spring and All* the automobile is the vehicle for a free-associative play of materials. But as in *The Great American Novel*, the automobile demands a driver, one who in this case brings with him an organic structure and measure. Williams melds machine and human in the prose from *Spring and All*: “the imagination is an actual force comparable to electricity or steam” (207). In both of Williams’ works from 1923, the poet’s imagination seeks to harness the forces of electricity for creative generation. In *The Great American Novel* the anthropomorphizing of the automobile becomes flamboyant, even perverse. In *Spring and All* the distance between the “purposefulness without purpose” of the human imagination and the “rational purposefulness” of machine production for profits is razor thin, and this book’s tone is one of pathos more than humor. Here Williams approaches a condition that Adorno assesses in *Aesthetic Theory*:

The assertion that something is amounts to both more and less and includes the implication that something is not. When Brecht or William Carlos Williams sabotages the poetic and approaches an empirical report, the actual result is by no means such a report: By the polemical rejection of the exalted lyrical tone, the empirical sentences translated into the aesthetic monad acquire an altogether different quality. (123)

The minute, nearly forensic, description of perspective in the preceding poem, while structured from the point of view of a car window, also foregrounds the imagination's distance from the merely existent. Williams' assertion of receptivity to "the whole armamentarium of the industrial age" transforms this influence into something else entirely. Rather than reverting to a Romanic lyricism to hold the industrial age at bay, Williams' poems become a conductive filament, producing new imaginative things alongside—instead of describing—empirical reality.

Without the poet's imagination to order the energies of the machine age, human flourishing is threatened. Aside from "The Red Wheelbarrow," the most famous poem in *Spring and All* is what comes to be titled "To Elsie." Here "The pure products of America / go crazy" for want of any stabilizing tradition:

and young slatterns, bathed  
in filth  
from Monday to Saturday

to be tricked out that night  
with gauds  
from imaginations which have no

peasant traditions to give them  
character  
but flutter and flaunt

sheer rags—succumbing without  
emotion  
save numbed terror

under some hedge or choke-cherry  
or viburnum—  
which they cannot express—  
(131-132)

With imaginings debased by consumer goods, these workingwomen are led astray into the bushes. Their modern worldview, though, is curiously analogous to the frenetic perception these poems themselves put on display: is not the watchchain that catches the boy's attention in the previous poem itself a gaud for the imagination? Williams plays on the line between moral and imaginative dissolution through commercial distraction—reminiscent of the city's "perfume" in *Leaves of Grass*—and his own freewheeling attention that gives dynamic force to his words. The same forces that threaten the imagination also provide a model for how to constellate the diverse objects and experiences of modern life. But unlike the rags turned into shoddy in *The Great American Novel*, the "sheer rags"—young women—of this poem have not been saved by the poet, whose task it is to "express" their mute condition.

Part of the pathos of "To Elsie" is that the doctor is not saved from the poem's indictment against America:

sent out at fifteen to work in  
some hard pressed  
house in the suburbs  
  
some doctor's family, some Elsie—  
voluptuous water  
expressing with broken  
  
brain the truth about us—

This "truth" is the degraded condition of the imagination, which material and sensual impoverishment attests to:

while the imagination strains  
after deer  
going by fields of goldenrod in  
  
the stifling heat of September  
Somehow

it seems to destroy us

It is only in isolate flecks that  
something  
is given off

No one  
to witness  
and adjust, no one to drive the car  
(133)

The automobile that gives coherence to the poem of section XI has here run amuck. Yet the negative inflection of this poem's final lines—"no one to drive the car"—at once reveals its opposite, since the doctor is not only witness to, but also composer of, the perspective offered on his characters' dissolution. The car is figured as symptomatic of the destruction wreaked on the moral life of Americans by products like "cheap / jewelry" (132). But the doctor is no Luddite. What is required is an adept driver, which as we saw in section XI is the poet himself. Williams said that the poet's task is to "use words as objects out of which you manufacture a little mechanism you call a poem which has to deliver the goods" (qtd. in Crawford 89). The automobile is the unified vehicle that can marshal the "goods" of America into an organic vision, which is fueled by the self-generating ground of the imagination.

Without a driver, though, the car is dangerous. As Williams writes in *Kora in Hell: Improvisations* (1920) in response to his own lament, "It is not fair to be old": "Worse is to ride a wheel, a glittering machine that runs without knowing to move" (68). The mindlessness of Elsie's world inheres in the automobile itself. In section XII of *Spring and All* the production of electricity that fascinates the doctor in *The Great American Novel* reappears, alongside menacing cars:

Waves of steel  
from  
swarming backstreets  
shell of coral  
inventing  
electricity—

Lights speckle  
El Greco  
lakes  
in renaissance  
twilight  
with triphammers

which pulverize  
nitrogen  
of old pastures  
to dodge  
motorcars  
with arms and legs  
(125)

Human limbs dodge motorcars just as these staccato lines punctuate space like a triphammer, or speckled lights. This flailing is galvanizing and beautiful in its edginess. It is also strangely organic: a “shell of coral” is washed by “waves of steel.” The sleek lines of American manufacturing find expression here as a tightly wound shell, where the poetic line splays outward only so far before returning to the left hand margin and the center of the poem’s movement. As he puts it in the prose immediately following “To Elsie”: “poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form” (133).

The mutual constitution of organic form with machines is compactly attested to in Williams’ poem that came to be called “The Rose” (from section VI of *Spring and All*). In the prose preceding the poem we are told of Juan Gris’ painting, presumably of “Flowers” (1914), “though I have not seen it in color” (107):

the attempt is being made to separate things of the imagination from life, and obviously, by using the forms common to experience so as not to frighten the onlooker away but to invite him,

the rose is obsolete  
but each petal ends in  
an edge [...]  
(107)

Williams appears to be deriding the mere depiction of flowers here, which is distinct from their imaginative rendering. As Perloff has shown, he inherited this critique from “Apollinaire in his insistence on ‘the falseness of attempting to “copy” nature’” (*Poetics* 111-112). The rose may be an obsolete, Romantic theme in Williams’ view, but if words can themselves make a rose rather than describe it, then they become utterances integral to poetic imagination. As Williams writes a few pages earlier:

What I put down of value will have this value: an escape from crude symbolism, the annihilation of strained associations, complicated ritualistic forms designed to separate the work from “reality”—such as rhyme, meter as meter and not as the essential of the work, one of its words. [...] The word must be put down for itself, not as a symbol of nature but a part, cognizant of the whole—aware—civilized.  
(102)

The words of his poem, then, while separating the imagination from existent things (“life” in the prose preceding “The Rose”), actually allow for a greater reality. The poem has a life of its own, much like a machine does: “From the petal’s edge a line starts / that being of steel” (108). The precision of both machinery and free verse is generative rather than descriptive, made of “infinitely fine” (108) lines that do not depend on a life external to them.

Williams’ poetry continually invites his readers to follow the logic of these lines, which are both mechanistic and organic, and imbued with but not expressive of the poet’s

personality. In section XXIV of *Spring and All* the eroticized leaves of “To a Young Housewife” reappear, again with a two-fold character:

The leaves embrace  
in the trees

it is a wordless  
world

without personality  
I do not

seek a path  
I am still with

Gipsy lips pressed  
to my own—

It is the kiss  
of leaves

without being  
poison ivy

or nettle, the kiss  
of oak leaves—

He who has kissed  
a leaf

need look no further—  
I ascend

through  
a canopy of leaves

and at the same time  
I descend

for I do nothing  
unusual—

I ride in my car  
I think about

prehistoric caves  
in the Pyrenees—

the cave of  
*Les Trois Frères*  
(142-143)

The leaves here follow their own ecstatic logic, but there is still the threat of harm from “To a Young Housewife” that lingers in “poison ivy,” as well as the sexualized exoticism of “Gypsy lips.” The “wordless world” of these leaves is “without personality,” offering a context curiously absent of the generative words emanating from both the machinery and the mother’s screams in *The Great American Novel*. The leaves, instead, make their own world which, following Whitman, is a world of leaves of poems. As we’ve seen in other poems, enjambment in this poem also provides for errant syntactic constructions, such as:

without personality  
I do not

seek a path

This sentence—nestled within the more obvious one for which “wordless / world” is the subject—provides a tautology that manages to be charming in its miniscule or cute evocation of personal impasse. The poet is swept along not on his own steam, but “ascend[s]” and “descend[s]” as though himself a leaf kicked up by the passing wheels of his car.

for I do nothing  
unusual—

I ride in my car  
I think about

prehistoric caves

In creating the point of view of Williams' poems, the car offers small, automatic destabilizations of standard syntactical constructions. The machine made of words, though, remains non-threatening, and is indeed something the poet is compelled to protect, as people are compelled to protect the pre-historic cave paintings discovered in Montesquieu-Avantès by three French brothers only eight years previous to this poem's publication. The car's point of view need be "nothing / unusual," but still allows Williams to break with both the ornamentation and subjectivism associated with nineteenth-century verse. Modernism, like first bloom of spring, is its own justification.

Williams' machines made of words are as much a continuation of Whitman's melding of the organic and the machine as they are a separation from a cruder symbolism. In pairing Whitman and Williams we see that there is an imperative for experimental American poets across the divide of modernism: to find new words for articulating American experience. And those new words, as well as innovative poetic forms, continually harness productive capacities, both human and machine. William's Romantic lineage does not exclude machine technology, but rather seeks to imagine machinery as providing for human, poetic ends. Both Whitman and Williams wage battle against European traditions they worry will overshadow organic American innovations. Williams makes of the automobile—dangerous without a driver—a primary metaphor for poetic expression. His verbal expression is both reeling—mixing poetry and prose—as well as minutely precise with its shell and steel-like edges. Williams' figuring of poetic utterance, whether as a mother's scream that drowns out the hum of industry, or as itself "inventing electricity," conceives of free verse as primal and generative, emphasizing open forms that mingle inner drives with technological developments. This is an

imaginative relation for Williams, full of the pathos of the distance between the purposes of art and machines. As we saw with *The Great American Novel*, this distance between human and industrial production can also be put to flamboyant and humorous effect.

What would it mean, though, to actually marry machines and art for a unified, organic, purpose?

### ***Machine Art***

As we have seen, Williams eschewed utilitarian ends for verse, declaring, “poetry is a rival government always in opposition to its cruder replicas” (*Selected* 180). While he played on the contradiction between artistic production for its own sake and industrial production for supposedly utilitarian ends, Pound sought to definitively bridge the gap. In seeking an art shorn of ornamentation, Pound came to imagine function and creative making, or *technê*, as one. He was preoccupied with machinery ever since coming into contact with the work of the Italian Futurists. R. John Williams has shown how rather than emulating the Futurists veneration for planes, cars, and bombs, Pound sought to create art “based on what he saw as the correlative aesthetic of machine energy and Chinese ideography” (118). Williams shows American artists using “Asia-as-technê” as the antidote to and the perfection of Western machine culture. While my focus is not Pound’s adaptation of the Chinese ideogram, it is worth pausing briefly to appreciate how the story Williams tells is also one, from another angle, of the imbrication of the organic and the machine.

Pound inherited the name for his “Imagisme” movement from T. E. Hulme (Kenner 178), who contrasted “geometric art” with “the art we are accustomed to [which

is] vital and organic” (Hulme 269). As Williams has shown, it is with Hulme’s 1914 talk, “The New Art and its Philosophy” that Pound encountered support for a machine aesthetic through which he could (rhetorically) distinguish himself from Futurism, which had been stealing the show in England, as in Italy (112-113). Hulme states, “I don’t want anyone to suppose, for example, that I am speaking of futurism which is, in its logical form, the exact opposite of the art I am describing, being the deification of the flux, the last efflorescence of impressionism” (277). Hulme’s transhistorical contrast between “vital or organic art” and a “geometrical art” of abstraction is a defining moment in modernism’s rhetoric against an overwrought, ornamental art, which is associated with Romanticism. Pound’s adaptation of the Chinese ideogram became a way to sublimate the contest between the machine and the organic, and serves indeed as primary instantiation of the marriage of vitalism and machines in twentieth-century poetics. Williams has shown how Pound’s veneration of the machine aesthetic turned Ernest Fenollosa’s pastoral and static—indeed anti-industrial—conception of *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry* (1918) into something else entirely: a vortex concentrating what Pound considered “maximum energy” and “greatest efficiency” (114). These phrases are from the inaugural issue of *Blast* (1914), where Pound is very clear about the provenance of his terms for his new movement, “Vorticism”: “We use the words ‘greatest efficiency’ in the precise sense—as they would be used in a text book of MECHANICS” (Ibid.). Pound’s modernism is based on his adaptation of both the energy and shape (and as we are about to see, sound) of machines toward poetic ends that value the same kind of precision we saw at work in W. C. Williams’ poems. Yet Pound

(following Hulme's rhetoric) all the while obscures the organicist or vitalist provenance of his art.

Curiously, though, this is about the same moment when Pound is making his "Pact" with Whitman's organicism. In the April 1913 issue of *Poetry*, Pound offered the following, now famous, reckoning of his American Romantic predecessor:

#### A PACT

I make truce with you, Walt Whitman—  
I have detested you long enough.  
I come to you as a grown child  
Who has had a pig-headed father;  
I am old enough now to make friends.  
It was you that broke the new wood,  
now it is time for carving.  
We have one sap and one root—  
Let there be commerce between us.  
(*New* 39)

What does Pound's later evaluation of the "heave" that broke the pentameter mean alongside this appreciation of Whitman as the poet who "broke the new wood"? In the final two lines of his pact Pound links the organic common ground he shares with Whitman—"one sap and one root"—to the possibility of "commerce between us." With the onset of the Great Depression both Pound and Williams would come to share a preoccupation with the English economist Major Douglas' Social Credit theories (Mariani 348), and already in 1913 "commerce" appears to signal for Pound an activity engaged in by self-possessed men. The wood may be broken, but there is "one root" premising equal exchange. It is a strained relationship, though, with Whitman invoked as "a pig-headed father." Indeed, as we are about to see, there is no room in Pound's mature vision for such mixed roots.

Pound eventually sought to take the machine aesthetic toward new ends, to where there was no longer any question about the social utility of the artwork. R. John Williams writes, “whereas Fenollosa had argued that, ‘debilitated minds crave a perfect machinery for learning art,’ in *Machine Art*, Pound maintains, ‘Objection to machines has probably disappeared from all, save a few belated crania’” (119). Unpublished in his lifetime, Pound’s “Machine Art,” written in Italy between 1927 and 1930, sketches the possibility of orchestrating machine noise into a more sonorous kind of making. Just as verse is to be ruled by economy—“To use no word that does not contribute to the presentation” (87)—industrial economy can itself come to liken music. In this piece Pound furthers T. S. Eliot’s attack in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1921) on the cult of personality associated with Romantic poetry. Machines, for Pound, have jettisoned this problem: “the aesthetic of machines is still in a healthy state, because one can still think about the machine without dragging in the private life and personality of the inventor” (58). Where Williams saw the American valorization of technology and science as in part threatening to the imaginative arts, Pound lauded industrial products for their craftsmanship and function and sought a comparable vocation for all forms of making, including poetry.

Even industrial products, though, can have ornamentation superfluous to their function: “When we come to the automobiles deluxe, we are distracted by all sorts of related or irrelevant questions. The machine proper is hidden under its hood. All sorts of traditional aesthetics, feeling for furniture, upholstery, carrosserie [*sic*], enter the problem” (69). Could it be that the same excesses that can supposedly hinder our proper appreciation of the function of a Ford car inhere, likewise, in the sounds of industrial production? “When I consider the disagreeable noises I have heard in factories it seems to

me that they are mainly disagreeable for one sole reason, namely they are not organized. Some screech continues too long; some repeat is irregular in an unpleasant manner” (73). Perfect function, Pound imagines, would also be perfect art, and music. He concedes, albeit skeptically, that such bad noise “*may* be due to ‘the needs of work’,” while “other noises are not inherent in the needs of work, they are merely noises that have not been considered as sonority. No one has thought of using them for the ease and refreshment of the workers. They are a waste and bad practice. Just as bad ventilation is bad policy” (73-74). Industrial production should be even more functional in being organized sonorously, according to Pound. Rather than ornamental, such organization would realize the great potential of machinery, as a form of making where function and pleasure are mutually construed.

Indeed, the point for Pound is to meld the generative power inherent in nature to the production of art, so that the two are synonymous. In her otherwise compelling account of Pound’s inhabitation of a machine aesthetic, Cecilia Tichi oversteps the mark (as she did in contrasting Williams with Whitman) in claiming that “Pound could make his vorticist argument on maximal energy from the model of machine technology, not organic form” (93). We gain a better understanding of Pound’s aesthetics and politics if we consider his veneration of machines as, instead, an *extension* of his organicism. As Maria Luisa Ardizzone explains in her introduction to his essay:

In Aristotle, nature contains in itself the generative principle, while the art object does not. *Machine Art* takes up this distinction, because the motor as the focus of energy is akin to the productive power of nature. [...] Nature as the process of growth is connected to *technê*, thus supporting a kind of osmosis between the generative process of nature and man’s productive activity. (22)

Nature does not need ornamentation, as its function is immediately bound to the pleasures it may afford. By making art explicitly purposeful—like machinery—it will in fact, Pound thinks, be of a piece with natural generation. Williams stands in complex relation to Pound on this question, as Williams both wanted words to be generative, while not wanting them to be reduced to utilitarian ends. For Pound, functional making—*techné*—is generation par excellence; the ultimate artistry marries function to form. Pound seeks, in short, to leave behind the paradox of art for its own sake, which according to Adorno is the double bind of artworks.

Strikingly, for anyone who has been dumbfounded by Pound's obscurity, he seeks to "oppose and block the process of abstraction" (13), which he associates with non-productive activity, such as usury. One might productively read Pound's war on abstraction and his veneration of immediacy as a reaction to the real abstraction of value, which as we've seen, Whitman and Williams likewise tarried with in seeking sensuous relationships with commodities. More to Pound's point, bureaucracy becomes the ultimate example of inefficiency and waste—in effect a bad ornamentation:

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

The aim of economy, according to the more enlightened economists is to release more energy for invention and design. Bureaucracy doesn't. (77)

In decrying inefficient organization Pound makes common cause with Fascism. As he goes on to put it, "the tyrant is biologically preferable to the bureaucrat, at least he has in him some principle of life and action" (78). The perfect form of organization,

furthermore, while demanding a conductor capable of independent life and action, must also disavow non-generative practices such as usury.

It should come as little surprise then that Henry Ford is given the stamp of approval by Pound, and not for his democratic thought:

An organization like Henry Ford's is probably feudal. I use the word here with a sense of, relatively, very high commendation; it implies the responsibility of the overlord to his vassals; and implies a very different mode of thought from that implied by the abusive term "industrial system" or "industrialism." (80)

What distinguishes Feudalism for Pound, in contrast to "Kublai Khan" or "the Byzantine empire" is that it "was founded on produce" (80). And such production can only be helped by orchestrating machine production as music, just as Ford sought to orchestrate the consumption and lifestyle of his workers. Pound imagines that he and Ford are ultimately of the same mind:

He might have a dozen reasons for not experimenting in sonority. There might be any number of obstacles; there might be any number of reasons, invisible in Rapallo, why experiments in the practice of sonorous division would not give an immediate yield in the auto or tractor business; but I should be very much surprised if Ford found the idea utterly mad, or its ultimate practice unthinkable. (81)

Pound fashions himself as the industrialist's poet, in a move that would likely have seemed odd to Williams, who so incessantly struggled with the provincialism of American art. In accord with developments in machine technology, not least the assembly line, Pound conceived of new possibilities for artistic achievement. While one possibility was evinced by George Antheil's score for *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), which included airplane propellers, sirens, and electric bells, Pound declared, by contrast, that "it is not for me a question of taking an impression of machine noise and reproducing it in the

concert hall or of making any more noise, but composing, governing, the noise that we've got" (76).

Pound's veneration of machine technology is of a piece with his poetics of the immediate image. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing has elaborated in relation to Pound's "idea of the image," namely the ideogram: "What is indeed new about his image is precisely its repression of rhetoric" (5). The generative quality of the image is, like the function of the motor, meant to be self-apparent and natural, rather than discursive and particular.

Pound's presentational image suppresses and naturalizes the rhetoric of figuration by representing figuration as spontaneous and immediate perception. Nonmetrical verse and verbal economy – literally, deleting grammatical connections, which also stylizes language and performs the function of meter – are deployed to represent unmediated perception. Eventually, even the grandly persuasive and highly didactic thrust of the *Cantos* can be naturalized, and rhetorically motivated arguments can be presented as self-evident, absolute truths revealed by the "adequacy" of Pound's technique. (7)

To repress rhetoric and to valorize technique as the means to immediate utterance is at its core organicist. The technique of the ideogram is propounded as more natural than a corrupt discursive logic, to which grammar is an especially guilty abettor. Likewise the motor without ornamentation is imagined as inherently functional and—in so far as its clean edges signal its potential orchestration—poetic.

The melding of function and sound that Pound hopes for in the factory is a logical extension of his organicist poetics. Blasing has, more than anyone, made apparent the connection between the modernist valorization of technique and the organicist myth of immediacy:

If language is used properly and scientifically – if it is purified of the contamination of rhetoric and historical corruption – its operations will coincide with those of natural process. Thus the "test" of "a man's sincerity" – whether he gives us rhetoric or truth, whether he observes or interprets nature – is his "technique" (Pound, *Literary Essays*). Reifying technique and repressing rhetoric

by appealing to universal, natural truths are the hallmarks of Pound's modernism. Such a mystification or sacralization of technique, authored by nature, marks a late phase of organicism, which continues to inform the Olsonian strand of contemporary verse. (8)

Rather than displaying its use of formal techniques as rhetorical and particular, Pound offers a poetics where natural immediacy is evinced by technical rigor. The truth of nature inheres in a scientific apprehension of form, making "free verse" authoritative in a way that no metrical traditions ever aspired to be.

In the same decade Pound wrote "Machine Art," Walter Benjamin warned in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1935-1939) of the ungodly marriage between machines and tradition: "The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its *Führer* cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values" (241). The mechanical production of art such as cinema is the death knell of traditional, auratic art, according to Benjamin. Machine production, furthermore, holds forth liberatory possibilities for the new mass audience it inaugurates, and so its enlisting to the rear-guard cause of producing an auratic work of art that is meant to hold its participants enthralled—as Pound imagines the workers in his sonic factory—is the gateway to barbarism. As Tim Beasley-Murray points out, for Benjamin artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction can be more organic than the desiccated husks of auratic art, and Benjamin "attribut[es] a form of revitalized unfolding to modern media such as cinema" (783). In the next chapter we will see what this can look like through Frank O'Hara's film collaboration with Alfred Leslie. My point here, though, is that Pound's totalizing aesthetic, which sought to forge auratic experience with machines, was considered politically dangerous even by his contemporaries.

Pound's veneration of scientific method is much more acute than Williams', who as we've seen was ambivalent about both the utility of art and using industrial production as a model for poetry. Being a county doctor had as much to do with an older, communal sense of vocation, as it did with scientific precision. While Williams invokes the hum of the electric power plant as a primal word in *The Great American Novel*, and uses the motion of the automobile as a locus of his montages in *Spring and All*, both his self-deprecating humor in the former book, and the danger he ascribes to automobiles in the latter, index his distance from Pound's mania for machines. In contrast to Pound's poetics, Williams' writing in 1923 is self-consciously rhetorical. For Williams the machine is a spur to poetic innovation, but threatens to overshadow the generative force of human imagination, which for him is primary. The presence of the personality of the doctor-poet in his work belies any pretense these works might have to being shorn of rhetoric or figuration. Williams' shoddiness likewise saves him from the authoritarianism of Pound's organicism, which seeks the absolute repression of personality, leading to fascism.

Pound and Williams offer two roads from Whitman. All three poets promulgate an incarnational organicism that can't help but link industrial production and modern commerce to a poetics of self-generating words. This generation is conceived as natural and organic, as Pound's pact with Whitman makes clear: "we have one sap and one root." Whitman's universality, though, sought to affirm the manifold of social existence, whereas Pound is at pains to judge and dispense with what he considered its unproductive aspects. Whitman's invitation to the reader to open their throat to a generative hum is a far cry from Pound's declaration of identity between nature and his manifestly particular

utterances. Pound's development of parataxis and indeed his epic cataloguing has proved decisive not only for what Blasing considers "the Olsonian strand of contemporary verse," but as we shall see in the next chapter, also for reactions against it by poets such as Frank O'Hara. Prefiguring this reaction, Williams' ironic, though probably unintentional, adaptation of Whitman's hum offers a critique of its givenness. The organic—rather than being natural and universal—is a powerful construct for Williams, one that he perceived as defining for American identity. But it is a construct nonetheless, inviting poetic elaboration, full of humor and pathos, which appreciates the historical contingency of its innovative materials.

## CHAPTER THREE

### FRANK O'HARA DRIVES CHARLES OLSON'S CAR

*Poetry is as useful as a machine!*

—O'Hara, from "Memorial Day 1950"

"The substantive element of artistic modernism draws its power from the fact that the most advanced procedures of material production and organization are not limited to the sphere in which they originate. In a manner scarcely analyzed yet by sociology, they radiate out into areas of life far removed from them, deep into the zones of subjective experience, which does not notice this and guards the sanctity of its reserves."

—Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 34

The Ford Motor Company started production of its Model T in 1908, well before the Great War. Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas drove one through France as volunteers, moving supplies and soldiers. As we saw in the last chapter, William Carlos Williams drove a Ford around Rutherford, New Jersey, writing poems and delivering babies, while Ezra Pound imagined orchestrating the noises of factory production as music. But it wasn't until after World War II, with the generalization of the Fordist social compact, that the automobile came to define American literature and culture. At the height of the

postwar boom, many poets projected themselves into a fantastic future that was nevertheless coupled to death, not least by automobile. For them the car symbolized personal freedom on the one hand and on the other the monotony of production and the social conformity it entailed. From Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) and Robert Creeley's "I Know a Man," to Andy Warhol's car crashes in his *Death and Disaster* series (started in 1963), Gregory Corso's *Gasoline* (1958), and not least the driver in the ditch in George Oppen's *Of Being Numerous* (1968), the automobile serves in this era as the vehicle par excellence of male pathos, carrying the burdens of both personal immediacy and individual finitude.

Creeley's concise "I Know A Man" (1962) is particularly evocative in this regard:

As I sd to my  
 friend, because I am  
 always talking,—John, I  
  
 sd, which was not his  
 name, the darkness sur-  
 rounds us, what  
  
 can we do against  
 it, or else, shall we &  
 why not, buy a goddamn big car,  
  
 drive, he sd, for  
 christ's sake, look  
 out where yr going.  
 (132)

These oft-commented upon lines have been taken by many critics to enact a confrontation with "existential despair" (Davidson 64) and "the horror of the void" (Altieri, "Unsure" 164), with little or no mention of the historical particularity of Creeley's conflict between "Man" and the automobile. However transhistorical reckonings with "the void" might be, Creeley's peculiar enactment of this confrontation is specific to his era. His use of

enjambment—even within words—coupled to the theme of the car as a deadly escape from alienated selves, emerges during the apex of assembly line production, which helped fuel American economic supremacy, and in the same breath anxieties about conformity and global and individual death.

Both through Creeley's prosody and thematically, driving, saying, and crashing are all of a piece here, which—per the poem's title—speaks to the condition of at least *this* man. Syntactic expectations are consistently shot through in "I Know a Man" by the breaks of Creeley's poetic line, which are parceled out as though so many motions on a conveyor belt. Words like "surrounds" have been split in two, and others like "said" and "your" have had the middle scooped out of them, thereby accentuating them as functional units of sounds as much as integral signifiers. O'Hara noted of Creeley (and Denise Levertov), "the amazing thing is that where they've pared down so that the experience presumably will come through as strongly as possible, it's the experience of their paring it down that comes through more strongly and not the experience that is the subject" (Lucie-Smith 23). Creeley, in his self-conscious minimalism, hammers away at words, making them conspicuous as bare materials for his poetic construction of, and confrontation with, a world where "Man" is flying off the edge.

The dialectic between immediacy and alienation evinced in "I Know a Man," where the drive for direct engagement and self-possession emerges from and at once calls forth a fear of severance and fatality, inheres in the regime of postwar capital accumulation that has been termed Fordism.<sup>35</sup> Fordism provided for a novel kind of

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<sup>35</sup> I use the term "Fordism" as it was developed in the 1960s "by a number of Italian Marxists (R. Panzieri, M. Tronti, A. Negri) and then by the French regulation school (M. Aglietta,

immediacy and freedom—often symbolized by the car—for certain sectors of the labor force. Yet the production (and for factory workers, purchasing) of automobiles was premised upon the regulation of work by minutes and seconds of repetitive movements. The conflicted status of the automobile, as a bearer of both freedom and alienation, emerges in Charles Olson’s dreamscape poem “As the Dead Prey Upon Us,” anthologized in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry 1945-1960* (1960). As I will show, the poet’s depiction of his car in this poem produces an instructive ideational complex, melding a preoccupation with masculine authority and autonomy with anxieties about the racial hegemony of Fordism as well as the degradations of commercial culture.

Olson’s markings of precise clock time in this and other poems had a palpable influence on Frank O’Hara’s “I do this I do that” style, not least in his most anthologized poem, “The Day Lady Died.” The main argument of this chapter is that O’Hara inherited both a poetics of breath and his signature style in part from Olson, but did so in ways that interrogated Olson’s claims for poetic authenticity. More specifically, when O’Hara marks time in his poems (“It is 12:20 in New York”) he is in the shadow of Olson; but rather than striving for immediacy by such markings, O’Hara foregrounds how “authenticity” and “immediacy” are always-already mediated by their opposite, in this case postwar consumer culture and productive relations. In retrospect, it is as though O’Hara’s attachment to fated celebrities serves as a metaphor for the inflated prospects of Fordism. Both O’Hara and Olson knew that the fortunes of postwar America were built on the mass destruction of World War Two, allowing O’Hara to write, “I historically

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R. Boyer, B. Coriat, A. Lipietz) as a name for the model of economic development *actually* established in advanced capitalist countries after World War II” (Lipietz 230).

belong to the enormous bliss of American death” (CP 326). Of course, death haunts every future. O’Hara’s poetry is known for its fascination with celebrity, personality, and the proliferation of cars as well as smaller commodities in postwar New York. But, rather than blankly affirming these phenomena, he consistently portrays his attachment to such objects as itself deadly, and “The Day Lady Died” includes aspects of supposedly personal experience that are indeed thing-like. These themes culminate in O’Hara’s collaboration with Alfred Leslie on the film *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964), wherein an interracial couple drives through Manhattan with a timer strapped to the dashboard. O’Hara offers a pastiche of Fordist construction here that doesn’t spare his own poetry, which serves as the film’s subtitles. This auto-critique, if you will, reveals O’Hara’s sustained preoccupation with the necessary fiction of personal immediacy, and the limits to its poetic utterance.

O’Hara inherits this fiction from Whitman, while he at once provides a poetic send-up of Olson’s vexed attempt to inscribe his autonomy from commercial culture through an organic machinery, which for its part is also Whitmanic. As in the last chapter, then, here we also have two roads from Whitman. Olson’s poetics carries forward Pound’s valorization of technique, while seeking more democratic ends. O’Hara inherits both Williams’ enthusiastic exclamation marks and his foregrounding of the eros and pathos of personality, which stands in contrast to the machine organicism of the Pound-Olson tradition. Williams’ cruising in his automobile has a lot in common with O’Hara’s reeling in New York City, while Olson—as I will show—makes the car into a metaphor for his poetics of technê. That Olson’s car fails to cohere from the start is itself a poignant recognition of the inherent limits to Pound’s project.

## **“Projective Verse”**

Olson’s “Projective Verse,” first published in the relatively staid *Poetry New York*, reprinted as a pamphlet by LeRoi Jones’s avant-garde Totem Press, and then canonized in the *New American Poetry*, is by many accounts the most influential North American poetics manifesto since WWII. Olson declares that his aim is to “get us, inside the machinery, now, 1950, of how projective verse is made” (*Prose* 241). The typewriter, according to Olson, allows for men to take direct control over their means of poetic production:

The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used, but which leads directly on toward projective verse and its consequences. It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space pretensions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rhyme and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (245)

The poet is no longer alienated from his means of production here, and for the first time he can have an exchange with his reader unmediated by obfuscating materials inherited from undemocratic traditions. Indeed, it is the poet’s voice—that “place of *origin*” (Ibid.) for both Olson and Whitman—that the typewriter will transfer to the life of the reader, who can now voice it anew in authentic form.<sup>36</sup> We might add then another irony, namely that the fantasy of this direct transfer, rather than reemerging for the first time since print with the typewriter, was already for Whitman the enabling fiction of his verse. Whitman,

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<sup>36</sup> On Olson’s fiction of immediacy from a media studies perspective see “Chapter 20: The Poet’s Stave and Bar” in Wershler-Henry 166-176.

remember, directs his reader to “loose the stop from *your* throat” (my italics), demanding of them a corporeal, indeed sexualized, enactment of his verse.

Olson’s poet as “the ‘Single Intelligence’” is “the Boss of all,” that is, both of the syllable and of the line (*Prose* 242). “And the line comes (I swear it) from the breath, from the breathing of the man who writes, and thus is, it is there that, the daily work, the WORK, gets in, for only he, the man who writes, can declare, at every moment, the line its metric and its ending—where its breathing shall come to, termination” (Ibid.). The typewriter can be felt in Olson’s overuse of commas, in his capitalizations and italicizations, and in the starts and stops and ultimate rest that ends the above sentence. The poet’s machine allows for the fiction that we are reading the organic mechanics of a man’s pausing to breathe, where at the end of the sentence he pushes back the roller of the typewriter and finally pauses at the period where his breath expires. This direct control by the poet of his craft is an essential part of the difference between the projective and the “non-projective,” with the latter consisting of inherited rhythms and materials, rather than those which the poet can, we are meant to believe, hold in his hands and shape to his own ends.

Heriberto Yépez, in his recently translated creative criticism of Olson, *The Empire of Neomemory*, has argued for the collusion of Olson’s body with machinery:

I believe no one has noted until now that one of the most paradigmatic essays of North American poetics takes as its fundamental concern how to pass the breath of the body (sexual) to the replacement body (the textual body). “Projective Verse” is a tract about how to make a text into a living body that breathes—assisted, says Olson, by the mechanographic machine—how to make of the text, one might say, a *Frankenstein* or *spiritual cyborg*. (15)

Yépez, while he doesn’t muster much evidence for his argument here, has emphasized what is perhaps most striking about “Projective Verse.” He continues, “what Olson was

looking for was to transfer his life from the fearsome body to the artificial body. His literature, as strange as this might sound, is prolegomenon to the exploration of the post-human. Or, better yet, as I would prefer to say: Olson speculates on the *neocorpus*" (15-6). Olson himself used the terms "post-modern, the post-humanist, the post-historic" in 1952 to laud those writers (like Melville and D. H. Lawrence) who "broke the spell" (*Prose* 207) of what Olson considered an obfuscating metaphysics. In a short piece on Lawrence from 1950 Olson concludes: "For Lawrence knew, as no metaphysician ever does, the discipline and health of form, organic form as distinguished from that false form which arrangements of the intellect, in its false speed, offer" (*Prose* 137). "False form" echoes here Olson's judgment of non-projective, inherited form from "Projective Verse," while in this essay on Lawrence Olson considers false any arrogation of "the profoundest of all sensualities," namely the sexed body. Strikingly, it is Olson's struggle with metaphysics that leads to his articulation of the "post-humanist" complex of the organic machine that was inaugurated by the Enlightenment.

Olson's anxiety over "false speed" refracts throughout his corpus, back to his reminiscence of his father in "The Post Office" (1948), which we are about to consider, and forward to his mature poetry. "Speed," though, has by no means a purely negative connotation for Olson. Its valence depends upon if it is the individual, or an obfuscating metaphysics, that determines its rate. Yet, as we will see, this distinction is untenable. In "Projective Verse" Olson writes:

I think it [the *process* of the thing] can be boiled down to one statement (first pounded into my head by Edward Dahlberg): ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION. It means exactly what it says, is a matter of, at *all* points (even, I should say, of our management of daily reality as of the daily work) get on with it, keep moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split

second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen. And if you also set up as a poet, USE USE USE the process at all points, in any given poem always, always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (240)

As Libbie Rifkin has perspicaciously noted, “There’s a certain Fordism in these injunctions, compromised only by their desperate tone” (52). Olson becomes here the boss of his own assembly line, where the kinetic energy of his poetic construct must hold itself taut so as to ensure its immediacy. As he writes two pages later, “contemporary workers go lazy RIGHT HERE WHERE THE LINE IS BORN” (242). Olson’s poet finds himself *on the line*, then, in several respects. Firstly, he is putting himself at stake, attesting to his authenticity. This posturing, secondly, is inscribed in the poem’s *lineation*, with the poet’s breath as measure. Finally, as a “contemporary worker” the poet compares his work to that of the *assembly line*, while his poetic utterances are produced by an organic measure rather than regulated time. This last part is crucial—in breaking from traditional meter, the projective poet is also breaking from measured time, but rather than becoming “lazy” this allows him to be all the more “taut.”<sup>37</sup>

Olson’s line management conceives the typewriter as providing for the writer’s physical immediacy, while also lauding the poet’s speedy writing as an antidote to conformity. This complex, of individual freedom against the regulation of time by the demands of capital accumulation, inheres in the terms of Fordist production. Henry Ford implemented the five-dollar-a day wage in 1914 to stem the flood of automobile workers

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<sup>37</sup> My use of gendered pronouns here and elsewhere in this essay is not simply generic. Rather, as I argue, Olson’s poet is figured as peculiarly masculine. Yet this didn’t prevent women poets such as Joanne Kyger, Anne Waldman, Susan Howe, and Kathleen Fraser from putting “Projective Verse” to their own uses, not least through the typographical experimentation enabled by the typewriter. (I am indebted to an anonymous reader for *Arizona Quarterly* for pointing this out, and to Stephen Fredman for identifying the above poets.)

walking off the job in response to de-skilling, as well as to neutralize the appeal of the Industrial Workers of the World, who had started organizing in his plants (Braverman 103). As Harry Braverman comments, “conceding higher relative wages for a shrinking proportion of workers in order to guarantee uninterrupted production was to become, particularly after the Second World War, a widespread feature of corporate labor policy, especially after it was adopted by union leadership” (103). Higher wages for relatively deskilled work for a relatively privileged section of the labor force was a crucial aspect of the postwar social compact, during which “living standards rose, crisis tendencies were contained, mass democracy was preserved and the threat of inter-capitalist wars kept remote” (Harvey, *Condition* 129). As David Harvey puts it, Fordism was “a total way of life. Mass production meant standardization of product as well as mass consumption; and this meant a whole new aesthetic and commodification of culture” (135). While Fordism was constituted by “a division between a predominantly white, male, and highly unionized work force and ‘the rest’” (138), the privilege afforded white men as breadwinners in the postwar boom was inextricable from their downsizing to mere moving parts on the assembly line.<sup>38</sup> The flip side of the social conformity demanded by both assembly-line production, and the reproduction of the Fordist social compact, is the driver spinning out of control and crashing. As with Olson’s typewriter the automobile comes, in the literature of this period, to be associated with existential freedom, but also, through figures such as James Dean and Jackson Pollock—who were particularly

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<sup>38</sup> While black workers entered northern factories in unprecedented numbers during and after World War II, few achieved the purchasing power of white workers; the latter also benefited from discriminatory federal housing policy. As Thomas Sugrue writes in his study of Detroit, “black workers were disproportionately concentrated in poor-paying secondary sector jobs (in service work, for example) or in the worst ‘subordinate jobs’ in the primary sector (unskilled, janitorial, and assembly work)” (92).

relevant for O'Hara—to be associated with the death and disaster of the very white men who were the icons of the boom.

### **“As the Dead Prey Upon Us”**

Olson's complex mediation of Fordism in his poetics begins with his relationship with his father, whose failure to resist the Fordist modernization of the postal service spurs Olson's attempt to harness it in his poetry. He narrates the crisis of his youth in Worcester, Massachusetts during the interwar period in “The Post Office,” which revolves around his father's resistance to, rather than embodiment of, speed. In 1920 the elder Olson took off work for a trip with his son to Plymouth to commemorate the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Pilgrim landing, using vacation-time that his bosses had revoked at the last minute in retaliation for his organizing activities. This act of defiance by the father ensured a bitter and continuing workplace struggle until his death at the age of fifty-two. “What he was after, what all the legislation he pushed was directed against, was the speed-up” (*Prose* 45). “He was opposition. He was fighting for pride in work which is personality. It is that simple” (46). In a fascinating passage Olson outlines the forces responsible for his father's plight, and then descends into the dialect of minstrelsy:

Behind his bosses were the postal inspectors. Behind them [Postmaster General] Burleson. Behind Burleson the huge forfeit of pro-duction. It is old George Harris' proposition: bishops eats elders, elders eats common peopil, they eats sich cattail as me, I eats possums, possums eats chickens, chickens swallows wums, an' wums is content to eat dus, an' dus is the aind uv hit all.

Only hit ain't. The dus is the kulchur daid on the groun'. For example. My father was old fashion. He had notions having to do with courtesy, modesty, care, proportion, respect. He had them confused with his work. (230)

Through invoking the character George Harris—the inventive, righteous, and put-upon slave from Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852)—Olson compares his

father's struggle against the Fordist restructuring of the postal service to the condition of American slaves fighting for emancipation.<sup>39</sup> I will return shortly to the politics of Olson's use of black dialect here.

Olson's identification of his father's condition with that of other minorities in America recurs in *The Maximus Poems*:

my father a Swedish  
wave of  
migration after  
Irish? like Negroes  
now like Leroy and Malcolm  
X the final wave  
of wash upon this  
desperate  
ugly  
cruel  
Land this Nation  
which never  
lets anyone  
come to  
shore  
(496-497)

The tragedy of the inaccessible American shore is evident in the family tragedy he dates from his father's heroic determination to take him to Plymouth:

my father  
And I  
on the same land      like Pilgrims  
come to shore  
                 he paid  
                 with his life dear Love to take me  
                 to Plymouth  
                 for their  
                 tercentenary  
(496)

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<sup>39</sup> For another fascinating moment of Olson identifying with the history of slavery, in his poem "Glyph" (1951), see Belgrad 87-94.



page. His dreamscape becomes an allegory of the car's underbelly, which is as much the poet's unconscious, as workshop of the world.

Indeed, it isn't difficult to get the impression that "the dead" in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" are the proletarian underbelly of capital accumulation, whereas their "living labor," in being objectified in commodities, has become so much "dead labor" (to use Marx's phrase), now preying on the living.<sup>40</sup> These dead, gathered in the poem's opening stanzas around Olson's mother in the living room, "are desperate with the tawdriness of their life in hell."

I turned to the young man on my right and asked, "How is it,  
there?" And he begged me protestingly don't ask, we are poor  
poor. And the whole room was suddenly posters  
and presentations  
of brake linings and other automotive accessories, cardboard  
displays, the dead roaming from one to another  
as bored back in life as they are in hell, poor and doomed  
to mere equipments.  
(Allen 28)

Olson's dead are as much the cogs of production as soulless consumers. This whole scene takes place, furthermore, while a movie is being projected in the room, with "some record / playing on the victrola," both of which are markers for Olson of a deadening commercial culture (28). Olson hated what in *Maximus* he refers to as "mu-sick," such as commercial jingles, and "the trick / of corporations, newspapers, slick magazines, movie houses" (14), and decried that "all had become billboards" and "even silence, is spray-gunned" (6). As Stephen Fredman has shown, Olson "links Pound's emphasis on the

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<sup>40</sup> "Capital is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx, *Capital* 342).

vernacular and on melopoeia to the disastrous ascendancy of consumerism in contemporary America” (*Grounding* 85):

(o Statue,  
o Republic, o  
Tell-A-Vision, the best  
is soap. The true troubadours  
are CBS. Melopoeia

is for Cokes by Cokes out of  
Pause  
(*Maximus* 75 cited in Fredman 85)

Paradoxically, though, Olson seeks to win autonomy from commercial culture through the self-possession machinery can afford, whether that of the typewriter or the automobile. And as if to illustrate the contradiction of masculine self-possession through Fordism, Olson’s car is falling apart.

The subtle sexual cross-dressing of this poem, where Olson’s masculine solidity seems to be unraveling until its embodiment—the car—is on top of him, echoes and inverts the preoccupations of Olson’s preceding poem in Allen’s anthology, “The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs.” This poem vaunts the masculine self-possession of a motorcycle gang, where the machine becomes a phallus, again coupled to breathing:

Except for the stirring of their leader, they are still  
catching their breath. They are almost like scooters the way  
they sit there, up a little, on their thing. It is as though  
the extra effort of it tired them the most. Yet that just there  
was where their weight and separateness – their immensities –  
lay.  
(26)

This is a poem about “ambiguous Fathers,” which Rachel Blau DuPlessis has convincingly read as consistent with Olson’s gender politics, in terms that translate to “As the Dead Prey Upon Us:” “So this motorcycle gang is an amalgam of

hypermasculinity, homosociality, male display, and outright phallicism as knowledge” (*Purple* 112). In “The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs” the poet is in awe of the sexual prowess of the members of the motorcycle gang, substantiated in their straddling of their machines. While their breath may have gotten away from them for a moment, they are “catching” it. In “As the Dead Prey Upon Us” the poet is suddenly beneath his deflated machine, which he can’t get started—signaling an anxious recognition that his own “air” (or breath) isn’t going to be enough to get the job done.

Olson’s phallicism unravels in “As the Dead Prey Upon Us,” leading him to bolster his materials by extraneous means. A primitive vehicle suddenly appears in the poem, with a striking racial identity:

O the dead!

And the Indian woman and I  
enabled the blue deer  
to walk

and when it got to the kitchen,  
out of our sight,  
it talked  
Negro talk.

It was like walking a jackass,  
and its talk  
was the pressing gabber of gammers,  
of old women

We helped it walk around the room  
because it was seeking socks  
or shoes for its hooves  
now that it was acquiring

human possibilities  
(28-29)

The poet, along with his Indian woman, are successful in this instance of getting this jackass of a deer moving, which when it finds itself in the kitchen begins talking “Negro

talk.” It is difficult to know how to parse the racial, and even animal, politics of these lines. Is Negro talk an advance on the deer’s abilities, suggesting a hierarchy of being from animal, Negros, to whites? And is the “blue deer” itself a marker of black culture, through jazz and the blues? The indentation of these lines toward the right-hand margin signals their connection with a third register running throughout this poem, which combines the narrative of his broken-down car and the dreamscape with his mother. It continues on the same page:

Walk the jackass  
Hear the victrola  
Let the automobile  
be tucked into a corner of the white fence  
when it is a white chair. Purity  
is only an instant of being.  
(29)

The poet’s mother, whom he has already told us he often finds asleep “in a rocker / under the lamp” becomes associated both with this white chair and the “old women” of the previous passage, whose speech is like that of the deer (28). In her fragile though stately repose in whiteness, the mother embodies the purity of a primary “instant of being,” at once elevated, and inseparable, from the tawdry dream reality surrounding her. The threadbare-ness of her purity demands, it would seem, a racial qualification so as to distinguish her as much from the dead, as from animals and blacks performing menial labor such as kitchen work.

Olson’s use of black dialect in “The Post Office” can now be more clearly appreciated as double-edged. He is not only providing an identification between George Harrison and his father as exploited men, but is also performing an aural blackface that leaves little question over who has the authority to inhabit the voices of others. The

anxiety undergirding Olson's negative identification between blacks and his family can be parsed through the difference between an animal that he helps enable to walk, which then starts talking, and his machine that breaks down on top of him. The blue deer, while clearly subordinate to the narrator and the Indian woman, is not only uppity in learning to speak and acquiring footwear but has also, it would appear, a more organic connection to "the kulchur daid on the groun'." This deer, in short, has not broken down as Olson's own means of transport has—a machine which needs more than air, and is revealed as artifice, and threadbare, compared to the at once natural and grotesque deer.

The automobile for Olson is—as with the motorcycles of "The Lordly and Isolate Satyrs"—a vehicle for masculine self-possession. But in so far as the poet's authority must be located in a machine it is always-already absent from him. His valorization of the typewriter is likewise a symptom of this loss of manly authority, which the machine is meant to re-instate. As Rifkin suggests, there is something "desperate" about this reliance on machinery, which demands continual authorial vigilance concerning its operation. Olson's reliance on whiteness as contrasted to animal blue and blackness in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" has a similarly desperate quality, asserting the autonomy of his and his mother's repose from both mass culture (the victrola, the projector, car advertisements), exploitative production (the dead), and racial inferiors (the blue deer). That the latter might themselves have a claim to organic authenticity without reliance on machinery is a source of vexed attraction for Olson, who in this poem relegates them to the kitchen, while he and his automobile sit *in* (rather than conventionally *on*) the white fence, in a white chair.

The last line of *The Maximus Poems* registers another death, this time of his wife,

in a car crash:

my wife my car my color and myself (635)

Rifkin offers a magisterially tragic reading of this line:

Read skeptically, this is a consumer's dirge, its emptiness the payback for a life lived on the right side of the gender, race, and class divide. A more generous reading lingers on the loneliness of this most public of poets' final stand. Culminating but not necessarily encompassing, "myself" is a term in a series whose unbroken commonality is loss. (66)

The authoritative, and in many respects proprietary, self-possession Olson sought to elaborate was thus premised on and contained its opposite—the absence of individuals' inherent worth in Fordism. That the self-possessed individual was conceived of as essentially white and male leaves little wonder that its others (women and blacks) could only provide versions of inherent authority threatening that of white men, who were already threatened with becoming mere moving parts. That Olson sought organic authority in machinery becomes, then, an attempt to translate the privileged position of white men as breadwinners in Fordism toward poetic ends. The phallic breath that only the typewriter can register is the particular property of men such as Olson, a property that is the vehicle for their self-declared organic poetic utterance, freed from the measures of pro-duction.

### **"The Day Lady Died"**

There is a striking, and until now unrecognized, crossover between Olson's use of time signals in "As The Dead Prey Upon Us," and those for which O'Hara became famous.

Olson's poem includes the lines:

I shall get to the place  
10 minutes late.

It will be 20 minutes  
of 9. And I don't know,

without the car,

how I shall get there.  
(29)

This passage should cause the dedicated O'Hara reader to perk up. O'Hara's most anthologized poem, "The Day Lady Died," which also appeared in *The New American Poetry*, begins:

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
three days after Bastille Day, yes  
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
and I don't know the people who will feed me.  
(264-265)

The similarities between these passages, in their reliance on time signals, trains or cars, and the pathos of an unknown outcome, are fairly self-evident. What mainly interests me, though, is their difference, namely how in O'Hara's poem his lack of knowledge about his hosts borders on the ridiculous. Are we really to believe that the author of *Lunch Poems* doesn't know who will feed him?<sup>41</sup> Might it be that O'Hara, in the opening stanza of his most famous poem, is aping Olson's inability to start his heroic car in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us," while all this poet of Manhattan has to do is take the train?

"As the Dead Prey Upon Us" was first published in 1957, so O'Hara could well have read it before composing "The Day Lady Died" in 1959. On April 12, 1956 O'Hara wrote to Kenneth Koch that he was reading Olson while in Cambridge for the Poets

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<sup>41</sup> For more confusion on this point see Joseph LeSueur's recollection of the day in question, 192-193.

Theatre. O'Hara had befriended John Wieners there, whom he mentions in his letter immediately before parodying Olson:

I've also been reading some of Charles Olson's  
things, which are more attractive than most, tho' ve / ry                      and quite sad  
making

Ez.

it seems to me.  
(Schneiderman 14)

In his biography of O'Hara, Brad Gooch shows that "following his exposure to Wieners' emulation of Olson, and his own mimicry of 'projective verse' in 'To a Young Poet,' O'Hara began to use an open field more consistently" (302). Directly after writing his poem "To John Wieners" on May 12, 1956 O'Hara began spreading his lines across the page in an open field, rather than sticking to the left-hand margin (*CP* 247). Three poems later in the *Collected Poems* (1961), which is chronologically organized by date of composition, we have his seminal "In Memory of My Feelings" (252-257). O'Hara started marking precise time in his poems the same month he wrote to Koch about Wieners and Olson, which happens to also be when Olson was composing "As the Dead Prey Upon Us."

O'Hara could have read instances of Olson's time signals in earlier work, such as the *Maximus Poems 1-10*, published in October 1953:

they whine to my people, these entertainers, sellers

they play upon their bigotries (upon their fears

these they have the nerve  
to speak of that lovely hour  
the Waiting Station, 5 o'clock, the Magnolia bus, Al Levy  
on duty (the difference  
from 1 o'clock, all the women getting off  
the Annisquam-Lanesville,  
and the letter carriers

5:40 and only the lollers  
in front of the shoe-shine parlor  
(14-15)

Olson decries here the despoliation of a moment in time by “these entertainers / sellers.” His are far from O’Hara’s sentiments about popular culture, but for both poets time signals become inseparable from the movements of buses, trains, cabs, and cars. It is as though O’Hara becomes, in “The Day Lady Died,” one of Olson’s “lollers / in front of the shoe-shine parlor”— a twentieth-century loafer.<sup>42</sup>

O’Hara’s “I do this I do that” style emerges in August of 1956 with “A Step Away from Them,” four months after he had written to Koch about Olson. The whole conceit of this poem is that it is written during O’Hara’s lunch hour, in which cars reflect back to him the tawdriness of work: “It is my lunch hour, so I go / for a walk among the hum-colored cabs” (*CP* 257). This hum-drum imperative to enthusiasm is of a different order from Olson’s heroic struggle, a contrast evident in the tone of O’Hara’s invocation of the typewriter on the back cover of *Lunch Poems* (1964): “Often this poet, strolling through the noisy splintered glare of a Manhattan noon, has paused at a sample Olivetti to type up thirty or forty lines of ruminations.” Rather than inscribing a vigilant autonomy from commercial culture, O’Hara’s casual typewriter is for sale. While in “Projective Verse” Olson affirms his poetry as a site of traditional working class labor (“the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price” (241-242)), O’Hara’s harried poetry is by contrast produced during his leisure time, which is full of shopping. In his mock-manifesto “Personism” (1961), O’Hara is also irreverent about using the male body as

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<sup>42</sup> Paul Blackburn furthers this topos in “Shoeshine Boy” (1963), which links the time signal to the subway, Wall Street, and pretty girls (Hunter).

prosodic measure as Olson does in his manifesto, where “*any* slackness takes off attention, that crucial thing, from the job in hand” (*Prose* 243). O’Hara jokingly highlights the sexual posturing of Olson’s admonishment not to lose sight of the job in hand when he writes, “as for measure and other technical apparatus, that’s just common sense: if you’re going to buy a pair of pants you want them to be *tight* enough so everyone will want to go to bed with you” (my italics, *CP* 498).<sup>43</sup> For O’Hara the commonplace and the commercial are fantastic, and rather than embrace an exclusionary tradition of masculine authority located, paradoxically, in exploited labor, he takes it all in: cabs, synchronous observations of people and billboards, leading to the poem’s crescendo in “Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:20 of / a Thursday.” (257-258)

This coupling of the automobile and precise time doesn’t seem incidental. In terms of the assembly line both the car and the minute measurement of time bespeak alienation as much as immediacy. Olson’s car troubles are already couched within a litany of complaints about commercial encumbrances and the dead remains of exploited labor. His physical immediacy is won through his epic struggle with a commercial machine. O’Hara’s reenactment of this complex in his own register shows up the comedy of the modernist topos of man vs. machine, which for O’Hara has already become a mainstay—rather than a radical critique—of modernity. As Mutlu Konuk Blasing notes, “when the connection between the values of aesthetic novelty and technological progress becomes increasingly clear, achieving a critical distance from a technology-driven culture requires a critical distance from modernist aesthetic values as well” (12). Instead of

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<sup>43</sup> I am indebted to Ed Luker for this tight reading of the slack in “Personism,” as well as for noting the difference between Olson’s work and O’Hara’s leisure.

merely being frivolous, though, O'Hara's self-deflating enthusiasms suggest a serious criticism of Olson's contradictory bids for authenticity through machinery on the one hand, and on the other personal autonomy from commercial culture.

Let us return to the rest of "The Day Lady Died":

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank  
and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
doesn't look up my balance for once in her life  
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
think of Hesiod, trans. Richard Lattimore or  
Brendan Behan's new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Nègres*  
of Genet, but I don't, I stick with Verlaine  
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE  
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and  
then I go back where I came from to 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue  
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and  
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton  
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of  
leaning on the john door in the FIVE SPOT  
while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing.

7/17/59  
(Allen 265)

The pathos of the personal experience enshrined in this poem is entwined with the fate of its accumulated commodities, whose fleetingness mirrors both Lady Day's life and the poet's walking through Manhattan on his lunch hour. O'Hara curatorial work at the Museum of Modern Art was no assembly line, but his lunch hour was nevertheless the privileged locale of many of his poems, which bear the markings of their production's

finitude. As David Herd has observed in reference to “A Step Away from Them,” “the whole poem is framed, from one point of view, by the constraints of the working day. It is the poet’s lunch hour. He has to get back. The clock is ticking” (83-84). The end of lunch is a small death for this poet qua poet, which in “The Day Lady Died” becomes freighted with a more dramatic and literal death, that of Billie Holiday.

Following Geoff Ward, Herd asserts that in walking O’Hara was a flâneur (84). In a crucial sense, though, Walter Benjamin’s description of the flâneur’s stroll departs from O’Hara’s practice in this poem.

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets. With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum; ever weaker grow the temptations of shops, of bistros, of smiling women, ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next streetcorner, of a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger. Our man wants nothing to do with the myriad possibilities offered to his appetite. (*Arcades* 417)

Benjamin’s flâneur is attempting to commune with “vanished time,” a collective rather than a private past (416). O’Hara’s leisure, by contrast, is not only circumscribed, but he has a shopping list. Nevertheless, Michael C. Clune claims that “the apparently random, trivial choices of the speaker (buying a strap for his watch, picking out a charm [in “A Step Away from Them”]) conceal a powerful and utopian claim” (64). For Clune, O’Hara dramatizes how all of our spontaneous purchases create a “virtual collective,” free from the ideology of the liberal individual motivated by interior reasoning (66). Why the absence of interiority is utopian is unclear to me, as this virtual collective sounds a lot like the commodity fetishism described by Marx, where “it is nothing but the definite social relation between men themselves which assumes here, for them, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (165). Clune’s model doesn’t account for the preoccupation with death that pervades O’Hara’s oeuvre. The poet’s attachments are personal and

essential and at once wholly impersonal and contingent. It is this dialectic, where the life of commodities provides for personal experience, the possibilities of which it continually forecloses, that O'Hara confronts with such deadly pathos.

"The Day Lady Died" is full of small, precious objects, from the poet's lunch hour to—in a reflexive complicity—literary artifacts. O'Hara's consistent enjambment, where syntax overrides line endings, encourages a prosodic assimilation between reading and the poet's reeling through Manhattan, which is distinguished here by monetary transactions, especially shopping. It is as though each purchase is a little breath cast into the void, falling away as soon as it arises. Just so is the poet's marking of personal time, which the poem's opening verse paragraph jokingly, hauntingly, clocks. For O'Hara, the time of life is made both profound and inconsequential through its incommensurability with death, providing for his mock-heroic stance: "I don't know the people who will feed me."

Marjorie Perloff has written expansively on O'Hara's elegy for Lady Day, noting both its foregrounding of "the meaningless flux of time" and how O'Hara traces "a process so immediate, so authentic, that when we come to the last four lines, we participate in his poignant memory of Lady Day's performance" (*O'Hara* 181-182). But, as with other critics, she offers little insight into how contingency *and* immediacy are intertwined here. Making this connection requires foregrounding the status of commodities in the poem. These commodities, supposedly knowable entities that inform us "what the poets / in Ghana are doing these days," are inherently fleeting—both in their topicality and personal relevance. If O'Hara is flippant it is because the objects he confronts are all the more so. As Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, "the abstractness of

the new is bound up with the commodity character of art. This is why the modern when it was first theoretically articulated—in Baudelaire—bore an ominous aspect. The new is akin to death” (21). O’Hara both ironizes and embraces the perpetually new. His poems are full of a whirlwind of enthusiasms and exclamation marks, setting a tone that has become all but ubiquitous today. But for O’Hara the perpetually new is continually threatening to overwhelm the personality that could be so enthusiastic in the first place. O’Hara’s enthusiasm, then, becomes a kind of death drive, revealing the fate of a never-ending array of new styles to eviscerate themselves, as well as the personality of their enthusiasts. As if in recognition of all this, Miss Stillwagon (read: still, as in stalled, wagon) “doesn’t look up my balance for once in her life.” Life and fleetingness are one and the same; finally the poet doesn’t have to stop for longer than a balanced line to check his credit, which he balks at as an accurate measure. Individual existence is contingent in capitalist society, O’Hara shows us—provoking so much sleep-inducing “quandariness”—so that the bid for immediacy through the happenstance measure of time reveals a lack of inherent quality, rather than heroic self-revelation. Time might tell us what the isolated self is, O’Hara’s sly joke on Olson seems to be saying, but that self only exists in its passing, as an ephemeral quantity in a sea of even more spurious objects and facts.

Mark Silverberg convincingly shows how “O’Hara and his colleagues position different types of neutral or ironic practices against various forms of ‘authentic’ speech (the projective) and naturalized sincerity (the confessional)” (47-48). This “neutrality” becomes its own justification for Silverberg, with its most salient content being queer identity: “It is now much easier to see O’Hara’s commitments as a species of (what

would become) a postmodern micropolitics of the local and particular. His commitments were to movie theaters, bars, and public washrooms” (50). But what was at stake in these commitments to provisional selfhood? Does O’Hara find a satisfying resting place in surface play, and does he merely affirm provisional identity?

Contrary to such assessments of O’Hara as Silverberg’s, which foreground his status as a minor poet of style and particularity, the life of commodities provides no ultimate comfort for the Prince of Camp. Rather “The Day Lady Died” enacts, through the happenstance of its objects, a deep anxiety about the stability of selfhood.<sup>44</sup> While Olson is at pains to delineate an authentic experience outside the reproduction of capital, to be affirmed in such places as the human body and the extension of breath in an open field poetics, O’Hara’s enthusiasm for the objects and lives he accumulates in his poems is subtly, but crucially, qualified. O’Hara may well be searching for thrills, but as with Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series, these thrills are inextricable from crashing and death. He writes in “Art Chronicle”: “In a capitalist society fun is everything. Fun is the only justification for the acquisitive impulse, if one is to be honest” (5). And he told Edward Lucie-Smith in October of 1965, “Enthusiasm for art, after all, is always involved with any number of interesting attitudes. Everybody wants to have a jewel [...] The basic human motive is acquisitive” (15). The objects and names O’Hara acquires in his poems *are* genuine loves, yet he is flippant about their often idiosyncratic significance. It is precisely his desire for the objects and people surrounding him, then, that makes their contingency so haunting.

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<sup>44</sup> Both Epstein’s *Beautiful Enemies* and Ward’s *Statutes of Liberty* have paid attention to this anxiety, but neither has linked it to the status of commodities in O’Hara’s poems, nor to how O’Hara’s provisional self is forged, in part, through the marketplace.

The nature of this contingency must be fully comprehended through an appreciation of the expanded role that commodities have in the rhythms of consumption, production, and not least the representation of personal experience in postwar America. Such an appreciation wouldn't end with O'Hara's domesticity, but would instead recognize how his "affirmative skepticism" (Altieri, "Significance" 98) is at once a deep skepticism about the affirmation of personal experience in a world where joy is inseparable from "the acquisitive impulse." We would then be able to hear the depth of O'Hara's sardonic refrain in "Ode to Joy": "We shall have everything we want and there'll be no more dying" (*CP* 281). While reaching for "a space free of the scarcity and sacrifice that have always constituted the tragic dimension of the economic" (Clune 65), O'Hara recognizes this horizon as itself being constituted by capital. And in taking the promise of self-fulfillment through acquisition to its logical end his poems accumulate dead selves. Such death is of course racialised for O'Hara as well. "Rhapsody," written two weeks after "The Day Lady Died," is a poem "linking 53rd with 54th / the east-bound with the west-bound traffic by 8,000,000s," and has the poet "declining the challenge of racial attractions / they zing on (into the lynch, dear friends)" (*CP* 326). Holiday's tragedy is, in short, inseparable from the tragedy of American white supremacy, which O'Hara abjures from promulgating by instead providing a pastiche of patriarchal modernism.

In an early critical assessment Paul Carroll considers "The Day Lady Died" "excellent *because* of its trivia and ugliness" (159). O'Hara, I want to suggest, inherits Whitman's catalog, and makes explicit its latent contradiction. Carroll asks: "Why does O'Hara devote only four lines to Lady Day and 24 lines to cataloguing his odyssey

among ‘pack-asses, blacksmiths, cobblers and tanners of leather’” (160). Carroll’s answer falls, like that of others, too far on the affirmative “post” side of the postmodern divide:

One lesson would be to appreciate that this poem finally opens the warehouse dreamt of by many poets: anything, literally, can exist in a poem; and anything can exist in whatever way the poet chooses—as an object which stands in its existential skin without moral or esthetic significance or as one which helps to point or adorn a tale. (163)

O’Hara’s poem is perhaps no well-wrought urn, the type of pure poetry which Carroll considers “organic” (162). But, as I have been arguing, the contingency of O’Hara’s chosen objects is its own significance. For Whitman each particular of society—each worker, each object—was an expression of the spirit at once animating *Leaves of Grass*. This spirit though, in so far as it inhered in utterly contingent objects and activities, provided likewise for a premonition of death in the 1860 edition of *Leaves*: “O to disengage from those corpses of me, which I turn and look at where I cast them” (Folsom and Price). Indeed, the all-encompassing unconditional that Whitman (in the 1881 *Leaves*) identifies with the sea—“Whoever you are, we too lie in drifts at your feet”—is the dialectical corollary to the endless accumulation of contingent particulars (Ibid.). The self-conscious trivia, then, of “The Day Lady Died,” in signaling the absolute contingency of the objects accumulated in the poem, provides at once a new significance for death. Or, rather, insignificance. Death for O’Hara does not signal life beyond itself, through a discovery “different from what any one supposed, and luckier,” but rather highlights the happenstance of lived experience, making its particulars all the more acute: their meaning must be made, and does not wait to carry us forward (Whitman, *Poetry* 32). This is why O’Hara’s exultant affirmation of accumulated particulars, as so many ready-made advertisements for life, is full of irony *and* pathos. Whitman, by contrast,

means what he says, and so risks becoming ridiculous—a result O’Hara has internalized through his style.

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What O’Hara did with the time signal in his poems became, despite him, the marker of a new kind of immediacy when Ted Berrigan wrote *Sonnets*, published in 1964, the same year as O’Hara’s *Lunch Poems*. Berrigan muses on his relation to O’Hara:

It turns out that when Frank was writing his poem and saying it is 4:16 a.m. in New York City, he meant that it wasn’t 4:16 a.m. at all. It was a flashback. Whereas when I wrote my poems, whatever time I said it was, that’s what time it was. So, I wrote an entirely different kind of poem than he did, and not only that, but in the language of the critical periodicals, I actually extended a formal idea of his into another area, actually extended his formal idea into another place. (43)

In writing pastiches of O’Hara’s style the same year that *Lunch Poems* was published, Berrigan manages to show up the mediation and conventionality of the time signal, while at once, paradoxically, claiming that his own pastiche is more immediate than the original. For Berrigan, O’Hara, and perhaps Olson as well, the time signal was a marker, at least in part, of alienation. Benjamin’s reading of Baudelaire is instructive here:

The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it does so, the less do these impressions enter experience (*Erfahrung*), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour of one’s life (*Erlebnis*). Perhaps the special achievement of shock defense may be seen in its function of assigning to an incident a precise point in time in consciousness at the cost of the integrity of its contents. (*Illuminations* 163)

O’Hara, through his marking of time, might well be warding it off, rather than attempting—as Berrigan presumes—to inscribe its supposed immediacy. As O’Hara muses in “My Heart,” “I’d have the immediacy of a bad movie, / not just a sleeper, but also the big, / overproduced first-run kind” (*CP* 231). Filtering life through commercial cinema, likewise time, paradoxically protects experience from over-exposure.

Authenticity for O'Hara, rather than residing in the poem, lives decidedly beyond it. In the case of "The Day Lady Died" breathing—in a figuration that is of course Olson's—provides for its continuance, with us. The lines stop when everyone is out of breath, we take a new one at its end; life is not in the poem, but in our carrying it on.

Unlike all the objects and times accumulated in O'Hara's frenzied stroll through Manhattan, Holiday—in accordance with elegiac convention—is nowhere named in the body of the poem. Instead, we are left with O'Hara's representation of an image from a newspaper—"a NEW YORK POST with her face on it"—which raises the question of the nature of the life behind its telling. The absence of Holiday's name suggests that her life was not appropriable in the way a bottle of Strega is. The space O'Hara provides Holiday—a black woman plagued by her country's racism and performing illegally (LeSueur 194) when O'Hara heard her "whisper a song"—stands in strange contrast to Olson's deer speaking in Negro dialect. The latter must be packed away as one of a number of spurious commodities, in part to disarm its claim to authenticity. While we might wonder likewise at the authenticity Holiday's tragedy instantiates for O'Hara, she nevertheless is the acknowledged catalyst here for the poet's own sense of presence, defined by absence and loss.<sup>45</sup>

O'Hara was explicit about his debt to Olson in conversation with Lucie-Smith:

It seemed to me that the metrical, that the measure let us say, if you want to talk about it in Olson's poems or Ezra Pound's, comes from the breath of the person just as a stroke of paint comes from the wrist and hand and arm and shoulder and all that of a painter. So therefore the point is really to establish one's own measure and breath in poetry, I think, than—this sounds wildly ambitious since I don't

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<sup>45</sup> For a stunning contrast between Whitman's and O'Hara's invocations of race see Blasing 61-63.

think I've done it but I think that great poets do it—rather than fitting your ideas into an established order, syllabically and phonetically and so on. (17)

Such a conception of non-metrical measure, which was central to the New American Poetry, provided O'Hara with the means of substantiating his poetic flux in experience through a syntax reeling beyond stable resting places. This mutable frisson, borne by the rush of postwar commodities, affirms not the "established order" but its happenstance. The poet's investment—with or without money in the bank—in the spurious life of commodities produced for profit calls forth the ultimate cessation of breath, life, and the poem. For both Olson and O'Hara the poem was, at last, a go-for-broke event—the ground for projective experience.

While contrasting O'Hara's poetics of camp with Olson's projective authority has become *de rigueur* in readings of O'Hara, no one has suggested before that O'Hara may well have inherited his time signals from Olson.<sup>46</sup> Such an inheritance is striking in its own right, especially as it opens up to questions of the relationship between assembly-line production and the so-called "everyday" in Fordism. Moreover, recognizing O'Hara's critique of Olson saves us from reading his poetry as simply committed to the immediacy of the quotidian, as so many of his critics do. By drawing out O'Hara's fascination with and pastiche of Olson's jargon of authenticity, as well as his preoccupation with death, we find a poet investigating the grounds of his art, rather than evincing what Robert von Hallberg derisively called a professionalized "range of style," which "had nothing to say about the relationship between art and society" (105). Perhaps critics have been right, then, to view O'Hara as a flâneur—the figure whom for

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<sup>46</sup> Aside from the examples already given (Gooch and Silverberg), see Belgrad 254, Epstein, *Enemies* 79, and Perloff 16.

Benjamin sought a collective inheritance beyond the displays in shop windows. As O'Hara's contemporary, Susan Sontag, put it: "Camp is the answer to the problem: how to be a dandy in the age of mass culture" (288). For O'Hara, in contrast to Olson, there is no return to authentic experience removed from commerce. In his own way Olson recognizes this, as physical immediacy is always to be won through the machine, such as the typewriter. When that machine breaks down, as the automobile in "As the Dead Prey Upon Us" does, the poet's psychological composure unravels as well. O'Hara is instead, like the proliferation of commodities in postwar New York City, always reeling. His own originality is imbricated with that of his loved objects, which are precarious, fleeting and, as in "The Day Lady Died," portend death.

### *The Last Clean Shirt*

I want to end by considering one of O'Hara's most notable collaborations. In 1964 he wrote the subtitles for Alfred Leslie's 41-minute film, *The Last Clean Shirt*, which features video of a drive through Manhattan repeated three times. O'Hara's text, often quotations from his own poetry, appears in the second and third repetition of the drive. At the beginning of each loop the silent black doctor/driver, played by Richard White, straps a timer to the dashboard, while his white wife, played by Ruth Cazalet, blabbers in a made-up language resembling Finnish. There is of course a political punch to this pairing, and each repetition of the drive begins with a verse sung from James Russell Lowell's 1845 anti-slavery poem "The Present Crisis."

O'Hara's cannibalizing of his own poems for the film's subtitles enacts the principle of assembly-line production, but toward foreign, defamiliarizing ends. During

the second loop of the film, when the subtitles refer to the wife's speech, we read these lines (in brackets are my own transcription of actions and diegetic sounds):

It's the nature of us all  
to want to be unconnected

[Suddenly the car radio turns on of its own accord and the couple press its buttons until it turns off again.]

That's the real me speaking.

Not my scarier Proustian self.

And you should pull  
us all together ...

like Humpty Dumpty

or a double  
carbonated bourbon

with a shot of  
vodka as a chaser

or something.

I didn't say I cared.

I didn't say I cared.

[Fire engine sirens begin.]

Who does?

Don't be silly.

Everyone thinks they're going  
up in these here America.

AND also –

If you're going to have one of  
those horrible attacks of guilt,

one of those horrible

attacks of guilt,

you may as well ...

you may as well be  
able to attach ...

You may as well be able  
to attach it to something

like your mother  
or World War Two.

It isn't so bad then.

[Sirens end.]

Even certain subtitles repeat themselves here, not least the existential credo “It’s the nature of us all / to want to be unconnected” which opens this loop earlier on. The mechanistic repetition and accretion of clauses concerning guilt appears at once as a Freudian repetition of the repressed and as an assembly-line meaning (see Figure 2). Repetition serves here as a parody of the search for narrative truth, whether in “your mother / or World War Two,” but nevertheless leaves such primary explanations intact; Leslie and O’Hara’s method is not iconoclasm. Instead, they perform a critical reflexivity, as when in the final moments of the third loop the song “The Last Clean Shirt” by Charlie Otis begins playing and the subtitles read: “I hate that song! // I told Leslie not to / use it in the picture!”

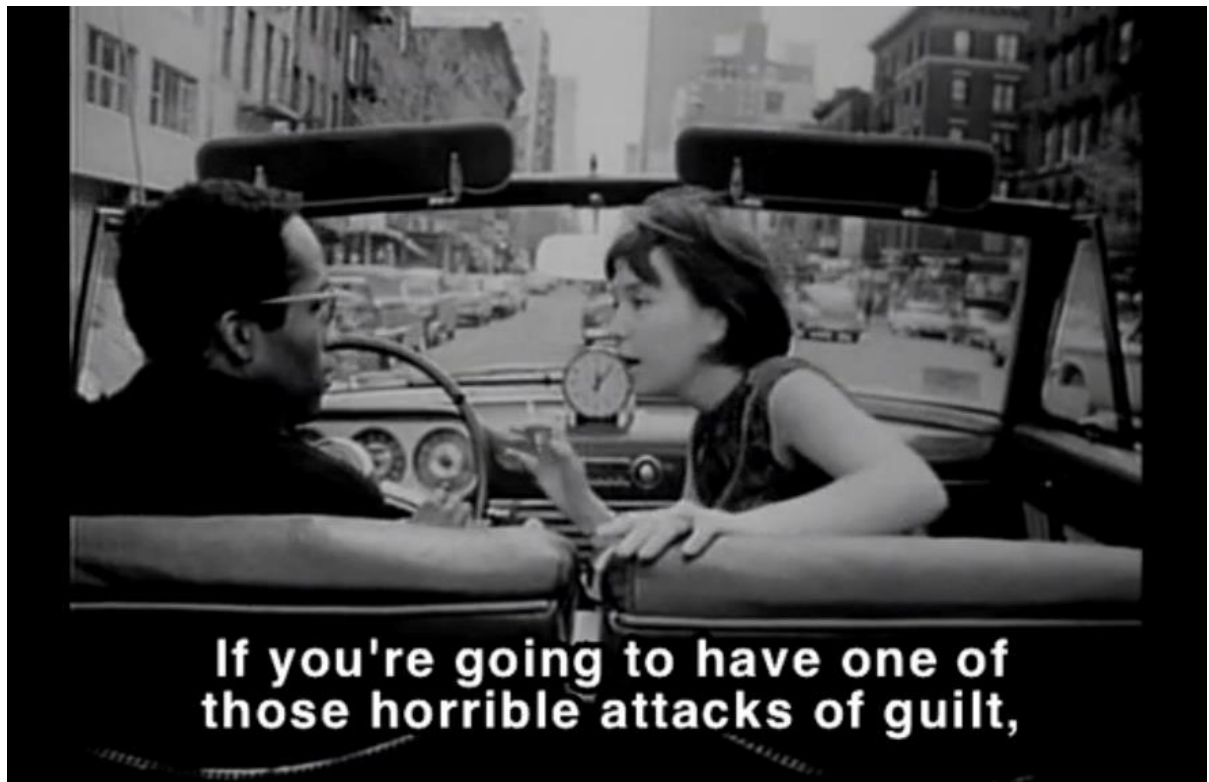


Figure 2. Still from Alfred Leslie's *The Last Clean Shirt* (1964).

The America in which “everyone thinks they’re going / up,” when “up” is here curiously dropped down to the next line, reveals the dual aspect of a national character that at once desires individuals to be unconnected and to be brought together like “Humpty Dumpty.” The separation of distinct parts, where each moment or gesture has no meaning in itself, and appears disconnected from a larger narrative explanation worthy of affirmation, is the principle informing both the structure of this film and the assembly-line. O’Hara ironizes this impasse, creating an unsentimental collage of his own style while foregrounding the critical edge such pastiche makes available. On the assembly line each action must contribute to the final product, which workers are meant to be able to purchase with their accumulated wages. *The Last Clean Shirt* lays the fantasy of this

narrative bare, by showing its fissures in inverted form; the ease and incomprehensibility of the film's interracial couple betrays the actual macabre quality of American race relations.

The audio of Lowell's poem that begins each loop of film is read by an appropriately operatic woman's voice, but its ironic presentation serves, strangely, to highlight the action demanded of individuals to construct and make manifest its import for the car ride that follows.

Once to every man and nation comes the moment to decide,  
In the strife of Truth with Falsehood, for the good or evil side;  
Then it is the brave man chooses, while the coward stands aside,  
And the choice goes by forever 'twixt that darkness and that light.

These lines never appear in this order in Lowell's poem. They are, if you will, a cut-up, which had ample precedent, as the poem was made into hymns. The NAACP, furthermore, named its newsletter, *The Crisis*, after the poem. The result of Leslie's and O'Hara's assemblage is not pre-determined, but calls for the engagement of its viewers in critically parsing the import of its materials.

What, finally, of the timer that the doctor straps to the dashboard when he gets into the car, and which records the length of the drive as ten minutes long? Daniel Kane, whose work introduced me to this film, writes in *We Saw the Light*:

O'Hara's impossible efforts to somehow enact the present moment, to embody that instant of time when "everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of / a Thursday" are perhaps more able to be interrogated when text becomes film. Cinema only fully exists *in* the present, urged into being as it is through the whirr of the machine, the practically magical projection of light. Film makes it corporeally evident "one second was never the same as the second before or after" even if—or, perhaps more appropriately, particularly if—what was being witnessed was the repeating mechanisms of a Chaplin skit or a road trip. (108)

Each second might be different, but here it is also repeated three times. The timer on the dashboard, then, foregrounds repetition, and an immediacy made available through mechanical reproduction. This repeated “immediacy” is the joke Leslie and O’Hara pull on the viewer, showing up any claim to unique presence, whether of the Pound-Olson tradition, or of cinema. As Ian White writes in the notes to the DVD of the film, “this is not absurdism for the sake of it, but marks something like the difference between the ‘real’ time of the single-shot structure and the artificiality of its recording, or ‘film’ time, such that time becomes like a poet playing the construction of himself.”

If poetry is to become “as useful as a machine!”—as O’Hara quips in one of his homages to modernism (“Memorial Day 1950”)—it must seek to re-determine experience (CP 18). O’Hara doesn’t, I think, consider such re-determination an active possibility for his poetry, which mostly conceives of fulfillment negatively, through recognition of its limits.<sup>47</sup> *The Last Clean Shirt*, in cannibalizing his poems, uniquely registers how the self mediated by technology can never speak its own language. Even O’Hara’s own poems have become so much sloganeering! Rather than being actual, then, the possibility of transforming experience toward other ends resides beyond the frame, with this film’s enervated viewers. O’Hara, in effect, gives the rub to both the rhetoric of autonomy and organicism. Even more than Whitman, he unabashedly inhabits the commercial, while his irony and pathos inscribe an impossible difference between “my love” and a personality that appears no less fantastic than a Hollywood film (CP 257).

In 1961 O’Hara’s “Song” appeared in *Floating Bear*, the small magazine edited by Diane DiPrima and Leroi Jones:

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<sup>47</sup> See especially “Adieu to Norman, Bon Jour to Joan and Jean-Paul” (CP 328-329).

Did you see me walking by the Buick Repairs?  
 I was thinking of you  
 having a Coke in the heat it was your face  
 I saw on the movie magazine, no it was Fabian's  
 I was thinking of you  
 and down at the railroad tracks where the station  
 has mysteriously disappeared  
 I was thinking of you  
 as the bus pulled away in the twilight  
 I was thinking of you  
 and right now  
 (CP 367)

This Whitmanesque personal address is at once wholly impersonal: the poem's "you" is whomever O'Hara is thinking of and writing to, a face on a movie magazine, or Fabian. Indeed, as Don Allen's note to the poem informs us, Fabian was only added to the poem after O'Hara crossed out "Eddie Fisher," the most successful pop singles artist of the first half of the 1950s, who also had his own TV show (548). That the railroad station has "mysteriously disappeared" only to be supplanted in the poem by the bus pulling away is indicative of the preponderance of motor vehicles in postwar America. The poet nonchalantly passes by the Buick repair shop, while the enjambment of the second line leaves it ambiguous whether it is him or his addressee that is "having a Coke in the heat." Do we see him? Another breathless finality closes "Song": "I am thinking of you / and right now." We pause, we inhale: now is no longer what it was, reminding us in Olsonesque fashion that the end of the poem is at once the end of a present context or "energy-discharge" (*Prose* 240). The bus disappears, but now Frank is still thinking of you, for as long as you are carrying his present on. This present is—rather than being timed—an undying gift. As Olson has it in the final line of "As the Dead Prey Upon Us": "The automobile // has been hauled away" (34).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SILLIMAN'S *KETJAK* BEYOND PROGRAMMATISM

*I can't afford an automobile.*  
—Silliman, from *The Alphabet*

In the 1970s a new poetics emerged to challenge the supposedly naturalized lyricism of confessional, projective, and New York School poetries.<sup>48</sup> The moniker for this new grouping was solidified with the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (1978-1981), edited by Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein. Language Poets sought—in a fashion akin to Conceptual Artists of the 60s and beyond—to foreground the materiality of their craft. This included a thoroughgoing critique of lyric voice, which drew from poststructuralist critiques of authorship. Theirs was a self-consciously political poetry during a time when poetry of the new social movements—by women, Chicanos, and Black Nationalists, to name a few—was flourishing. Contra, though, the identity-politics of the new social

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<sup>48</sup> See Epstein, “Content.”

movements, Language Poets saw themselves as unmasking lyric voice as a conservative trope and defamiliarizing the very means to signification by foregrounding textuality as such, often through procedural hijinks. Mostly in the Bay Area and New York City, Language Poets were known for “using or alluding to Marxist or poststructuralist theory in order to open the present to critique and change” (Perelman 12-13). They are notable, then, for radicalizing a politics of form that in its modernist varieties of the early twentieth century was often linked, as we saw with Pound, to an explicitly conservative cultural politics.<sup>49</sup>

While polemically situated in opposition to both the academy and mainstream poetic practice (not least as reproduced in Creative Writing programs) as well as dominant American politics (especially the imperialist war in Vietnam), many Language Poets came in ensuing decades to hold posts as tenured professors at some of the U.S.’s top English programs.<sup>50</sup> The imbrication of Language Poets with theory, and then the academy, has led to them being their own most prominent critics—or, more accurately, their own best explicators and boosters. Sianne Ngai describes a similar situation with regard to Conceptual Art of the 1960s and early 1970s. As she elaborates:

Conceptual artwork becomes coextensive with evidence in support of its claim to quality or value, though in a manner that almost furtively embeds that claim, whose basis in ambiguous feeling makes it easy to miss from the start, inside the evidence presented in support of it. (*Categories* 167)

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<sup>49</sup> I am indebted to the thread “Politics of Form in the Age of Austerity” organized by Tim Kreiner and Chris Chen at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Comparative Literature Association in Seattle, Washington (March 27-29)—where I presented aspects of this chapter—for some of my thinking here on the tensions between the politics of form and identity-politics.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Bernstein and Bob Perelman are at the University of Pennsylvania, where Ron Silliman was a fellow at the Kelly Writers House in 2012. Lyn Hejinian is at the University of California – Berkeley. Barrett Watten is at Wayne State University.

In other words, the explication of this work becomes inseparable from its claim on our attention. Language Poets have been the main theorizers of their own work, which was at least initially met with resistance, from both academic critics and other poets.<sup>51</sup> That Language Poets have been their own most prominent critics has meant that their pronouncements about themselves have been the primary means by which their work has been interpreted. This has, predictably, led to certain aporias in assessing their output, not least concerning the affinities of Language Poets' innovations to capitalist development.

Ron Silliman is perhaps the most theoretically prominent Language Poet. A Marxist, computer programmer, and the assembler of a much-trafficked gateway to American poetry, *Silliman's Blog*, Silliman has been explicit about what he saw as the failings of a previous generation of poets:

The closed forms of the Academics (so-called) admitted only of the repetition of the past in the face of the present. The open forms of the New Americans (so-called) concealed their "madness," but for a time offered a more fully generative response to daily life. Once, however, the creative euphoria of sketching out what the false model of a (non-constructed because "natural") speech-imitating poetics would look like was complete, the same limiting claustrophobia set in. (Beckett 34)

The implication is that Language Poets have shorn themselves of false beliefs about both form and subjective expression. It is difficult, when discussing what is distinctive about Language Poets, not to revert to their own terms, in this case considering their poetry as a critique of naturalized lyric expression. In the preceding chapter I argued that this critique was already present in the New American Poets, especially Frank O'Hara, who nevertheless has the reputation of being esoterically personal. Interestingly, while Language Poets sought to eschew what they saw as the naturalized self-expression of

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<sup>51</sup> See Perelman, Chapter 2: "Language Writing and Literary History," 11-37.

lyric, books like Lyn Hejinian's *My Life* (1980), and also Silliman's *Ketjak* (1978), are preoccupied with how to best account for personal experience. As we shall see, merely taking Language Poets' claims about their work at face value causes us to miss much of what is interesting about their work.

In this chapter I will read Silliman's poetic output against the grain of his poetics, considering his long prose poem *Ketjak* alongside his poetics book *The New Sentence* (1987), which collects essays from across his early career. *Ketjak* is also the name of Silliman's serial life work, so that all his books fall within the orbit of this title. The discreet book *Ketjak*, then, might serve as a roman-a-clef for Silliman's output as a whole. Timothy Yu, in his book *Race and the Avant-Garde*, has already done important work that doesn't explicate Language Poets on their own terms. Yu brilliantly elaborates how Silliman, in response to the emergence of identity-politics and the poetry of new social movements, came to conceive of his innovations in terms of his own identity as a white, heterosexual, working-class man. Here I will foreground Silliman's preoccupation with a programmatic politics of labor, which was meant to subvert what he conceived as the reification of capitalism via realism and its erasure of the gestural signifier. Silliman, in short, has conceived of his innovative form—in this case, “the new sentence”—as granting his work radical autonomy from capitalist development.

Silliman's conception of his poetry as impeding capitalist forms of representation is tied to his affirmation of his gestural labor and by extension the gestural quality of the signifier. His conception of the autonomy of his labor and utterances from capital, while meant to subvert naturalized lyric voice, attempts to imagine an organic relation between labor, sound, and meaning. Problematically—as Yu makes clear—this organic labor is

tagged as that of white, heterosexual men. Silliman clings at times to the privileging of white men in Fordism, while at once making apparent the unnatural quality of Fordist assembly through his ironically assembled new sentences. Fordism was premised on an organic relation between production and consumption, where workers were meant to be able to purchase the goods they produced. This relation presupposed a national sphere of capital accumulation, which was systematized through Bretton Woods. Contra Silliman's poetics and politics, I will read the experiments of *Ketjak* as relying on the restructuring of Fordism in the 1970s and the emergence of what David Harvey has called a regime of "flexible accumulation," not least through hyper-financialization (*Condition* 147). The rescinding of the Fordist compact between capital and labor was inseparable from the official de-linking of the U.S. dollar from gold in 1971, the globalization of production-chains, and the financialization of social provisions—from housing to pensions—previously under the purview of the welfare state. *Ketjak*, through its innovative strategies of punning, repetition, and parataxis, ironizes the Fordist fantasy of an organic relation between producer and product, and production and valorisation, while in his poetics Silliman clings to a trope of writerly organicism.

Silliman, more than his own poetics allows, composes *Ketjak* in the contours of the restructuring of Fordism, mobilizing the new machinery of flexible accumulation and hyper-financialization to write a work which, as he puts it in one of *Ketjak*'s new sentences, "repeats and repeats, adding new lines without apparent relation, building with great visual and mental invention a tremendous formal beauty that carries no cargo at all"

(*Age* 61).<sup>52</sup> If his ultimate aim, as he claims, is to reveal the constructedness of language over valorizing any particular method, then we indeed need to recognize the organic construct of his work, rather than take it as somehow more authentic than so-called lyric, an assessment promoted through his gestural politics of labor. His affirmation of autonomous labor in his poetics is precisely what *Ketjak* eclipses through its emergent techniques that are premised on post-Fordist transformations of the capital–labor relation. Through, for example, dramatizing and playing on the function of signification in *Ketjak*, Silliman reveals its constructed nature. Things might, this work suggests, be otherwise. *Ketjak* inscribes the rhythms of post-Fordism as a fiction of organic everydayness. Rather than appearing natural, Silliman’s defamiliarizing evocation of these rhythms reveals both his own technique and the social relations it reflects upon to be constructed and therefore historically contingent.

In *The Constructivist Moment*, the Language Poet Barrett Watten has—as the exception that proves the rule—done some highly suggestive work linking Ford’s assembly line to Gertrude Stein’s constructivist composition, and by extension to the serial authorship projects of Language Poets. Yet while Watten notices, for example, “the analogy between the paratactic unit structures of postmodern cultural forms and the assembly line,” his attempts to describe the relation between Language Poetry and capitalist development are oblique in comparison to his reading of Stein (135). Crucially, Watten has no account of the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism and the restructuring of the capital–labor relation that it entailed. Silliman’s *Ketjak*, rather than simply re-issuing

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<sup>52</sup> Unless otherwise attributed all Silliman quotations are from *Ketjak*, collected in *The Age of Huts*.

the relation between, say, parataxis and assembly, restages such relations in an ironizing play whose characters also include the end of the traditional labor movement, hyper-financialization, and the eclipse of Fordism along with 1960s radicalism. *Ketjak* lays bare, ultimately, a world beyond the program of proletarian self-affirmation. As Théorie Communiste—who emerged from the smoke clouds of Paris ‘68—argue, the structural conditions for the affirmation of a workers’ program and a workers’ world were undermined with the restructuring of Fordism. That Silliman, in his poetics, clings to an identity between laboring poet and gestural signifier makes apparent a politics of form that *Ketjak* has itself walked out on.

**“A bus ride is better than most art” (105)**

Silliman wrote *Ketjak* between June and November of 1974 while riding the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART), which had begun service two years earlier. On the face of it there is something anomalous about this public transportation venture coming during the eclipse of Fordism and the post-war boom. As Lawrence Webb explains:

San Francisco was a key arena for the emergence of a new discipline, urban design, which superseded the practices of modernist planning that had defined urban development in the postwar period. Nascent during the 1960s, the new approach was enshrined in public policy in the San Francisco Urban Design Plan (1971), which set a benchmark for future engagement between city government, developers and citizens. [...] Throughout the 1960s, a pro-growth coalition of local government and business interests pushed urban renewal schemes intended to revitalize key areas and reposition the city as a financial hub for the West Coast/Pacific Rim. Downtown office space doubled between 1960 and 1980; by the mid 1970s, the city could claim to be the second largest financial center in the United States.

San Francisco’s development in the early 70s was premised upon the production of new media technologies and the expansion of financial instruments that, as we shall see, came

as a response to the rigidities of Fordism. The construction of BART echoes the public works aspirations of the receding era of Fordism, while being a necessary component of the Bay Area's new economy of high finance.<sup>53</sup> The logic of *Ketjak* displays a similar temporality; its innovative technique reflects post-Fordist developments, while in his poetics Silliman seeks to affirm the autonomy of labor through invoking an industrial or even artisanal past. It is appropriate then that Silliman composed much of *Ketjak* while riding the BART, as both evoke, through their formal (or, in the case of BART, structural) hybridity, the transformation away from Fordist production and toward an economy increasingly defined by services, not least financial ones.

*Ketjak*, which in its most recent printing is 100 pages long, is made up of a cascade of sentences grouped into longer and longer paragraphs, which quickly begin to span over several pages. These sentences don't offer a narrative, but rather moments of perception, aphoristic observation, and puns. Moreover, sentences repeat themselves anew in each paragraph, often in slightly altered or expanded form. Here are the first three (and shortest) paragraphs of the book:

Revolving door.

Revolving door. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

Revolving door. Fountains of the financial district. Houseboats beached at the point of low tide, only to float again when the sunset is reflected in the water. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, camels pulling wagons of bear cages, tamed ostriches in toy hats, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line. (3)

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<sup>53</sup> On the planning of and lobbying for BART by corporations—including Bank of America, the relevance of which will become evident—see Hartman 6-7.

The first sentence of the book, repeated at the beginning of every subsequent paragraph, intimates both the restructuring of Fordism and *Ketjak*'s formal innovations. This "revolving door" is on the one hand a metonym for finance capital, via the corporate office buildings that facilitate investment. On the other hand, "revolving door" evokes the way sentences function in *Ketjak*, continually re-emerging, often in altered form, and whether altered or not, always in a new context. The surreal "sequence of objects" that Silliman puts in play here evokes a kind of assembly line, which is just to say that they encapsulate in one sentence what *Ketjak* does across sentences. A later example of this will be the sentence, "posits of new information not like the cars recently attached to a train, but like memory, embedded in the presences" (21). The present, populated by "fountains of the financial district," reflects the spectral dimensions Fordism (a memory) has itself taken on, as the assembly of goods is determined first and foremost by "posits of new information."

In his seminal essay (and then book), "Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," Fredric Jameson comments on the new sentence as employed by one of Silliman's Language School peers, Bob Perelman. Perelman's poem is called "China," and Jameson reflects on the paradox of "the reemergence here across these disjointed sentences of some more unified global meaning" (29). Jameson can be maddeningly evasive about what this meaning is in his account of postmodernism, letting himself off the hook for providing an "infrastructural description" because, as he puts it, such a description "is necessarily itself already cultural and a version of postmodernism theory in advance" (xv). In short, since culture in this brave new world has no quintessentially modernist autonomy left to it, and in postmodernism can only grease the wheels of

capital accumulation, there is no way for the artist, or even the critic, to fully grasp developments. The frenetic character of Jameson's descriptions of postmodernism evinces, as he allows, the content of his object of critique. And yet he offers useful passes on the topic of infrastructural shifts, as when he comments in the "Introduction" to

*Postmodernism*:

It is my sense that both levels in question, infrastructure and superstructure—the economic system and the cultural "structure of feeling"—somehow crystallized in the great shock of the crisis of 1973 (the oil crisis, the end of the international gold standard, for all intents and purposes the end of the great wave of "wars of national liberation" and the beginning of the end of traditional communism), which, now that the dust clouds have rolled away, expose the existence, already in place, of a strange new landscape. (xx-xxi)<sup>54</sup>

It is this new landscape through which Silliman rides the BART. If Silliman ironizes the mechanics of Fordism, he does so with explicit reference to what Harvey called "a total way of life," the quality of which has shifted since the days of the New American Poets: "Sat in the Ford World Headquarters lobby, reading Olson" (38).

This isn't, though, how Silliman conceives of the work he is doing in *Ketjak*. Rather, in essays such as "The New Sentence" and "Disappearance of the Word, Appearance of the World," he seeks to affirm the gestural, expressive, and possibly non-sense sounds of the signifier against the reification of reference. Silliman offers a chronology of human language use, where signs first began as sonorous play. With capitalism and the emergence of realism, though, we came to pass over the signifier in reading for its referent. Silliman argues, "it is the disappearance of the word that lies at

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<sup>54</sup> Jameson's use of the seemingly benign qualifier "somehow," just as his "*some* more unified global meaning," is indicative of the totalizing tenor of postmodern theory. *It* happened, but we can't exactly say how, which attests either to the monstrous or the revelatory nature of the totality before us, and the heroic, albeit Sisyphean, task of accounting for it.

the heart of the invention of the illusion of realism and the breakdown of gestural poetic form” (*Sentence* 12). “The new sentence,” he writes, “is the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning” (93). Yet Silliman explicitly challenges Jameson’s pronouncement that in Perelman “the isolated signifier is no longer an enigmatic state of the world or an incomprehensible yet mesmerizing fragment of language but rather something closer to a sentence in free-standing isolation” (*Postmodernism* 28). Rather, Silliman claims, “the new sentence is a decidedly contextual object. Its effects occur as much between, as within, sentences” (*Sentence* 92). His affirmation of the merely gestural mark of the signifier, however, does not allow for the play between signifier and referent that *Ketjak* employs, as we shall see, with puns such as “mould forms in old coffee” (44).

Silliman might sound absolutist in his poetics, but reading the new sentence as a reflection of the structural transformations Jameson points to risks making *Ketjak* a merely symptomatic work. This risk, indeed, is what motivates Silliman’s criticism of Jameson’s reading of Perelman. In refuting Silliman’s poetics, then, I seek to open up a reading of *Ketjak* that Silliman’s own writings have delimited. As Anna Kornbluh has argued, literature can set in relief the very financial processes that otherwise appear both opaque and natural. She writes that “the ill fit between the literary and the social—the asymmetries, the chafing, the strained themes—delineates those spaces of irritation through which literature may ultimately ironize the social regimes it mobilizes” (14). Indeed, it is this self-distancing from its own mode of enigmatic expression that makes *Ketjak* so fascinating.

In his poetics, Silliman asserts the autonomy of his new sentence from capitalist reification—an autonomy that in *Ketjak* becomes translated into an Orientalist organicism. Silliman’s method of accretion and repetition in *Ketjak* was inspired by Steve Reich’s *Drumming* (1972), which was itself based on the rhythms of Balinese gamelan. Reich is sensitive to the politics of Western appropriation, which he enacts, in a way Silliman never appears to worry over.<sup>55</sup> Yet the form of gamelan known as the monkey chant, or *kecak*, was itself the product of Western artists collaborating with Balinese musicians in the early part of the twentieth century, and so Silliman’s appropriation of the idea of this music (rather than the music itself) for his life project is in its own way fitting, though it is not clear he is aware of this history.<sup>56</sup> In *Under Albany* (2004) Silliman couples, furthermore, his breakthrough recognition of what the structure of *Ketjak* would be to the “revolving door” of financialization.

One evening Barry and I went to the Asian Art Museum in Golden Gate Park to hear a concert in its auditorium, the west coast debut of Steve Reich’s *Drumming*. It was the third Reich performance I’d attended, the others being Paul Zukofsky’s performance of *Violin Phase* on my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on the UC campus (several listeners walked out, led by, of all people, Mario Savio). [...]

As *Drumming* began and proceeded (augmented by the room’s perfect acoustics), I began to sense, for the first time, exactly what the formal structure of *Ketjak* would be. Within a week I was beginning to scribble out ideas and, finally, on my way to meet my ex-wife Shelly (we were to meet on the steps of the Bank of America headquarters), I began to write in a cheap notebook, my first sentence inspired by the B of A’s architecture, “Revolving door.” (61-62)

For Silliman the structure of *Drumming* becomes an aid to impeding capitalist reality’s reification through hypotactic narrative. Yet he fails to make the connection of Reich’s

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<sup>55</sup> See Reich 69-71.

<sup>56</sup> See McGraw 25-26.

method—and that of his own paratactic new sentences—to the “revolving door” of finance.

Reich inherited from Balinese gamelan a paratactic, non-climax-oriented model for music. To this he added his own technique of “phase-shifting” or “phasing,” the moving in and out of tempo of two or more players or instruments. In an interview for the *South Bank Show* on his work, Reich stated,

what’s really interesting is this process of starting in unison and gradually separating, passing through all these different canonic relationships, these different mini-roads, and coming to variously recognizably musically interesting parts, and then these irrational parts, followed by another rational resting part, and finally, if you let it go, it comes back together again. (“Steve Reich”)

Brian Eno’s conception of the listener’s role is significant here: “Your brain is actually making this piece of music, because you knew what the ingredients were, there’s nothing mysterious about how the piece works” (Ibid.). Indeed, for Silliman, the claim to impeding capitalist reification takes just this tack. In an interview with Tom Beckett he states:

For me, then, the question of procedure is not one of seeking a “correct,” or valorized device (e.g., the “new sentence”), but of taking a stance toward language, the activity of composition, and reality, which will call forth strategies and structures that are both generative and unconcealing of their constructedness. (34)

While in *The New Sentence* Silliman argues that his particular method frees itself from an alienating form of referentiality, here the claim is more modest: the work is radical because it reveals its own constructedness. Robert Fink has argued that the “terrifying control” (Alan Rich) of Reich’s *Music for Eighteen Musicians* (1978) is underwritten by “*syntactic* control, a transformed, complex musical erotics of repetitive tension and

repetitive release” (41).<sup>57</sup> Silliman’s foregrounding of each sentence as an autonomous affective unit in *Ketjak*, through a parataxis of torques, evinces a comparative syntactic control, brought to full effect in the repetition and alteration of those sentences. *Ketjak*’s thematic discontinuity from sentence to sentence creates a flat and un-lyrical work, while at once inviting the reader to an appreciation of differences residing as much between as within sentences, demanding that the reader work out their experience of the text through, and not in spite of or over, its ingredients.

The organic structure of *Ketjak*—as will become clearer in light of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s critique of Jameson—evinces an at once homogenizing and Orientalizing postmodernism that inscribes in this case Balinese gamelan to its own ends.

R. John Williams has shown how

American art and literature have been shaped as much by resistance to technology as by submission to it—and, with startling frequency, that resistance has taken the form of an investment in what I call *Asia-as-technê*: a compelling fantasy that would posit Eastern aesthetics as both the antidote to and the perfection of machine culture. (1)

No longer are we in the realm of Leo Marx’s “sudden appearance of the machine in the landscape,” where “this intrusive artifact figures forth the unprecedented power and dynamism of the oncoming order, and it exposes the illusory character of the retreat to nature as a way of coping with the ineluctable advance of modernity” (378). As we saw in his description of the emergence of *Ketjak*, Silliman’s “retreat” to the Asian Art Museum and the Bank of America is at once a turn to new technologies of the information economy constitutive of post-Fordism. Silliman utilizes methods of

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<sup>57</sup> For an excellent reading of feedback loops in minimalism, finance, and cybernetics see Seymour.

repetition and parataxis that are inspired in part by the revolving door of finance to construct an organic, non-hierarchical composition that privileges process and play over narrative outcomes. Reich's and Silliman's constructivist techniques—using Asia-as-technê—are both the antidote to and the perfection of post-Fordism.

In accord with his statement in *Under Albany*, Silliman notes in *Ketjak*, “when Zukofsky debuted Reich's Violin Phase on the west coast, the first person to stomp out was Mario Savio” (22). On December 3, 1964 Savio, leader of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM), gave a rousing speech at UC Berkeley to students who proceeded to occupy Sproul Hall:

Now, I ask you to consider: if this is a firm, and if the Board of Regents are the board of directors, and if President Kerr in fact is the manager, then I'll tell you something: the faculty are a bunch of employees, and we're the raw material! But we're a bunch of raw material[s] that don't mean to have any process upon us, don't mean to be made into any product, don't mean to end up being bought by some clients of the University, be they the government, be they industry, be they organized labor, be they anyone! We're human beings!

[Wild applause.]

There is a time when the operation of the machine becomes so odious, makes you so sick at heart, that you can't take part; you can't even passively take part, and you've got to put your bodies upon the gears and upon the wheels, upon the levers, upon all the apparatus, and you've got to make it stop. And you've got to indicate to the people who run it, to the people who own it, that unless you're free, the machine will be prevented from working at all!

That Silliman has Savio walking out of a performance of Reich, whose music his own composition is inspired by, attests to his recognition of a fundamental shift. It is not only Mario Savio who stomps out of Silliman's sentence, but the very “first person” affirmation of identity that was emblematic of sixties radicalism. Savio ends his speech: “Now, no more talking. We're going to march in singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ Slowly; there are a lot of us. Up here to the left – I didn't mean the pun.”

Savio's inadvertent pun becomes precisely the kind of play Silliman does mean: "Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind" (17). The winds of change come hard, but the new content is made of stuff so soft it's ungraspable—at least by the subject who would muster a self-affirming interiority as their badge of identity. Silliman, in his sentence on Savio, raises the possibility of his own activist lineage emerging from Savio and the FSM in the same moment that Savio stomps out of the field of composition Silliman comes to adopt. Savio is no anomaly here; in 1973, when Michael Tilson Thomas debuted Reich's *Four Organs* at Carnegie Hall with the Boston Symphony, the audience, five minutes into the performance, broke out into cat-calls and booing so loud that "Thomas had to yell bar numbers so that we knew where the hell we were," just as Nijinsky had been forced to shout counts to the dancers at the famous 1913 Paris debut of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (Reich qtd. in Duckworth 304).<sup>58</sup>

**"From the house where Trotsky died they caught a ride with a man  
who worked for the World Bank" (36)**

Between Savio's speech and Silliman's *Ketjak* is a transition of global historical significance. I am not referring to 1968 per se. This transition is one between what Théorie Communiste (TC) have termed the programmatic workers movement, and the restructuring of the capital-labor relation that began in the 1970s. TC's claim is that the historical worker's movement's "affirmation of the proletariat, whether as a dictatorship of the proletariat, workers' councils, the liberation of work, a period of transition, the withering of the state, generalized self-management, or a 'society of associated

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<sup>58</sup> See also "Steve Reich."

producers,” always carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction, because it affirmed one pole of the capital-labor relation and thereby necessarily reproduced that relation in one form or another (Endnotes 155). For TC, Jameson’s “strange new landscape” is one wherein the realization of a worker’s program, where the world would be remade in the worker’s image—“a worker’s world”—is no longer viable. The official delinking of the dollar from gold is only one index of these developments, as the sphere of national accumulation became eclipsed for a new, globalizing landscape.<sup>59</sup> The social wage guaranteed by the welfare state likewise begins to unravel, while workers find their mortgages and pensions directly integrated into the reproduction of global capital through financial markets. Soon it will take two incomes to support a household, while labor that women had traditionally performed outside the wage-relation becomes commodified, and labor in general feminized both in its precariousness and affective character.<sup>60</sup> The structural basis, in short, for the affirmation of the relative autonomy of workers from capital becomes dramatically eroded during the 70s.

For TC this restructuring leads to new possibilities, not least of which is a revolutionary struggle—“communization”—that will cast off the “external constraint” of proletarian identity.<sup>61</sup> There is a homology between the self-affirming proletarian and the expressive lyric subject. This latter, likewise, becomes curiously conspicuous—because contested—during the restructuring of the 70s. Mario Savio is himself on the cusp of this transformation, as he inveighs against organized labor and machinery, not as the means to

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<sup>59</sup> On falling profitability and the end of the gold standard see Brenner.

<sup>60</sup> For a thorough and nuanced discussion of the status of gender in post-Fordism see “Post-Fordist Zaniness” in Ngai, *Categories* 197-222. Feminization is also addressed by Bernes.

<sup>61</sup> See *Théorie Communiste*.

human realization, but rather its fetters.<sup>62</sup> Silliman's theoretical statements on the gestural integrity of his expressive labor belie what is most compelling about *Ketjak*, mainly its making hypotactic narrative, and by implication the expressive subject, anomalous. As Yu points out, "the technique of parataxis, of following one sentence with another that is apparently unrelated, refuses to allow this perspective [of Silliman's individual identity] to cohere—serving, in essence, as the author's bulwark against himself" (71). Silliman reports on the transition away from Fordism, programmatic struggles, and lyric self-expression—a transition his work exemplifies—while he nevertheless retains a strikingly programmatic poetics. His poetics do not only contradict his poetic production proper, but more interestingly highlight precisely what has become evanescent with the restructuring of the 70s—the laborer's ability to assert the integrity of his organic toil.

In *Ketjak* we see sentences reappear, often with added or altered elements, propelling the continual elision of what we expect to come down the line. "As each new sack, parcel of information, was cut open, its contents spilled onto the conveyor belt, the foreman would announce it by blowing on a conch shell. We ate them. This is before we knew of Cointelpro" (101). We can expect more of the same in one sense, yet what is the same has "somehow," to follow Jameson, become different. *Ketjak's* composition indexes, in part, the expansion of financial derivatives after Richard Nixon's de-linking of the dollar from gold in 1971, creating what the German chancellor at the time called a "floating non-system" of national currencies being measured against each other (qtd. in

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<sup>62</sup> Consider TC's analysis of the contradictions of the Situationist International, who at once demanded the abolition of work, as well as declaring "All power to the worker's councils!" See "Chapitre 5: De la critique du travail au dépassement du programmatisme: une transition théorique, L'Internationale Situationniste" in Simon 469-604. (I am indebted to Jeanne Neton & Peter Åström's unpublished translation of this text. See also Watten, "Language.")

McNally 92-93). As David McNally explains in *Global Slump*, “the period from 1973 on saw a tsunami-like wave of transactions in financial derivatives related to currency and financial uncertainty” (97), which was at once the severing of money from “a direct link to past labor embodied in a commodity” (92). The point is not, as Gail Day has brilliantly argued in her critique of Jameson, that credit becomes strictly autonomous from productive relations (217-229), but rather that, as David Harvey puts it, “the quantity of fictitious capital [bets of future profits] moves steadily ahead of the actual accumulation, and the gap between the monetary basis as a real measure of values and the various forms of paper moneys in circulation begins to widen” (*Limits* 303). The vicissitudes of what Marx called “those roving cavaliers of credit” come furthermore to determine the terms of commodity production as ready money falls into the hands of the cavaliers (qtd. in *Ibid.*). Financial and industrial accumulation circuits become increasingly out of phase with each other, while the ultimate outcome of bets on future profits remain dependent on the profitability of production.

All this exacerbates crises. As with Reich’s music, though, it is the movement between phases where content and contestation burgeon forth. In *Ketjak* this gap is set in motion by the shifting significance of sentences as they morph while other sentences proliferate around them. Puns are a conspicuous aspect of this kind of play, where the distance between signifier and a stable referent is dramatized. Consider the play of amorphous referents in this passage:

Exorcise your monkey. Early morning mental system. The poem as a form sensed prior to the writing, as the act thereof, as a text fixed upon paper, as the act of reading, as the memory of one of the above. The tenor sax is a weapon. Posits of new information not like the cars recently attached to a train, but like memory, embedded in the presences. We stood or sat on the deck, breaking oranges into slices, watching the four-masted prison ship across the bay. Her sense of the

distance within families is American, but beyond that, Chinese. Linoleum story. Men eating burgers in silence, at a drug-store counter, wearing t-shirts and short hair, staring at their food. Bob's bitter days. The bottle of wine is empty. The main library was a great weight in a white rain. (21)

The ambiguous referent in “exorcise your monkey” is one way of foregrounding the work of signification itself, which here becomes a bawdy joke that at once calls forth the Buddhist concept of “monkey mind.” Indeed, the chattering of such a mind, the monkey chant, and the incessant “new information” of *Ketjak* are of a piece. The first two sentences of this passage also foreground alliteration and a curious kind of rhyming, where the sounds in the phrase “exorcise your monkey” echo in the word “system.” Such equivalence of letters and sounds with a difference is thematized in the various clauses of the third sentence, where writing is explicated by several terms, ending with a multiple choice-like refrain, “as the memory of one of the above.” This sense of memorializing past and present actions pervades *Ketjak*, and is, again, attested to with the sentence “posits of new information not like the cars recently attached to a train, but like memory, embedded in the presences.” Silliman enacts the new sentence here as self-othering, asserting a difference between presence and memory, signifier and signified, rather than a mere attachment of new materials in narrative continuity. It is hard not to read the distance in American and Chinese families, a difference that here lacks qualification, as a reference to the structural transformation that these sentences both attest to and play with. As Spivak has made clear, though, while criticizing Jameson's use of Perelman's poem “China,” referencing China in this way enacts a cultural politics whereby, in this instance, the U.S. reader is meant to know what an American family consists of, while “Chinese families” become—again—an invention of a homogenizing and at once Orientalizing “postmodern condition” (330-336).

Not only does *Ketjak*'s meaning emerge, as Silliman argues, between sentences, but especially with puns, it is beyond them. Puns illustrate a proliferation of referents, as well as syntactical constructions, from the same semantic unit. The sentence "mould forms in old coffee" (44) is a prime example, where "mould" is either an imperative or the subject of the sentence. We are not talking about "Writing that grows out of itself, poetry of mould," but rather writing that contradicts expectations, and may be funny: "mould" as formal achievement or just as likely fungal growth on rancid coffee (58). Form, we might say, is fungal in *Ketjak*. Rather than hypotactic and narrative hierarchies, there is a rhizomatic web of cross-references. But, most importantly, the way these constructions refer to themselves makes palpable the absence of any stable, underlying referent, or value. If gold was the ostensible guarantor of value in Fordism, value is now a "floating non-system."

I am making an analogy here between Saussure's linguistic system and the gold standard, for while in Saussure signs gain meaning by virtue of their relation to other signs, they do so in a way that presupposes fixed relations. Punning—like floating exchange rates—disrupts all this.

In Ferdinand de Saussure's account, the linguistic system consists of relational entities, signs defined by their relations with one another. Emphasis on new punning relationships disrupts the system: if *laconic* means both "terse" and "Lacanian," then the system of differences is functioning in a way that is difficult to predict or describe. If, as Saussure writes, the most precise characteristic of a linguistic unit is to be what the others are not, what happens when it seems to be another sign also? (Culler 12)

Punning allows Silliman to dramatize the play, or non-sense, of signifiers. Of course this is a play *with* signification, rather than somehow free from it. While Silliman imagines in *The New Sentence* that he can enshrine the gestural autonomy of the signifier, he allows

elsewhere that what he is mainly concerned with is revealing the constructedness of syntax and signification. Although Silliman doesn't use the language of organicism here, the stakes are the same. While he fantasizes an organic relation between sound and sense in his poetics, what *Ketjak*'s puns reveal is how signification is anything but organic. By dramatizing the constructedness of signification, *Ketjak* suggests that poets' conceptions of organicism are likewise constructs.

From the "revolving door" that begins each paragraph, to his reference to "fountains of the financial district," Silliman thematizes the emergent priority of finance. While hyper-financialization was a flight from the rigidities of Fordism, it remains tethered—as the financial and housing crisis of 2008 testifies, or before that the Dot-com bubble—to profits realized (or not) in the sphere of production. "Stood there broke and rapidly becoming hungry, staring at nickels and pennies at the bottom of the fountain" (33). "A large, hot-air balloon had drifted over the central part of the city, shadow passing over canyons of the financial district" (78). "I sat atop the fountain, which, at midnight, was shut off, all concrete and pools of still water" (95). The fountain of finance will not feed the poet, and when the water is turned off there is nothing but concrete and stagnant pools, perhaps with a few coins in them. The hot-air balloon here evokes the same fantasy as the sequence of objects—which expands throughout the book—migrating, like a mirage, to a vanishing point on the horizon line. One might go so far as make a biographical analogy between the restructuring of the 70s and the end of Silliman's marriage, as the composition of the book begins when meeting his ex-wife outside the Bank of America. Finance, in this metaphor, is an index of defeat as much as it is a novel possibility. Part of *Ketjak*'s brilliance is how its play of puns and repetitions is imbricated

in—despite Silliman’s poetics—the restructuring of Fordism, and indeed the defeat of 60s radicalism in the vein of Savio. These transformations enliven *Ketjak*. Rather than being merely mimetic, Silliman’s novel constructions ironize both Fordist rigidities and the fantasy of definitively escaping them; his dialectical play always has an eye to the concrete.

Composition (which we should now be reading as always at once production) and fantasy are of a piece in *Ketjak*. “How this sentence could open to comment on itself, how these words, first written, swelled with intention, spilled meaning, later to have become so opaque certain terms, modifiers of the first purpose, expanded, redistributed value, took over” (60). Or again: “It repeats and repeats, adding new lines without apparent relation, building with great visual and mental invention a tremendous formal beauty that carries no cargo at all” (61). There is a curious and implicit auto-critique of *Ketjak*’s own method here. If we are to take Silliman’s poetics seriously, though, then the absence of “cargo” or reference is an end-in-itself in so far as it impedes capitalist reification. Of course this isn’t what these fairly conventional sentences are doing here, but Silliman seems to continually provide reflections on his composition as an effect of alien forces, and as at once purely self-referential. *Ketjak*, we might say, doubles back on itself, for as I have been arguing signification without reference—or more properly with multiple referents, as with puns—evokes fictitious capital and the eschewing of relatively stable values, as much as any threat to capitalist reification. The book critically reflects on its mimesis of capital through ironizing and denaturalizing the solidity of its determinants: “The signs sing” (22).

Nevertheless, some critics have taken Silliman's affirmation of the autonomy of his gestural labor at face value. In *Procedural Form in Postmodern Poetry*, David W. Huntsperger elaborates Silliman's conception of his own labor as manifest in a language challenging depiction, where "Silliman's discontinuous narrative lays bare the labor involved in the production of the text. The notebook, the pen, the typewriter, the typed page—all the instruments of writing double as the subject matter of writing in an endlessly self-reflexive praxis" (121). While the subject is the subject of *Ketjak* it also seems true that—as Marjorie Perloff puts it— "the subject, far from being at the center of the discourse ... is located only at its interstices" (432). Huntsperger refers his own programmatism to Georg Lukács's "'real material substratum,' conceiving of 'capitalist society with its internal antagonism between the forces and the relations of production'" (100).<sup>63</sup> Huntsperger's affirmation of the fact of labor before exchange on the market, as though the worker's identity wasn't forged through *going to* market to sell their labor power, causes him to affirm "the raw material of a writing process that refuses to recede into the background, a labor process that refuses to disappear into commodity fetishism" (130). It seems to me that the reverse of this is just as plausibly what is happening in *Ketjak*: Silliman's sentences detach themselves from hypotactic narrative, as well as stable referents, thereby becoming free-floating and semi-autonomous; mimetic of how financial transactions appear to us. While Silliman, as I have just suggested, does foreground his own process, it is anomalous to think of this process strictly in terms of

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<sup>63</sup> For the definitive critique of the conception of capitalism as defined by a contradiction between the forces and relations of production see Postone.

the materials of his craft.<sup>64</sup> Huntsperger, following Silliman in his poetics, thinks as though Silliman were writing in a pre-industrial workshop, and in order to subvert the fetishism of exchange had, perversely, to make a fetish of his own labor process.<sup>65</sup>

Christopher Nealon provides a more subtle sense of the relation between Language Poetry and “the spectacle”:

The Language poets frequently think of poetry as a problem of the vicissitudes of a political and linguistic totality. [...] The Language writers want their writing to extend outward to meet the language of the spectacle, to match its emulsification of experience with a capaciousness that still makes room for live thought, for surprise, possibly even for politics. (129)

And as Timothy Yu has so effectively documented, Silliman (and Charles Bernstein) “sought to continue the politics of the 1960s by other means, steering away from the perceived perils of separatism and violence toward an analysis of language” (14). Yu has foregrounded Silliman’s paradoxical affirmation of his position as a white, heterosexual, working-class male amidst the flood of identity politics, which is consonant with his anxiety over the slipping away of a generalist, avant-garde position. Silliman’s affirmation of his personal identity, along with his yearning for a programmatist politics that is no longer feasible, is legible in terms of the central role of white men as breadwinners in Fordism. As Harvey notes:

While it is true that the declining significance of union power has reduced the singular power of white male workers in monopoly sector markets, it does not follow that those excluded from those labor markets, such as blacks, women, and ethnic minorities of all kinds, have achieved sudden parity (except in the sense

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<sup>64</sup> For a brilliant critique of a similar tendency in “new materialism” see Ngai, “Visceral Abstractions.”

<sup>65</sup> David Marriott deftly probes the relation between Silliman’s fetish of the signifier and his incorrect conception of “tribal poetry.” Nevertheless, when analyzing financialization, Marriott falls into an even more fetid pastoral trap than the one for which Gail Day indicts Jameson.

that many traditionally privileged white male workers have been marginalized alongside them). (*Postmodernity* 152)

While the hypotactic subject slips through the interstices of *Ketjak*, Silliman affirms the autonomy of the writerly subject in his poetics. That Silliman links this writerly subject to his own white, working-class identity, highlights the imbrication of the self-affirmation of labor with white supremacy that we saw Whitman articulating.<sup>66</sup>

**“A sign within the diesel’s whine” (66).**

Silliman, in terms that are reminiscent of Whitman’s catalogs, struggles with the sense that his technique is merely mimetic of the market.

A writing which is never “about” anything is never limited as to what can enter it. The furniture is endless. In a funny way, that is what David Antin was getting at when he compared “language poetry” to a stroll through Sears. All those shiny sentences stacked in a row. But, of course, retail layout *is* a hierarchical structure: it’s a narrative with a conclusion “you buy.” That is why the impulse items are by the register. (Beckett 43)

Silliman’s assertion that the new sentence is either eschewing narrative, or revealing its constructedness, is central to his conception of the distinctiveness of his labors. This lack of narrativity was distinctive of much of Whitman, too—evinced, for example, when a contemporary reviewer compared an actual auctioneer’s catalog favorably to his poetry.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, the parataxis so characteristic of American free verse seems nearly to make Silliman’s claim to eschewing narrative redundant.

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<sup>66</sup> My point here is not that Silliman or *Ketjak* are racist. As Epstein (“Content” 771-772) explains, the last line of *Ketjak* refers to the Attica prison riot, and Silliman was an activist for prison reform throughout the 1970s. Rather, I am suggesting that the politics of the self-affirmation of labor are historically coupled to white supremacy.

<sup>67</sup> See page 45, note 18.

It is worth pausing over David Antin's essay, "Radical Coherency" (1981), which Silliman alludes to in his interview with Beckett. This essay in the style of his talk poems records the minutia of a shopping trip to Sears with his senile mother. Antin begins by reflecting on his transition from assembling collages to writing talk pieces. Indeed, the whole piece is a subtle and hilarious indictment of collage as mirroring a department store's method of organization. Antin avers that in his collages "the audience would / surely not recognize all the sources the original discourses from which / those pieces had been drawn" (228). Soon after he implicates such collages, and those of Language Poets, with the organization of Sears:

and I think that probably many of the poets who  
are now called "language poets" have some of the same pleasures of not  
knowing what their audience makes of the constructions they put  
together while they are aware of the sources from which they've taken  
them and probably enjoy taking them and sometimes perhaps the  
poets are lucky enough to forget where they've taken them from (229)

Because he is not interested in "the original discourses" of his sources—"something from a manual on / aeronautics and something else from leonardos writings on water and / something else from the *watch tower* the jehovahs witness magazine"—Antin concludes that "I was not the best audience for my work" (228). This worries Antin because, as he puts it, "i like being the best audience for my own unalienated work" (228). Antin's tongue-in-cheek suggestion is that authorial voice still provides the best way to be present for one's own work. As Silliman himself writes, "The design of a department store is intended to leave you fragmented, off balance" (*Alphabet 2*).

While offering a subtle critique of Language Poetry, which Silliman thought significant enough to defend himself against, Antin is also providing a pastiche of Frank O'Hara, especially his poems "A Step Away from Them" and "Personal Poem." Antin

even replaced O'Hara as the writer of "Art Chronicle" in the small magazine *Kulchur* in 1965, a year before O'Hara's death (Antin 1-2). As we know from the previous chapter, it is with "A Step Away from Them" that O'Hara's quintessential "I do this I do that" style emerges, along with the "hum-colored / cabs" where "Everything / suddenly honks: it is 12:40 of / a Thursday." (257) Here "laborers feed their dirty / glistening torsos sandwiches / and Coca-Cola" while "I look / for bargains in wristwatches." Later, in "Personal Poem" O'Hara writes: "I wonder if one person out of the 8,000,000 is / thinking of me as I shake hands with LeRoi / and buy a strap for my wristwatch and go / back to work happy at the thought possibly so" (336). We shouldn't be in any doubt—the poet seems to be telling us—about where his time signals come from. Antin mobilizes O'Hara in his stroll through Sears: "i needed a band for my wristwatch [...] they didn't have any wristwatch bands" (230). The whole point of the trip, though, was to help his mother find shoes: "now there were two parts to the section in shoes        there was one part / clustered around the central counter and cases where they sold shoes / and there was another part where they sold bargains in shoes" (230). On the next page Antin continues: "there were giant bottles of coca cola and a place / where you could apply for credit" (231). Antin's oblique references to O'Hara here reveal how central the latter's "I do this I do that" style are to Antin's own procedure and voice. Indeed, O'Hara is the kind of "source" Antin wonders whether or not his audience will pick up on. Antin suggests that "language poets"—against the grain of their own poetics—are carrying on the same lineage as O'Hara, where commerce and credit provide for the experiences figured as "personal." Of course Antin implicates his own composition in this

problematic, while nevertheless seeming to suggest that his own—and by implication O’Hara’s—“talk” still has something over mere collage.

We should remember here Silliman’s denunciation of the New American Poetry, in terms that are surely meant to apply to O’Hara in particular: “Once [...] the creative euphoria of sketching out what the false model of a (non-constructed because “natural”) speech-imitating poetics would look like was complete, the same limiting claustrophobia set in.”<sup>68</sup> In a sense, Antin gives this claustrophobia full scope, where his own thoughts (not least upon his process of composition) dominate the field of his utterances. What he mobilizes here is a compelling critique of claims by Language Poets like Silliman that their method reveals the unalienated laboring subject. Antin’s imitation of O’Hara suggests that no such unalienated position exists, and that it is indeed a mistake of Language Poets to think that poets like O’Hara ever meant to inhabit one.

Let us return again to the nature of *Ketjak*’s novelty, in which a detour through the nineteenth century will prove useful. In his essay on “Culture and Finance Capital” (1996) Jameson explores the restructured quality of syntax as well as of the fragment in postmodernism. Of the former he writes that

The adventures of syntax down the ages, from Homer to Proust, is the deeper narrative of *Mimesis*: the gradual unlimbering of hierarchical sentence structure, and the differential evolution of the incidental clauses of the new sentence in such a way that each can now register a hitherto unperceived local complexity of the Real. (147)

Rather than disappearing into one of its constitutive clauses (as with Proust), the gestural autonomy of *Ketjak*’s sentences confronts the reader with a flat (and gleaming) surface to

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<sup>68</sup> Perelman has also noted how for Silliman “it was crucial to distance himself from Olson’s speech-based poetics” (170).

the degree that sentences lack hypotactic, expressive depth. When Silliman does play with clauses, linear development takes a back seat to associative accretion:

The private lives of kindergarten teachers, a party about the clubhouse of an apartment complex, one who by the pool shows the young woman an appropriate way to drive a golf ball, or strangers stare confusedly at the sauna, read instructions, implies to the newcomer, engaged now in a contest of pocket billiards, chalking his cue in that harder light, high beamed ceiling, aligning in the mind ball to pocket, a world of repose, of a stasis that includes activity, sailboats decked in a garage, as, what is the word, he can't find it, as something as the light which each night is turned upon the garden. (40-1)

Rather than getting lost along the hypotactic way, the way itself is kept at bay—"he can't find it." "To destroy syntax in advance" (71). This "stasis that includes activity" provides for some of *Ketjak*'s unique pleasures. And yet, it seems impossible not to read narrative into the tensions of this sentence. As with other sentences in *Ketjak*, which are often more explicit, sex and sexual tension of a particular kind—men doing things to women—mobilize a highly traditional arc of action. This, one might say, is "the light which is each night turned upon the garden." Masculinity—in ways we should be familiar with from Whitman and Olson—becomes a kind of machine here, repeatedly insisting on the formulation of itself as organic.

Jameson writes of the fragment, which seems inextricably bound to the problem of modernist syntax:

What happens [in Barthes] is that each former fragment of a narrative, what was once incomprehensible without the narrative context as a whole, has now become capable of emitting a complete narrative message in its own right. It has become autonomous ... in its newly acquired capacity to soak up content and to project it in a kind of instant reflex. Whence the vanishing away of affect in the postmodern: the situation of contingency and meaninglessness, of alienation, has been superseded by this cultural renarrativization of the broken pieces of the image world. ("Culture" 170)

Jameson's assessment of Barthes here echoes that he offered of Bob Perelman's

sentences as hovering in “free-standing isolation.” The fragment has lost its modernist pathos, according to Jameson, and “culture”—at once economic and artistic—has now become “an instant reflex.” As I have been arguing, “this cultural renarrativization” is made up of the new terms of production and representation brought on by the restructuring of the capital-labor relation during the 70s. Reading Jameson against the grain, affect does not vanish in *Ketjak*, but rather is endlessly reflexive, without a stable referent outside its own workings.<sup>69</sup> The text’s internal capaciousness is, then, a presentiment of how finance capital becomes increasingly, and ever more dangerously, adrift from value-production proper. *Ketjak* ironizes its own reflexivity though, and as Silliman argues in his poetics, reveals its own constructiveness. Its self-deflating answer to Jameson’s proposition is: “Give historical intention a natural justification, make contingency appear eternal.” (91)

In a later book, *Lit* (1987), Silliman gives over a page to a quotation from Thoreau’s journals:

“Write often, write upon a thousand themes, rather than long at a time, not trying to turn too many feeble somersets in the air—and so come down upon your head at last. Antaeus-like, be not long absent from the ground. Those sentences are good and well discharged which are like so many little resiliencies from the spring floor of our life—a distinct fruit and kernel itself, springing from the *terra firma*. Let there be as many distinct plants as the soil and the light can sustain. Take as many bounds in a day as possible. Sentences uttered with your back to the wall.”

Henry David Thoreau  
November 12, 1851 (44)

It is not difficult to see why Silliman chose to include this passage on writing sentences,

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<sup>69</sup> In *Ugly Feelings* Sianne Ngai of course indexes this proliferation of affects, which are nevertheless grounded in quite material conflicts.

so full as it is of word play. Spring, it would seem, is valued over summer for Thoreau, which might prove unfruitful for being too lofty. Springing, then, is to bare fruit from firm ground, reminiscent of Whitman's profitable rhyme that "conveys itself into its own roots in the ground out of sight." The juxtapositions of the final sentences in this passage offer a curious image, as though bounding is best done lying on the ground. Thoreau provides here a traditional version of writerly organicism, where composition is figured as foliation. Even more than Whitman, Thoreau's organic metaphor for language is evinced through his versatile play with words, suggesting that there is a wildness to composition that this metaphor is both party to and struggles to contain.

Stephen Fredman has considered a lateral kind of "containment" shared by Thoreau and Olson as productive for a dialectical elaboration of "facts," which applies to Silliman as well. Fredman focuses on Thoreau's sounding of the depths of Walden Pond as an emblematic instance of American poetic self-grounding.

The sequence runs something like this: first we must work our way down past all the hearsay notions we have inherited from our neighbors (such as the superstition that Walden is bottomless) and find the facts for ourselves (for example, plumb Walden to ascertain its 102-foot depth); once we have accomplished this arduous act of discovery or revision, then we find that the facts disclosed through our experimental discipline become endlessly productive (bottomless).  
(*Grounding* 28)

Silliman does something similar in his attention to, and construction of, the syntax of post-Fordist experience. The construction of the new sentence is an exposition of how the self and syntax—which are continually figured as synonymous—are mediated through the market and productive relations. Rather, though, than merely taking this fact of construction as given, Silliman ironizes his own composition, thereby gaining a critical purchase upon it. Indeed, Silliman's irony is endlessly productive while dramatizing—as

with the hot air balloon floating over canyons of the financial district—bottomlessness. Silliman thereby reveals the organic as a construct, a fiction of self-grounding over a bottomless modernity where all solids melt into air.

While Thoreau, like Silliman, employs a highly allusive wit, Silliman's hyper-awareness regarding the mechanisms of signification suggests how capital-labor relations have altered during the more than a century that separates these writers.<sup>70</sup> There is a telling difference between Silliman's attention to weightless particulars and Thoreau's to bottomless ponds. *Ketjak*'s boundaries are at once more circumscribed and enigmatic than *Walden*'s: "Stood there broke and rapidly becoming hungry, staring at nickels and pennies at the bottom of the fountain" (33). While *Walden*'s bottomlessness is productive, the riches of *Ketjak*'s fountains are a mirage revealing their own fictiveness. This mirage, of course, is the "revolving door" of *Ketjak*'s constructions. As with the organic, Silliman's facts are presented as always-already fictions, structured by terms he gestures toward between sentences. Perelman's reading of *Ketjak* is instructive here:

In the following juxtaposition—"Fountains of the financial district spout soft water in a hard wind. She was a unit in a bum space, she was a damaged child" (3)—we have switched subjects between the sentences: the child and the fountains need not be imagined in a single tableau. [...] Throughout the book, Silliman insists on such connections as the one between the girl and the wider economic realities implied by the corporate fountains. The damage that has been done to her has to be read in a larger economic context. (67)

That "damage," though, is in its own way a fiction, here highlighted by the clichéd phrase "a damaged child." Silliman's anxiety over the structuring of social being through hypotactic narrative is particular to his historical moment. In the syntactical puns of

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<sup>70</sup> In deploring the California Gold Rush in "Life Without Principle," Thoreau writes: "I did not know that mankind were suffering for want of gold. I have seen a little of it. I know that it is very malleable, but not so malleable as wit" (*Collected* 354).

*Ketjak*, such as “mould forms in old coffee” or “clapping music,” the new sentence reflexively marks itself as open to various determinations, dramatizing on the level of syntax transformations that we have seen occurring with the repetition of sentences throughout the work (96). If Silliman, as Perelman states, is “trying to fight the random parataxis of commodification with a more committed, oppositional parataxis,” he is attempting to play emergent structural transformations against themselves, while providing for linkages disavowed by neoliberals (78). These links are organically structured by capital, rather than eternal and natural. In de-narrativizing these links Silliman manages both to reflect the transformations of post-Fordism and to de-naturalize its imperatives, providing for a free play of referents that is reflexive about its determinants.

One might, in light of Andrew Epstein’s work, read Silliman’s quotation of Thoreau as an emblem of his everydayness. For Epstein *Ketjak* goes beyond philosophical preoccupations with the everyday by modeling “new modes of attention that change the way we experience our everyday lives and that perhaps even wake us to action” (“Content” 746). By bounding many of his sentences across the quotidian experience of moving through the Bay Area, Silliman evinces the saturation of the personal by the market which becomes—as with Whitman or O’Hara—a formal principle: “Walking each day through the business district, select a facet on which to fix attention, displays of white loafers, calendars at half price, clocks on coffee shop walls, given by such variation a formal perception” (87). (We should remember, though, that Silliman is riding as much as walking. If he was truly committed to the autonomy of labor we might find him hiking to Fitchburg instead.) One of the joys of Silliman’s and

O'Hara's flânerie is taking stock of the hottest things on the market. While Epstein valorizes attention to the everyday as unmasking habit, passages such as this dramatize how the everyday is also a construction that, like the position of labor, becomes contradictory when affirmed in and of itself. There is, in short, no way to separate the quotidian from the terms—such as labor and leisure, or consumption—which constitute it. Once again, rather than organic autonomy, what Silliman puts on display is how the quotidian and the personal are structured by capital.

Silliman seeks, in his poetics, to affirm the autonomy of composition and signification from what he considers the reification of capitalist reality via realism. It is true that *Ketjak* lacks the narrative structure we associate with realism. As I have been arguing, though, *Ketjak* plays with signification with explicit reference to contemporary capitalist reality, namely the restructuring of Fordism. Whatever “immediacy” is to be found in *Ketjak* is self-consciously constructed as mediated, both through and against the reproduction of experience as capitalist social relations. Silliman's syntactical play enacts a constitutive schism in experience itself, where the lack of firm moorings instantiates both the poverty of experience and its thrilling polyphony. If Silliman's subject can be found at the interstices of his sentences, it is because during the restructuring of Fordism in particular, everything appears up for grabs.

### **“Motor city farewell” (43)**

As I intimated at the outset, that Silliman’s poetics have loomed large in the reception of his work suggests his affinity with Conceptual Artists, who often sought primarily to talk about their work. Conceptual Artists, like Silliman, “voiced [their convictions] with the (by now often hilarious) self-righteousness that is continuous within the tradition of hypertrophic claims made in avant-garde declarations of the twentieth century” (Buchloh 108). As we saw in Chapter Two, in *Our Aesthetic Categories* Ngai extends the same point, arguing that the dissonance between the stated ends of the avant-garde and their actual effects is “cute.” For Ngai, the cute claims to efficacy made by avant-garde poets are dramatized through a poetry of cute objects, such as William Carlos Williams’ plums and wheelbarrow. While Ngai considers cuteness in terms of twentieth-century poetry’s vexed relationship to the commodity aesthetic, Silliman’s *Ketjak* has a more obvious affinity to the conceptual art Ngai discusses in terms of the category of the “interesting,” or “merely interesting.”

In Ngai’s consideration of interesting art, duration is a key part of what demands our attention:

The aim [of Sol LeWitt’s ‘emotionally dry’ work] seems to have been that of making the act of perceiving less instantaneous and more durational by calling attention to the pathways between conception and perception, idea and execution, sight and thought, judgment and justification. These ‘in-betweens’ are ones that the conceptual work tried to make the viewer not only grasp but feel, as if in order to restore the temporal middle, or the ‘lag’ between production and reception in danger of being lost by the increase in circulation’s temporal powers. (172)

Applied to *Ketjak*, the suggestion would be that its length, and the effect of its repetitions which depend upon that duration, are ways of re-inscribing a distance from reception that the simple fact of Silliman’s poetics have foreshortened. Language Poets, in short, have

already told us how to read their work, so that there is a strange dissonance between the length of a work like *Ketjak* and our reception of it. Ngai does not concern herself with finance here, but we can use Ngai's framework to emphasize how Silliman's expansive corpus—where each new book is part of a larger project, itself called *Ketjak*—functions as an implicit critique of finance capital's attempt to foreshorten the distance between investment and the realization of profits.

*Ketjak*'s length, then, is antagonistic to the temporality of finance. But if avant-garde pretensions are somehow cute, surely this bid to stave off capital is likewise so. *Ketjak* is forbidding of easy consumption. The work's duration, as well as that of the explication of the work's concept, suggests the failure of its immediacy. Silliman's poetics in *The New Sentence* are meant to protect the work from precisely this failure. Paradoxically, by having explained to us the immediate gestural work of the signifier shorn of signification, we are left at a curious remove from what is supposed to be a primary, and habit-changing, encounter with the words on the page themselves.

As I have been attempting to show, Silliman's *Ketjak* exceeds this double bind because it is something other than Silliman says it is. Its fragmentary totality—ironic (“This is not a new sentence” (70)), loquacious, street-wise, and unsentimental—offers a unique characterization of post-Fordist experience. While Silliman's theoretical pronouncements in *The New Sentence* would suggest otherwise, what emerges in his poetry is a confidence in his aesthetic eminence on the new terms of social life he inhabits. Rather than reverting to a programmatic conception of expressive depth or writerly autonomy, *Ketjak* plays with the affective vicissitudes of a world at once shorn of illusion and full of it. The spectral vision of building a worker's world has receded

from the horizon, while the machinations of fictitious capital have only become more apparent. *Ketjak*'s performance of this strange, new landscape advertises its fictionality. While its fountains are revealed at times to be empty, *Ketjak*'s gusts of water, meant for their own sake, hardly abate. Silliman, despite his own poetics, reveals organic utterance, like the position of labor, to be a necessary fiction of capital. Indeed, in this light the fiction of organicism begins to look a lot like an "external constraint" to free verse, just as TC conceive of proletarian identity as an external constraint to proletarian needs. At once necessary and anomalous, such fictions are the horizon upon which poetic self-fashioning runs aground.

## CONCLUSION

Adorno writes somewhere (with Hegel in mind) that we must begin with fixed concepts—such as, in this case, the organic and the machine—so that we can, through elaborating their mediations, supersede them. This dissertation is open to the criticism—in the fashion of Bruno Latour, perhaps—that it holds two things separate that indeed never were so. For as we’ve seen, Whitman, Williams, Pound, Olson, O’Hara and Silliman all mutually constituted the organic and the machine in various ways. To assume a separation between the two simply to show this mutuality might seem like a parlor game that holds things that belong together apart only to then put them together again in ever more spectacular ways. Worse still, my original definition of the terms organic and machine doesn’t even meet the rigors of the philosophical tradition targeted by posthumanism, as I have allowed them to be enumerated on the fly by a motley crew of avant-garde poets!

My reading of Whitman, especially, is open to this critique. For him the energies of American industry and commerce made possible his own novelty, with *Leaves of Grass* turning the “barbarism and materialism of the times” (Emerson) into free, luxuriating verse. Nevertheless, though, Whitman again and again demands that the American bard be not intoxicated by riches, but “[confront] all the shows he sees by

equivalents out of the stronger wealth of himself.” This imperative to self-possession in the face of wealth, power, and indeed outright slavery, risks passing notice, as it has come to define the lyric tradition as we know it. What it means though is a *difference* between self and society, between poetry and the accumulation of profit, a difference which poets articulate as often as critics show it to have never been the case. One of the things that is striking about Whitman is just how openly he allows that the poet is constituted by the forces from which he seeks to stand apart. My reading of the organic hum of the loafer in the grass as the expression of a humanity held in common by (industrial) capital is meant to attend to this tension between poetic subject and inhuman ground. Indeed, figuring human song as a hum readily available in a loose throat registers an impossible difference between self-possession and being possessed. The hum is the sound of that virtual or fictional difference— an essential fiction, like happiness, to which Whitman was committed.

In *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence* Latour writes:

That the world is articulated and that this is why we sometimes manage to take up certain of its articulations through the intermediary of expressions, only an infinitesimal number of which are produced through the channel in which air currents slip past the glottis—is this not a more realistic, more economic, more elegant hypothesis than imagining a human projecting from his head signs lacking any purchase on an inarticulated material world? Everything flows, everything creeps in the same *sense*, in the same direction: the world and words alike. (257)

This passage could itself serve as an elegant description of Whitman’s hum, which articulates the mutual constitution of the human and the machine. For Latour there is no essential difference, no internal contradiction, between these realms, as he strives for a figuration of “air currents slip[ping] past the glottis” that is “more realistic, more economic” than any metaphysics of representation. Whitman can productively be read in

this fashion, and my own reading has itself taken much from the articulations of posthuman hybridity that are everywhere, as it were, *in the air*. It should be clear by now, though, that I am not satisfied to accede poetry to an undifferentiated “flow,” where Whitman’s “soul” moves only in the same direction as his catalogs. Whitman was himself at pains to differentiate the sources of his poetry from the contingencies of the marketplace. Neither does Williams’ poetic “sense” and that of his automobile move only “in the same direction.” As we’ve seen, machine technology was both a condition of and a threat to Williams’ poetic vocation. His poetry is crafted in the teeth of this threat, to which the violence in many of his car poems attests. Flowing leads to crushing, as well as crashing.

For Olson, the problem with his car is precisely that it has broken down. In Chapter Three we saw why it behooves us to attend to the contradictions of organicism, such as Olson’s attempt to assert autonomy from commercial culture through machines such as the typewriter and the automobile. I have shown just how tortured Olson’s machine organicism was, a complex that O’Hara sought to move beyond by playing on Olson’s claims to immediacy. As we have seen, O’Hara’s pastiche of the avant-garde poetics of technique carried forward Williams’ foregrounding of personality as threatened, if also enlivened, by machine technology. O’Hara self-consciously immerses himself in the movements of commodities, revealing the deadly pathos of a life lived on the clock and mediated by the fantastic life of things. In critiquing Olson’s contradictory claim to organic immediacy through machinery, O’Hara, following Williams, reveals organicism to be a fiction that while generative is also problematically linked to a politics of masculine authority.

A few decades after the advent of the New American Poetry, Silliman can't even afford an automobile, though riding the BART offers new experiences and new poetic possibilities. On the bus he can in fact write "while running," as Williams claimed to do. In his poetics Silliman clings to a writerly organicism in line with Olson's, which appears all the more anachronistic with the contemporary eclipse of the traditional labor movement. As both Olson and Silliman have made clear, the programmatic affirmation of the position of labor has been part and parcel of attempting to construct a poetry that organically harnesses machine technology toward human ends. This was, in short, also the dream for most of the workers' movement. But *Ketjak*'s new sentences, rather than simply bypassing capitalist reification, ironize the post-Fordist landscape that emerges in the 1970s. If his bid for a natural, gestural immediacy seems cute in retrospect, it is also clear that his presumed autonomy is what provides him with such a compelling, critical grasp on his historical moment. His organicism, though, like Olson's, in most compelling in how, strictly speaking, it *doesn't work*.

Organicist poets seek to inhabit the machine, but with a difference. They likewise seek autonomy from dominant social forms, but often through machinery. The breaks, then, between their stated aims and their actual poetic productions is where history shows through. At times poetry and the machine become indistinguishable, as in Pound's fascist factory, but the absurd horror of his vision reminds us of a difference, a tension, that all the other poets I've discussed keep rearticulating in their own moment, with the materials to hand. The organic, in short, comes together only to come apart, much like capital does: it is process, flow, but also stoppage, contradiction, and crisis. Organicism, I have found—to my critical consternation—is not one fiction, but many. Yet the dream of an

organic art is an abiding one for free verse poets, and it is perhaps their primary way of relating to the totality of capital. The fractures in this dream are, indeed, an integral part of the history of organicism, which poets often thematize in vexed confrontations with technology in their poems.

Tellingly, the fractured terms through which poets strive for imaginative autonomy from capital are by no means always salutary. With Whitman resisting slavery and exploitation also meant affirming a form of proprietary self-possession that has historically been coupled to white, masculine labor. The programmatic affirmation of the position of labor as itself organic is very much alive in American poetry, no matter poets' explicit political affiliations. O'Hara's pastiche of the rhetoric of technique, and his immersion in the deathly logic of commodities—of which labor power is itself the most significant—troubles this tradition by showing how the supposed immediacy of labor is structured by the imperatives of profit accumulation. That so many of the poets I've discussed (including O'Hara) figure blackness as a locus of authenticity attests to the compromised, and exclusionary, figuration of poetic authority that machine organicism has so often entailed.

While this dissertation has plowed in well-worn fields of experimental American poetry, I have also shown how the standard ways of furrowing the field have at times failed to apprehend fertile connections between periods, camps, and concepts that have been generative for American free verse. American poetry has consistently been the object of aesthetic divisions between, for example, the raw and the cooked, or the Romantic and the modernist. As we've seen, experimental formalisms are indeed distinctive in their refashioning of the empirical world into innovative kinds of

articulation. While such refashioning provides its own organic vision of reality, that vision need not be more radical, or liberatory, than poetry composed through more traditional forms, as the politics of white, masculine labor, or Pound's fascism, attest. As we've also seen, the machine organicism of high modernism is, for its part, continuous with the organic vitalism of the American Renaissance, rather than providing a definitive break from it. This dissertation has not abstained from forging its own distinctions, though. I have charted, for example, (at least) two roads from Whitman, one unabashedly valorizing technique as the means to immediacy (as in Pound and Olson), and the other critical of this valorization, and foregrounding the travails of personality with technology (as in Williams and O'Hara). These roads are by no means cut-and-dry, though, as they cross and double back on one another. Crafting such maps give us a purchase on distinct figurations of poetry, but we should be careful not to let them solidify too readily into schools that disavow whole swaths of verse.

This dissertation has made clear how American free verse has inaugurated its own rich tradition of formalisms. Rather than emerging *ex nihilo*, we have seen how these forms have translated the machinery of capital into poetic song. At least since Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, poets have crafted organic forms that sought to envelop the machine, rather than simply retreating to a pastoral and transhistorical nature. Through their experiments poets have critically engaged capitalist social forms such as the catalog, wage labor, the assembly line, and hyper-financialization, organically transforming them toward poetic ends. As I have shown, this organicism is at once a bid for autonomy from the determinations of capital, creating free verse that reckons with the actual social violence wrought by capital accumulation, while attempting to articulate an essential

difference between that violence and the life of poems. These songs, then, while at times replicating capital's most pernicious aspects, are also more than the machine itself. By effectively fictionalizing their own nature, they make capital appear at times all encompassing, or as evanescent as poetic utterance itself, which elicits our participation to become what it is.

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