

Radical Politics and Literary Form in 20th Century American Writing

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the US literary left of the 1930s, tracing precursors in pre-WWI anarchism and the bohemian culture of 1920s Greenwich Village, and following the careers of key authors, beyond the Depression, into popular and mainstream culture post-WWII. The free verse of Michael Gold, the ‘proletarian’ novels and short fiction of Robert Cantwell, Tillie Olsen and Erskine Caldwell are read as instances of a kind of modernism from below. As such, they are held up for consideration alongside the more politically conservative modernisms of T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and D. H. Lawrence, as well as the work of two writers also on the left but more securely situated in the official canon: Ralph Ellison and George Oppen.

The emphasis throughout is on form, understood as fluid and subject to self-conscious experimentation: the politics of the works considered are in this sense embodied in the transformation of pre-existing forms and structures. For this reason a multidisciplinary approach is adopted, with attention being paid to contemporaneous production (with some overlap of personnel) in music and visual culture.

There are considerable difficulties involved in the attempt to harness the techniques of ‘high’ cultural thinking to the needs of an organised left with close links to the labour movement: problems of intention; matters of tone; issues of distribution. These difficulties are worked through in order to answer two fundamental questions. First, how did this historical project, riven by contradiction from the outset, manage to achieve even the limited success that it did? Second, why should a place be maintained in contemporary criticism for its recovery? Ultimately, an argument is made for an inclusive critical practice sensitive to the traces of exclusion and absence as figured in the non-representational, whilst at the same time resisting the temptations of obscurantism, superficiality or idealization.

Contents

Introduction	1
1. ‘Yes, but is it Art?’ The Revolutionary Transformations of Michael Gold	42
2. ‘A Moment of Ecstasy, a Lifetime of Regret’: the Limits of the Proletarian Grotesque	69
3. Crisis of Demand: Modernism Meets the New Deal	94
4. <i>The Bastard</i> as Art Object Bastardized: Erskine Caldwell’s Fine Art of Standing Still	122
5. Ralph Ellison and the Weight of the Real	150
Conclusion	210
Bibliography	221

Introduction

But if we now seek what is possible before us – all that is possible, whether or not we might have wanted to, we who no longer have any need to construct rational thought, which is effortlessly arranged for us – we are again able to recognise the profound value of these lost modes of thought.

Georges Bataille

The texts examined in this thesis all come out of a specific—if complex—cultural formation. In both Carl Sandburg’s ‘Smoke and Steel’ (1920) and Michael Gold’s ‘The Strange Funeral in Braddock’ (1924) industrial workers are shown as dehumanised products of the labour process. In my readings of these texts I am drawn neither by doctrinal statements nor by logical propositions but instead by what I understand as the working out of a particular formal problem: namely, the representation of social class. In Robert Cantwell’s *Land of Plenty* (1934) class-consciousness can only take place – literally – in the dark, and Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio* (1974), even more literally, spent some forty years buried in a drawer before eventually seeing the light of day. If it is not exactly content I am looking for, neither is it the symbolic or figurative. I do not take the eponymous strangeness of Gold’s prose poem, the manifest failures of *Land of Plenty*, or the gaps and elisions of *Yonnondio* as representative but rather as constitutive of a real aporia: that the immediacy of intersubjectivity—if such a thing could even be said to exist—remains untranslatable within the bounds of official discourse.

This is no appeal to transcendence or to the mystical. Even the instances of the non-referential I am tracing here emerge within some kind of frame; this is the importance of form. When radical musicians in the 1930s gifted elevated notions of dissonant counterpoint to the cause of proletarian revolution, they were brought down to earth with a resounding bump; dialogue with working-class fractions led to the development of cultural forms urgently needing to look a lot less like showing off. The farcical implications of this collision of politics and aesthetics can be mapped directly onto literature. The humour of much of Erskine Caldwell’s work comes from the shock of what feels like melodrama fallen to the status of the utterly banal. Repetition and stereotype in his writing were often mistaken for folklore, but in actuality these were new and unsettling distortions of existing forms. Caldwell’s innovations—precisely because they took on the appearance of the absence of innovation—meshed perfectly with the expansion of conformity into the total

fabric of everyday life post-WWII. By the time Ralph Ellison published *Invisible Man* (1952), dissent had been pushed so far to the margins that class-consciousness was supplanted by the dissociated sensibility of existentialist cool. Yet Ellison's circular blues forms revisit key moments of American history in vituperative counterpoint to the mythos of the republic, at the same time as his backward glance to emergent classics of the American canon privileges passion over complacency, balances sufferance against suffering, as the objective spirit of democratic struggle.

I read these various texts as moments in a putative avant-garde praxis through which aesthetic forms were employed to bring pressure to bear along the structural fault lines of a capitalism in deep crisis. There are two distinct though not unrelated senses, then, in which the notion of an artistic avant-garde needs to be understood as a thing of the past. First is its now broadly accepted definition as a historically situated—and limited—event. In Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), various European isms of the first part of the twentieth century are interpreted in terms of a collective onslaught against the institutions of high culture. Bürger is not overly concerned with the forms these interventions take, other than to note that each challenges in some fundamental way models of production and reception already in place, not the least important of which is the category of the 'work' itself. Thus Dadaist manifestations aim at the provocation of the public rather than the making of a unique aesthetic artefact, and when Marcel Duchamp submits his notorious urinal for exhibition he calls into question the relevance of the gallery system in an age of mass production, at the same time as inviting his audience to show their appreciation in the most scandalous of ways. Bürger's formulation is explicitly political. Avant-gardism, as defined here, is the conviction that the struggle to innovate in the cultural field can not only co-exist with but also somehow enable a move towards radical social transformation. Art as bourgeois institution exhibits a form of social mesmerism. Breaking the illusion of the organic work serves to distract for a moment the disinterested gaze of the spectator, as polite society is transformed into an angry mob. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, as a force for systemic change the movement proves ineffectual. 'It is a historical fact,' Bürger states, 'that the avant-garde movements did not put an end to the production of works of art, and that the social institution that is art proved resistant to the avant-

gardiste attack.’¹ If these instrumental goals are unrealised, the formal gestures of the avant-garde have endured, and that they have been subsequently absorbed into an art ‘scene’ as such suggests only the basically affirmative function of all cultural production, no matter how oppositional it wants to be. Writing from the perspective of the early 1970s, Bürger sees the proliferation of ‘happenings’—what he terms the ‘neo-avant-garde’—as at best an exercise in style. Avant-garde practise has become institutionalised, and that it can be located within a tradition is proof, at least insofar as any claim to political efficacy is concerned, that it is over. To say that Bürger is sceptical as to the renewed possibility of an art that is both aesthetically and socially progressive would be to understate the case. For Bürger, so catastrophic is the failure of the historical avant-garde that the very possibility of progression itself has been irrevocably lost, ‘transformed into a simultaneity of the radically disparate’ (Bürger, p. 63). Nowadays, in other words, anything goes, but it can never go far enough.

There is a second sense, though, in which the avant-garde can be understood as a thing of the past, one which suggests a less pessimistic conclusion than that of Bürger’s famous theorization, and which is concealed, moreover, within his own definition. Time and again, Bürger refers to the intention of removing art from its institutionalised autonomy and embedding it in the practice of everyday life as a return, as if the avant-garde attempts to bring down the institutions of art not by acts of destruction, but by somehow pre-empting the need for all those galleries and museums in the first place. This is the avant-garde’s Utopian vocation, and its role is to remind us that institution art is itself a historical formation with its own temporal and geopolitical limits. Entrusted with the task of awakening historical consciousness, avant-garde practise is liberated from its purely negative function. No longer bound to its adversary, dependent, that is, on a bourgeoisie its sole mission is to scandalise, avant-garde work (work now understood as productive activity) comes instead to represent in a positive sense all that institution art has forgotten: its sense of humour, for one thing, and for another its parvenu status. Contemptuous of vulgarity, high culture stands in opposition to the indignities of the commodity form, but in order to secure this elevated position it conveniently erases its embarrassing origins in craft production and ritual. Where institution art makes claim to an immaculate conception, the avant-garde is replete with antecedence.

¹ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 56-57. Further page references are given in the text as Bürger.

All of this is true, at least, in Andreas Huyssen's notion of the avant-garde 'American style.'² Central here is the existence of a hidden dialectic between avant-garde practice and mass culture, an unexpected alliance that destabilises the supposed 'great divide' of high and low. This taboo relationship is already present in Duchamp's mass-produced ready-mades and theorized most famously by Walter Benjamin, yet by the 1960s Europe has grown too weary of the co-option of once revolutionary strategies by Adorno and Horkheimer's culture industry to have much energy left to spend time on the dubious attractions of kitsch. Not so in the US, where a resurgence of Dadaist activity in the form of 'happenings, pop vernacular, psychedelic art, acid rock, alternative and street theatre' (Huyssen, p. 193) manages somehow to avoid the cycle of empty repetition. What makes the situation in the United States so fundamentally different, in Huyssen's thesis, is again the result of a particularly historical understanding. The attempt to tear down the walls of high culture in the service of political insurgency could only make sense in the context of a political establishment shored up by the institutions of high culture, but in early twentieth-century America the situation is by no means so clear-cut. Such iconoclasm 'would have been meaningless (if not regressive) in the United States where "high art" was still struggling hard to gain wider legitimacy and to be taken seriously by the public' (p. 167). For this reason, the innovators of the American scene had no interest in the anti-aesthetic of their European forebears, and were drawn instead to 'the constructive sensibility of modernism' (p. 167). The counter-cultures of the 1960s are thus no mere revivalists. Agents of radical change, they are able to point towards a transformed future because the historical event that was the failure of the European avant-garde's attack on the institutions of bourgeois art simply had not taken place in America. Indeed, sixties counter-culture harnesses the energies of the historical avant-garde, without reifying the urge to dismantle the boundaries between producers and audience, because its target is not some monolithic institution of high art but rather the process of institutionalisation itself.

The post-war canonisation of a restricted field of literary modernism, ossified by the close reading strategies of New Criticism, paves the way for what Frederic Jameson has called 'modernism as ideology'.³ Yet if this sanitised, de-politicised canon gives the sixties

² Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 165. Four further page references are given in the text either consecutively or as Huyssen.

³ See Frederic Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2009), esp. pp. 165-169. Jameson notes that in the post-war academy 'the rich and complex oeuvre of Wallace

radicals something to rebel against, the relative transparency of the move also allows them a ghostly sense of an avant-garde tradition not so much irrevocably lost as conveniently forgotten. Criticism, in a very real sense the enemy of the historical European avant-gardes, is in this new context able to counter its own complicity in canon formation and ‘congealed [...] interpretative practices’ (Huysen, p. 164) by resisting the pull of increased specialization and turning outwards instead to embrace all that has previously been excluded. When Huysen shifts the focus of attention from pre-WWI Europe to post-WWII America, on one level he simply relocates and reiterates the avant-garde’s historic failure. Pop Art is ‘art’ after all. Yet failure, whether political, commercial or even artistic, becomes in a new sense a qualification for entry into the historiography of the margins. So powerful is the undertow of this dialectical reversal that yesterday’s defeats are transformed into touchstones of tomorrow’s legitimacy, and the archive, rather than being the prescribed repository of all that is hierarchically imposed from above, becomes instead the practical arena of ideological contest.

When, in 1968, Leslie Fiedler wrote that, for a certain generation of Americans who had come of age in the 1930s, ‘nothing fails like success’, he anticipated future developments in critical theory at the same time as casting a backward glance over the evasions and rewritings that constituted his own sense of the contemporary.⁴ Concerned with the influence of cultural memory on political radicalism, Fiedler notes that the youth movements of the late 1960s are determined from two directions, first by their immediate predecessors in the late fifties and early sixties, but also by a set of vicarious memories—largely derived from literature and film—of the ‘red decade’:

The Radicalism of the Sixties, like that of the Thirties, is influenced by the Bohemia which preceded it, and with which it remains uncomfortably entangled; and it differs from its earlier counterpart precisely as the one Bohemia differs from the other. The young radicals of the Thirties came out of a world of bootleg and bathtub gin, and the tail end of the first Freudian-Laurentian [*sic*] sexual revolution; the young radicals of the Sixties have emerged from the post-1955 world of “pot” and other hallucinogens, and the homosexual revolution so inextricably entwined with the struggle for Civil Rights as well as the quest for “cool”.⁵

Stevens begins to displace those of Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, both of them tarnished by politics, or in other words by extrinsic, and extrapoetic, extraliterary concerns’ (p. 168).

⁴ Leslie Fiedler, ‘The Two Memories; Reflections on writers and writing in the Thirties’, in *Proletarian Writers of the Thirties*, ed. by David Madden (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1968), pp. 3-35 (p. 16).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

This entanglement is doubly uncomfortable. For the activists of Students for a Democratic Society, alienation from late capitalism finds its expression in the manifestos of the New Left, yet from an individual perspective participatory democracy is still bound up in the outsider chic of the hipster. It is not just that there is a parallel between this fundamental contradiction and the situation in the 1930s, where Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) circles were swollen by an influx of a generation of Depression *déclassé*, steeped in the mythos of 1920s Greenwich Village. More than an echo, there is a direct and bilaterally causal connection in the cultural realm whereby the present is being understood in terms of a past mediated through a radical, ‘underground’ literature. Where the ‘official’ story of the Roosevelt years celebrates the historic rise of labour and paints the decade in heroic terms, this recovered ‘proletarian’ literature, entangled as it is with its Bohemian antecedents, rather than reviving the Utopian spirit of mass action offers instead an apocalyptic, Spenglerian vision of the collapse of capitalism. On the one hand the result of a kind of ‘masochistic wish-fear that welcomes the End of Days’, this intensely negative impulse reveals at the same time a perhaps even more unsettling truth: dissent in the United States, Fiedler notes, ‘has always meant the rejection of all official optimisms’.⁶ If, in the 1920s, the critique of consumerism embodied itself in the intentionally oblique strategies and *non-sequiturs* of modernism, by the mid-1930s the only available options left for those restless souls still intent on embracing avant-gardism in its fullest sense lay in scepticism about the New Deal and a concomitant and largely unconscious pessimism as to the regenerative potential of the now legitimised labour movement.⁷

Whatever the psychological ramifications of Fiedler’s reflections, his emphasis on the complex mediations of political consciousness and cultural memory are firmly located within a highly self-conscious, albeit unstable, genealogy of American thought, which problematizes clear distinctions between the popular and the avant-garde. For poet and critic Joseph Freeman, writing in 1935, there is a tradition of revolutionary literature in America, and he condemns those liberal critics who, by allowing this history to remain

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁷ It is interesting to note that this situation is not as exclusively American as Fiedler suggests. Mark D. Steinburg has noted that in revolutionary Russia, Soviet Proletcult ran up against a working class reluctant to celebrate conditions in factories. ‘In the face of state censorship,’ he notes, ‘simply chronicling the sufferings of the poor and the subordinate was an implicit challenge and protest.’ Mark D. Steinburg, *Proletarian Imagination: Self, Modernity, and the Sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 82.

unwritten, ‘distort the past, the present, the future’.⁸ Freeman’s introduction to the anthology *Proletarian Literature in the United States* serves as a corrective to this systematic misrepresentation, and it does so, in characteristic style, by an appeal to ‘the facts’. Literature aligning itself with the cause of the revolutionary working class has its antecedents in the writing of Jack London and Upton Sinclair, in pre-WWI journals *The Comrade* and *Masses*, and in the *Little Red Songbook* of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Of the sixty-plus writers featured in the anthology, however, the vast majority have had their work published during the aftermath of the Wall Street Crash. Revolutionary literature, Freeman concludes, has reached the mainstream, and ‘is no longer a sect but a leaven in American literature as a whole’ (p. 28). What Freeman actually means by this is not that American fiction has exploded into a frenzy of automatic writing (it hasn’t), nor that established authors have flocked to join the CPUSA (they haven’t), nor even that CPUSA members have become established writers (very few have), but rather that in the Depression the texture of American experience has changed, and imaginative writing has reflected this by turning to a consideration of ‘basic American reality [...] the social scene’ (p. 28). What marks this apparently modest critical statement as of some historical interest is not so much the fact that Freeman is clearly quite right, as any survey of the actual content of the bestsellers of the mid-1930s will confirm, but the importance he places on the role of literary modernism in this development.⁹

Freeman is too close to modernism to use the term at all, and certainly not in its restricted, post-WWII sense. For him, those writers Huysen sees as immune to the allure of the European avant-garde are numbered among ‘the present generation’ (p. 19), and Freeman is by no means as hostile towards them as his CPUSA credentials might suggest. The received notion that 1930s Marxists pitted a uniform social realism against a thwarted modernism only makes sense once the latter term is designated a meaning something along

⁸ Joseph Freeman, Introduction to Granville Hicks et al., eds., *Proletarian Literature in the United States: An Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1935), pp. 9-28 (p. 21). Four consecutive references are here included in the text.

⁹ Each of the two best-selling novels of 1935, Ellen Glasgow’s *Vein of Iron* and C. Lloyd Douglas’s *The Green Light*, thematize the effects of the Depression, although neither approaches the situation from a revolutionary perspective. In *The Green Light*, the Wall Street Crash serves as the motive force driving the plot, but only on the most superficial of levels. In *Vein of Iron* class-consciousness emerges only insofar as the *noblesse oblige* of Glasgow’s aristocratic Virginians is put to the test by the indignity of the breadlines. In both Glasgow’s novel and Thomas Wolfe’s number three bestseller *Of Time and the River*, indeed, the deformations of modernist technique are set to the task of portraying working-class life in its deleterious proximity to the central, bourgeois characters. See Chapter 2, below.

the lines of ‘autonomous production’. In point of fact, for Freeman, as for the other critics represented in the anthology *without exception*, precisely the opposite is the case:

The movement associated with Harriet Monroe, Carl Sandburg, Ezra Pound, Sinclair Lewis, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway was one which repudiated the “eternal values” of traditional poetry and emphasized immediate American experience. The movement had its prophet in Walt Whitman, who broke with the “eternal values” of feudal literature and proclaimed the here and now. Poetry abandoned the pose of moving freely in space and time; it focused its attention on New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Iowa, Alabama in the twentieth century. (p. 19)

Literature, for Freeman, is never fully autonomous, is always sending out powerful messages, always doing something, no matter how hard it tries to assume a mask of indifference. To be radical in this context is simply to be relevant; to be relevant is to take working-class experience seriously. The pared-down style, the treatment of the everyday in the moderns had thus begun a process of radicalisation now to reach fruition once this progressive current in the arts fused with that other illicit tradition of revolutionary party allegiance, itself reanimated by economic crisis. As Marcus Klein noted, in the same anthology of writing from which the quotations from Fiedler above were culled: ‘In [Freeman’s] telling of history, proletarian literature was what happened when modernism met the depression.’¹⁰

More recently, Michael Denning has characterised what he refers to as ‘the cultural front’ as ‘a third wave of the modernist movement’.¹¹ In seeking to maintain a rigorous distinction, unavailable to critics either in the 1930s or the 1960s, between modernism and the avant-garde, Denning attempts to establish the existence in 1930s America of what should be impossible: an American modernism that is as confrontational as the historical avant-garde, at the same time as being an avant-garde that is genuinely popular. So contradictory, ungainly and indeed unlikely would be the outline of such a configuration, that Denning’s name for it—‘the proletarian grotesque’—serves as well to evoke the distortions of historical understanding of the period required as conditions of its possibility as it does the deformations embodied in its works. Following Freeman and Klein, insofar as seeing the US moderns as emphasizing immediate American experience, Denning notes that this experience itself was largely determined by the emergence of Fordism.

¹⁰ Marcus Klein, ‘The Roots of Radicals: Experience in the Thirties’, in Madden, ed., pp. 134-157 (p. 137).

¹¹ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 122. Further references are given in the text as *Cultural Front*.

[M]odernism in the United States', he writes, 'was less the bohemian outrage against a nineteenth-century bourgeois culture than the cultural logic of late Fordist capitalism' (*Cultural Front*, p. 121). As geographer David Harvey points out, what was 'special' about Henry Ford's adoption of F. W. Taylor's principles of scientific management was not simply the fragmentation and regulation of the labour process but also 'the explicit recognition that mass production meant mass consumption [...] [and] a new aesthetics'.¹² The five-dollar, eight-hour day serves both to buy worker compliance and to provide those workers with income and leisure time sufficient to buy themselves into 'a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society.'¹³ Meanwhile, the Bohemian excesses of Greenwich Village take on an uncanny double character as both middle-class revolt and marketable lifestyles. In *Exile's Return* (1934), Malcolm Cowley recalls how during the 1920s modernism and mass culture aligned: 'The New York Bohemians [...] came from exactly the same social class as the readers of the *Saturday Evening Post*. Their political opinions were vague and by no means dangerous to Ford Motors or General Electric'.¹⁴ Thus at the same time as Greenwich Villagers embrace the culture of capitalism by opening tea shops, book stalls and night clubs, big business seizes the opportunities provided to repackage the new values of the cultural rebels and sell them on to wider America. Self-expression, Cowley observes, 'encouraged a demand for all sorts of products—modern furniture, beach pyjamas, cosmetics, colored bathrooms with toilet paper to match', whilst the demand for sexual equality 'was capable of doubling the consumption of products—cigarettes, for example—that had formerly been used by men alone.'¹⁵ With the crash of 1929, however, the mutual entanglement of Bohemia and capital evaporates, sending this complicit, second wave of modernist culture into a state of crisis and thus making room, Denning argues, for a proletarian movement which, politically enabled by the burgeoning labour unions, artistically informed by adherents of the older, more oppositional European modernism, and peopled largely by the newly unemployed and dispossessed, represents not only a third phase of modernism but also 'one of the few important avant-gardes in US culture' (*Cultural Front*, p. 121).

¹² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 125-126.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁴ Malcolm Cowley, *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920's* (London: Bodley Head, 1961), p. 58.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

What makes Denning's proletarian grotesque an avant-garde is its 'plebian appropriation of the avant-garde hostility to "art," the anti-aesthetic of dada and surrealism' (*Cultural Front*, p. 123). This anti-aesthetic is generated by dissonance, by the clash of opposites, and Denning's formulation is influenced by the work of one of the most prominent of modernist critics who 'went left' during the thirties, Kenneth Burke, for whom the crisis of the 1930s had led culture into 'the realm of gargoyles.'¹⁶ Burke saw grotesque imagery everywhere during the Depression, but he singled out the work of novelists Erskine Caldwell and Robert Cantwell—both represented in the 1935 anthology—as instances of what he called 'perspective by incongruity'. Denning expands the field to encompass Billie Holiday and Orson Welles, as well as Tillie Olsen (née Lerner), whose work was also included in *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, although *Yonnondio*, the novel from which the extract was taken, was not published in 'complete' form until 1974. The lynched bodies of 'Strange Fruit', the gargoyles in the opening shots of *Citizen Kane*, and the now famous passage in *Yonnondio* where Olsen describes the grisly aftermath of a mine explosion are all attempts 'to wrench us out of the repose and distance of the "aesthetic"' (*Cultural Front*, p. 123), and the scope of their reach into popular forms of culture, as well as into the more traditional book trade, makes them more rather than less of a force to be reckoned with.

Denning's notion of the 'proletarian grotesque' is at first sight an immensely appealing one for a number of reasons, not the least of which being that it seeks to ascribe enigma and mystique to a cultural sub-formation more usually regarded as unconscionably dreary. Each of the literary works discussed in this thesis could more or less productively be held up against Denning's template: Michael Gold's 'The Strange Funeral in Braddock'; the novels of Erskine Caldwell, Robert Cantwell and Tillie Olsen; the long reach of the form is certainly traceable all through the work of Ralph Ellison up to and including *Invisible Man*. My use of the formulation, however, is not without certain reservations. For one thing, as Denning notes elsewhere, there is a gap between the ways a culture understands itself and the generic terms used in reconstruction.¹⁷ The term 'grotesque'

¹⁶ Kenneth Burke, *Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose* (Indianapolis & New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), p. 69. See pp. 71-162 for 'perspective by incongruity'. Further references are included in the text as *Permanence*.

¹⁷ 'To be content with the terms the culture used, with the culture's self-understanding, is to abdicate the historian's task, which is to understand the way a culture's social and political unconscious overdetermines its self-consciousness. On the other hand, a culture's own understanding of its genres is an important part of its

would have been familiar to these writers through the work of Sherwood Anderson, who was acknowledged as an influence across the board during the thirties, especially on the left, but none of them used it with reference to their own work. Anderson's portraits in *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) of isolated individuals, rendered grotesques through their desperate fixation to a single 'truth', would make uncomfortable models for revolutionary Marxists.¹⁸ Second, Denning is at pains to disprove the received wisdom that the proletarian movement dealt solely in social realism, and offers instead his coinage 'social modernism', of which the proletarian grotesque represents the militant wing. To an extent this is simply a word game. Even if none of the authors here used the word 'realism' to describe what they were doing—Gold, as I shall show, has been misrepresented on this count, and Caldwell in particular was later to contest the term—the prevailing aesthetic evidenced in the 1935 anthology is realist nevertheless, in the sense that privileged epistemological space is granted to working-class consciousness: 'The worker may never have heard of Marx,' as Freeman puts it, '[...] but he knows the *facts*'.¹⁹ With little or no understanding of Marxist theory, however, worker-writers are left dependent upon Party intellectuals such as Freeman for legitimising interpretations of their work, and this is to strengthen the hand of the institutional apparatus rather than to encourage democratisation. Moreover, the degree to which proletarian writing constitutes textual praxis, as some critics have suggested, is made problematic by this untroubled approach to representation, summoning as it does an uninterrogated illusion of immediacy. As we shall see in the next section, even from within historical limits of the development of Marxist aesthetics during the thirties, an appeal to the 'facts' may have proven deeply unhelpful.

rhetoric and must be attended to; any attempt to construct ahistorical, ideal typologies violates the first premises of historical materialism.' Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America* (London: Verso, 1987), pp. 75-76.

¹⁸ 'It was the truths that made the people grotesques. The old man had quite an elaborate theory concerning the matter. It was his notion that the moment one of the people took one of the truths to himself, called it his truth, and tried to live his life by it, he became a grotesque and the truth he embraced became a falsehood.' Sherwood Anderson, *Winesburg, Ohio* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.

¹⁹ Freeman, 'Introduction', p. 15 (emphasis in the original).

1. The Stigma of Immediacy

‘[W]hen we conceive things thus, as they really are and happened,’ write Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, ‘every profound philosophical problem is resolved [...] quite simply into an empirical fact.’²⁰ But this fact is the enslavement of individuals under the alien power of the world-market, and the critique of Feuerbach compels apprehension of socio-economic forces at work in the production of even the most innocent of sense data. Passive contemplation of the sensuous world, for Marx and Engels, amounts to the same thing as capitulation to the dominant ideology, a moral, religious and metaphysical framework imposed over and above the ground of everyday perception, and no one in mid-nineteenth century Germany is less innocent of this act of deference to the ruling class than professional philosophers. The legacy of Hegelian Idealism is the separation out of the values of bourgeois civil society—freedom, equality, progress—from their material origins in market exchange, free trade and capital accumulation. Thus ideas, rather than the productive forces of actual people engaged in the daily struggle to forge out some form of existence, have become the motive force of history. Empiricism has been complicit in this falsification by presenting history as ‘a collection of dead facts’ (p. 15). The illusion of ‘pure’ objectivity, therefore, masks the intervention of class interests, and these interests—in themselves historically specific—are passed off by the ideologists as timeless and for the benefit of all.

Marx and Engels are writing at a moment when, in the wake of the collapse of Idealism’s hegemony, the philosophical marketplace is glutted with—as they see it—shoddy goods, and founded on ‘a credit system devoid of any real basis’ (p. 4), and so their polemic is to no small degree shaped by the ideological contest that surrounds it. All the same, their image of ideology as camera obscura—in which ‘men and their circumstances appear upside down’ (p. 14)—finds currency much later, in the late 1930s, as Georg Lukács draws on it and applies it in the realm of aesthetics. In his dissection of ‘So-called avant-garde literature [...] from Naturalism to Surrealism’, Lukács accuses the historical avant-gardes of mistaking the experiential perception of rupture and fragmentation for the fabric of reality itself, and hence of blindly reproducing existing conditions, an artistic

²⁰ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, Parts I & II, ed. by R. Pascal (Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino Publishing, 2011), p. 35. Three consecutive references are given here in the text.

misjudgement inviting political calamity during a time of crisis.²¹ The theoretical groundwork for this assertion is laid down in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), where Lukács insists that clinging on to the ‘facts’ on the one hand, whilst holding out a faith in Utopian illusions on the other is a characteristic of the dualism of reified consciousness, which presents itself as ‘the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society.’²² The rigid opposition of thought to existence in Western philosophy leads to an insoluble problem: since thought and existence are separate from each other there can be no guarantee that they reflect each other to any degree of accuracy, but at the same time the only effective measure of ‘correct’ thought is that it corresponds to reality. The answer to this problem, for Lukács at least, lies in Marx’s theory of dialectical materialism, where reality itself is understood not as a fixed quantity but rather as a ‘complex of processes’ unfolding in historical movement. ‘This reality is by no means identical with empirical existence’, Lukács writes. ‘This reality *is* not, it *becomes*’ (p. 203 [emphasis added]). Placing the concrete past in dialectical relation to a future equally concrete, insofar as it takes place within the historical process, problematizes the notion that thought need follow in the wake of reality. On the contrary, in order for reality to *become*, ‘the participation of thought is needed’ (p. 204). The identity of thought and experience is thus that each is an aspect of the same dialectical process, and the proletariat, Lukács insists, is uniquely positioned in this process of becoming because, as in itself a kind of product of industrial capitalism, what is reflected in its putative class-consciousness is ‘the new positive reality arising out of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism’ (p. 204). Given the mutual interconnection of thought and reality, proletarian consciousness contains the potential of transforming the relations of production, but only when philosophy is itself transformed into praxis. Without practical action there is no materiality to the dialectic: ‘every purely cognitive stance bears the stigma of immediacy. That is to say, it never ceases to be confronted by a whole series of ready-made objects that cannot be dissolved into processes’ (p. 205).

²¹ Georg Lukács, ‘Realism in the Balance’, in Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 28-59 (p. 29).

²² Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 196-197. Four consecutive references are given here in the text. For an analysis of the influence of Lukács on the 1930s radicals see James. F. Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment: The Controversy over Leftism in Literature* (Urbana & Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1991), esp. pp. 153-157.

Jameson has pointed out that when Lukács attacks ‘naturalism’ in the 1930s and 1940s, he uses the term as a ‘pejorative code-word’ for socialist realism.²³ His critique of empiricism, then, applies as much to the portrayal of the kitchen sink or the tractor as it does to the minutiae of one day in the life of Leopold Bloom. Lukács, moreover, was the only one of the Western Marxists whose work US radicals in the 1930s would have known. For both of these reasons, his work, unfashionable though it manifestly is in the contemporary academy, provides a useful corrective framework nevertheless against which to shore up what Michael Gold called the ‘groping experiment’ of proletarian writing.²⁴ Something of the difficulty involved in realising the transformation of the ‘facts’ of social life, rather than simply reproducing them, is illustrated by the practice of ‘worker correspondence’ carried out in the thirties by, amongst others, both Gold and Tillie Olsen. First published in March 1934, in Hollywood John Reed Club journal *The Partisan*, Olsen’s ‘I Want You Women Up North To Know’ refigures a letter by Felipe Ibarro, published in *New Masses* two months earlier, as Whitmanesque free verse:

i want you women up north to know
 how those dainty children’s dresses you buy
 at macy’s, wannamakers, gimbels, marshall fields,
 are dyed in blood, are stitched in wasting flesh,
 down in San Antonio, “where sunshine spends the winter.”

I want you women up north to see
 the obsequious smile, the salesladies trill
 “exquisite work, madame, exquisite pleats”
 vanish into a bloated face, ordering more dresses,
 gouging the wages down,
 dissolve into maria, ambrosa, catalina.
 stitching these dresses from dawn to night,
 in blood, in wasting flesh.²⁵

The surrealist flourishes of Olsen’s treatment—the sales assistant’s face transforming into that of the bloated capitalist—may seem on the surface at some remove from the nineteenth-century prose realism of which Lukács was famously a devotee, yet the sense of

²³ Fredric Jameson, ‘Reflections in Conclusion’, in Adorno et al., pp. 198-213 (p. 202). Jameson goes on to say that ‘the structural and historical identification for which [Lukács] argued between the symbolic techniques of modernism and the “bad immediacy” of a photographic naturalism was one of his most profound dialectical insights’ (p. 202).

²⁴ Michael Gold, ‘Go Left, Young Writers!’, *New Masses* (January 1929), rpt. in Michael Folsom, ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1972), pp. 186-189 (p. 189).

²⁵ T. Lerner, ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’, *The Partisan*, 1.4 (1934), reprinted in Selma Burkom and Margaret Williams, ‘De-Riddling Tillie Olsen’s Writings’, in *The Critical Response to Tillie Olsen*, ed. by Kay Hoyle Nelson and Nancy Huse (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), pp. 33-53 (p. 35).

immediate perception as somehow not to be trusted, the warning that there are hidden processes at work, suggest that modernist technique and dialectical materialism need not cancel each other out as explanatory forces. One month later, in the New York John Reed Club journal *Partisan Review*, Lukács would publish the essay ‘Propaganda or Partisanship?’, where he contrasts propaganda (or ‘tendency’), a basically subjective, idealist wish-fulfilment passing itself off as objectivity, with partisanship, a fundamentally objective insight which is subjective nonetheless because, filtered through the dialectical consciousness of the revolutionary proletariat, it shows its own workings-out, its ‘desires and its behaviour’, as elements in a dynamic totality.²⁶ ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ elaborates Lukács’ dynamic totality *avant la lettre*. The ‘wasting flesh’ of Tejanas Maria Vasquez, Ambrosa Espinoza and Catalina Rodriquez, figuratively woven into the fabric of the luxury goods they produce, is here put to more than metaphorical use. In classical Marxist theory, commodity exchange conceals the traces of human labour expended in the production of goods; at the same time, workers, alienated from the actual goods they produce, succeed only in reproducing the conditions of their own exploitation. ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’, then, presents the ‘correct’ dialectical analysis and, moreover, that it does so not as a statement of ‘fact’ but instead as the expressive desire of the speaking subject insulates the work against the charge of propaganda in the Lukácsian sense. What remains problematic here, I think, is that even the anti-aesthetic impulse of ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ frames what would otherwise amount to a bald statement of facts in some kind of *form* all the same, and thereby risks—in that deeper Lukácsian sense—privileging the purely cognitive over the practical. This, in turn, may serve no political function whatsoever, other than to legitimate actual suffering, and thereby add insult to the injury of sufferers.²⁷

Whilst recent critical reassessments of radical writing have engaged form as a central, if contested, issue, such problems were sometimes pushed aside in debates amongst the 1930s left, often with a sense that the urgency of the moment rendered aesthetic concerns extraneous. Gold, rightly famous for the bathos of such *ad-hoc* pronouncements as ‘Technique has made cowards of us all’—if not so for his supposed enforcement of them—defended the practice of worker correspondence with a rhetorical appeal to cultural

²⁶ Georg Lukács, ‘Propaganda or Partisanship?’, *Partisan Review*, 1.2 (1934), pp. 36-46 (p. 46).

²⁷ Olsen herself draws attention to this double bind in a much-discussed section of her novel *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (1974), and I discuss this in Chapter 2.

relativism: ‘Would you judge workers’ correspondence by the standard of James Joyce or Walter Pater?’²⁸ If aestheticism is Gold’s target here, he neatly sidesteps the question of why to bother engaging with artistic production in the first place. Moreover, it is not clear at all which criteria are available for use in dealing with a work presenting itself as literature, other than those already explicitly set out for that purpose. In *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U. S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993), Barbara Foley shows that, because literary radicals such as Gold and Freeman evaded critical engagement with bourgeois aesthetic theory, they relied upon ‘an eclectic theoretical model drawn from both Marxist and non-Marxist sources.’²⁹ In particular, Foley notes, 1930s critics often cited I. A. Richards, who provided a touchstone for literary radicalism insofar as his *Practical Criticism*, like Freeman’s appeal to the facts, operates along distinctly empiricist lines. Richards’ emphasis on the formal integrity of the literary work also made him an important influence on the New Critics. Gold and Freeman’s resistance to a hermeneutic model of criticism, their insistence on the immediacy of the present-to-hand, therefore, leaves them – in retrospect - in an unlikely alliance with political opponents at the roots of the intellectual current which, by the early 1950s, had swept them away beyond the margins of literary discourse.

“[I]nterpretation’ [...] is only legitimate when it is not interpretation at all, but merely putting the reader in possession of facts which he would otherwise have missed’, writes T. S. Eliot in ‘The Function of Criticism’ (1923).³⁰ ‘Facts’ for Eliot are the results of comparison and analysis, the technical tools of the expert critic, and his project is to set limits around the kinds of observation admissible within the discourse of literary criticism and, by implication, upon the range of texts to be etherised for analysis. If Eliot strives to keep to the facts by defining whatever transgresses the autotelic bounds of the work of art—psychology, politics—as that which is extraneous to the concerns of the critic, however, worker correspondence draws on those very social facts—by this definition on the outside—for its authority. Even fully equipped with the tools of comparison and analysis, there is not all that much to be said in these terms about a piece as fundamentally

²⁸ Quoted in Murphy, p. 68; in Barbara A. Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1978), p. 137.

²⁹ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U. S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), pp. 144-145. Further references are included in the text as *Radical*.

³⁰ T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), p. 32.

heteronomous as ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’. Attention might be drawn to the alliterative pairings of the title: to the median position of the dactyl beginning ‘women’; to the ‘fact’ that towards the end of the piece the fronting of the phrase ‘women up north’—‘Women up north, I want you to know’—introduces a caesura, effectively inducing a triple meter, and that this lends urgency to the proceedings.³¹ In the face of the semantic imperative of the work, however, such attention to detail may seem to be already labouring the point. What to Lukács bore the ‘stigma of immediacy’—the pointing out of immutable forms, ready-made by tradition and fixed by the cognitive exertions of the expert critic—is wielded both as gateway to and hallmark of institutional legitimacy.

Eliot’s assertion of literary form as a matter of observable fact is consistent with his scientific analogy in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ (1929) of the poet’s mind to chemical catalyst and his definition of the objective correlative as ‘the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts [...] are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.’³² Conceived in generational terms, these demystifications of the creative process must rank amongst what Joseph Freeman understood as the repudiation of ‘eternal values’ and the proclamation of the ‘here and now’ of immediate American experience characteristic of what we know now as high modernism. As any sympathetic reader of Marx would be aware, however, empirical data are always embedded in an ideological framework, and Eliot’s depersonalisation of the poet/critic role implies a degree of professionalisation somewhat at odds with the impulse towards the negation of the division of mental and manual labour driving the proletarian moment. *Partisan Review* editor William Phillips, himself later to gain prominence as a leading member of the so-called New York intellectuals, wrote in 1935 under the pseudonym Wallace Phelps of his suspicion that the ‘evasive approach to content’ evinced by both Eliot and Richards masked ideological bias.³³ Form can never be neutral or objective: ‘method or technique alone are merely the verbal *surface* of the impact which a poem or novel has upon the reader, because linguistic methods are intimately associated with the writer’s purposes and

³¹ In Nelson and Huse, eds., p. 37.

³² Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 145 (emphasis in the original).

³³ Wallace Phelps, ‘Form and Content’, *Partisan Review*, 2.6 (1935), pp. 31-39 (p. 32). The definitive study of the emergence of the New York intellectuals, including most famously Phillip Rahv, remains James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Writers and Partisans: A History of Literary Radicalism in America* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1968).

perceptions.³⁴ Form, in other words, is not simply a fact but also a content, and whilst on the one hand the dialectical inversion Phelps sets in motion adds substance to his intuition that the putatively autonomous forms privileged by an Eliot or a Pound may be irrevocably contaminated by the reactionary political perspectives covertly expressed through those self-same forms, on the other any effort to supersede this impasse with a reinvigorated sense of the here and now is compromised by the equally regressive tendency ingrained in the assumption that content—of whatever this may consist—is somehow representable without mediation of one form or another. The circle, as it were, is unbroken. The kind of material bound up in the practice of worker correspondence, however, invokes fact as neither form nor content; if anything, what marks the practice as *praxis* is its deployment of fact *as fact*.

To interpret a text such as ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ as an allegorical representation of the labour theory of value, as above, is to carry out a critical procedure not wholly devoid of its own intrinsic worth, at least insofar as it operates according to verifiable empirical observation. As with so many of the texts covered in this thesis, the Marxian perspective is just *there*, figured as content or theme, and from my readings of Sandburg’s ‘Smoke and Steel’ through to Ellison’s *Invisible Man* I have found it impossible to resist the potent lure of correspondence between the desire of what it is I think I am looking for—the working through of political forms at some level of abstraction—and the satisfaction of actually finding it. But this fundamentally reductive approach stands at some distance from the grasp of a cultural artefact as a production of its own singular materiality. When Eliot states that the function of criticism is not to interpret but to convey ‘facts’ otherwise absent, and doubles this assertion with the insight that ‘the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour’, he moves formalist criticism some way towards an understanding of its complicity in the instantiation of meaning.³⁵ Of course during the 1920s and 1930s, when radical authors encoded Marx’s analysis of political economy into their work, they understood what they were doing as offering a useful heuristic device, as meeting the needs of an implied working-class readership with little time on their hands to plough through chapters one to nine of the first volume of *Capital*. But this, needless to say, is not really what Eliot means. Rather, he is arguing that, whilst it should be a given that the task of the critic is to pay close attention to

³⁴ Phelps, p. 33.

³⁵ Eliot, *Selected Essays*, p. 30.

the literary work taken as the object of consideration, it is also a necessary part of the task of the author to become a careful reader—of their own work in progress at the very least. This imperative to take the production of art seriously, and to allow some space for self-criticism, is by no means the sole province of the political right. Ralph Ellison emerged onto the literary scene as a committed Marxist, deeply implicated in the social and political milieu surrounding *New Masses*, and his work throughout the late-1930s and 1940s engaged dialectical materialism on a level of sophistication far ahead of many of his contemporaries. Even in *Invisible Man*, often regarded as proclaiming a disavowal of the left, the critique of the commodity form is still in place—still *there*—but treated ambivalently, indissoluble in a sense from the weave of the narrative. The end of the novel is in its beginning, to paraphrase its narrator, himself caught in an act of allusion to the Eliot of *Four Quartets* (1943). Yet self-reflexivity for Ellison, far from signalling cultural and political exhaustion, the degraded state of a fallen modernity, points forward to the generation of future possibility.

For Ellison, just as for Eliot, form *matters*, but if this sense of the work of art as a substantive, organic whole marks off modernism from the representational realism that comes before, it also demarcates the modernist project from the barbed, often vociferous interventions of the avant-garde. As Bürger notes, the precondition supporting an ‘adequate’ reading of the organic work of art is the willingness to trace meaning through the movement of the hermeneutic circle: ‘the parts can be understood only through the whole, the whole only through the parts’ (Bürger, p. 79). Eliot’s gesture towards musical form in *Four Quartets* is thus paradigmatic, each of the poems in the collection functioning as a movement, self-contained yet never wholly free-standing, all the way down to the level of the phrase or the sentence ‘where every word is at home,/Taking its place to support the others’.³⁶ But in avant-garde production, as in early cubist collage, where scraps of newspaper or pieces of woven basket—‘reality fragments’ as Bürger designates them—are attached unceremoniously to the canvas, the compositional integrity of the work is broken down, the controlling ego of the artist renounced, and the constituent elements of the piece ‘are no longer signs pointing to reality, they *are* reality’ (Bürger, p. 78). Something of this (dis)order, it would seem, takes place in the practice of worker correspondence. In the absence of the original letter, and so with no way to compare and contrast, it is impossible

³⁶ Eliot, *Collected Poems, 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 208.

to know where in ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ the ‘art’ resides: which of the phrases are Olsen’s; how much of the original she has changed. How transparent is her treatment of Ibarro’s words? Even the poetic ‘I’ is radically destabilised, the notion of ‘persona’ somehow redundant. If all this were purely a matter of the disruption of conventional art practice, and since it is ‘a historical fact’—as Bürger reminds us—that the avant-garde failed, then the institution that is art, charged with its historical mission to absorb all dissent, will always prevail, always assert its nonchalant prerogative to label the exhibit and file it somewhere out of harm’s way. Olsen’s collaboration with Ibarro, however, refuses to be treated in this manner, and this is not simply because the artefact, in pointing beyond itself, breaks the hermeneutic circle, because the category of authorship is so manifestly contested, nor even because as a consequence of these deformations art is momentarily transformed into the real. *Pace* Bürger, that institutions *do* file away works in the archive becomes the principle by which those momentary transformations are open to reconstitution in the present. As Hal Foster points out, Bürger’s pessimism regarding the efficacy of avant-garde work is curiously ahistorical, and ignores the extent to which praxis operates according to a logic of ‘deferred action’.³⁷ Moreover, ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ performs effective political work only by *means* of its deformations—enjoyable though these may be—of the autonomy model of art production. The end in sight, in the final analysis, is less the transubstantiation of art into life as it is the reanimation of history, that ‘collection of dead facts’.

2. The Passion for Immediacy

Twentieth-century history is a catalogue of suffering, inhumanity and disaster, so the only hope of containing the horror is to draw a line at some point around the millennium and, as with Walter Benjamin’s angel of history, survey the ruins as they recede into the distance.³⁸ Yet to draw back from the horrors of the twentieth century, and to dismiss the ideologies and psychological motivations that drove them as unthinkable, is on some level to deny their reality. Philosopher Alain Badiou argues that to understand the twentieth century *as a*

³⁷ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 28-32.

³⁸ See Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), p. 249.

century, as opposed, that is, to a set of sobering statistics, necessitates a move ‘beyond mere empirical calculation [...] [into] a method of maximal interiority.’³⁹ For Badiou, in his effort to think the century as it thought itself, what characterises twentieth-century subjectivity is a deeply contradictory impulse he terms ‘the passion for the real’. On the one hand, this urge, as manifested both in avant-garde art and radical politics, summons the presence of the here and now as witness to the promise of Utopian possibility. But at the same time, this passion for immediacy also betrays a corrosive scepticism towards an ingrained sense of the way things already are, the *status quo* that needs to be exploded before it can be reconstructed in the image of the new age. The theatres of Pirandello and Brecht, with their distancing effects, the rigorous exploitation of an audience’s conventionalised submission to the evidence of the senses, thus serve as intimate expressions of the buried conviction that

the real, conceived in its contingent absoluteness, is never real enough not to be suspected of semblance. The passion for the real is also, of necessity, suspicion. Nothing can attest that the real is the real, nothing but the system of fictions wherein it plays the role of the real. (p. 52)

The idea that there is an unstable relation between artifice and the actual would presumably not have been lost on a contemporary audience of *Hamlet*, but in the twentieth century—and especially amidst what Badiou refers to as ‘the dark fury of the thirties’ (p. 8)—as Marxism, with its insistence on ideology’s usurpation of popular understanding, and modernism, with its emphasis on the role of form in the production of value, momentarily coalesce, the objectifications of cultural production become, potentially at least, the things wherein not only the conscience but also the consciousness of the dominant power structure is to be caught, held up to exposure and thereby brought down. Some of the fatal flaws inherent in this historical project, as evidenced in the tragi-comedy of the proletarian avant-garde’s failure to make good on its own part in it, are explored in this thesis.

When the likes of Freeman or Gold talk about workers knowing the facts, what they are either unwilling or unable to articulate is that what is at stake are not really empirical data at all but rather a far more slippery concept. This is not to suggest that statistics are unimportant. According to a 1940 study, of the estimated 100,000 Mexican-Americans living in San Antonio some 65,000 were concentrated in the West Side of the city, in an

³⁹ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), p. 5. Two further consecutive references are included in the text.

area of about four square miles. Here, the report goes on, ‘is one of the most extensive slums to be found in any American city, with decrepit wooden shacks in crowded “courts” overflowing with Mexican families who are forced by poverty to live there.’⁴⁰ As historian Richard Buitron explains, conditions for Tejanos during the Depression were appalling: men and women had to compete for unskilled positions in ‘unsanitary, unhealthy, and tedious labor’, which the American Federation of Labor (AFL) disdained to organise; New Deal relief agencies refused help to unemployed non-citizens who, living in tin and cardboard shacks with no indoor plumbing, were vulnerable to tuberculosis and infantile diarrhoea.⁴¹ ‘I Want You Women Up North to Know’ in a sense augments this historical record, although the information we are given is somehow off the record, unofficial, as in a section detailing falling wages:

Three dollars a week,
two fifty-five,
seventy cents a week,
no wonder two thousands [sic] eight hundred ladies of joy
are spending the winter with the sun after he goes down-
for five cents (who said this was a rich man’s world?) you can
get all the lovin you want.⁴²

What is problematic, even paradoxical, about this intervention is not that the information here—because it comes from an unofficial source—is untrustworthy. On the contrary, unless we regard prostitution as a necessary and fair structural offset to crises in the accumulation of capital, we are drawn as a matter of conscience – of interiority in Badiou’s sense - to take these figures at face value. But at the same time, what is going on here is not about information at all: not about what is known, but about what is not known. Olsen’s representation of Ibarro’s letter as verse illuminates the gap between semblance and the real, that leap of faith made in everyday transactions with authority. What motivates the practice of worker correspondence above all, I think, whether consciously or not, is this accentuated sense of form not so much as intermediary but as something in the way. When Joseph Freeman states that the worker, never having heard of Marx, has direct access to ‘the facts’ nonetheless, he nominates the proletariat as custodian of knowledge, not in spite of its theoretical ignorance but because of it, not in terms of immediacy but in those of critical

⁴⁰ Seldon C. Manefee and Orin C. Cassmore, *Pecan Shellers: The Problems of Underpaid and Unemployed Mexican Labor* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1940), quoted in Richard Buitron, *The Quest for Tejano Identity in San Antonio, Texas, 1913-2000* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 39.

⁴¹ Buitron, p. 38.

⁴² In Nelson and Huse, eds., pp. 35-36.

distance. What is made explicit in worker correspondence is implicit across the range of proletarian writing: that working-class people inhabit a space outside of ideology, and that life on the margins of society, therefore, is not only real life—which it undoubtedly is—but also by definition the privileged location of truth, the site of refuge for those ‘eternal values’ repudiated by Pound, Sandburg, Hemingway and Stein.

Factual knowledge is contingent knowledge, and what the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels tries to do is historicize the empirical, grasp the singular as a moment in a process of continual change. American history during the period between 1920 and 1952—the publication dates of *Smoke and Steel* and *Invisible Man* respectively—emerges through a series of unexpected—bizarre, even—reversals. Nowhere is this more evident than in the fate of the industrial working class. Organised labour in America has its origins in the late nineteenth-century, with the formation of the Knights of Labor (1869) and the AFL (1881). Whilst the former had all but collapsed by the 1890s, the latter continued on into the twentieth century, dominated by conservative business interests. Activists committed to revolution rather than reform of the capitalist enterprise, therefore, found it impossible to work within the constraints of the AFL’s ‘company unions’, and so a system of so-called dual unionism came about, whereby radical organisations such as the IWW (formed 1905) carried on the struggle outside the mainstream union movement. Whilst the IWW succeeded insofar as many of its strategies—the sit-down strike in particular—were to be re-employed to spectacular effect during the mass disputes of the 1930s, they failed insofar as their uncompromising stance ultimately succeeded only in bringing down the might of the state upon the heads of its members who, during the ‘red scare’ coming immediately in the wake of WWI, were either imprisoned for terms of ten to twenty years or forced into exile. The CPUSA, from its formation in 1919, initially resisted the dual union agenda, but by 1928, in the face of mass expulsions of left-wing activists from AFL unions, backed down and established the Trade Union Unity League, a separatist federation of revolutionary industrial organisations, confined, once more, to the fringes.⁴³

A radical departure from this cycle of incursion and retreat came in 1933 with the Roosevelt administration’s passing of the National Industrial Recovery Act (NRA), section 7(a) of which (also known as the Wagner Act) enshrined the ‘right of labor to

⁴³ This thumbnail sketch of the history of dual unionism is indebted to Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Dan Georgakas, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Left* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), pp. 200-202. For more detail on the IWW see op. cit., pp. 354-359.

representatives of its own choosing' in federal law. This is the moment that Leslie Fiedler, writing in the late 1960s, registers as, in the 'official' story of the Roosevelt years, marking the historic rise of labour. Yet by 1947 the Taft-Hartley Labor Act reversed the progressive agenda of the Wagner Act, outlawing not only the right to collective bargaining of any trade union with an elected officer unwilling to swear they were neither a member of nor sympathetic to the CPUSA but also the right to strike over such jurisdictional disputes resulting from that same legislation.⁴⁴ Explaining such rapid turnabouts demands more than an appeal to the vagaries of incipient cold war paranoia or even to the dictates of political expediency. As historian Mike Davis points out, neither the Wagner nor Taft-Hartley Acts actually include the word 'union'.⁴⁵ The rights of American unions are based, not on any form of collective legitimacy, but rather on the basis of individual consent. Consequently, they are 'provisional and revocable; anti-union campaigns are thus always waged in a Jeffersonian language of the "rights of individual workers"'.⁴⁶ Thus, for Davis, 'the most ironic experience of all' in the twisting narrative of the US working class comes during the Great Depression itself:

Despite a cataclysmic collapse of the productive system and the economic class war that the crisis unleashed, the political battlements of American capitalism held firm. Indeed, it can be argued that the hegemony of the political system was reinforced and extended during this period. The same workers who defied the machine guns of the National Guard at Flint or chased the deputies off the streets during the semi-insurrectionary Minneapolis General Strike were also the cornerstone of electoral support for Roosevelt. The millions of young workers aroused by the struggle for industrial unionism were simultaneously mobilized as the shock troops of a pseudo-aristocratic politician whose avowed intention was 'the salvation of American capitalism'.⁴⁷

Electoral support for Roosevelt from the rank and file of the industrial working class was only the most visible, perhaps, of the symptoms of the fatal compromise labour made with capital during the 1930s. Behind the scenes, the CIO funded Roosevelt's 1936

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 767-770. See also Judith S. Levey and Agnes Greenhall, eds., *The Penguin Concise Columbia Encyclopedia* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987), p. 460; p. 812.

⁴⁵ Mike Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream: Politics and Economy in the History of the US Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1986), p. 113.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 5

re-election campaign to the tune of some \$770,000.⁴⁸ But the real issue is not simply that organised labour's triumphs were reversed by support for the Roosevelt administration, but that those hard-won victories themselves were concealed stepping-stones leading towards transformed relations of production in the post-war economy. The worker-occupation, during the winter of 1936-1937, of General Motors' Flint, Michigan plant lasted for forty-four days and ended with the company agreeing to strikers' demands. This was the symbolic apotheosis of the historic rise of labour. It is telling, however, that this action unfolded not in a mine or a steelworks but at an automobile assembly line, both symbolically and actually the home terrain of Fordism. David Harvey argues that where unions won a place in the market place as a result of NRA legislation this was with the explicit recognition that 'collective bargaining rights were essential to the effective demand problem' of the Depression. What was sacrificed, in the entry to the realm of consumption, was power 'in the realm of production'.⁴⁹ The details of Flint seem to bear this assertion out: in the months leading up to the strike, workers were awarded a pay rise, but the ultimate settlement guaranteed recognition to the United Automobile Workers of America (UAW) for a period of only six months.⁵⁰ Sidney Fine notes that, whilst the Flint sit-down was without doubt the single major factor in the emergence of the UAW as one of the largest industrial organisations in the US, and whilst this popularity was gained as a result of particular grievances being settled, as far as structural change across General Motors on a national level is concerned the union 'failed, in the main, to secure its demands with regard to wages, hours, and the timing of operations.'⁵¹

Not all commentators are agreed that these shifts in the relations of production taking place during the Depression were all bad, and that the entry into consumer culture necessarily places limits on individual agency. James Livingston points out that the 1930s saw the consolidation of a move, with its origins in the 1850s, from proprietary to corporate capitalism.⁵² Livingston's economic analysis is founded on the Marx of the *Grundrisse*,

⁴⁸ Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 107. Support was given through the auspices of the somewhat ironically named Non-Partisan League.

⁴⁹ Harvey, p. 133.

⁵⁰ Cochran, p. 118; p. 128.

⁵¹ Sidney Fine, *Sit-down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 324.

⁵² James Livingston, *Pragmatism and the Political Economy of Cultural Revolution, 1850-1940* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997). Further references are included in the text either consecutively or as Livingston.

who sketches an end to capitalism according to its own logic of accumulation: an increase in investment in machinery, relative to wages paid to skilled labour, points towards a situation in which the value produced by the ownership and maintenance of the expanded means of production itself exceeds that accruing through the production of consumer goods. At this projected stage, the labour theory of value no longer applies; once the difference between necessary and surplus labour time ceases to be the determinate factor in the production of wealth, exchange value ceases its dominance over use value ‘and the direct, material production process is stripped of the form of penury and antithesis’.⁵³ As Livingston acknowledges, exchange value has not broken down, ‘and penury and antithesis are still very much with us’ (Livingston, p. 19). However, he maintains that, during the Depression, a move towards an economic model whereby growth is achieved, not through investment in and thereby the accumulation of fixed capital, but rather through the consumer goods sector becomes the logical solution to the crisis. Whilst this hardly threatens ‘the sanctity of private investment as the arbiter of growth’ (p. 23), the receipt of wages become disengaged—through welfare projects such as those promoted by the New Deal—from ‘the capital-labor relation and the production of value through work’ (p. 23). The critique of consumer culture as reification, therefore, is missing the point. Once consumer demand becomes the key variable in economic growth, a culture emerges in which value becomes measurable in terms of subject position: ‘in which consumption is authorized by the articulation of desire and criterion of need as well as the production of value through work’ (p. 112). For Livingston, the emergence of a new ‘discursive subject’ is registered first by Whitman, but in the post-bellum period disappears from view, only to re-emerge in the 1890s in the anti-realist forms of literary naturalism:

This naturalist notion of selfhood as the effect of entanglement in externality enables a new, discursive model of personality that lives another underground (or rather apolitical) existence during the 1930s to the 1950s, when, in the absence of official apartheid and an institutionalized Left, it reshapes the languages of both popular culture and radical politics. (p. 138)

Whether or not Livingston’s analysis represents a fair assessment of the whole of Marx’s argument in the *Grundrisse*, let alone whether or not the Keynesian economic policies instituted during the 1930s signal the consolidation of a qualitative transformation of the capitalist mode of production, remain outside the scope of this thesis, although I have my

⁵³ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 705-706; cited in Livingston, p. 19.

doubts on both scores.⁵⁴ All the same, the allusion to an ‘underground’ existence during the 1930s to the 1950s of a non-realist literary form, ‘apolitical’ yet somehow deeply engaged with the categories of political economy, is suggestive. If, as I take it to mean, the statement above signifies that from the 1950s on ‘an absence of official apartheid and an institutionalised Left’ allows for the re-emergence of cultural workings-through of what is elsewhere referred to as the ‘social self’, then the question remains as to where the traces of this underground current are to be found during the period 1930-1950. Livingstone implies that an institutionalization of the left during that period leads to a preponderance of social realism, a form he denigrates insofar as realism, with its ‘finished characters’, cannot contain the dynamic characters thrown up by the ‘credit economy’ (Livingstone, p. 132). However, as Denning and others have shown, much proletarian writing was anti-realist enough to be understood as an avant-garde. The focus on emergent class-consciousness throughout the period led to characters, works and indeed careers, moreover, which could be described as anything but ‘finished’.

Skilled manual labour may have lost its privileged position in the forces of production, but the working class did not go away. A celebration of fluid, invisible subjectivities during the Great Depression seems a little at odds with the very visible and solid presence at that time of the unemployed and destitute: those Marx made clear were essential to the workings of capitalism as a reserve army of labour, ‘a surplus population’.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The enigmatic appeal of the fragmentary statements Livingstone focuses on, arguably, is the emphasis they place on knowledge as praxis. The development of the industrial landscape—factories, railways, telegraph lines—seems to Marx an impressive measure of ‘to what degree [...] the conditions of the process of social life itself have come under the control of the general intellect and been transformed in accordance with it’ (*Grundrisse*, p. 706). The use of the term ‘social individual’, in this sense, has more to do with the harnessing of collective endeavour than consumption *per se*. Marx’s point is that bourgeois economics has singularly failed to theorize the possibilities inherent in capital’s contradictory—in terms of the labour theory of value—drive towards the reduction of necessary labour time. If the majority of people no longer need to spend most of their time in back-breaking manual labour, then they have more time to think, and in that case ‘the non-labour of the few’ (i.e. the capitalist class) need no longer be a precondition ‘for the development of the general powers of the human head’ (p. 705). But this is still only an idea. As David McLellan’s translation in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) makes abundantly clear, the shift to the social individual can only take place once private ownership of the means of production is forcibly abolished, and so the subjective perception, from the point of view of the worker, of the sum total of social production – all those factories and pylons – as an overpowering, alien force is objectively overturned: ‘So long as the creation of this material form of activity, objectified in contrast to immediate labour power, occurs on the basis of capital and wage-labour, and so long as this process of objectification in fact seems to be a process of alienation as far as the worker is concerned, or to be the appropriation of alien labour from the capitalist’s point of view, so long will this distortion and this inversion really exist and not merely occur in the imagination of both workers and capitalists’ (p. 420).

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. I (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 782. Further references are included in the text as *Capital*, Vol. I.

At the sharp end of social change were Maria Vasquez, Ambrosia Espinoza and Catalina Rodriguez, and for the Tejano population of San Antonio, New Deal legislation served ultimately only to deepen their marginalized status. Buitron draws a causal relationship between the passage of the Fair Labor Standards Act Of 1938, under the terms of which a minimum wage was introduced across industry, and the replacement of low-paid ‘hand-work businesses’ by machinery.⁵⁶ There is no evidence to suggest that enforced idleness in these instances freed up time for entry into a culture of consumerism as the playground of a newly invigorated subjectivity.

It is one thing to draw attention to the contingency of empirical data, but to reject facticity *tout court* seems entirely another. ‘The retreat of ontology from the course of the world is also a retreat from the empirical content of subjectivity,’ writes T. W. Adorno in *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1964), his broadside against the legacy of Heideggerian existentialism.⁵⁷ Leslie Fiedler’s somewhat curmudgeonly bemusement, also in 1964, at what he termed the ‘new mutants’, betrayed the genuine concern of a former 1930s radical that ‘the new world of the new men of the latter twentieth century is to be discovered only by the conquest of inner space.’⁵⁸ If the radicals of the 1960s, as Fiedler suggested, were crippled by entanglement in the faux mysticism of hallucinogenic drugs, then perhaps what they sought out in the proletarian writing of the 1930s was to come down to a sense of groundedness, to the comforts of materiality, to content. But content always comes along with a form, in this instance the hand-me-down legacy of the 1920s moderns, whose celebration of consumerism rediscovers its conscience in the dismal experience of the surplus populations of the Depression decade. The traces of this surplus population run through the works of the proletarian avant-garde, not purely as manifest content but also as absent presence: in unconscious evasions, failed experiments. This literature embodies ‘fact’ not only in a documentary sense—although much of it does that too—but also in Eliot’s sense of form as constituting ‘fact’. What, if anything, to do with these facts, however, presents problems for a contemporary project of critical recovery, a brief outline of which I sketch here as a frame for my own work.

⁵⁶ Buitron, p. 40.

⁵⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 74.

⁵⁸ Leslie A. Fiedler, ‘The New Mutants’, *Partisan Review*, 32 (1965), pp. 489-525 (p. 525).

3. Repression and Recovery

Revisionary literary history, because it speaks to its own time and place, speaks *of* that time and place, burrowing away a counter-narrative to the process of official canon formation. That the recovery and reappraisal of neglected work can be understood in terms of a narrative at all, moreover, serves as a reminder of how far such a project stands in opposition to modes of critical reception that gained ground in the post-WWII academy. Art critic Clement Greenberg, for whom the paintings of De Kooning and Rothko carry to a maximal level of abstraction the drive to empty out the autonomous work of all but essential content, is for Jameson the major theorist of what he has termed modernism as ideology.⁵⁹ This desire, congealed in the opaque surfaces of abstract expressionism, to eliminate the figurative as somehow extraneous to the artwork is paralleled in the New Criticism, where ‘lyric poetry, non-narrative poetic discourse, is positioned at the very centre (or summit) of some modernist *systeme de beaux arts*’ (p. 173). Represented here by the work of Wallace Stevens in preference to the still troublingly political, if conservative, Utopian modernisms of Eliot and Pound, poetry dealing in abstraction, although in one sense a kind of spiritualization of language, also—by virtue of that very resistance to being pinned down to anything as vulgar as a discernible meaning—ends up drawing attention to its own blank materiality. ‘Literature—in the age of commodification—wishes it could be a thing,’ Jameson notes, ‘as the objects of the other arts seem to be’ (p. 174).

Quite how literature could ever not, at least to some extent, be a thing remains mysterious. Even without the help of Jameson’s insights into the near cosmological scale of revolutions in the mode of production, New Criticism’s historic necessity is not too difficult to place in the immediate context of the rise of McCarthyism.⁶⁰ It can be no accident that the first critical works to engage sympathetically with Depression-era literary Marxism - Walter Rideout’s *The Radical Novel in the United States, 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (1956) and Daniel Aaron’s *Writers on the Left* (1961)—both emerged after the Senator’s fall from grace, and both disregard poetry

⁵⁹ Jameson, *Singular Modernity*, p. 173. Two consecutive references are included in the text. For a clear statement of Greenberg’s theory of modernism as self-criticism see ‘Modernist Painting’, in Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, Vol. 4, ed., by John O’Brien (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), pp. 85-94.

⁶⁰ The definitive account of Jameson’s critical method remains ‘On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act’, his introductory essay to *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 17-102. See especially, in this context, pp. 74-102.

entirely. Whilst this easing of the political situation allows history to seep back in, the value inhering in literature is still understood in abstract, normative terms. It is not simply that there is a lag between change in the political arena and its reflection in culture; the critical paradigm itself acts as an effective brake on social change, valorisation coming through a place in Eliot's tradition, rather than through the social embeddedness both of history in the text and of the critic in history. The techniques of close reading, indispensable perhaps when dealing with a short section of verse, cease to constitute reading at all when they imply the mutilation of a novel length work into manageable extracts. When that novel length work is, as if to add insult to injury, itself bad—'awful' as Rideout in his 1992 introduction characterises many of the novels he was 'required' to discuss—then an amount of despair might be admitted as part of the critical process.⁶¹ The problem for Rideout, whose survey remains essential reading for anyone with an interest in the field, is in a sense performative. Because it is a lonely struggle to read the texts under consideration productively, he needs to ask himself the question: who is this work addressing? In answering that question he needs to establish an audience rather than find one. As he points out in his original 1956 preface, *The Radical Novel in the United States* crosses too many institutional boundaries to be taken as wholly valid by any one school: for the 'strict literary historian' there is too much literary analysis; for the formalist critic too much 'extrinsic' material.⁶² What formal analysis there is, moreover, as evidenced by the disproportionate space devoted to John Dos Passos' *USA* trilogy (1936) and Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep* (1934)—both works displaying 'poetic' prose techniques not dissimilar to those employed by Joyce—betrays Rideout's on-going situation, labouring from within the modernist paradigm, and begs the question of the likelihood of anyone ever crawling out from under that weight.

If *The Radical Novel* does not solve this problem it makes the question available all the same, and just as the persistence of the normative standard is only articulated by Rideout (in a roundabout manner) some forty years after the fact, so too the real breakthrough effected in Aaron's *Writers on the Left* only emerges in hindsight. In his analysis of the 'literary wars' of the early thirties, Aaron focuses on cultural history as a counterweight to anti-communist polemic spread through literature such as Eugene Lyon's

⁶¹ Walter Rideout, *The Radical Novel in the United States 1900-1954: Some Interrelations of Literature and Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. ix-xviii.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

The Red Decade (1941), for Aaron a book ‘full of facts’ yet written ‘without charity or understanding.’⁶³ The impressive scholastic sweep of *Writers on the Left* promotes understanding insofar as it places what are elsewhere presented as isolated outbursts in their broader social and cultural contexts. Michael Gold’s corrosive attack in the *New Republic* on Thornton Wilder as ‘Prophet of the Genteel Christ’, for instance, tentatively described by Rideout as the inaugural event of the proletarian movement, is more explicitly situated by Aaron in the context of a growing disenchantment within American liberalism already evidenced in the pages of the *New Republic* in comment from established voices such as Cowley, Burke, Edward Dahlberg and Katherine Anne Porter: a sense, as Edmund Wilson put it, ‘that the economic crisis is to be accompanied by a literary one.’⁶⁴ The major drawback of *Writers on the Left*, however, is that the legacy Aaron’s important revisionary work leaves behind is almost entirely extra-literary. Even in the section on Dos Passos, easily the most conventionally accomplished of authors under consideration, Aaron draws his sources entirely from journal articles and personal letters. If Aaron refrains from imposing a critical framework from the outside, however, as Alan Wald astutely notes, intrinsically the form of *Writers on the Left* as a whole owes more than a little to the Dos Passos of *USA*: ‘a lively structure [...] that enable[s] [Aaron] to shuttle among group narratives, representative figures, and inter-chapters.’⁶⁵

If the problem encountered by Rideout and Aaron is to find a new form of criticism, Cary Nelson attempts precisely that in *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1989), written as ‘a single, continuous essay [...] the best way to suggest the interpretive fluidity of the wide range of poetry published during this thirty five year period.’⁶⁶ Insofar as Nelson resists attempts to impose a singular narrative upon disparate phenomena, and is uncomfortable with interpretative claims to objective truth masking political or ideological agendas, his provocative formal experiment offers an immanent critique of modernist canon formation. Where, for Eliot, interpretation straying too far outside its legitimate perimeters blurs the edges of a given work, for Nelson the entire edifice of literary studies is contaminated:

⁶³ Daniel Aaron, *Writers on the Left* (New York: Avon, 1965), p. 248.

⁶⁴ Quoted in Aaron, p. 260. For Rideout’s take on Gold’s Wilder review see Rideout, pp. 153-154.

⁶⁵ Alan M. Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), p. 16.

⁶⁶ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945*(Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), p. xii.

One literally never sees a poem on a page in and of itself alone; it is always a function of the assumptions and urgencies of our psychology, our critical models, our disciplinary aims and defences, and our own historical moment. Nothing that we can say or think about a poem is free of social construction. If the 'thing itself' were available to us, it would have no meaning whatsoever. There is no perceptible, unmediated, unconstructed degree zero of literary materiality that serves as a consensual basis for interpretation. Even what is to count as a poem has to be decided before the words in white space will have any meaning.⁶⁷

The rightness of the word 'literally' in the first sentence may be open to debate, and the piling up of such absolutes as 'never' and 'always', 'nothing' and 'whatsoever', may give the impression that Nelson's project is to appear more totalizing than the totalizers, but the great service provided by *Repression and Recovery* is the decentring of criticism from a focus on the generic to a concern with whatever in a given context licenses categorisation: a displacement from what makes a thing count as a poem to an interrogation of what constitutes 'literariness'.

Olsen's 'I Want You Women Up North To Know' is charged with that anti-aesthetic impulse of the proletarian avant-garde isolated by Denning. The determinate social contradiction whereby the sweated, unpaid surplus labour of Maria Vasquez, Ambrosa Espinoza, Catalina Rodriquez and others like them becomes congealed in children's dresses sold in northern department stores, the sense in which social content vanishes within the commodity form, is mediated through the practise of worker correspondence, which redirects aesthetic production towards precisely that transfigured content. What Nelson's acts of recovery seek to achieve is once again a reversal of trajectory - the reabsorption of neglected content back into literary discourse *as form*. Worker correspondence, he argues, transposed with line breaks and into stanzas, is transformed in both function and status: 'no longer the same texts they were as letters, [...] they have been reconstituted within literariness and thereby rearticulated to numerous possibilities for poetic idealization' (p. 106). In the absence not only of Maria Vasquez and her colleagues, but also of those women up North addressed by the speaking voice, a basically communicative act is appropriated back within an institutional framework understood as fundamentally dialogic in structure. But if the academy is here imagined as a kind of marketplace where the struggle for local hegemony is conducted according to a

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 10.

process of haggling over what counts as value in literary terms, it remains the case that worker correspondence as praxis is deeply conflicted in this environment. After all, what is repressed in Olsen's adaptation of Ibarro's letter is that very claim to literariness up for grabs. Partly as result of the collectivist political milieu the work reaches out from (and towards), and partly as a kind of hangover from the bohemian *ressentiment* implicit in the tone of straight-faced vanguardism wherever it appears, 'I Want You Women Up North To Know' obstinately refuses to want to capitalize on its investment.

Just as the off-the-shelf identities supplied to the children of the North are already somehow second-hand—sweatshop-soiled, as it were—so the collapse of the poetic 'I' implies a kind of copying or mechanical operation. As a text, 'I Want You Women Up North To Know' is massively constrained by the original published letter. That an original exists in the case of worker correspondence is the latter's condition of possibility, and in this sense the practice bears a remarkable affinity to that of the unassisted readymade—Duchamp's infamous urinal, for instance, which we encountered at the outset of this introductory essay. In *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (2007), John Roberts notes that Duchamp's presentation of everyday objects of utility—the urinal, a snow-shovel, a commercial bottle rack—as gallery exhibits was short-lived, and all too easily misunderstood as a gesture of artistic nihilism; yet the objects themselves continue to exist somewhere and, potentially at least, be useful long enough for criticism to catch up with the deeper significance of the work.⁶⁸ During the first decades of the twentieth century, as Fordism, the modus operandi of corporate capital in its drive towards increased productivity, systemizes machine production, reducing the role of skilled labour to repetitive, isolated activity, Duchamp finds a way of making art relevant. He does this by presenting—in the readymade—an object which takes the form both of productive and artistic, alienated and non-alienated labour simultaneously. Here the empirical and the analytical are folded into one another, the phenomenal and the discursive working together. As Roberts points out, the readymade produced 'a kind of mimetic short-circuit', an art object 'that didn't need to persuade you it was something else.'⁶⁹ My argument is that all of the writers represented in this thesis shared something of this commitment to a re-wiring of mimesis. Joseph Freeman spoke of proletarian literature embodying on some non-

⁶⁸ John Roberts, *The Intangibilities of Form: Skill and Deskilling in Art After the Readymade* (London: Verso, 2007), pp. 39-42.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

theoretical level the ‘facts’, and my intention is to take him at his word. Social facts, however, cannot simply be read off but need to be rewritten, produced out of sometimes unpromising materials.

Chapter 1 traces precursors to the proletarian literature of the 1930s to the twin currents of pre-WWI anarchism and the bohemian culture of Greenwich Village, as figured through the career of writer and *New Masses* literary editor Michael Gold. Despite the success of Gold’s novel *Jews Without Money* (1930) his reputation has suffered disproportionately as a result of his membership of and vocal support for the CPUSA. It is not simply that Gold’s writing is deemed unreadable; the man himself has been routinely portrayed in the secondary material as either some kind of slavering bigot or else a sentimentalist run amok. Whatever empirical basis there is for these observations—and much of it is drawn from his own journalistic outpourings—versions of Gold as either intellectually or temperamentally inadequate to acknowledgement in the official canon betray a politically sanitised agenda behind the appearance of institutional objectivity. It is impossible to separate Gold’s work from his politics, but this need not mean his work is beneath consideration. Whilst recent critical reassessments have focussed on *Jews Without Money*, here an attempt is made to read meaning from the shape of a career considered by even sympathetic commentators as falling short of the realization of early promise. First and foremost, Gold was a poet in the American free-verse tradition of Whitman and Sandburg. Through detailed analysis of both Sandburg’s ‘Smoke and Steel’ and Gold’s ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ I show that neither is in fact especially resistant to close reading techniques. Whilst Sandburg was eventually to reject modernism, Gold continued producing on into the thirties his influences from Soviet and European avant-gardes. Indeed I contest the view that Gold was ever able fully to abandon his entanglement with modernism. Taking a route through Gold’s editorials in *New Masses*, the chapter traces an unlikely alliance of avant-garde music production and proletarian literature, an encounter that also brings together Gold and Ezra Pound. If Gold’s impulses were essentially populist, however, his technique remained that of the provocateur, and during the Depression decade this placed him in an uncomfortable position in relation to the mass-cultural preferences of his readership. Although Gold registered disillusionment with formal experimentation for its own sake, the baffling series

of targets singled out for demolition in his *Daily Worker* column only makes sense as the expression of a kind of modernist fascination—simultaneously a product of and a response to the commercialisation of popular culture.

Chapter 2 continues to trace the hidden contours of this relation of the avant-garde to the popular. The focus here is on the mid-1930s, and in particular on incursions into the mainstream literary scene. Early in the decade a series of novels were published taking the 1929 Gastonia textile strike as subject matter. In their efforts to throw in their lot with the side of organised labour in North Carolina, works such as Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* and Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart*—both published in 1932—adopted variants of nineteenth-century realism. Something of the limits of this approach is evidenced by the three-year gap between the bloody events in the South and the novels' arrival in the bookstores, by which time the struggle had long been suppressed. An exception to this rule comes in Mary Heaton Vorse's expressionistic *Strike!* (1930), where a kind of hyper-realism at times achieves something of the urgency of breaking news. Vorse's status as a respected labour journalist and activist, however, and her thinly-veiled treatment of personnel and events at Gastonia ensure that the novel remains far less problematically than should be the case an adjunct to the impressive corpus of Vorse's documentary work than an artistic statement in its own right. Something more progressive in aesthetic terms emerges two years later with the publication of William Rollins' *The Shadow Before* and Robert Cantwell's *The Land of Plenty*, and then, in the following year, with Clara Weatherwax's *Marching! Marching!*. Each of these is identifiable as a distinctly modernist text, although whilst Rollins remains fixed in the real Gastonia, both Cantwell and Weatherwax portray—nominally at least—entirely fictional events, coincidentally set around the lumber-mills of the Pacific Northwest. This imaginative break with 'the facts', on the one hand introducing far greater scope for autonomy into the act of production, by that same manoeuvre places these texts in a precarious relation to realist epistemology, with or without the employment of stylistic tics derived from European and Soviet avant-gardes. In this chapter, close attention is paid to the way in which Cantwell, in particular, in his attempt to summon and sustain the momentum of radical popular celebration, runs up against severe ideological limitations. If the Gastonia novels, in a sense, fought and lost a hopeless battle with the pro-capitalist hysteria of the mainstream press, both Weatherwax and Cantwell attempt to counter this by incorporating biased news

reporting as a kind of immanent heuristic.⁷⁰ This has the obvious effect of recalling the intertextual play of Joyce or Dos Passos. The problem here, however, is not so much an empty formalism but rather a matter of tone. Understandable bitterness at the manufacture of consent easily spills over into a kind of anti-populism starkly at odds with the democratic impulse of a revolutionary literature, and although Cantwell struggles to point to a way out of this impasse by subtly exhorting his readership towards self-reflexivity, this comes with the proviso nevertheless that his fictional strikers will be defeated.

If anything, the limits of proletarian novelists' engagement with modernism were proportionate to the extent to which they held themselves back from extremes of formal experimentation, torn between, from one side, perennial accusations of self-indulgence, and from the other a necessary eye on the demands of the marketplace. Exempted from the dictates of commercial viability by virtue of its author's incarceration—institutional, domestic or otherwise—Olsen's *Yonnonidio* stands as testimony that form is in every sense prior to political signification. In the 1970s recovery and reception of the novel it is the abstract and non-discursive that bears the weight of hidden history, and chapter two concludes by considering the role literary criticism may play in relation to theories of the neo-avant-garde. All of this is to have come a long way from Joseph Freeman's alleged immediacy of working-class experience, so far indeed almost to have reached an opposite pole in the guise of another kind of immediacy altogether: the presence, that is, of pure form. In Chapter 3 I take a detour from the literary scene to examine the ways in which classically-trained composers attempted, during the Depression, to align the glacial structures of the New Music with the needs of the labour movement. The struggle that modernist musicians of the New York Composers' Collective engaged in was to find a method to direct music, understood as a fundamentally non-representational medium, towards political partisanship. To some extent American musical modernism had already introduced a discordant note of realism amongst the clinical abstraction of the European models pioneered by the likes of Schoenberg and Stravinsky. In the work of Charles Ives, in particular, quotation from a range of sources—spirituals, popular tunes, Beethoven—anchored daunting complexity in a distinct imaginative landscape. Henry Cowell, too, used traditional melodies in counterpoint with experimental techniques so as to suggest a tension

⁷⁰ Vera Weisbord cites the *Gastonia Daily Gazette*, 4 April 1929, claiming the strike, 'was started simply for the purpose of overthrowing this Government, to destroy property and to KILL, KILL, KILL.' Vera Buch Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 183

between permanence and change. The institutional demands of collaboration with a sector of the population, many of whom were unlikely ever to have stepped inside either a university or a conservatory, however, led to the conviction that not only should the song take precedence over the sonata, but that lyrical content be subject to the same kind of appeal to immediacy expected in proletarian writing. The basic error behind what must remain one of the most absurd attempts to meld the politics and art of the period was not, however, the understanding that music alone was insufficiently meaningful to suit the revolutionary task in hand but, on the contrary, to imagine that form could ever be emptied of signification.

Far more so than writers, perhaps, musicians need to go to radical extremes in what they do to their materials for their performances to become incomprehensible on their own terms. Language will only take so much deformation before it ceases to signify; a musical instrument can withstand violent maltreatment and still *sound like* a musical instrument. Henry Cowell proved this in the 1920s, playing tone clusters with his fists. Cowell's involvement with the Composers' Collective signalled the American avant-garde's willingness to espouse radical causes, yet it was his *New Music Quarterly Review* recording series, funded almost entirely by Ives, that makes it possible today to hear a Collective member actually put into practise the coupling of proletarian literature with contemporary art music. Elie Siegmeister's *The Strange Funeral in Braddock* (1936), a setting of Michael Gold's text, was recorded as part of a series of cultural artefacts aimed at a specialist audience consisting typically of college professors. But Siegmeister had been performing the composition at workers' meetings around New York for at least two years prior to committing it to disc. The result of this clash of blue-collar protest with high-brow intransigence which the recording—alone—represents was not, as might be expected, that for labour activists modernist composition challenged too far the parameters of the aesthetic: Collective performances did not sound too little like art, but too much. Residual in modernist procedure was the transcendentalist notion of the composition as a conceptual object that, even if unsounded, exists. Insofar as this was the case, strike meetings must have been envisaged more as mystic rites than strategic interventions, and mid-decade, under the twin pressures of the New Deal and the Popular Front, such esoterica all but melted, if not into thin air then into a romanticised vision of 'the folk', itself no less an ideal than the sculptural silences of modernism. What was needed was some way of

conserving the best in the tradition of nativist populism—whether this was Whitman or the IWW—without descending into gung-ho nationalism, whilst at the same time salvaging what was workable from the European avant-gardes, without capitulating either to the impotently romantic or the dangerously authoritarian. Although whatever this was had yet to materialize, there were already—as ever—strong undercurrents making themselves felt. With the benefit of historical hindsight it is possible to trace this emergent formation through the chequered career of Erskine Caldwell.

In the second half of the thesis the critical focus moves away from the Depression decade to the re-evaluation and recovery of 1930s texts during the 1960s. What is at stake in this move, rather than the projection of an imagined postmodernist perspective, is some means of retaining certain features of modernism without the need for an expert reader, a connoisseur of high culture, or a gatekeeper of the great tradition to interpret them for the masses. A fundamental tenet of modernism is that in the process of its production the text affects change in the subject: Proust really does recapture lost time; Joyce really does experience epiphany. Some theorists of the proletarian novel explicitly sought to harness this potentiality in search of the dissemination of revolutionary class consciousness, but even at its most ramshackle proletarian writing gestured implicitly towards this aim with its much derided ‘conversion endings’—Gold’s *Jews Without Money* providing the genre with its classic expression. Reflexivity is central to this strategy, but also its weakest point. Art works hold a mesmeric sway over those susceptible to such influences. Caldwell, throughout the ten years of writing discussed in Chapter 4, returned over and over again in his work to what I have called his art of standing still: moments interrupting the flow of narrative with tableaux. People tend not to become converts in Caldwell novels; instead they become frozen—either in fascination or total impassivity. Caldwell’s career as a bestseller lasted well into the 1960s, by which time the sex and violence his books became famous for takes place not only between the covers, as in his earlier, frequently banned works, but also on open display on the lurid covers of New American Library and Pan paperbacks, produced and sold in their millions. This was the context—qualitatively unrecognisable from the viewpoint of the little magazines of the 1920s and 1930s his work grew out from—in which the critical recovery of Caldwell began to take place. Something in the utter hopelessness of Caldwell’s fictional South, the sheer impossibility of redemption, seemed to speak to the times. The modernist paradigm of transcendence had

been more or less abandoned, and this fitted with Caldwell's truculently non-sentimental, immanent critique of both the real and its representation. Although his subsequent writing undeniably lost its charge, the sequence of novels from *Tobacco Road* (1931) to *Trouble in July* (1940) provided a unique resource for writers post-WWII: popular yet uncompromising, critical yet readable, and an object lesson—at times excruciating—lesson in how important it is to resist the temptation to create an ideal out of the folk.

Criticism has only recently caught up with how indispensable form is to Caldwell's achievement. The repetition—both across and within texts—he was so repetitively accused of now turns out to be the method through which intense scrutiny is brought to bear on the notion that subjective change can be meaningful from within the perspective of critical disinterest, that insight occurs in isolation. The absence of affect, the blankness in Caldwell's narratives, so often interpreted as evidence of callousness on the author's behalf, now turns out to be the flipside of consciousness rendered transparent, the necessary tonal space enabling a look to the far side of the self. If Caldwell's cartoon-like characters lead inner lives at all, they do so somewhere outside the text, in some liminal zone where inside and outside exist in an unstable relation. It is perhaps no accident that both of these features, insistent repetition and a kind of mind-bending textual doubleness, play significant roles—and with, moreover, far less restraint—in the only canonical text as such under consideration in this thesis, also the work of a post-WWII refugee from the literary left, Ralph Ellison's magisterial *Invisible Man*. With the notable exception of *Yonnondio*, the texts so far discussed in the thesis are generally situated somewhere towards the lower end of the spectrum of literary value. It is ironic, therefore, that Ellison, whilst at least taken seriously in the academy, is also the author here—Gold's toxic reputation notwithstanding—with whose name the most vitriolic critical opprobrium has been associated. Attacked by what remained of the radical left in the fifties as a renegade, Ellison was further set upon during the sixties for what was perceived as his patrician stance towards young writers, and for his refusal to endorse black nationalism in any shape or form. When Ellison declined an invitation to attend a 1965 conference organised by the Harlem Writers Guild at the New School for Social Research, delegates rounded on him. '[W]hether Ellison has grown up is open to question in many quarters starting with me', stated John Hendrik Clarke.⁷¹ The subsequent profusion of monographs on *Invisible Man*

⁷¹ Quoted in Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: William Morrow, 1967), p. 507.

could provide material enough for a thesis in itself, and so it perhaps fortunate, then, that Kenneth Burke, a critic whose work retrospectively underpins so much of the more recent assessments of radical modernism under consideration here, began to address precisely this issue of Ellison's political maturity in *Invisible Man* prior even to its publication.

Burke recalls hearing Ellison read from the early 'battle royal' episode of the novel, and immediately sensing a connection with his own attempts at thinking through the means by which the individual—and for Burke this means the intellectual—is able to transcend the socio-political limits of race and class, limits which Burke explicitly labels 'ideological'.⁷² On reflection, however—and after having actually read the novel—Burke writes to Ellison of his increasing frustration in attempting to match his own ruminations on the quandary facing the black intellectual with the tortuous passage of the invisible man until he eventually realises that this is because '[Ellison's] narrator doesn't "solve" that problem' (p. 67). There is no transcendence in *Invisible Man*, only a process of continual transformation: 'the withinness-of-withinness-of-withinness' (p. 69). Ellison has written a *Bildungsroman*, pitting the coming-to-maturity of his narrator against the notional maturation of US society post-Civil War. Ellison's 'Kantian "as if"', as Burke has it, is to take juridical equality at face value, 'by acting as if the constitutional promise has the markings of reality' (pp. 73-74). In Chapter 5, I first trace Ellison's own maturation as a writer from within the framework of an aesthetic practice grounded in a concern with form as heuristic, as much a product of engagement with modernism as of Marxism, and mediated through the symbolic topography of the blues, a tradition always Ellison insisted on as foundational in US culture. What differentiates Ellison's 'mature' work, *Invisible Man*, from his early, short fiction is not so much, as the narrative of Ellison as *disengagé* suggests, that he discards the proletarian-tinged thematics of violence in favour of angst and introspection, but rather that, in the later work, Ellison finds a form within which to weave the separate strands of his intellectual and artistic roots simultaneously.

The episodic structure of *Invisible Man* allows Ellison to move his transparent protagonist through history, and this is reflected in a move through literary styles which in turn places emphasis on the centrality of form to signification. This is the sense in which Ellison enacts his 'as if'; productive tension in the novel comes through the radical disjunct

⁷² Kenneth Burke, 'Ralph Ellison's Trueblooded *Bildungsroman*' (1987), in *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, ed. by John F. Callahan, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 65-79. Three consecutive references to the essay are here included in the text.

between promise and actuality, and in each episode the false promises of democracy are shattered from a first person perspective. All that remains unbroken throughout the course of the novel, indeed, is the semblance of aesthetic *Schein* itself.

This thesis began with an interest in Ellison's novel, and I have made no particular attempt to disguise my deep admiration. What the process of work on the text has added to my understanding—aside from a mild and I hope not too distracting case of contagion from Ellison's pathological dependency on allusive puns—is how difficult it is to select passages from the book for close reading. There is a flow to Ellison's prose which proves inimical to the scissions of Eliot's tools of comparison and analysis: an ironic state of affairs considering Ellison's much-vaunted (and much vilified) claim that Eliot was a formative influence. If Ellison, then, manages in thematic terms an immanent critique of democracy, it seems he also uncovers—in the same move—a deep contradiction within those critical practices informed by the New Criticism. How far this dissonance between circularity and selection, this implicit sense of the novel as an indivisible unit, meshes with Ellison's explicit politics of integration, and whether this interference pattern resonates on broader frequencies, are questions for another time. For the moment I need to track the roots of Ellison's achievement through the twin currents of European modernism and a nativist socialist tradition, components of an obscure and at times counter-intuitive history, illuminated in the literary career of the charismatic though controversial figure of Michael Gold.

Chapter 1.

‘Yes, but is it Art?’ The Revolutionary Transformations of Michael Gold

Michael Gold is everywhere in critical writing on Depression-era cultural production in the United States. More often than not, though, his name is cited in the most unflattering of terms. For Irving Howe and Louis Coser, Gold was ‘a writer endowed with a style of corrupt vividness and characterized by an astonishing incapacity for sustained thought.’¹ As if to demonstrate what a sustained thought might actually look like, Howe and Coser proceed at some length to chastise Gold as, amongst other things, ‘an inveterate low-brow [...] who wrote with a recklessness possible only to a man who could not even imagine that the possession of Marxism [...] did not exempt a writer from the need for knowledge’.² That Gold is singled out for this rough treatment is in part simply a reflection of the extent of his influence. As chief editor of *New Masses* he was at the nexus of art and left politics in the early 1930s, but for Howe and Coser the so-called proletarian literature Gold devoted much of his life to bringing into being was a political and artistic disaster. Working-class writers were recruited from the factory floor only to be publicly exposed to a critical gaze that held out impossible expectations for their untutored work. Meanwhile, *déclassé* intellectuals, consumed by the guilt ‘of not having transformed their lives as they had their vocabularies’, enacted upon themselves ‘rituals of humiliation’, offering up self-abasement as the price of commitment.³

These comments were made in the late 1950s when, as Barbara Foley (rather sardonically) explains, Howe and Coser were elaborating ‘the first full-fledged formulation of the devastating effects of the CPUSA upon the artists and intellectuals in its orbit’ (*Radical*, p. 23).⁴ At that time the Soviet Union was perceived not only as a totalitarian

¹ Irving Howe and Lewis Coser, *The American Communist Party: A Critical History* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), p. 274.

² *Ibid.*, p. 275.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁴ Foley’s revisionist account of proletarian fiction rests on the assertion that anti-communism informed subsequent critical disparagement of the genre. Bad politics, in other words, came to equal bad art, and left-leaning writers thus opened themselves to an unforeseen political reaction operating under the auspices of the literary criticism of the future. Although this is a fair assessment of much academic reception of 1930s radical writing in general, I want to argue here that there is more than anti-Stalinism at work in the treatment of Michael Gold. In his particular case, the movement of the ideological into the aesthetic (and back) generates

regime masquerading as a socialist Utopia, but also as presenting an urgent military threat to the West. Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that someone who in 1932 had proclaimed membership of the Communist Party ‘the only road that leads into the new world’ could more than twenty years later be unequivocally described as ‘simple-minded’.⁵ What does remain perplexing, however, is that, more recently, on the face of things re-evaluative accounts of a neglected literary career continue to disparage Gold’s fitness for purpose for what, nowadays, might be called joined-up thinking. In the introduction to his 1972 literary anthology of Gold’s writing, Michael Folsom describes Gold’s ‘constitutional aversion to sustained effort’ (Folsom, p. 15). Alfred Kazin states that Gold ‘was an injured soul but clearly not very bright.’⁶ Astonishingly, this comment comes in his introduction to Gold’s semi-autobiographical novel *Jews Without Money* (1930). Perhaps the most generous of this type of account comes from John Pyros, who in his 1979 *samizdat* biography simply states that Gold was ‘driven mad by poverty.’⁷

But there is another side to the naming of Michael Gold in the historiography of the left. This tendency is succinctly illustrated in Richard Hofstadter’s index to his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* where, sandwiched uncomfortably between entries for Goebel, George H., (‘right-wing Socialist’) and Goldwater, Barry comes the somewhat accusatory ‘Gold, Michael, Communist Party critical hatchetman, 293, 294, 295’.⁸ It is important to note that this verdict, despite the title of Hofstadter’s book, does not focus on a perceived anti-intellectual stance taken by Gold. Indeed Hofstadter takes the valuable step of pointing out that Gold spoke out on the record against philistine sentiment in the CPUSA.⁹ Nor does this strand of thinking interrogate Gold’s Marxism or his support for Soviet policy under Stalin. In fact this portrayal of Gold does not concentrate on his

the momentum of a kind of negative critical mass, a moment at which public discourse is compelled to implode, and retreats into the more personalised realm of invective.

⁵ Michael Gold, ‘Why I am a Communist’, *New Masses* (1932), rpt. in Folsom, ed., *Mike Gold: A Literary Anthology*, pp. 209-214 (p. 214). Further references to the anthology are included in the text as Folsom.

⁶ Alfred Kazin, ‘Introduction’ to Michael Gold, *Jews Without Money* (New York: Carroll and Graf, 1996), p. 4. Further references to the novel itself come from the same edition.

⁷ John Pyros, *Mike Gold: Dean of American Proletarian Literature* (New York: Dramatika Press, 1979), p. ix.

⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1964), index, p. vii.

⁹ Hofstadter (p. 295) quotes a comment from Gold more fully represented by Folsom (Hofstadter, somewhat ironically, does not include citations). The comment itself comes from a 1927 piece on John Reed in which Gold reflects on a still present but dying ‘hard-boiled’ tradition in left radicalism: ‘The role of the intellectual in the revolutionary movement has always been a debating point. In the I.W.W. the fellow-workers would tar and feather (almost) any intellectual who appeared among them. The word “intellectual” became a synonym for the word “bastard,” and in the American Communist movement there is some of this feeling.’ Gold, ‘John Reed and the Real Thing’, *New Masses* (1927), rpt. in Folsom, ed., pp. 152-156 (p. 153).

‘position’ as such at all, but rather on his role as a literary assassin following a quasi-institutionalised party line. The emphasis, in other words, is not really on what he thought, nor even on what he either said or wrote, but more emphatically on what he *did* by either saying or writing it.

Harold Cruse glosses Gold as ‘perfectly personifying’ the hardening line of the literary left during the period of his joint editorship of the *Liberator*.¹⁰ The magazine, under the chief editorship of Max Eastman, was in all but name a resurrection of the old *Masses*, suppressed during the First World War. In 1922 Eastman left the *Liberator* in the hands of Gold and Claude McKay as executive editors. Jamaican-born McKay clashed with Gold, and resigned after only six months. Cruse insinuates that Gold had intentionally driven his colleague away, but offers no real evidence other than the unsupported allegation that, either through envy or fear, Gold was ‘not sympathetic to McKay’s work’.¹¹ This may or may not be the case, but it is a tenuous assertion that—conflating office politics with doctrine—is magnified into a full-blown synecdoche of the CPUSA’s hijacking of the cultural space carved out by the Harlem Renaissance.¹² As William J. Maxwell notes, Cruse’s account is ‘highly selective’.¹³ For one thing, as Maxwell notes, in McKay’s autobiography he blames Gold’s ‘emotional intensity’ as much as his editorial policy as a factor in his decision to leave. For another, Cruse entirely neglects to mention that by the end of the year Gold too had jumped ship and gone to California, disillusioned with the effective takeover of the magazine by the Central Committee of the Party. From there he wrote to Joseph Freeman, now acting as editor, to implore him, as Freeman recalled, ‘not to let [himself] be “swamped by the new regime” and not to “give up trying for the literary people and the artists in the matter of contributions.”’¹⁴

The trope of Michael Gold as CPUSA hatchetman is an enduring one, but not one that always bears the weight of examination. Without a doubt there is an element of critical quid pro quo in the reduction of Gold to an epithet, for it certainly is the case that during the 1930s he gained notoriety as something of a polemicist, relentless in his baiting of what he

¹⁰ Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, p. 49.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 49-54.

¹³ William J. Maxwell, ‘The Proletarian as New Negro: Mike Gold’s Harlem Renaissance’, in *Radical Revisions: Rereading 1930s Culture*, ed. by Bill Mullen and Shelley Lee Linkan (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), pp. 91-119 (p. 95).

¹⁴ Joseph Freeman, *An American Testament: A Narrative of Rebels and Romantics* (London: Victor and Gollancz, 1938), p. 287. Further references are included in the text as *Testament*.

saw as bourgeois complicity in the cultural realm. Beginning in 1930 with his infamous attack on Thornton Wilder as ‘Prophet of the Genteel Christ’, Gold embarked on a course of systematic assaults on the institutions of both high and mass culture, most effective when most aphoristic, and primed to deflate the pretensions of those who stood in the way of a radical reconfiguration of what it meant to produce art, and of the wider changes that art, in its turn, would thereby be empowered to effect.

The lasting significance of Gold’s writing on Wilder lay not in the venom of the invective he used but in the fact that it was published in the relatively mainstream forum of the *New Republic*. Edmund Wilson, who commissioned the piece, later wrote ‘There is no question that the Gold-Wilder row marked definitely the eruption of the Marxist issues out of the literary circles of the radicals into the field of general criticism.’¹⁵ Gold’s castigation of ‘Anglo-Catholicism, that last refuge of the American literary snob’ (Folsom, p. 200) needs to be taken in the context of his ecumenical aversion to organised religion, and is more moderate perhaps than the attack on Reb Moisha, Mikey’s cheder teacher in *Jews Without Money*, who ‘was a walking, belching symbol of the decay of orthodox Judaism [...] who knew absolutely nothing but this sterile memory course in dead Hebrew which he whipped into the heads and backsides of little boys.’¹⁶ All the same, his characterisation of ‘a pastel, pastiche, dilettante religion, without the true neurotic blood and fire, a daydream of homosexual figures in graceful gowns moving archaically among the lilies’ (Folsom, p. 200) warrants repeating here if only because the outrage he provoked still resonates in criticism today. Paula Rabinowitz argues that the ‘absent presence of gender [...] alters the shape of both the political and literary history of the Left and recasts their relationships to one another.’¹⁷ Philip Rahv’s often-quoted 1939 assertion that proletarian literature was ‘the literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class’ inadvertently established a ‘vulgar’ base/superstructure model adopted by studies both sympathetic and antagonistic to 1930s literary radicalism.¹⁸ Because the categories here are limited to a hierarchical

¹⁵ Edmund Wilson, *New Republic*, (May 1932), cited in Folsom, ed., p. 197.

¹⁶ *Jews Without Money*, p. 65.

¹⁷ Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women’s Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1991), p. 18. Further references are included in the text as *Labor*.

¹⁸ Philip Rahv, *Literature and the Sixth Sense* (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 14. James F. Murphy has detailed Rahv’s manoeuvrings in relation to Gold. Accusations of ‘leftism’ levelled at *New Masses* writers such as Gold during the late 1930s came from *within* the revolutionary project, as the editors of *Partisan Review* laboured to set up a straw man in order to deflect from the inconsistencies of their own fluctuating position. Murphy points out that Michael Gold was as active in seeking to broaden the scope and

determination of the economic, the political and then the literary (in that order), gender ‘as a salient category for organising thought’ is erased. Rabinowitz’s project is the recovery of the contours of this ‘invisible scar’ (*Labor*, p. 20)

For Rabinowitz, Gold genders proletarian literature as masculine in the Wilder review. As a corollary of this, modernism is connected with ‘bourgeois decay and femininity’ (*Labor*, p. 22). Crucial to this argument is the reasoning that ‘Gold’s choice of metaphors ultimately set the tone for the homophobic and antifeminine rhetoric of literary radicals’ (*Labor*, pp. 22-23 [emphasis added]). But Gold’s references to homosexual figures, graceful gowns and lilies were not metaphors but rather an inventory of the actual content of the ‘historical’ novels he was asked to review. Although Wilder was later to become known as the exponent, in plays such as *Our Town* (1938), of an innovative dramatic realism, his best-selling novel *The Woman of Andros* (1930), an allegorical tale set in ancient Greece and with a distinctly Christian subtext, made sense to Gold only as ‘a masterly retreat into time and space’ (Folsom, p. 198). Wilder’s output to date was ‘a museum [...] not a world’, where ‘wan ghosts’ moved ‘each in “romantic” costume’ (Folsom, p. 199). Rabinowitz’s argument is forceful, but not unproblematic, and I return to *Labor and Desire* below. For the moment it will have to do to plead that it seems inconsistent with the text to argue that Gold’s target in ‘Prophet of the Genteel Christ’ is modernism. On the contrary, his parting shot is the challenge: ‘Let Mr Wilder write a book about modern America’ (Folsom, p. 202).

Michael Gold’s name is invoked with near ubiquity in the critical literature on the period, but there seem to be two distinct stories being told about him. On the one hand, in the assessment of Howe and Coser, say, or Michael Folsom, Gold was a writer with an uncommon gift for vividness, but who was somehow rendered incapable of joining up the dots of experience, of presenting a coherent account of himself. On the other hand, there is the Michael Gold of Cruse and Rabinowitz, the CPUSA stooge relentlessly pushing the Party line, oblivious to the nuances of difference. In both of these portraits Gold is denied

professionalism of proletarian writing prior to the establishment of the Popular Front as Philip Rahv was in maintaining a Third Period hard line, and that Rahv was published extensively both in the pages of *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*. That the latterly Trotskyite Rahv’s subsequent attempts to cover his Stalinist tracks were given so much credence ‘remains one of the most glaring misinterpretations in the writing of recent American literary history.’ Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p. 195. For corroborating accounts see Foley, pp. 15-29, and Douglas Wixson, *Worker-Writer in America: Jack Conroy and the Tradition of Midwestern Literary Radicalism 1898-1990*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), pp. 396-419.

agency. Either he is simply a mouthpiece for the Party, reading from a preordained script, or he is somehow inadequate to the task of following a script in the first instance. Clearly these very different representations cannot add up to the sum of their parts. The answer to this problem, I think, lies not in confronting the dynamics of representation head-on, but rather in looking to the margins of discourse. Reading around the edges of the secondary material, in books and articles on experimental theatre, for instance, or in coverage of debates in modernist music, a picture emerges that shows neither hatchetman nor tortured soul. In these decentred versions of Gold, what come into focus are respectful citations of an acknowledged authority, both theoretician and exponent of avant-garde praxis during the 1920s and 1930s. This is the Gold I want to uncover here. Gold's presence in literary history as somehow non-identical with himself reflects what Lawrence Hanley has called the impossible location of proletarian literature, the ambivalent status of working-class and subaltern voices staking a claim to representation from outside the legitimizing institutions of bourgeois culture.¹⁹ But it also records a moment when those institutions were themselves held to account, and when change was effected in existing models of the production and reception of art precisely through the strategic employment of non-identity, dissonance and juxtaposition.

When Vladimir Mayakovsky visited New York in 1925, little attention was paid to the event in the mainstream press. According to Joseph Freeman, it was then generally believed that 'famine, murder and robbery were the essence of the October Revolution, and that the bolsheviks had killed all art' (*Testament*, p. 336). So the arrival of one of the Soviet Union's leading poets and dramatists was celebrated as news only on the radical fringes of the city. Freeman recalls a house party 'typical of the gay 'twenties—jazz records, bathtub gin, dancing in shirt-sleeves' (*Testament*, p. 337). Mayakovsky dances 'with the strength and awkwardness of a bear', everyone drinks too much, and the eminent Russian Futurist wows the assembled throng by bringing out his notebook and reading 'his latest.' In drunken reciprocation, Gold recites his free verse piece 'A Strange Funeral in Braddock', bursts into tears, and makes 'an eloquent speech about the proletarian revolution.' Reading between the lines, as it were, it becomes clear that Gold's performance has a profound

¹⁹ 'Thematizing the class logic of cultural distinction, proletarian narrative characteristically delineates the non-identity of working-class literature, its necessary location on the other side of every class border.' Lawrence Hanley, "Smashing Cantatas' and 'Looking Glass Pitchers': The Impossible Location of Proletarian Literature', in *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*, ed. by Janet Galligani Casey (Iowa City: Iowa Press, 2004), pp. 132-150 (p. 136).

effect on Freeman, who first complains of a headache, and then that his conscience is bothering him. ‘Revolutionary writers,’ he says, ‘shouldn’t drink’:

“Don’t get foolish,” Mike Gold said. “Mayakovsky drinks three times as much as we do.”

Mayakovsky admitted it.

“Yes, I am a bohemian,” he added. “That is my great problem: to burn out all my bohemian past, to rise to the heights of revolution.” (*Testament*, p. 337).

Alan Wald notes a number of parallels between Gold and Mayakovsky: the two were born in the same year; both went through a difficult youthful period during which they struggled to fuse poetry and modern theatre; both were to embrace the Russian Revolution ‘with every fiber of their beings.’²⁰ Most important for Wald is Gold’s identification with Mayakovsky as a rebel who abandoned the undisciplined ways of his youth for the responsibilities of commitment to the proletarian cause. Thus for Gold, Mayakovsky’s story justified ‘the narrative of his own struggle to gain control of his emotional and personal life’.²¹ During the 1930s this deep-set need became systematized as Gold’s rejection of bohemianism for the hard shell of Party commitment; Gold reinvented himself, he ‘forged [a] new identity’ and ‘retained this self-selected personality [...] to his last day.’ Wald’s thesis has the advantage of plotting both sides of the tortured soul/hatchetman antinomy along the axes of place and time; behind the Stalinist mask of the 1930s lay the ‘real’ Gold. An otherwise generous take on Gold’s reinvention of himself hence begins to echo Howe and Coser and the ‘rituals of self-abasement’ theory. Gold’s 1930s persona was a measure of psychic frailty, a surface strength adopted in order to disguise a fundamental weakness. Whatever that weakness was, some intrinsic fluidity, a lack of consistency, it drove Gold towards self-transformation. If Gold’s new identity was a performance, however, there is no reason to suppose it was any more or less theatrical than his earlier styling of himself as a bohemian. The revolutionary transformations of Michael Gold, indeed, were efforts to transcend the self altogether: both personal reinvention and social transition, mediated through experiments with literary form.

Cultural transformation would not emerge from a vacuum, and in Gold’s early writing he maintained a deep investment in nativist traditions alongside his enthusiasm for

²⁰ Alan M. Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), p. 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

the work of the Soviet avant-gardes. The refrain of ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ (‘LISTEN TO THE MOURNFUL DRUMS OF A STRANGE FUNERAL/LISTEN TO THE STORY OF A STRANGE AMERICAN FUNERAL’) posits disclosure of a definitively American experience, but the distinctive capitalisation—which comes in to play only cumulatively—recalls the typographical experimentation of Mayakovsky. Signalling a crescendo, the technique constitutes the formal realisation of Gold’s sense that although revolution was inevitable, proletarian art must play a role in hurrying it along. At the same time, the piece sounds an elegy to a lost bohemian scene that had nurtured him. Jan Clepak is introduced as ‘the great grinning Bohemian’, (Folsom, p. 126) and his existence as an industrial worker is made dangerous when he ‘forgets to be hard as steel and remembers [...] the villages and fields of sunny Bohemia.’ When Gold burst into tears at the bathtub gin party, it was this sense of loss, perhaps, that he communicated to Mayakovsky, and which triggered a counter-reaction in Freeman. The milieu Gold found himself mourning comprised the remnants of what John Patrick Diggins has dubbed the Lyrical Left, a radical socialist formation that predated the rise of the CPUSA, and who ‘rose up in revolt against abstract doctrine, embraced a pragmatic socialism that was as open-ended as free verse, and proudly heralded itself as conqueror without a creed.’²² Associated with the Greenwich Village bohemian set of Mabel Dodge and John Reed, this grouping also embraced outsiders such as IWW leader Bill Haywood and writers Upton Sinclair and Carl Sandburg. By linking political and artistic forms, they sought to establish a shared tradition, an inclusive fund of resources to be drawn on by all. ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’, as a case in point, can be read as a kind of recycling of Sandburg’s long poem ‘Smoke and Steel’.

Although Sandburg was fifteen years older than Gold, they are in many senses complementary figures. Both were first established as journalists rather than poets. In their poetry, moreover, the use of free verse with long, end-stopped lines means they appear now as early twentieth-century rejuvenators of Whitman rather than as innovators in their own rights. The major difference between the two, at least in terms of how they are received today, is that whilst Gold’s Communism has been passed down as the core of his writing,

²² John Patrick Diggins, *The Rise and Fall of the American Left* (New York and London: Norton, 1992), p. 39.

the depth of Sandburg's involvement in radical politics has only recently been discussed.²³ In his first published collections, Sandburg set the techniques of the literary avant-garde to the task of revealing social content to an audience used to regarding poetry and politics as mutually exclusive categories. This collision of registers caused raised eyebrows amongst the circles he was most eager to impress. Amy Lowell argued that Sandburg's concern with contemporary realities amounted to little more than propaganda. By the standards of 'pure art' political concerns were merely ephemeral: 'Art, nature, humanity, are eternal. But the minimum wage will probably matter as little to the twenty-second century as it did to the thirteenth'.²⁴ *Smoke and Steel* (1920), especially its title poem, is all about accommodating these extremes, the wide-screen panoramas of art and the grainy close-ups of reportage. And though the title suggests an opposition between the fleeting and the permanent, anaphora and circularity in the poem's formal scheme suggest their interpenetration.

The pastoral and the modern exist side-by-side in the opening stanzas. Rather than change or contrast, equivalence is sketched between 'Smoke of the fields in spring' and 'Smoke of a steel-mill roof or a battleship funnel'.²⁵ At first this transitional landscape is paradoxically static; the plumes of smoke 'all go up in a line', demarcating the sky into neat divisions. There is nothing especially radical in this impressionistic relativism, but as the formal mechanism grinds into motion, the different smokes begin to 'twist...in the slow twist...of the wind.' Eleven lines in and animation becomes anthropomorphism, and the smokes begin to 'know each other'. What they communicate to each other, as metonymies of the agricultural and industrial scenes, is their common origin as the products of human labour: 'Smoke of the fields in spring and leaves in autumn,/Smoke of the finished steel,

²³ For a round-up of recent positions on this debate see the 'Radical Sandburg' page on Cary Nelson and Bartholomew Brinkman's *Modern American Poetry* site: 1999-2011. Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/>> [accessed 16 February 2012].

²⁴ Quoted in Mark Van Wienen, 'Taming the Socialist: Carl Sandburg's *Chicago Poems* and Its Critics' *American Literature*, 63.1. (March 1991), pp. 89-103 (p. 95). Van Wienen argues that radical critique in the 1916 collection *Chicago Poems*, offers the potential for 'destabilizing the boundary between literary art and political life' (p.89). Because the collection presents imagist offerings reminiscent of Pound alongside more politically vocal pieces dealing apparently sympathetically with subjects such as industrial sabotage and mass demonstration, Sandburg can be read in either one of two ways; either this confrontation closes the gap between poetry and politics, or it reinforces their existence as discrete alternatives. This ambiguity is further complicated by Sandburg's tendency within the political pieces themselves to establish oppositions—between state and workforce, say—only to collapse them with a wider appeal to human nature rather than political economy as a corrupting influence. This argument could equally be applied to 'Smoke and Steel', but I think that Sandburg solves the problem to some extent by embedding the social content more securely within the formal experimentalism of the later work.

²⁵ Carl Sandburg, 'Smoke and Steel', in Carl Sandburg, *Complete Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950), pp. 151-157 (p. 151). Five consecutive page references are given here in the text.

chilled and blue,/By the oath of work they swear: “I know you.” Something like a conclusive assertion of the labour theory of value is suggested in the consonance of the rhyming couplet, but the tension between economic analysis and the demands of representation is such that no sooner is a connection made than it dissolves. Just as smoke has taken on human form, the human must be reduced back to smoke, and in Sandburg’s cosmic scheme it follows that man is the product of God’s labour, and created from smoke: “Deep down are the cinders we came from—/You and I and our heads of smoke.” Smoke is a measure both of labour and mortality, and these separate strands come together when ‘they cross on the sky and count our years’ (p. 152). If the fusing of labour and life suggests a transcendence of the limitations of those categories, this can only take place with a concomitant liberation from the earthbound, and this process is located within the functional remit of the poetic.

The poetic I’s gaze now settles on a steelworks, where smoke is not simply a by-product of the manufacturing process, but an ingredient of the finished commodity.²⁶ Sandburg names the products of steel, and the places where it is made. But the attack of the journalistic approach is continually undermined by the twisting, circular motion of the verse. Like the smoke it eulogises, the poem unmakes and remakes itself. Indeed to make, in the active sense of production, is subsumed under the passive meaning of rendering: ‘Smoke into steel and blood into steel;/Homestead, Braddock, Birmingham, they make their steel with men./Smoke and blood is the mix of steel’ (p. 152). As ‘The birdmen drone/in the blue’ (p. 153), barbed wire is strung around the steelworks, and human agency goes into retreat. Steel making becomes an end in itself; mechanical diggers excavate ore then transported on steel boats to industrial plants where ‘the handlers now, are steel [...] they are steel making steel.’ As victims of accidents at work, labouring bodies are transformed into a constituent element of the modern environment:

Five men swim in a pot of red steel.
 Their bones are kneaded into the bread of steel:
 Their bones are knocked into coils and anvils
 And the sucking plungers of sea-fighting turbines.
 Look for them in the woven frame of a wireless station.
 So ghosts hide in steel like heavy-armed men in mirrors.

²⁶ To some extent there is a scientific truth in this. In modern steel making, iron ore is heated in blast furnaces in order to produce pig iron, an alloy with high carbon content. Oxidising pig iron by blowing compressed air through it removes impurities. The resulting iron/carbon alloy—steel—is a substance durable enough to be used for railway tracks or the frames of skyscrapers. Carbon is an essential part of steel, and yet the steel-making process involves the separating out of iron and carbon. So smoke is in a sense a part of steel.

Peepers, skulkers—they shadow-dance in laughing tombs.
They are always there and they never answer. (pp. 153-154)

The latticework of the radio station recalls the crosshatched sky of the earlier stanzas. But where the intertwined trails of smoke enabled dialogue, the profusion of technological communications systems diffuses human voices:

One of them said: “I like my job, the company is good to me, America is a wonderful country.”

One: “Jesus, my bones ache; the company is a liar; this is a free country, like hell.”

One: “I got a girl, a peach; we save up and go on a farm and raise pigs and be the boss ourselves.”

And the others were roughneck singers a long ways from home.
Look for them back of a steel vault door. (p. 154)

The difficulty facing the artist committed to qualitative change is captured here in a starkly quantitative formulation. The oppositional voice is clearly outnumbered two to one by the big lie of nationalism and the pie-in-the-sky of the American dream. To a working-class riven by ethnic and regional divides, the fantasy of individual transcendence of conditions on the ground—one day to ‘be the boss ourselves’—underpins liberal ideology. The overarching transcendentalism of ‘Smoke and Steel’ itself hardly helps in this regard. What makes Sandburg’s poetry radical, the urge to report rather than just to versify, flounders in the face of the irony that modernist technique seems a peculiarly obscure way of delivering a populist message. The reference to ‘roughneck singers’ is telling. At around this time Sandburg was discovering a new outlet for his talents as a singer and ethnomusicologist. Accompanying himself on self-taught guitar, he was performing both his own poetry and folk songs, assiduously collected over a number of years. He is far better known now as the celebrant of a brand of rootsy but populist Americana than as bemoaner of the plight of the industrial working class, let alone as a political insurgent. It would be too easy, however, to blame Sandburg for this apparent capitulation. As Phillip D. Yannella points out, by the time *Smoke and Steel* was published, ‘The cultural debate about the purposes of literature [...] had been won by the arguers for “apolitical” art.’²⁷ This decision did not come about as the result of some new diktat emanating from the salons of high culture, but rather in the wake of a systematic and at that time unparalleled suppression of dissent at the hands of the US government.

²⁷ Phillip D. Yannella, *The Other Carl Sandburg* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), pp. 152-153.

In 1918 Sandburg, writing under the pseudonym Jack Phillips, had published an article on Bill Haywood, imprisoned under the terms of the 1917 Espionage Act for conspiring to hinder the draft, in the Chicago-based *International Socialist Review*. By 1921 Haywood had jumped bail and fled to Russia. Ralph Chaplin, a former colleague of Sandburg's at the *Chicago Review* and now a resident of Leavenworth jail ('back of a steel vault door'), wrote to him with the news that fifteen IWW prisoners had either died of disease or committed suicide, and a further five had been driven insane.²⁸ Open socialism had been effectively criminalized. Reviews of *Smoke and Steel* were unfavourable, and it was unlikely that mainstream publishers would risk further investment in work liable to open itself to the accusation of being anti-government propaganda. Even if Sandburg had chosen to concentrate instead on political journalism, the *Chicago Review* had folded. Indeed, as Yannella notes, with the 'notable exception' of the *Liberator*, the left press had been all but silenced.²⁹ And this is where Michael Gold steps back into the frame. Unlike Sandburg, Gold had actually joined the IWW.³⁰ Born Itzok Granich, he changed his name to avoid deportation as an 'alien'—i.e. a non-US citizen—during the Palmer raids, a 1920 clampdown triggered by the Wilson administration's fear that Bolshevik-inspired insurrection would follow in the wake of the October revolution. Granich had spent 1918-1919 in Mexico in order to avoid being drafted into a conflict he considered a capitalist conspiracy against the international working class, so he had good reason to fear persecution. In 1924 he picked up the baton passed on by Sandburg, not just in the sense of becoming a Whitmanesque seeker-for-the-truth through the medium of free verse—he already was that—but in writing specifically on the subject of accidents at work in the Pennsylvania steel belt.³¹ In his transformation of the terms of 'Smoke and Steel', he anticipates his own not-so-superhuman endeavour, during the 1930s, to transfigure himself.

As Rachel Rubin points out, to attempt a close reading of Gold's work is to defamiliarize his reputation. His place in scholarship as 'the favorite whipping boy for the sins of Communist Party literary dogmatism' has become so normalized that 'virtually no

²⁸ Ibid., p. 151.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 50.

³¹ On the influence of Whitman on Gold see Richard Tuerk, 'Michael Gold on Walt Whitman', *Walt Whitman Quarterly Review*, 3.4 (1986), pp. 16-23.

one is willing to take him seriously as a writer.’³² The upshot of New Criticism’s disavowal of extra-literary concerns is that work coming from out of such a clear political context as Gold’s is easily read as unsophisticated. This is a shame, as ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ is in at least one significant sense more amenable to close analysis as a discrete object of study than are the meandering curlicues of ‘Smoke and Steel’, where the claim to poetry as a self-governing realm is more firmly (if ambivalently) underscored. It would run counter to my argument to set up an opposition between Gold and Sandburg. Not the least of the similarities between them is the marginalized space they now share as peripheral figures in literary history. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that whilst Gold’s handling of the long line is at times less secure, what is pared away is the troubling indeterminacy of the smoke motif, to be replaced by a striking objective correlative in the form of the ‘three tons of hard steel’ that ‘hold at their heart, the bones, flesh, nerves, the muscles, brains and heart of Jan Clepak’ (Folsom, p. 127).

Like ‘Smoke and Steel’, ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ opens with a pastoral scene, but one grotesquely distorted by the ‘foul dragons’ of the steel mills, devouring ‘man and earth and sky’ (Folsom, p. 126). This totalized vision paints the staples of folklore into the landscape of an apocalyptic modernity. Unchecked industrialisation has usurped the natural order so fundamentally that the spring is ‘a frightened child in the land of the steel ogres’. Onto this stage comes Jan Clepak who, on his way to work, ‘Sees buttons of bright grass on the hills across the river, and plum-trees hung with wild white blossoms’. Gold’s technique is to emphasize the pastoral in complete opposition to the infernal reality of the steelworks; rather than blurred edges we get interlocking blocks of language. The syntax of the narrative is fractured by the awkward intrusion of metaphors, and as Clepak ‘sweats half-naked at his puddling trough, a fiend by the lake of brimstone,/The plum trees soften his heart’. At this point, a moment that introduces a kind of textual schizophrenia, the verse seems to divide itself, directly addressing its own content: ‘Wake up! Wake up! Jan Clepak, the furnaces are roaring like tigers,/The flames are flinging themselves at the high roof, like mad, yellow tigers at their cage’ (Folsom, pp. 126-127). Gold’s angular lines cut through

³² Rachel Rubin, *Jewish Gangsters of Modern Literature* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp. 72-73. Both Rubin and James D. Bloom, *Left Letters: The Culture Wars of Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) redirect Gold’s novel via Bakhtin to bring to the surface dialogic complexities in a text more often submerged.

Sandburg's veils of smoke but Clepak, consumed by his daydreaming, is still fixed in the pastoral mode, and entirely fails to notice:

Wake up! it is ten o'clock, and the next batch of mad, flowing steel is to be
poured into your puddling trough,
Wake up! and wake up! for now a flawed lever is cracking in one of those
fiendish cauldrons,
Wake up! and wake up! for now the lever has cracked, and the steel is raging
and running down the floor like an escaped madman,
Wake up! Oh, the dream is ended, and the steel has swallowed you forever,
Jan Clepak! (Folsom, p. 127)

Poetry's gesture towards self-reflexivity, then, is no help to the industrial worker who refuses to heed the call to consciousness. Moreover, in the rhetorical frenzy of the accident—the tiger flames, the steel like a madman—the verse seems to burn out its own capacity for figuration. In the third stanza we enter a new phase; the piling up of elaborate metaphorical constructions evident in the earlier sections is abandoned. What comes in its place is the singular image of the block of steel that encases Clepak. When this is presented to his widow for burial, in the strange funeral of the title, it is obvious that this is intended as on some level symbolic. But the force of the image lies in its monolithic blankness.

At the graveyard, 'three thinkers are thinking strange thoughts'. These voices echo Sandburg's ghosts in the wireless station, but the power of speech here is redistributed to the living. For one, 'Life is a dirty joke, like Jan's funeral', and he resolves to get drunk 'and stay drunk forever'. Jan's wife vows never to let her children work in a steel mill again, even if this means she has to be 'a fifty-cent whore' (Folsom, p. 128). But for a third thinker, 'the listener', the solution to the problem of dangerous working conditions is to be found in Clepak's grotesque demise: ' "I'll make myself hard as steel, harder, I'll come some day and make bullets out of Jan's body, and shoot them into a tyrant's heart!"'. Each voice here is in some way oppositional, but only one offers a way out of despair.

Sandburg's dilemma—how to reach his audience—is resolved by what seems to be a call to revolutionary violence. 'Strange Funeral' was first printed in the *Liberator* in June 1924. By that time Gold had long gone as an associate editor, but if the poem was intended as a call to arms, the *Liberator* would have seemed an obvious place to publish nonetheless. In January 1919 the magazine had published Lenin's *Letter to American Workers*. Carl Sandburg's role in smuggling the pamphlet into the US and then into the hands of Max

Eastman has been disputed.³³ Whatever the truth of the matter, it is fascinating to note how seriously Lenin's tract was taken, especially since the main point of the letter was by the time anyone in the US got to read it essentially redundant.

Writing in August 1918, whilst American troops were still fighting WWI, Lenin defends the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, under the terms of which the new Bolshevik government had made a separate peace settlement with Germany. The next time—in 1939—that a Soviet leader was to announce a pact with Germany, American support for Communism would all but collapse. But by 1919 the war had ended, and the treaty itself renounced. So if any of the literary radicals had qualms about appearing to betray their country's war effort they were spared the indignity of making these known. 'We clipped that letter, read it and re-read it, got to know it by heart,' wrote Joseph Freeman: 'It seemed to us that never before in history had a political leader talked so simply, honestly and wisely to the mass of mankind' (*Testament*, pp. 136-137). For simplicity, honesty, and wisdom read flattery. Lenin extols the virtues of the American working class, appealing to a revolutionary tradition not to be abandoned in favour of imperialism. Blaming the war rather than the revolution for poor conditions in Russia, he responds to the accusation that his government has resorted to 'terror' with the grim assertion that no revolution can succeed unless resistance is crushed. Support for the Soviet experiment, in other words, was no real support at all without an acknowledgment of the necessary role of violence in the capture and maintenance of state power. Addressed to an audience still witness to the industrial carnage of WWI, Lenin's message was more a reminder of the way things already were than a blueprint for the future. Moreover, whilst the call to worldwide proletarian uprising had once seemed an inclusive and celebratory affair, the stark plea for solidarity in *Letter to the American Worker* chimed with the left's sense of itself as a beleaguered political minority; in the face of the Espionage Act at home, survival was replacing Utopia as the new socialist imperative.

³³ Daniel Aaron claims that Sandburg had been the first to bring the letter into America in *Writers on the Left*, p.61. There is no doubt that on Christmas day 1918 Sandburg, who had been acting as a foreign correspondent in Stockholm, landed at New York with \$10,000 in bank drafts intended for the Finnish Socialist Workers Party and two suitcases packed with Bolshevik propaganda. It is equally clear that the material had been given to Sandburg by Mikhail Borodin, Lenin's agent in Sweden. Where opinions differ is both on what exactly it was Sandburg had intended to do with the material, and on whether he succeeded in those intentions. See Penelope Niven, *Carl Sandburg: a Biography* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1991), pp. 316-327 and Yannella, pp. 122-130 for revised accounts.

There is a difference, however, between writers' and artists' decisions to incorporate a newly streamlined political edge into their work, and a political agenda according to which art was to be discarded outright as peripheral to the interests of the Party. This was the situation at the *Liberator* at the time 'Strange Funeral' was published. Under the editorship of Robert Minor, a talented cartoonist who abandoned creative work for a full-time Party position, the magazine moved premises out of Greenwich Village into CPUSA headquarters on East Eleventh Street. The final issue of the *Liberator* appeared in October 1924. According to some accounts, Gold never forgave Minor for his rejection of art for politics.³⁴ After this, Gold's work went in a new direction. Inspired by a visit to the Soviet Union in early 1925, he reasserted the political efficacy of experimental art, by embracing the innovations of Russian Futurism. 'No one feels apologetic about art in Russia,' he wrote in *New Masses* in 1926. 'Carl Sandburg sells some two thousand copies of his poems here; but Mayakovsky, a Futurist writing the most modern and complex of rhythms, sells three million books in Soviet Russia' (Folsom, p. 130). Although by that time Sandburg had abandoned radicalism *and* modernism, Gold remained convinced of the continuing relevance of both. The reference to sales figures—more than just a rueful reflection on success (or the lack of it)—bears testament to a belief in the potential of art to change lives. Just as the listener in 'Strange Funeral' is moved to make use of the steel of Jan's coffin in order to challenge tyranny, so a working-class audience could make use of the products of the mass printing industry in order to discover that life was not just a dirty joke, but that it had meaning. For Gold, a democratization of participation in the production and reception of art was no less essential an element in human emancipation than was the collectivization of industry. He was certain that this was the essence of the Soviet experiment, where science was taking the place of religion as the bearer of truth. Criticism in the United States needed to learn from this. 'The Bolsheviks have been a huge party of teachers,' he argued, 'and what they are teaching Russia is modernism, the Machine Age' (Folsom, p. 136).

It is unsettling to received notions of the development of modernism to read, in the same March 1927 edition of *New Masses*, Michael Gold eulogise skyscrapers and just a few pages later Ezra Pound extol the virtues of 'the clatter, the grind, the whang-whang, the

³⁴ Folsom, ed., p. 16.

gnrrr, in a machine shop'.³⁵ For one thing, the former writer is more usually associated with a kind of messianic denunciation of capitalism rather than the celebration of its most visible monuments. For another, since when did the latter ever step foot inside a factory, and what was he doing publishing his observations in the pages of the totemic publication of the 1930s literary left? David Peck notes that cold war-era misrepresentations of *New Masses* as a CPUSA organ pushing a monolithic Stalinist culture were sustainable in their day, as '[p]eople busy burning or throwing away their collections of the magazine in the 1950s were in no position to argue.'³⁶ Since then, however, ignorance about the content of the magazine has compromised serious scholarship's efforts to uncover the buried history of the Depression decade. Gold's writings in *New Masses* during the late 1920s were not only placed alongside surprisingly disparate works, but also contained within themselves sometimes wildly incongruous groupings of topics and treatments. In 'Loudspeaker and Other Essays' a forewarning of imminent global catastrophe sits next to a review of the latest edition of Pepys, and a report on college suicides rubs up against an anecdotal account of the generosity of Mexico City flower sellers.³⁷ As the composite piece unfolds, the separate sub-headed sections break down into series of fragmented sentences, and reading the article as a cohesive whole becomes increasingly hard work. In the section 'Lower Broadway', skyscrapers 'are not minor poems of love and tenderness [...] but rip the soft clouds to tatters.' A hundred typewriters drum out manifestos, and following the invocation of a 'great organised Purpose', the roof of the world cracks 'and messages rain through' (*Loudspeaker*, p. 6).

If this is journalism, it is cast in a highly idiosyncratic mould. In fact it is only in the final section, 'Announcement', that some sense of what the organised purpose of the whole might actually be emerges. Writers and artists in America are in flight from modernity, and this is 'Strange; in semi-peasant Moscow, they have boldly converted typewriters, radios, jazz, skyscrapers, revolution and machinery into art.' New York needs to catch up with the times, and the opening of the New Playwright's Theatre, although it may fail, 'will make the first heroic attempt to prove that the old theatre has come to an end.' By 1929 the New

³⁵ Ezra Pound, 'Workshop Orchestration', *New Masses* (March 1927), p. 21. Further references are included in the text as *Workshop*.

³⁶ David Peck, 'The Tradition of American Revolutionary Literature: The Monthly *New Masses*, 1926-1933', *Science and Society*, 42.4 (1978/1979), pp. 385-409 (p. 386).

³⁷ 'Loud Speaker and Other Essays', *New Masses* (March 1927), pp. 5-6. Further references are included in the text as *Loudspeaker*.

Playwright's Theatre had indeed failed and come to an end, but over the two seasons it lasted, Gold, Em Jo Basshe, Francis Faragoh, John Howard Lawson and John Dos Passos worked in unorthodox writer/producer roles to bring the innovations of constructivism for the first time to the New York stage. Ira A. Levine states that of the five it was Gold who proved 'the leading exponent of a machine-age art for the theatre.'³⁸ It seems entirely appropriate, then, that he should have shared print space in his original *New Masses* announcement with another American poet rhapsodising machine-art in promotion of a project doomed to critical disparagement. This was Ezra Pound, and the work he was publicizing was the *Ballet mécanique* of his protégé George Antheil.

'His musical world is a world of steel bars, not of old stone and ivy', Pound had written in *Antheil and the Treatise on Harmony*.³⁹ Antheil's use of Pianolas, mechanical pianos operating by cut-out rolls of pre-programmed music, led Pound to view the young German-American's work as fulfilling the tenets of the original Vorticist manifestos. Machines were an inescapable part of modern life, and so art needed to find the most fitting way of representing this new content. Debussy's musical impressionism had conflated music and painting, establishing connections between listening and the visual imagination, but for Pound the essence of machinery was not visual but lay rather in precision and in movement. Thus the internal mechanics of Antheil's heavily percussive compositions provided the perfect medium for the expression of a new aesthetic. Although Antheil was later to deny that he had had any interest in representing anything as 'mundane' as machinery, in the *New Masses* piece 'Workshop Orchestration' Pound draws a direct analogy between the *Ballet mécanique* and the soundscapes of industrialisation.⁴⁰ Setting aside any technical or theoretical considerations, the reason why *New Masses* needs to take account of Antheil is that he has found a means to take music out of the cloistered world of the concert hall. With the machine production of *Ballet mécanique*, the potential range of composition is exploded beyond the 'smallish bits of sound' organised in the academy. Not only can music now become louder, it can also be arranged over longer durations of time—

³⁸ Ira A. Levine, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1985), p. 53.

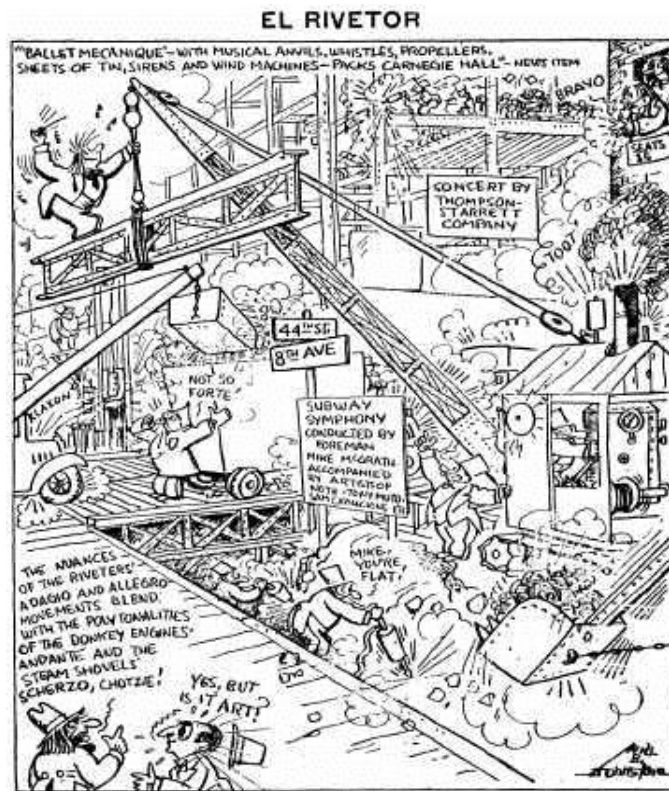
³⁹ Ezra Pound, 'George Antheil (Retrospect)', in *Ezra Pound and Music: The Complete Criticism*, ed. by R. Murray Schafer, (London: Faber & Faber, 1978), pp. 253-265 (p. 264).

⁴⁰ In his autobiography, Antheil – by then working in Hollywood - distanced himself from Pound's analysis, arguing that rather than celebrating the machine, his intention in *Ballet Mécanique* had been 'to warn the age in which I was living of the simultaneous beauty and danger of its own unconscious mechanistic philosophy, aesthetic.' George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981), p. 140.

over the length of the eight-hour day even. Pound imagines factory work transformed into a kind of musical performance; ‘the men at the machines shall be demechanized, and work not like robots, but like the members of an orchestra’ (*Workshop*, p. 21). Heavy machinery will be operated in synchrony, and each workshop will have its own variations. Although the mathematics enabling the measurement of sounds into their constituent frequencies is already in place, the new art will be no theoretical abstraction, but instead embody practical work informed by the expert knowledge of the ‘musician *on the floor of the factory* [emphasis in the original].’

All of this, of course, now sounds completely mad, but no more nor less so than Gold’s bizarre apostrophising, in the same magazine, of ‘Mr. A, the great engineer [who] has thrown Chaos into the wastebasket’ and who ‘prays to the God of numbers, who will give us peace’ (*Loudspeaker*, p. 6). In terms of the changes described in the production and reception of art, though, the writings of both Gold and Pound would be prescient. Just as Gold’s insistence that Vsevolod Meyerhold’s avant-garde techniques (abandonment of the proscenium arch and so on) had ‘broken down the silly drawing room walls of the theatre, and brought the street onto the stage’ and had anticipated and to some extent instigated the agitprop movement of the 1930s—where theatre actually took place on street corners—so Pound’s instinct that non-musical sources would play an increasingly important role in composition looked forward much further to the found sound of *musique concrète* in the 1950s. But whilst Gold’s sense of urgency (‘it must come it must come howl for it’) found effect within a couple of years in significant developments in Depression-era art, Pound’s *New Masses* assertion that the proletarian appeal to social justice was ‘waiting for a millennium’ and that in the meantime ‘there are certain things that can be done’ prefigured a breakthrough that would be some twenty years in gestation. Ironically, this gap was a result of the limitations of music technology in the 1920s rather than its advances; Antheil’s original score for twenty Pianolas was at the time of its conception impossible to realise. In the event, when the *Ballet mécanique* made its 1927 U.S. debut, only three Pianolas were used, along with ten pianists, eight xylophonists and four bass drummers. Use was also made of electric bells, a siren, and three ‘aeroplane propellers’. Partly because the piece was first commissioned (on Pound’s recommendation) as the score for a Man Ray/Fernand Leger film of the same name, and partly because the ‘aeroplane propeller’ (in fact an industrial fan) had blown ladies’ hats off and sparked a ‘riot’ at a Paris performance the

year before, New York awaited the *Ballet* as a kind of Dadaist manifestation. The Carnegie Hall audience responded in the appropriate manner, making paper aeroplanes out of the programmes and launching them back at the stage, and the debut was critically panned. A representative if particularly memorable contribution came in a cartoon printed in the *New York World* the next day, showing construction workers in evening dress barking out musical directions to each other. In the foreground a familiar-looking bohemian type rhapsodises while a perplexed bystander poses the question: ‘Yes, but is it art?’⁴¹



Cartoon from the *New York World*, April 12, 1927.

Fig. 1: *New York World* cartoon, available at *The Ballet mécanique* page, ed. by Paul D. Lehrman <http://www.antheil.org/art/chotzie.JPG> [accessed 19 November 2007]

The worlds of proletarian literature and contemporary art music seem now improbably connected. If, as Michael Denning suggests, proletarian writing with its ‘ghetto pastorals’—the archetype of which being *Jews Without Money*—filtered down through the Popular

⁴¹ Pound was not alone in being caricatured. Louis Genin wrote columns throughout the 1930s in anarchist journals *Vanguard* and *Challenge* using the pen name Gike Mold. The idea behind his column, he recalled, was ‘humor used as a weapon to ridicule corrupt institutions.’ Quoted in Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Voices: An Oral History of Anarchism in America* (Edinburgh, Oakland, West Virginia: AK Press, 2005), p. 442.

Front in detective and mystery fiction, then experimental music is more likely to have entered the mainstream through cartoon soundtracks, such as Carl Stalling's work for Looney Tunes.⁴² Yet this flattening out of the codifications of high and low culture—art music as entertainment; gangsters as art—transforms and intensifies generic distinctions at the same time as it conceals them. Detached from its moorings in zaniness, atonal composition floats up to impossibly lofty and impenetrable heights. Moreover, although the *New York World* cartoon is an immediate response to an isolated moment of iconoclasm contained within a relatively esoteric cultural space, it is instructive, I think, to note how applicable the general wisdom appealed to here regarding what art could and could not be is to the subsequent critical reception of proletarian writing in the 1930s; art does not belong on the street, and certainly is not made or understood by the working class. My emphasis here, in variance with most critical treatments of Gold, is not on the abandonment of experimentalism but rather on its development and continuation throughout the 1920s and on into the 1930s. Gold did not reject the avant-garde in favour of the cause of proletarian literature; proletarian literature was itself thoroughly avant-gardiste in intention, and it was this dissonant space it occupied, poised between modernism and populism, which lent it force to drive home the contradictions and evasions inherent in the dominant cultural apparatus.

In May 1928 an editorial coup at *New Masses* left Gold in control and in January of the following year, in the notorious leader 'Go Left, Young Writers!', he pronounced the 'romantic democracy of Carl Sandburg' (Folsom, p. 186) dead. The *nouveaux riches* had gained cultural ascendancy in the United States, and writing had become coated in a veneer of 'glitzy sophistication.' According to the dictates of what Gold referred to as 'the current politics of literature', some forty million Americans—'Negroes, immigrants, poor farmers and city proletarians' (Folsom, p. 187)—went without representation. Working-class life was like 'a lost continent', and the task of bringing it to the surface awaited the emergence of a new breed of writer, provocatively embodied in the form of

a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working-class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, and steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America. He is sensitive and impatient. He writes in jets of exasperated feeling and has no time to polish his work. He is

⁴² Denning, *The Cultural Front*, pp. 230-258. For an account of the use of experimental music in early Hollywood cartoon production see Daniel Goldmark, *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

violent and sentimental by turns. He lacks self-confidence but writes because he must—and because he has a real talent. (Folsom, p. 188)

For Paula Rabinowitz this portrait of the proletarian artist as by default a young man is yet further evidence, alongside the Thornton Wilder review, of ‘the outrageously sexist (and heterosexist) remarks of Michael Gold’ (*Labor*, p. 52). Both Robert Schulman and Barbara Foley, whilst acknowledging the importance of Rabinowitz’s work on the re-evaluation of women writers of the Depression era, including Josephine Herbst, Meridel le Sueur and Tillie Olsen, have expressed reservations as to the acuity of what seems an overly reductionist attribution of blame. Schulman notes that the privileging of the masculine at this time was a ‘script [...] written by the dominant society of upper-middle-class America, not, as in Rabinowitz’s account, by Mike Gold and the genre of 1930s left fiction.’⁴³ Foley points out that, difficult though it is not to use terms such as ‘sexism’ in discussing the 1930s left, ‘the frustration motivating the deployment of such terms is in some ways anachronistic, a product of a 1990s perspective inaccessible to even the most revolutionary Depression-era activists and writers’; the limits of any historical formation are generated by internal contradictions, and for Foley the task of the critic is ‘to analyse why some tendencies rather than others ended up shaping its theory and practice’ (*Radical*, p. 216). Gold’s detailing of America’s undiscovered continent in terms of African Americans, immigrants, agricultural and industrial labourers may exclude women in name, but then each of these categories cuts across gender lines. Walter Kalaidjian has argued that, given the everyday participation of women in industrial production at the time, symbolic investment in fetishized images of male authority ‘stand not so much as phallic icons of working-class hegemony but as uncanny symptoms of its absence.’⁴⁴ Behind the reified iconography of ‘the assertive upraised fist [...] the muscle bound torso’ lay deep political divisions, and the use of such imagery served an essentially compensatory function. Gold’s wild youth, perhaps, had good reason to lack self-confidence.

What *is* divisive in the ‘Go Left’ editorial is Gold’s attempt to draw a definitive line under ‘the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing, the professional poetising etc’ in favour of ‘a hard precise philosophy of 1929 based on economics, not

⁴³ Robert Schulman, *The Power of Political Art: The 1930s Literary Left Reconsidered* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. 135.

⁴⁴ Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), p. 138.

verbalisms' (Folsom, p. 188). The hard-bitten stance here betrays fundamental anxieties as to working method: real concerns about the practicability of cultural production on the margins of economic life. Unfortunately worded though it may be, Gold's reference to 'jets of exasperated feeling' expresses what Douglas Wixson has called 'the proletarian night': the time-bound material constraints that worker-writers—writers actually working at manual jobs—faced in also somehow finding the space and energy to produce literary work. The ambivalent status of the worker-writer, Wixson notes, led to 'creative tensions'.⁴⁵ Gold's proletarian, violent yet sentimental, insecure yet driven, displays these tensions, and whilst for Rabinowitz this model excludes women writers, who 'cannot write "in jets of exasperated feeling," as Gold had claimed his new writer would' (*Labor*, p. 53), overemphasis on the apparent phallocentrism of the formulation distracts from the fact that what is at stake here is that same frustration of creative energy Tillie Olsen has dubbed 'the cost of discontinuity': the damage inflicted on writing by the demands of economics, of motherhood, and of social responsibility.⁴⁶ Gold's version of *New Masses* as the outlet for the forgotten voices of America was not a commercial success. Only by the mid-1930s, in fact, during the era of the Popular Front, did the magazine's sales figures recover.⁴⁷ In the face of these all but insurmountable difficulties, then; the precariousness of establishing let alone maintaining solidarity, financial insecurity on both personal and institutional levels, the struggle to just get work done, it is ironic that Rabinowitz's insistence on Gold as personally responsible for 'constructing the proletariat and proletarian literature as masculine' (*Labor*, p. 22) stands as one of the few assessments of his career guaranteeing him some degree of effective agency.

'Don't quibble. ACT', Ezra Pound urges Gold in a letter written sometime in 1933.⁴⁸ Sporadic correspondence between the two, following the *New Masses* publication

⁴⁵ Wixson, p. 211.

⁴⁶ Tillie Olsen, *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978) p. 39.

⁴⁷ 'Gold's Proletcult version of *New Masses*, with its worker correspondents, did collapse in the fall of 1933; it was recreated as a weekly review of politics and culture in early 1934, and its circulation grew from 6,000 to 24,000 by early 1935' (*Cultural Front*, p. 223). Even that figure is dwarfed by the circulation of *The Liberator*, which in some years reached 50,000. See Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, p. 123.

⁴⁸ Undated letter from Pound to Gold. Mike Gold (Irwin Granich) and Mike Folsom Papers, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. In the letter Pound attempts to enlist help in publishing a scurrilous doggerel rhyme lambasting Roosevelt's economic adviser Bernard Baruch. As Pound saw it, Roosevelt's NRA masked the infiltration of big business interests into civil society, and this *coup de main* was personified in the figure of Baruch, the Wall Street multi-millionaire and former adviser to Woodrow Wilson during the negotiations at the Peace Conference of Versailles. Pound's strategy, in the absence of any actual evidence against Baruch, is intended to provoke: 'as one can't prove anything, only policy is to kid him, in hope he'll

of ‘Workshop Orchestration’, had yielded little in the way of common ground, and in 1930 Gold published an open letter in which he berated Pound for his support for Mussolini.⁴⁹ Fragmentary though the Pound/Gold dialogue was, it illuminates the extent to which, behind the scenes, an exponent of such highbrow aesthetics as Pound was prepared to collude in winning the attention of a public he openly distained. In ‘Machine Art’, an essay written between 1927 and 1930 but unpublished except for a series of photographs of mechanical components, Pound responded to the *Ballet mécanique* debacle with a defence of his call for the aestheticization of factory work. ‘You can show a normal low-brow a spare part’, he wrote, ‘and get from him a rational unprejudiced answer as to whether it is “a good shape” [...] or whether it looks scamped and flimsy.’⁵⁰ Pound’s economics, as Peter Nicholls explains, failed to take into account the social relations of production.⁵¹ Rejecting the Marxian analysis of the commodity form, Pound relied on a subjective theory of value under the terms of which ‘mental labour is free from economic restraints’.⁵² Pound’s economics and aesthetics were outgrowths of each other, but his dismissal of the role of the commodity in the extraction of surplus value left him with a model of writing which ‘as the production of the autonomously creative activity of the self-employed writer seemed [...] to promote and conserve values which impose no limits on the creative freedom of others.’⁵³ It was precisely the limits on the creative freedom of others that, for Gold, ‘professional poetising etc’ seemed to represent, but in his efforts to counter this incursion he was propelled inexorably still further towards the margins of aesthetic discourse.

After 1933 Gold was more prolific in his *Daily Worker* column than as either poet or playwright. But as I have tried to illustrate above, Gold’s ‘journalism’ was by and large

get mad and make a mis/step.’ Gold, clearly, was no friend to big business, but presumably the anti-Semitism implicit in Pound’s conspiracy-mongering was not lost on him. There is no evidence of any reply to the letter.
⁴⁹ See William M. Chase, ‘Ezra Pound and the Marxist Temptation’, *American Quarterly* 22.3 (1970), pp. 714-725 for detailed coverage both of Pound’s political flirtation with Gold and of points of contact between Pound’s economic thinking and Marx. Ultimately, Chase notes, Pound’s avant-gardist sensibility led him to privilege cultural production over political action and, moreover, ‘Pound was in no way prepared to launch an attack upon capitalism [...] because capitalism was the system most suitable to his sense of himself as a “free” individual whose entrepreneurial literary energies could help transform the consciousness of his nation’ (pp. 722-723).

⁵⁰ Ezra Pound, ‘Machine Art’, in *Machine Art and Other Writings: The Lost Thought of the Italian Years*, ed. by Maria Luisa Ardizzone (Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 55-83 (p. 58).

⁵¹ See Peter Nicholls, *Ezra Pound: Politics, Economics and Writing* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 51-59.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

closer to ‘art’ than reportage, and the populist *Daily Worker* supplied him with a ready means to get his work distributed at street level. Whilst he did publish a surrealist tract, ‘Mussolini’s Nightmare’, in which the insomniac dictator is visited by a series of apparitions, including a Napoleon so inflated he floats up to the ceiling ‘medal, boots, cocked hat and all’, a peasant boy who turns into a machine gun, and ‘a million hens, with faces like Russian dukes’, Gold was far more likely to direct his polemical energies against figures from the worlds of culture than of economics or politics.⁵⁴ His gift for the tag line sometimes distracted from more serious point he was trying to make. In ‘Hemingway—White Collar Poet’, written in 1928 and ostensibly a review of *Men Without Women*, Gold’s agenda is to find a rational explanation for the vagaries of literary fashion, some reason why a writer ‘once considered a member of a cult’ (Folsom, p. 157) has become a bestseller. His answer is to explain Hemingway’s success as symptomatic of growing disaffection amongst a middle-class youth that ‘hates in its heart the rapacities, the meanness, the dollarmanias of business’ (p. 158). In ‘Gertrude Stein: A Literary Idiot’, Gold is well aware that Stein is in possession of ‘a strong, clear, shrewd mind’ (*Change*, p. 24). What she lacks is any sense of responsibility ‘except to her own inordinate cravings’ (*Change*, p. 25). The charge against Stein is that her wilful refusal to make any kind of sense represents ‘the complete attempt to annihilate all relations between the artist and the society in which he [sic] lives’ (*Change*, p. 26). This theme of language itself corrupted to a criminal degree is developed in a piece on the death of gangster Dutch Schultz, where—supported by the liberal use of quotation—Gold draws a direct parallel between Stein’s literary experimentalism and the transcript of Schultz’s deathbed ravings. ‘It is an interesting psychological document,’ he comments, ‘and will undoubtedly be printed as a scoop by *Transition*’ (*Change*, p. 65).

Were Gold’s critique limited to an attack on ‘such-like little art magazines’ then his position would be consistent: a populist stand against cultural elitism. But it is the *success* of Hemingway the bestseller, Stein, who ‘appears to have convinced America that she is a genius’ (*Change*, p. 26), and even Schultz, whose outpourings ‘[have] been printed in all the papers’ (*Change*, p. 65) that fuels his rage. Indeed, in the Schultz piece in particular, what he rages against is capital’s squaring of the circle, the process whereby the esotericism peddled by the returning expatriates has been incorporated, inexplicably, into a popular

⁵⁴ ‘Mussolini’s Nightmare’, *Anvil* (1933), rpt. in Michael Gold, *Change the World!* (New York: International Publishers, 1936), pp. 11-15. Further references to the anthology included as *Change*.

mythology entirely regressive yet capable somehow of endlessly transcending its own limits: a false consciousness from within which there is no longer any outside. The more Gold is transfixed by the industrialisation of culture, the more baffling becomes the array of targets he is compelled to use his *Daily Worker* column to lash out at: the Ziegfeld Follies; the way pharmaceutical products are marketed; professional league baseball; Mothers' Day. When he lashed out at child-star Shirley Temple, even *Daily Worker* readers were moved to complain. Forced to clarify his position he insisted his point was not to pile ignominy onto the appealingly furrowed brow of the movie icon, but rather to draw away the veil of glamour from the hideously made-up face of child labour. There are laws against this kind of thing in the Soviet Union, he explained, 'But look! in [sic] our own America where individualism is supposed to be tenderly nourished, a child genius like Shirley has as little protection as a child textile worker in the South' (*Change*, p. 180). Worthy enough though his argument may be, it is clear that with this comment Gold's strategy has imploded. In amongst all the confusion of Hemingways and hoofers, the inversions of hoodlums and aesthetes, the champion of America's working class has found himself on the run from public taste.

There are two distinct stories being told about Michael Gold in the critical literature on the period. What the non-identity of Gold in the critical record reveals most of all is that, whilst an entire critical school has been built around the scholarship of literary modernism, it remains a real problem what to do with work such as Gold's. As Michael Thurston has pointed out, Ezra Pound, in his *Cantos* drawing on the writings of John Adams, brought to bear 'the weight of his own cultural capital as a well-known poet, along with the weight of American early national history and the already powerful institution of literary modernism, in his attempts to shape American foreign policy before and during World War II.'⁵⁵ Gold had little cultural capital to speak of and his political agenda was, by the late 1930s, diametrically opposed to Pound's. But he too drew on existing materials in order to find workable forms. The difference is that, whilst Pound kept his materials at some historical distance, Gold found his closer to home. Lacking Pound's confidence as a scholar, moreover, Gold played his cue cards far closer to his chest. 'Proletarian writers have no tradition to work by, as have the others', he wrote in 1929: 'We must thrash out our problems as we go along' (Folsom, p. 192). This was disingenuous. Just as 'A Strange

⁵⁵ Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 168.

Funeral in Braddock' bore the traces of the template set out by IWW sympathiser Carl Sandburg's 'Smoke and Steel', so too in his 'Go Left' piece Gold wilfully appropriated the iconography of a strand of American libertarianism stretching back through the writings of Jack London, Emerson and Thoreau.⁵⁶ Gold's critical praxis was like some ramshackle acting out of the IWW preamble's famous war cry, itself an appropriation from Marx: 'we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.'⁵⁷ In Chapter 3, I will trace the afterlife of Gold's 'Strange Funeral' as in itself part of a usable past for some unlikely radicals in the latter part of the 1930s. In the meantime I probe further into ways in which proletarian writing can be seen as constituting an avant-garde, in particular looking to the efforts of novelists to represent revolutionary class-consciousness.

⁵⁶ The evidence for this comes, ironically enough, from the Hofstadter text in which Gold is reduced to a footnote. In the same study comes an extract from a 1908 edition of the *International Socialist Review*, in which, as Hofstadter explains, its author, state secretary of the Oregon wing of the Socialist Party, is stating the position of 'party members affected by the IWW spirit' (Hofstadter, p. 290). The extract, describing 'the proletarian ... He has little education, no manners, and little care for what people think of him. His school has been the hard school of human experience' (p. 291), clearly foreshadows Gold's 'Go Left' editorial, and suggests that even at the height of Third Period Communism Gold remained committed to the nativist traditions of the IWW.

⁵⁷ 'Preamble to the IWW Constitution', *Industrial Workers of the World*. 2005. Industrial Workers of the World. Chicago, Illinois. <<http://www.iww.org/en/culture/official/preamble.shtml>> [accessed 29.09.10].

Chapter 2.

‘A Moment of Ecstasy, a Lifetime of Regret’: the Limits of the Proletarian Grotesque

In Robert Cantwell’s novel *The Land of Plenty*, school-leaver Johnny Hagen is forced to abandon hopes of college study and takes a job instead at the veneer factory where his father is chief machinist. On the week leading up to the Fourth of July, Johnny’s first in the factory, production is stepped up to meet an export order. When a power cut plunges the factory into darkness, and the machines stop running, tensions are stretched to breaking point. By the end of the evening, the foreman and the plant manager have fallen through the floor of the factory and are wandering, bruised and muddled, in the scrubland below, and a hoist operator has been fatally injured, his legs crushed. Meanwhile, Hagen Senior and another worker have been summarily fired and then hastily reinstated, yet when the nightshift return after the holiday, fifteen of them, including Hagen, are handed their notice. A sense of unreality spreads as the call goes up to walk out, and a column of workers takes to the march, circling the factory office. Johnny, swept up in the crowd, finds himself transfixed by the presence of a teenage girl, dancing, ‘waving her lunch bucket [...] moving along sideways and letting her feet snap together and swinging her arms’.¹ My starting point in this chapter is to fix this image, in its sense of movement, its expressiveness of radical popular celebration, of the liberation of the collective from the official culture of the factory authorities, as an instance of the carnivalesque. But in so doing I want to allow for the instability of the moment, to grasp, somehow, something of its evanescence. After all, as Terry Eagleton notes, the ‘necessary political criticism [...] almost too obvious to make’ of such a move is that carnival is an officially sanctioned upheaval, and so the more fully to abandon oneself to its moment is only the more energetically to invest in the rewriting and reinvigoration of existing hierarchical structure.²

¹ Robert Cantwell, *The Land of Plenty* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 297. Further references are included in the text as *Land*.

² Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 148. ‘Carnival laughter,’ Eagleton notes, ‘is incorporative as well as liberating, the lifting of inhibitions politically enervating as well as disruptive’ (p. 149).

If it seems unlikely now that Johnny will ever make it to college, he is to receive an education nonetheless, and the first lesson he learns is that as far as the outside world is concerned none of the above ever happened, at least not in the way he experienced it. The jubilant workforce is portrayed in the press as a violent mob, and even close family value distorted versions of the walkout and ensuing strike over and above his first-hand accounts. This comes as something of a shock, but over the coming week Johnny finds ‘a strange feeling of excitement and strength [...] [in] the memory of the afternoon when the machines began stopping, when the day shift raced out to join them, when the girl danced along beside him as they went around and around the office’ (*Land*, p. 298). As the strike limps on toward what Cantwell’s narrative makes abundantly—and perplexingly—clear will be its certain defeat, Johnny’s commitment to this redemptive figuration of the past is put to trial. If his holding on to this fragmentary image can be taken as a measure of political faith, then he is tempted too by the official story, and keeps an eye on the newspapers, ‘with a bitter amusement, only occasionally driven to fury by some cunning lie and spitting on the print or tearing the paper into bits’ (*Land*, p. 301). This sense of ‘bitter amusement’, I propose, marks the irruption into Cantwell’s text of a distinctly modernist sensibility, one that the novel, his only, and intended, he subsequently claimed, as ‘quite simply, a work of propaganda’, negotiates at its peril.³

Michael Denning has enlisted *The Land of Plenty* onto the roster of what he calls the proletarian grotesque, a third wave of modernism, emanating from the US left of the 1930s, and seeking ‘a plebian appropriation of the avant-garde hostility to “art”’. Certainly there is evidence to suggest that Cantwell—prolific as a book reviewer if not as a novelist—understood the mid-1930s literary scene in terms of the exhaustion of the imagination, and the task of both author and critic, therefore, as the contesting of established norms and modes of production. In a review of Thomas Wolfe’s *Of Time and the River* (1935), Cantwell praises Wolfe’s portrayal of the gap between the everyday, communal culture of his Southern, lower middle-class characters and the self-conscious ‘culture’ of the novel’s isolated, ex-patriot and urban intellectuals.⁴ The ‘basic pattern’ of Wolfe’s book, Cantwell writes, ‘is determined by the conflict between the real culture of

³ Quoted in Rideout, *The Radical Novel*, p. 177.

⁴ Robert Cantwell, review of *Of Time and the River*, rpt. in *Thomas Wolfe: The Critical Reception*, ed. by Paschal Reeves, (New York: David Lewis, 1974), pp. 55-57.

the people and the pretensions of the recognized carriers of “culture”.⁵ In *The Land of Plenty*, this same conflict is played out through the manipulation of narrative perspective.

‘Suddenly the lights went out’ (*Land*, p. 3), Cantwell begins his narrative. In order to meet the technical challenge of an interior space deprived of lighting, he needs to relinquish the privileged perspective of the realist novelist, and limit his characters’ access to empirical stimuli. Carl Belcher, the factory foreman, is an outsider, hired as a time and motion man: ‘that goddamned efficiency expert’ (*Land*, p. 55), as Hagen puts it. Already in the dark, metaphorically, as to how the production process actually works, when the lights go out he is plunged into an insensibility that reveals character in precisely the extent to which it conceals environment: ‘At one moment there were things he could see, there were familiar objects and people and walls; and at the next there was nothing, nothing but darkness streaming from the empty bulbs’ (*Land*, p. 3). With no intuitive knowledge of his surroundings, he cannot adjust. For Hagen, on the other hand, the loss of power is just another problem to solve. The only man in the entire factory in possession of a flashlight, he is at the same time one of the least likely to need it:

He knew the factory; he could find his way around it in the dark. The minute rises in the floor were blue-printed in his mind, and the narrow trails between the machines were so much a part of his way of thinking that he could not have forgotten them, even if he had wanted to. (*Land*, p. 49)

Hagen’s intimate knowledge, his *consciousness* of the contours of his workplace, signals a kind of integrity, contrasted with Carl’s superficial awareness. Even on a day-to-day basis, as far as Hagen is concerned, ‘Carl can’t tell the difference when a man’s doing his work and when he’s going through the motions’ (*Land*, p. 88). The factory space thus serves as a metonym for a network of conflicting human relations.

Barbara Foley has argued that, in their attempts to communicate class-consciousness to a readership unschooled in the nuances of ideology critique, proletarian writers of the 1930s were compromised by ‘essentialist assumptions about personality guiding inherited novelistic conventions of [...] characterisation’ (*Radical*, p. 384). At its most basic, this tendency is seen in ‘the temptation to reduce character to caricature’ (*Radical*, p. 383). Nowhere is this more evident than in the stereotypical portrayal of capitalists and their lackeys as villains of one form or another. If, in *The Land of Plenty*, Cantwell refrains from issuing Carl with a top hat (although he does wear a suit under his

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

overalls), his incompetence in one sense marks recourse to type. As Foley notes, ‘Carl’s inability to make a single correct decision about production verges on idiocy’ (*Radical*, p. 383). On the one hand, then, we have the hard-bitten yet justified proletarian, and on the other his undeserving boss. Even by the standards of the mid-1930s, this binary of protagonist/antagonist borders on the hackneyed, yet Cantwell’s text in some measure anticipates this problem. The novel is structured into sections headed with one of nine characters’ names, and within each section perspective is limited to that point of view. Others on the left, notably John Dos Passos, had already tried out variations on multiple perspective writing, and Granville Hicks had sketched out a critical taxonomy of such experiments in *New Masses*.⁶ The political value in all this was understood to be the representation of a collective rather than an individual protagonist, and for this to work it was necessary to keep intrusive narration to a bare minimum. Cantwell applies this template only loosely, untroubled by the occasional pragmatic incursion into fictional space, as when the details of the accident involving the hoist operator are plainly related, or when we are simply and directly told of Carl that ‘Time was real to him. The minutes had value and when he thought of them slipping away it was as though wealth he had in his hand was escaping’ (*Land*, p. 19). Although Carl’s equation of time and money may be stereotypical, the cash nexus, deployed via characterisation, marks a nodal point. If time, to Carl, is real, this thematic materiality punctures the surface of the text by means of formal extrusion, as he calculates the cost of lost labour time during the power outage:

How long? Christ, how long? Three hundred and fifty men at sixty cents an hour, cent a minute, three dollars and fifty cents a minute. Five minutes = $5 \times 0 = 0$, $5 \times 5 = 25$, carry two, $5 \times 3 = 15 + 2 = 17$ - \$17.50. Jesus Christ. Half an hour: 6×17.50 : $6 \times 0 = 0$, $6 \times 5 = 30, 00$; $6 \times 7 = 42 + 3 = 45$; $6 \times 1 = 6 + 4 = 10$. \$105.00. Thrown away. (*Land*, p. 13)

Sentence fragments and comma splices here overstep the bounds of grammatical convention, just as the use of numerals and mathematical symbols deforms the typographical standards of well-made prose. Moreover, this is one of the few instances in the novel where Cantwell’s third person narrative spills over into free indirect discourse, where the text seems most to flow, as if unrestricted. This is revealing because, whilst the factory workforce is intentionally positioned as collective protagonist in the novel, and its

⁶ Granville Hicks, ‘Revolution and the Novel’, in *Granville Hicks in the New Masses*, ed. by Jack Alan Robbins (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat, 1974), pp. 19-66. See Foley, *Radical Representations*, pp. 362-441 for a detailed revision of Hicks’ taxonomy.

synchronic relations carefully monitored, the role of antagonist is here unconsciously figured not by the hapless time and motion man but by the plotting of time itself, an irresistible teleological pull along the diachronic axis.

In the novel's first part, set around the duration of only a few hours, the separate sections overlap. The lights go out for Carl on page three, but not for Hagen until page thirty-nine. Similarly, when Carl and Hagen eventually meet this happens for Carl on page thirty-five, but twenty pages later for Hagen. What is important is not depth of perspective but a sense of circularity, as if not only light and power have been suspended but so too the onrush of temporality. In the second part of the novel, which details events leading up to and following the strike – a period of some days – this imbrication of points of view is levelled out. The first three sections of the second part piece together in consecutive order the acceleration of a journey away from the internalised location of the factory by means of the outward, cinematic device of a car chase. From this point on the elliptical experience of the first part is replaced by a narrative linearity that elides sections of time rather than circumvolving them. As the novel reaches its end, with the strike in disarray, young Johnny and Wobbly Vin Garl collapse exhausted onto a pile of driftwood as the wounded figure of an unnamed worker appears through the rain:

He was terribly beaten on the face and head. His hair was matted with blood from a cut on his scalp and his eyes were almost closed from the welts on his swollen cheeks. He said nothing as they approached, only holding himself with an inflexible, automatic alarm, ready to run again. The three of them sat down together. (*Land*, p. 368)

Walter Rideout, noting the perverse desire of radical writers in the 1930s to inflict the cruellest of defeats on their fictional proletarians, traced the working out of a kind of psychological self-defence mechanism. Spiritual injuries inflicted on young writers in Depression-era America could be exorcised, he argued, 'if they themselves outdid these injuries, if they were able to create in their art the very worst fate that could happen.'⁷ Here, Cantwell saves the worst blow for last, as the bloodied worker delivers news that Johnny's father has been shot dead by police:

The rain fell hard, drenching them while they waited, not like rain but like some new and terrible weapon of their enemies. He tried to crowd under the driftwood and Vin Garl put his hand on his shoulder, "Come on, son," he said gently, "don't cry," and then they sat there listening to him, their faces

⁷ Rideout, p. 179.

dark with misery and anger, listening and waiting for the darkness to come like a friend and set them free. (*Land*, p. 369)

Commentators from Marx to David Harvey have pointed out that capitalism survives as a system because of its ability to transcend its own limits. If paying decent wages places too much of a brake on profits, then efficiency measures work towards increasing productivity. If home markets become saturated, or demand falls, then foreign exports find new markets elsewhere. If illegal force is necessary to resolve industrial disputes, then commodity production's status as the general form of social production ensures that, even if isolated practices are later shown as corrupt and in need of reform, systemic change stays off the agenda. All of these eventualities are treated thematically in *The Land of Plenty*. In a prescient move, some three years before the 1936-1937 sit-down strikes in the steel and auto industries forced capital to the negotiating table, Cantwell even has his strikers occupy the factory. The ultimate failure of the strike is thus on one level a symptom of the failure of the imagination, as Cantwell was later to acknowledge. 'I couldn't imagine clearly what would happen,' he told a *New Masses* symposium, 'and the novel suffers as a result.'⁸ But this failure is also enacted on the level of form: the novel's attempt to overstep its own limits of characterisation and plot lead in the end to a driftwood covered beach where character counts for nothing, a point from which things can go no further and where the novel collapses back onto itself. Environment here is entirely a product of manufacture—even the rain is a conspiracy. But if *The Land of Plenty* is unable to overstep the bounds of its own literariness, it at least dramatizes the desire to do so by laying out as lines in the sand just where—and when—those limits might be. The darkness we are waiting for is not simply a return to lost promise, to the *tabula rasa* of the opening scenes. This scene on the beach with its melodrama and tears and the bloodied, grotesque face of the unknown class warrior is effective not because it takes us forward out of the book but because it cannot. What registers as the shock of the new is our finding ourselves somehow surrounded by the very old, by echoes of pre-novelistic literary discourse: mad Lear and the blinded Gloucester meeting on Dover beach; Achilles reaching out to embrace the dematerialising ghost of Patroclus on the shore at Troy. It is impossible, in other words, to read the end of the novel in terms other than those of tragedy. And this underscores the dialectic of form and content, the relation between what Cantwell described as his failure to imagine a

⁸ Quoted in Rideout, p. 177.

successful outcome to the strike and the reversion here to well-established generic conventions, despite the radical, exploratory promise of the early sections of the book.

In *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) Kenneth Burke wrote that Cantwell enrolled himself ‘on the fringes of mysticism’ in portraying ‘the ways in which a deeper understanding among workers arises while the lights are out. He tells us in effect that they are seeing in the dark.’⁹ When Burke characterises the grotesque as ‘something very like mysticism’, he refers to the potential of radically juxtaposed elements to bring forth in their collision an unmediated experience of the real (*Permanence*, p. 112). This is one aspect of what he calls perspective by incongruity. The ‘planned’ incongruities of cultural production, however, can only gain this access when they take place within (or above) a wider context of social, political and economic instability. Such is the case in Hellenistic Greece, as the deconstruction of the classical genres exposes a seismic shift from democracy to imperialism. To this extent, then, Burke’s grotesque is a kind of inverted mimesis. ‘Grotesque inventions flourish *when it is easiest to imagine the grotesque*,’ he writes, ‘or *when it is hardest to imagine the classical*’ (*Permanence*, p. 117 [emphasis in the original]). What is grotesque about Cantwell’s *The Land of Plenty* is therefore this failure to imagine, or at least to realise, the classical. Neither epic, in the sense of being centred around an individual hero, nor tragic, in the sense that collective suffering is mitigated by the powerful fallen low, the novel is uneven in every sense. That the two parts are so mismatched in narrative pace is unsatisfying aesthetically. Moreover, that the workforce’s propulsion out into the light, far from realizing the Utopian promise of the strike, leads only to riot and murder points to the conclusion that any heightened experience of the real promised in the novel will be no ecstatic elevation to transcendence but rather a brutal immersion in trauma.

What this reading misses, however, is that much of what goes on in *The Land of Plenty* is actually very funny. Carl’s pantomime antics as he stumbles around the factory, calling out idle threats and bumping into walls, are especially comic. Bawdy remarks and disembodied laughter come out of the darkness, and he grows increasingly paranoid. His sense of a hostile audience is made real when, caught in the beam of Hagen’s flashlight, he finds himself surrounded by a circle of faces, and motions to Hagen to talk to him alone. But Hagen is baffled and watches ‘in perplexity while Carl edged towards the darkness,

⁹ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 59.

jerked his head sideways, and made grimaces and motions which he thought were suggestive' (*Land*, p. 55). Humour, with its cathartic release, is a degradation of Burke's grotesque, 'the cult of incongruity *without* the laughter'.¹⁰ Denning carries this fundamental intransigence over into his proletarian grotesque, with 'its grim refusal of smiles' (*Cultural Front*, p. 123). For both critics, the anti-aesthetic shock of the grotesque, and thus its political charge, are nullified by humour. 'The grotesque is not funny unless you are out of sympathy with it', Burke claims. 'Insofar as you are *in* sympathy with it, it is in deadly earnest.'¹¹ This assertion implies that there is only one correct way to interpret a historical form he refers to elsewhere as 'an incongruous assortment of incongruities' (*Permanence*, p. 111). It is also virtually antithetical to the theory proposed by his more famous European counterpart, M. M. Bakhtin, for whom it is not laughter that degrades the grotesque, but rather the grotesque that, through laughter, degrades and so materialises the abstract.

For all Burke's dissection of the historical necessity of the grotesque, and Denning's even more precise relocation of it to a specific cultural formation, there is something ahistorical about the positing of a form of radical heterogeneity somehow transposable across cultures and periods, awaiting only the correct disparate contents to be poured into it. For Bakhtin also, the grotesque is in essence a form; images of dismemberment and disintegration are the embodiment in the arts of the revolutionary spirit of carnival. In the introduction to his famous book on Rabelais, Bakhtin traces the means by which this essentially folkloric material has been appropriated into high culture, specifically into the novel. His point, however, is that along the way from pre-classical antiquity, through the Renaissance and up to the contemporary moment these images of disintegration, unassimilable as they are to the standards of classical aesthetics, have themselves been subject to dismemberment. The Bakhtinian grotesque, in its purest form, is 'filled with [the] pathos of change and renewal,' because what it represents is incomplete.¹² In Renaissance figurations of birth and defecation, copulation and death, something of an archaic sense of cyclical change, 'the phases of man's and nature's reproductive life', is retained and reincorporated into a deepened awareness of 'social and historic phenomena' (p. 25). In this sense the grotesque is a way of grasping the fullness of becoming, a heuristic process; the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 58 (emphasis in the original).

¹¹ *Ibid.* (emphasis in the original).

¹² Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 11. Four consecutive references are here included in the text.

grotesque body 'is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits' (p. 26). Laughter is inseparable from this process for two reasons. Firstly, the kind of laughter Bakhtin is talking about is profoundly ambivalent. Not merely satirical or mocking, this humour includes its own subject, the vacant, grinning mouth, amongst its objects of ridicule. Second, even in the Middle Ages, once the folk humour element of carnival is lost, its idioms are formalised, and its Utopian potential closed off. Taking grotesque imagery completely seriously, in other words, is a form of reification, the means by which official culture '[uses] the past to consecrate the present' (p. 9). This depletion of the power of the grotesque, because of a refusal of laughter, is precisely what Bakhtin sees in modernism: 'a laughter that does not laugh' (p. 45).

This laughter without laughing catches in the throats of many of the representative figures of high modernism: in the arch tones of Hugh Selwyn Mauberley, for instance, or in the self-lacerating urbanities of J. Alfred Prufrock. It is articulated forcefully by D. H. Lawrence through the 'black bitterness' of Richard Somers, protagonist of *Kangaroo* (1923), who—too physically frail to pass muster for action in WWI, yet harassed by the authorities nonetheless—is horrified not by the thought of death but rather 'the loss of the integral soul'.¹³ Swamped by 'the unspeakable baseness of the press and the public voice' (p. 216), Somers loses all faith in the belief that 'in any crisis a people can govern itself, or is ever fit to govern itself' (p. 217). In this distinctly anti-democratic frame of mind, somewhat at odds politically with the nascent class-consciousness of Johnny Hagen, Somers 'laugh[s] at the palpable lies of the press, bitterly' (p. 217), and his subsequent infatuation with a charismatic fascist leader is at least fictional and distinctly non-committal, unlike that of Ezra Pound, say, with Mussolini. Scathing of an outwardly degraded modernity, voices such as Somers' close in upon themselves nonetheless as the emanations of the individual ego in revolt against social powerlessness. It is precisely this barely suppressed rage, a defining tone of literary high modernism, I would argue, that breaks out afresh in the bitter amusement of Cantwell's novel. *The Land of Plenty*, indeed, is pestilent with *ressentiment*. Of the nine characters given a named section, only factory girls Marie and Ellen Turner, and the light man, who, collecting a power company debt from the Hagens, warns of a hard winter coming with 'ominous words and [a] dead helpless voice' (*Land*, p. 290), escape without saying something 'bitterly' or otherwise displaying

¹³ D. H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, ed., by Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 215. Three consecutive references are included here in the text.

their ‘bitterness’. Even Rose MacMahon, the plant manager’s daughter, is ‘bitter and remorseful’ (*Land*, p. 124) as she reflects on a row with her father, and her parents, of course, are given voices that grow ‘more bitter and more loud’ (*Land*, p. 119) as they quarrel. So endemic, in point of fact, is this recrudescence of bitterness it is tempting to label this novel itself a kind of ‘bitter amusement’, and so too, admitting *Land of Plenty* as a representative case, the proletarian novel as an identifiable form.

Caught in the headlights of literary history, something in these books writhes in its own thwarted ambition. With one or two notable exceptions, a skein of joylessness surrounds the proletarian novels of the early to mid-1930s, obscuring, perhaps, their potential worth as coordinates to a buried topography of modernism. There is no doubt that in books such as Cantwell’s, in Clara Weatherwax’s *Marching! Marching!* (1935) and William J. Rollins Jr.’s *The Shadow Before* (1934), techniques learned, no matter how indirectly, from high modernism were employed with the expressed intent of furthering a leftist agenda. But in order to build momentum as an anti-aesthetic rather than an offshoot, the tone of bitter amusement—itsself a response to the encroachment of the extraneous onto the autonomous space of cultural production—would need to be redirected in some way. The avant-garde makes no secret of its need to alienate its audience; after all, the division of labour between producer and consumer is one of the primary targets of its attack. Such disregard for popular opinion, however, is easily received as a form of cultural elitism, as contempt for the masses, and as such never far from a flirtation with fascism *à la* Richard Somers. To an already enlightened audience, confident in its own powers of discrimination, this ambiguity becomes part of the process of the production of meaning. But for a proletarian avant-garde—institutionally aligned with the labour movement—to make any sense, it would need to reach a contemporary audience beyond the enclaves of the *cognoscenti*. William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* sold approximately 3300 copies between 1929 and 1946; *The Land of Plenty* matched that within a year. But these figures are pitiful compared to those of the mainstream fiction of the day. Lloyd C. Douglas’s now unheard of bestseller *Green Light* sold 103,286 copies in 1935 alone.¹⁴ Douglas, who also wrote *The Robe* (1942), turned into a hugely successful film of the same name, probably deserves more attention than he receives simply because he sold so many books. The

¹⁴ David Minter, Preface to the Second Edition, William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (New York: Norton, 1994), p. ix; Rideout, p. 235; Alice Payne Hackett and James Henry Burke, *80 Years of Bestsellers* (New York and London: R. R. Bowker Company, 1977), p. 120.

success of *Green Light*, however, a novel in which a surgeon's losses in the stock market crash are the immediate cause of a fatal operating room mistake (and hence, ultimately, of individual redemption), suggests that Douglas's complacency in attempting to rehash his trademark Christian moralizing to suit contemporary reality was easily matched by his audience's clear lack of concern for the intricacies of narrative perspective: 'Everybody in the room knew that he had been engaged in an emergency conversation with his brokers, and he knew that they all knew. They knew that he knew they knew.'¹⁵

The omniscience of Douglas's narrator stands in sharp contrast to the experiments with restricted point of view carried out by Dos Passos, Weatherwax and Cantwell, but in some senses the proletarian avant-garde found itself moving closer to the forms of popular fiction than to modernism once the latter had entered the mainstream. The fragmented voices of *The Land of Plenty* may derive from Joyce, but by the mid-1930s these disembodied voices are everywhere in US fiction. In Ellen Glasgow's *Vein of Iron*, also a 1935 bestseller, stream-of-consciousness is reserved for a central, aristocratic character's immersion in the babble of working-class voices on a bus ride: "my niece said she saw her identical dress in the moving pictures' [...] 'What I want to know is, When you get your working class dictator, is he going to let us have all the chicken fights we want?'"¹⁶ Dismemberment and disintegration here, rather than opening the text out and collapsing hierarchy, work to fashion the grotesque in the image of the untouchable. Confronted with this kind of ideological double bind it is easy to understand how a counter-modernist moment—a need not to show but to tell—drove proletarian writing. It was more than poor sales figures, after all, plaguing the committed modernists of the 1930s. When 'The Iron Throat', a short piece later to make up the bulk of the first chapter of Tillie Olsen's *Yonnonidio*, was published in *Partisan Review* in 1934, Cantwell, reviewing the piece, found it 'the work of early genius'.¹⁷ On the strength of the few lines he devoted to it, in a *New Republic* round up of writing from the little magazines, Random House contacted him,

¹⁵ Lloyd C. Douglas, *Green Light* (London: Peter Davies, 1935), p. 25.

¹⁶ Ellen Glasgow, *Vein of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1946), pp. 321-323. In a *New Republic* review of the novel, Cantwell acknowledged that Glasgow's characters were 'vital and varied and interesting, and they come up against problems—the War, unemployment—that force them to reach into the reserves of their experience and understanding for strength to keep going. But that—to keep going, even if it is in hopelessness and misery—is evidently all they want.' Robert Cantwell, 'A Season's Run', (*New Republic*, 1935), in *Ellen Glasgow: The Contemporary Reviews*, ed. by Dorothy Scura (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 392.

¹⁷ Quoted in the introduction to Kay Hoyle Nelson and Nancy Huse, eds., *The Critical Response to Tillie Olsen* (Westport Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1994), p. 5.

soliciting help in locating the apparently reclusive author. Whilst Cantwell sent out feelers in Northern California where Olsen, then going by her maiden name Lerner (amongst others), was rumoured to be living, two more publishers and a literary agent joined the trail. What no one suspected was that Olsen, Young Communist League member and labour activist, was actually in jail, arrested on a trumped up charge of ‘vagrancy’. By the time Cantwell followed up the original review one month later in a *New Republic* piece on ‘The Literary Life in California’, the two messengers sent out to find Olsen had been similarly ‘disappeared’. ‘To the difficulties of finding hospitable publishers’, he wrote, ‘must now be added the problems of dodging the police [...] if writers are to get their novels finished.’¹⁸ For whatever reason—and there were surely reasons enough: incipient tuberculosis; motherhood and marriage; the continuing imperative of political action—Olsen was either unwilling or unable to submit further work for publication, and *Yonnondio* remained unpublished in its final form until the early 1970s. This deferred publication, however, has only intensified critical interest in the silence preceding it. Bound up as it now is within the pages of the ‘completed’ novel, Olsen’s legendary silence—the novel still waiting to happen—has become interwoven with the substance of the text itself.

Reviewing *Yonnondio* in 1974, Catharine Stimpson made the point that ‘[Olsen’s] silence was less the result of a romantic rendezvous with the abyss at the edge of language than of acute self-doubt [...] and the moral pressure of radical politics.’¹⁹ The suggestion of a problematic connection between self-consciousness and ethics is one that could no doubt be productively explored. More recently, however, critical approaches to *Yonnondio* have tended to home in on the former of Stimpson’s alternatives, that abyss at the edge of language she downplays in her own account. *Yonnondio* emerges in the critical record as forever the most contemporary of texts, because it proves itself peculiarly amenable to critical or theoretical paradigms operating around the limits of the autonomous model of production. Sometimes, in the 1970s and early 1980s, a radical feminism seized on the work as a vital link in a chain of socialist feminism stretching back as far as Rebecca Harding Davis.²⁰ Later in the eighties a kind of left-leaning poststructuralism takes hold,

¹⁸ Robert Cantwell, ‘The Literary Life in California’, in Nelson and Huse, eds., pp. 21-22 (p. 22).

¹⁹ Catharine R. Stimpson, ‘Three Women Work it out’, in Nelson and Huse, eds., pp. 23-25 (p. 23).

²⁰ See Deborah Rosenfeld, ‘From the Thirties: Tillie Olsen and the Radical Tradition’ (1981), in Nelson and Huse (eds.), pp. 54-89. Rosenfeld’s addition of both Olsen and Davis to a tradition including Olive Schreiner, Agnes Smedley and Alice Walker is indebted to Olsen’s own work on the recovery of Davis, detailed in *Silences* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1978).

filtering Olsen's complex narrative through the lens of Bakhtinian heteroglossia.²¹ More recently still, *Yonnonidio* has found itself centre stage in the project of revisionary modernism. For Michael Denning, *Yonnonidio* is 'the lyric masterpiece of the Popular Front' (*Cultural Front*, p. xiv), perhaps the 'most powerful' (p. 249) of all proletarian novels. It represents the epitome, moreover, of his concept of the proletarian grotesque, which—drawn from Burke's notion of perspective by incongruity—implies the possibility of some unmediated space, hidden along the interstices of conventionalised genre. Joseph Entin probes this potentiality of formal hybridity still further, rejecting outright the term 'grotesque' as 'a relatively established and traditional category' in favour of his own formulation 'monstrous modernism', a redefinition conveying not only the limits of the aesthetic, but also 'of representation itself'.²²

Largely autobiographical, and set during the 1920s, the novel tracks the itinerant and profoundly dysfunctional Holbrook family on their chaotic trajectory from bleak Wyoming mining town, through a short-lived pastoral idyll on a farm in the Dakotas, and finally into the orbit of a Nebraska slaughterhouse. Olsen's sensitivity to fluctuations in narrative perspective is by any standards exceptionally nuanced, yet most critics agree that the bulk of the action, such as it is, is shown from the shifting points of view of Anna Holbrook and her prepubescent daughter, Mazie. We can never be quite sure, however, and there are moments where the text makes explicit gestures towards the contingencies of characterisation, as in an early scene—here quoted from 'The Iron Throat'—where Mazie's struggle to make sense of her environment doubles as both exposition and metacommentary:

She pushed her mind hard against the things half known, not known. "I am Mazie Holbrook," she said softly, "I am a knowen things. I can diaper a baby. I can tell two ghost stories. I know words and words. Tipple. Edjiccation. Bug dust. Superintendent."²³

Obviously there is a degree of dramatic irony here. The things Mazie is only half knowing or not knowing are not things either the narrator or the projected reader lack access to (although the term 'tipple' may be an exception). These limits of language are on one level

²¹ See Linda M. Park Fuller, 'Voices: Bakhtin's Heteroglossia and Polyphony, and the Performance of Narrative Literature' (1986), in Nelson and Huse, eds., pp. 90-103.

²² Joseph Entin, 'Monstrous Modernism: Disfigured Bodies and Literary Experimentalism in *Yonnonidio* and *Christ in Concrete*', in *The Novel and the American Left: Critical Essays on Depression-Era Fiction*, ed. by Janet Galligani Casey (Iowa City: Iowa Press, 2004), pp. 61-80 (pp. 78-79 n.1).

²³ Tillie Lerner, 'The Iron Throat', *Partisan Review*, 1.2 (1934), pp. 3-9 (p. 5).

simply those of a six-year-old. But at the same time we are being directly invited to consider the formation of consciousness through language, and to understand the ability to narrate—to tell ghost stories—as a form of everyday praxis. Moments such as these, where ‘characters’ inner thoughts are rendered [...] unmediated by a narrative voice’, provide one element of Entin’s monstrous hybridity.²⁴ In other places, though, the relative subtlety of Olsen’s interweaving of perspectives is blasted apart by the intrusion of an omniscient narrator, at times empathetic, urging awakening consciousness on generally peripheral characters, but at other times blatantly hectoring.

One such instance of the latter occurs early on in the novel when, as the wounded bodies of miners are brought to the surface in the aftermath of an underground explosion, the narrative flow is broken off, interrupted by a portentous, self-reflexive voice, hell-bent, apparently, on berating the reader for the mute act of bearing witness: ‘And could you not make a cameo of this and pin it to your aesthetic hearts?’²⁵ For Denning, as for others, this moment, with its invocation of ‘these grotesques, this thing with the foot missing, this gargoyle with half the face gone and the arm’ (*Yonnondio*, p. 29), summons forth, reanimates somehow, the anti-aesthetic of the historical avant-garde, and does so, moreover, within the auspices of an overtly Marxian undertaking. For Entin, the cameo scene, in contrast to the stream-of-consciousness technique evidenced in monologues such as Mazie’s above, is ‘a kind of Brechtian estrangement effect [...] an experimental metacommentary on the conditions under which the action is taking place.’²⁶ Constance Coiner makes a similar connection between Olsen and Brecht, noting that these narrative interpolations ‘announce the gulf between art and reality’.²⁷ But if this is the case then the cameo scene, in which after all it is the text rather than the reader supplying the grisly details of broken bodies, registers this gulf between art and reality as a point of anxiety, marking its own ethical crisis with the reflexive gesture of making a cameo of itself. These moments of narrative rupture, where the text seems to break out beyond its own limits, becoming somehow extraneous to itself, suggest the mutual imbrication of art and reality rather than their separation. Far from a distancing effect, the direct address serves—as

²⁴ Entin, p. 73.

²⁵ Tillie Olsen, *Yonnondio: From the Thirties* (London: Virago, 1980), p. 28. Further references appear in the text as *Yonnondio*.

²⁶ Entin, p. 72.

²⁷ Constance Coiner, *Better Red: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 183.

Susan Edmunds points out—to draw the reader in.²⁸ One reason, I would argue, that it is necessary so aggressively to place the reader amidst the grotesque debris of a mining accident, is neither specifically to shock nor to alienate, but to make an important point about objectification.

‘The commodity is, first of all,’ writes Marx, ‘an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind’ (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 125). But this materiality of the commodity, its tangible physical presence, offers no somatic clue to the reality of the commodity form as the embodiment of abstract value. ‘We may twist and turn a single commodity as we wish’, Marx goes on; ‘it remains impossible to grasp it as a thing of value’ (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 138). Faced with the absurd task of reconciling an infinity of qualitative difference between various goods and their raw materials—and between the uses we find for them—a solution emerges in the search for some quantitative equivalence, and this is found in the measure of all it is, after all, that each commodity shares: hidden traces of the human labour gone into its production. The apartness of the commodity thus hides a secret. An object exterior to us in one sense, the commodity bears—as its condition of possibility—our prior involvement in its very constitution. And further, the thingness of the commodity, its singularity, marks the coagulation of a process. This famous analysis of the commodity form provides a framework for Peter Bürger’s theorization of the institution of art. Like Marx’s commodity, Bürger’s artwork is first and foremost an object, and, just as Marx soon passes over distinctions between an incalculable multiplicity of commodities in order to find some formal equivalence, so too Bürger abstracts particularities to arrive at what he refers to as a ‘formal determination’.²⁹ Whereas for Marx, however, this move reveals the function of the commodity for capital as principally a thing to be bought and sold, for Bürger the apartness of artworks, ‘their status as objects that are set apart from the struggle of everyday existence’ (Bürger, p. 12) remains their most salient quality. But it is also their weakest point, as from this generalisation of the autonomy of the art object follows ‘the important theoretical insight that works of art

²⁸ Susan Edmunds, *Grotesque Relations: Modernist Domestic Fiction and the U. S. Welfare State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 123-147. Edmunds notes that at such moments Olsen’s text suggests ‘that the novel’s implied reader is white, female, and middle class’ (p. 224, n. 22), and that the technique is a reworking of a device used by Rebecca Harding Davis.

²⁹ The concept of ‘formal determination’, Bürger notes, ‘is thus used in the same sense as when Marx speaks of the determination of goods by the commodity form’ (Bürger, p. 110 n. 15).

are not received as single entities, but within institutional frameworks that largely determine the function of the works.’

Bürger never pluralizes his institution of art; galleries, museums, the entire productive and distributive apparatus is placed under the totalizing concept of an institution which, because it exists in a dialectical relation to the individual work, not only subsumes the entirety of cultural production, but also ensures that the whole is contained within each part. Just as commodity exchange effaces human creativity, so formal determination by the institution of art in bourgeois society absorbs content, transforming it into ‘the neutralization of critique’ (Bürger, p. 13). If Bürger pays close attention, then, to the first half of Marx’s proposition quoted above, postulating that the artwork, like the commodity, is in its objectified form always somehow paradoxically beyond our reach, he seems to ignore the extent to which Marx insists that this distant relation is only apparent. When, in the *Yonnondio* cameo scene, Olsen’s intrusive narrator invites us to pore over body parts as we might an *objet d’art*, the formal determination of the art object—like the mangled limbs—is exposed, and this moment of reflexivity becomes the means by which critique is engaged. By the effect of drawing the reader onto the imaginative ground of aestheticized suffering, the institutional framework is itself objectified as anterior to the phenomenal data of the text. But this objectification is at the same time a cognitive production of the reading subject, and thus in a general sense evidence of prior cognitive involvement as the formal determination of the institution. The institution is therefore no longer a purely external framework, something imposed from without, but something negotiable, capable, in a sense, of bearing multiple readings. It is no longer a thing, but a process.

This instance of reflexivity is by no means unique amongst the output of the proletarian avant-garde, yet the delayed publication of *Yonnondio* has enabled critics to recoup for Olsen a degree of strategic success unavailable to many of her contemporaries. For a writer and critic as well-schooled in the literature of his day as Robert Cantwell to have placed the thought in the mind of a character such as young Johnny Hagen, as he holds on to the memory of ‘that first sweet hour when they danced out of the factory’ (*Land*, p. 300), that ‘Someday all the people would come out of the factories, singing in the streets...’ (*Land*, p. 301) places a near impossible weight of expectation on the silence figured by those three dots. Cantwell’s failure to imagine a positive outcome for his workers’ occupation was perhaps inevitable given the fundamentally realist prescription

implicit in that task, and the novel's own moment in history. All the same, he does in the end manage to carve out some space in his narrative where the weight of common sense restrictions on what is or is not possible is lifted, provisionally at least. The bitter amusement that figures as theme and also lends texture to *The Land of Plenty* turns out to be just a phase Johnny passes through on his way to political awakening. Soon he learns to process the grotesque distortions of the popular press, how to 'see between the lines and understand what had actually happened' (*Land*, pp. 301-302). To read silences, to grasp the non-discursive elements of textual production, becomes a form of political praxis, and this heuristic extends awareness – painfully at first - beyond the confines of subjective experience. This is not much use, it might be argued, for Johnny in the end, as—bereaved and defeated—he waits on the beach 'for the darkness to come.' But this is to mistake an ending for closure; Cantwell's self-conscious direction in the final sentence of his novel, back to the beginning, to the moment when 'Suddenly the lights went out' (*Land*, p. 3), suggests just how far his book is actually *about* rereading. The text, with its overlapping temporal sequence, compels us to reread even as we move forward. Moreover, in the first part of the novel darkness assumes physicality, and factory girls giggle as they bump 'against substantial portions' (*Land*, p. 92) of it. What enables Johnny to progress with his readings of the popular press is also what enables readers of the novel to make sense of a fictional environment they may have no experience of in life. What Johnny looks for in the newspaper he holds is not actually materially present, but we may take it to be real nonetheless. His sense of the gaps and evasions implicit in what makes a story comes from the acquisition, through practice, of a general form to be read against the grain. For the reader of Cantwell's novel, likewise, formal determination allows the tracing of the non-discursive at work.

'Under the lens of his method all the overworked scenes of realistic narrative, like drops of water under a microscope, are suddenly seen to be teeming with unsuspected life', Cantwell wrote of James Joyce.³⁰ In his own writing, Cantwell aimed to uncover an unsuspected life also, but the urgent sense of political necessity he shared with so many of his generation limited the reach of his experimental method. Insofar as he already knew what he was looking for, and understood that something as external to literary production, modernist technique was never going to help him find it. The genius of 'The Iron Throat',

³⁰ Quoted in Merrill Lewis, *Robert Cantwell* (Boise: Boise State University, 1985), p. 35.

even if this was unclear at the time, is that the narrative, rather than attempt to summon an imaginary real—as if from out of the ether—and then rewrite that onto the page, commences instead by drawing attention to the prior abstractions of language. The world of *Yonnondio* is replete with sensuous detail, and because what we experience of that world is filtered in part through six-year-old Mazie’s passion for ‘words and words’, life is no longer something that gets in the way of literary production. On the contrary, thus refracted, the empirical and the imaginary overlap. What constitutes the political, moreover, is no longer a matter of perspective; even the sound of a word, or what it looks like on the page, may take on political force if grasped as concrete experience. The textual deformations of *Yonnondio* register the impact of the real as exactly that kind of negative mimesis Kenneth Burke describes in his notion of the grotesque. Just how much any of this was *intended* as such, however, is another matter entirely. As Alan Wald has pointed out, whilst the patchwork surface of the *Yonnondio* narrative certainly feels a lot like some kind of postmodern language experiment, ‘the fragmented consciousness evidenced in Olsen’s *Yonnondio* [...] is largely the outgrowth of the unfinished character of the text’.³¹ Unfinished here is meant in the most literal of senses. In her 1978 work *Silences*, Olsen refers to the ‘cost of discontinuity’, of the damage inflicted on writing by the demands of economics, of motherhood, of social responsibility: the damage inflicted, that is, by everyday life.³² And in her short preface to *Yonnondio* she details the painstaking job of reconstructing, forty years after they had been set aside, ‘odd tattered pages, lines in yellowed notebooks, scraps.’³³ What is foregrounded here is a model of writing—any writing—as a process of interminable and heroic struggle, and it is no accident, surely, that writers themselves have been drawn to this. Margaret Atwood, reviewing *Silences*, noted that ‘respect’ was too pale a word, and ‘reverence’ more like it, as descriptive of the esteem in which Olsen was held by women writers, who ‘even more than their male counterparts, recognise what a heroic feat it is to have held down a job, raised four children and still somehow managed to become and to remain a writer.’³⁴ Scott Turow, a former writing student of Olsen’s, recalled in a review of *Yonnondio* his sense of awe when granted a privileged viewing of fragments of the original manuscript:

³¹ Wald, *Exiles from a Future Time*, p. 96.

³² Olsen, *Silences*, p. 39.

³³ ‘A Note About This Book’, in *Yonnondio* (no page numbers).

³⁴ Margaret Atwood, ‘Obstacle Course’, in Nelson and Huse (eds.), pp. 250-252 (p. 250).

I saw a section of it then, typed and handwritten on greenish sheets, the paper so brittle with age that the edges flaked cleanly like chips of paint when touched: the few chapters were bound together with an old, curliqued paperclip, a kind that I had never seen, and I recall that somehow that clip became symbolic to me of the entire manuscript, a human design, useful, ingenious, forgotten'.³⁵

A legitimate concern with the privations of literary production is here transferred onto the writing itself, which, at least insofar as a part is taken for the whole, is thus fetishized. The labour process is congealed at the same time as it is effaced, transformed into a mysterious object, whose secret—which is to say the same thing as its reality—is thereby one step removed. But Turow is surely aware of this, and his displacement of the pathos of production onto a weird piece of stationery operates as a counter-fetish to the normalised reifications of the literary marketplace. What is so striking about *Yonnonidio* is that just as at key points the novel steps over the bounds of its own limits, so too the history of the book's reception, pieced together through reviews, monographs and personal testimony such as Turow's, brings into sharp focus the critical process at work.

By the time *Yonnonidio* was eventually published, a resurgence of vanguardist activity secured a willing audience for Olsen's belated intervention. Art critic Hal Foster is interested in the political valences of this post-war neo-avant-garde, 'a loose grouping of North American and Western European artists of the 1950s and 1960s who reprised and revised such avant-garde devices of the 1910s and 1920s as collage and assemblage, the readymade and the grid, monochrome painting and constructed sculpture.'³⁶ For Bürger, of course, any such efforts to replay the anti-aesthetic attack of the failed historical avant-garde simply engorge the already satiate appetite of the omnivorous institution. Foster engages this account at two critical junctures. Firstly, for a theory supposedly informed by an understanding of history as dialectical process, Bürger's retelling of events is uncomfortably linear, a 'narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after' (p. 13). Secondly, although the failure of the historical avant-garde signals the moment of a kind of epistemological break—the realisation that no purely formal intervention will ever again even hold out the hope of punching its way back through into the praxis of life—Bürger's dogged insistence on this very point, holding apart as it does the twin poles of art and life, seems to fall into the trap already in wait for the historical avant-garde itself: the

³⁵ Scott Turow, review of *Yonnonidio*, *ibid.*, pp. 28-32 (p. 29).

³⁶ Foster, *Return of the Real*, p. 1. Five consecutive references are here included in the text.

illusion, that is, of immediacy, as if life ‘were simply *there* to rush in like so much air once the hermetic seal of convention is broken’ (p. 15 [emphasis in the original]). For Foster this could never happen, and he offers instead a model of institutional critique moving away from ‘grand *oppositions* to subtle *displacements*’ (p. 25 [emphasis in the original]). Crucially, these displacements take place in temporality as much as they do in any movement between the imaginary and the real, and Foster, as a working through of Bürger’s foundational text, elaborates his own theory of historical and neo-avant-gardes as constituted ‘*in a deferred action that throws over any simple scheme of before and after, cause and effect, origin and repetition*’ (p. 29 [emphasis in the original]).

The recovery of *Yonnondio* in the mid-seventies, it would seem, lends itself exceptionally well to Foster’s notion of ‘deferred action’, the sense of ‘a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working’ (p. 1). Here, after all, was a reinvigorated modernism, one that could counter its politically deracinated, institutionalised double, matching its evasive strategies move for move. The hierarchical determination of time implicit in high modernism, as in Eliot’s appeal to the distant past as sanctuary from a degraded present, is negated as the modern itself returns to haunt the contemporary with echoes of both lost promise and repressed pain. Moreover, as Constance Coiner points out, the passage of time immanent to the novel itself forms part of its praxis. The intrusive narrator of the cameo scene reappears at strategic points throughout the novel, and as Coiner carefully elucidates, the cumulative effect of these ruptures is to make us aware that what is being represented is not an individual voice at all but rather a collective one, with an ‘ironic and allegorical perspective on individual subjugation and revolt.’³⁷ This valorisation of plurality can only take place over time, over the course of reading and rereading. Truth to be told there is as much of Proust as of Brecht in the way Olsen crafts memory into substantive layers. The heuristics of literary modernism, however, were developed as means of resisting reification, as ways of claiming autonomy status in opposition to the marketplace, and specifically against the emergence of mass culture. It is no less true of Cantwell’s Johnny Hagen than it is of Lawrence’s Richard Somers that the target of his bitterness is the popular press.³⁸ What makes *Yonnondio* particularly amenable

³⁷ Coiner, p. 190.

³⁸ For a reading of *Kangaroo* which explores the novel’s double discomfort both with mass culture and modernism, see Tony Pinkney, *D. H. Lawrence and Modernism* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1990), pp. 106-123.

to reception in a context framed by the neo-avant-garde is therefore its refusal—despite its manifest allusion to modernist technique—to draw hierarchical distinctions between cultural spheres.

The wasteland is of course a central image in modernist iconography, and the proletarian avant-garde indeed wasted no time in re-appropriating its contents for its own purposes. Were the proletarian grotesque to be found anywhere, it would be here, beyond the administered spaces of Fordist production, amidst the Hoovervilles and scrap mountains of the Depression-era hinterlands. As early as 1928, Michael Gold had published his ‘Love on a Garbage Dump (32nd Attempt at a Short Story)’ in *New Masses*. ‘I will not be picturesque, and describe the fantastic objects that turned up during a day on this conveyor. Nor will I tell how the peasants whimsically decorated themselves with neckties, alarm clocks, ribbons, and enema bags’, he wrote, in characteristically self-contradictory mode.³⁹ During the thirties the importation of the wreckage of consumer society—understood not simply as discarded commodities but also of whole communities—into the proletarian novel achieved privileged status as an anti-aesthetic, as art against itself *par excellence*. Typically, this gesture was accompanied by images of human disfigurement. In Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933), protagonist Larry Donovan runs into a Hooverville dweller whose ‘toothless jaws stretched into a yawn’; in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Tom Joad has to deal with a ‘spectre’ of a junkyard worker: ‘One eye was gone, and the raw, uncovered socket squirmed with eye muscles when his good eye moved.’⁴⁰ In *Yonnonidio*, Olsen recasts such grotesques as dignitaries of the margins: ‘the nameless FrankLloydWrights of the proletariat [who] have wrought their wondrous futuristic structures out of flat battered tin cans’ (*Yonnonidio*, p. 69). Deformation, moreover, is overwritten, absorbed by the texture of Olsen’s centrifugally expansive prose and itself refigured as a kind of material plenitude.⁴¹ In the eighth and final chapter, as the heat of July builds, ‘the children of packingtown turn from June wildnesses to deeper, more ancient play’ (p. 149), marking out their territory on the town dump, ‘in passionate absorbed activity’. Just as ‘strange structures’ are raised and ‘strange vehicles move’ (p. 150) as the

³⁹ Folsom, ed., p. 178.

⁴⁰ Jack Conroy, *The Disinherited: A Novel of the Thirties* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 233; John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951), p. 163.

⁴¹ Coiner writes that the narrative intrusions in *Yonnonidio* ‘constitute an exploration of the conditions necessary to maximize the possibility of heteroglossia’ (p. 191). As far as the final chapter of the novel is concerned, this is something of an understatement.

children—and adults—scavenge for all the reusable detritus of consumer society they can lay their hands on, so the chapter is pieced together in a remarkable bricolage of some thirty or more distinct voices and registers which, propelled by the mounting temperature, the punishing speed-up system at work, the brute intensification of daily existence, lurches towards completion. To the voice of the narrator is added those of each of the major characters, of the school authorities, of chanting children, of fragments of children's stories, of crying babies, of the workers in the packinghouse, of 'a dozen dialects' (p. 160). This heteroglossia is overwhelming, the human voice itself distorted into something monstrous or grotesque, horribly enmeshed with 'the shuddering drum of the skull crush machine' (p. 165) in the industrial slaughterhouse. Even at night, sounds persist in the 'Sad rustle of trees in the unmoving trees and the creak of bedsprings as the sleepless ones toss' (p. 160). Small wonder then, that Anna Holbrook poses the not-so-rhetorical question: 'Isn't there enough noise around here already?' (p. 152)

'If artworks are answers to their own questions,' writes Adorno, 'they themselves thereby truly become questions.'⁴² Only through the rigorous exploration of its own formal logic, by tracing its own outline from within, as it were, can the artefact discover anything in any real sense objective. Exponents of the proletarian grotesque sought out some space along the intersections of genre where cultural production could summon something that, whilst cognitive in essence, could gain the momentum of material force. This paradoxical desire was neither an appeal to metaphysics nor logocentrism, but historically determined. The spectre of a society so malformed by the senseless amassing of commodities that it is incapable of consuming its own products haunts the twenties and thirties, and for Kenneth Burke, whose critical work supplies the framework for the proletarian grotesque, the sheer wrong-headedness of the economic imperative is matched by a concomitant imbalance in the apotheosis of facts over forms.⁴³ Form acts as real presence, as a necessary counter to a barrage of information that, emanating from sundry positivist discourses, becomes misinformation simply because there is so much of it. Even if the form itself is obscure, so much the better, as its outline marks out a space, the possibility of a counter-statement to

⁴² Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Athlone Press, 1999), p. 6.

⁴³ For Burke on overproduction and its relation to culture see 'Psychology and Form' in *Counter-Statement* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), pp. 29-44. 'It would be absurd to suppose that such social disorders would not be paralleled by disorders of culture and taste,' he writes, 'especially since science is so pronouncedly a spiritual factor. So that we are, owing to the sudden wealth science has thrown upon us, all *nouveaux-riches* in matters of culture, and most poignantly in that field where lack of native firmness is most readily exposed, in matters of aesthetic judgment' (pp. 31-32).

the relentless psychology of information. In *The Land of Plenty* the possibility of such a space is figured as darkness. This is Burke's perspective by incongruity: inner psychology laid bare by the stripping away of external stimuli. But the method soon proves illusory, because what stands in the way between the subject and direct perception of the real is not simply information but ideology. Art, because of its formal determination, cannot cause a rupture in reified consciousness but only express one. Artworks *are* pieces of reified, solidified subjectivity. The darkness in Cantwell's novel, therefore, takes place from within not from outside the ideological. It is no less a production of bourgeois rationality to show that the interior monologue of a time and motion man would look like a series of calculations than it is to suggest that radical change in the relations of industrial production are unthinkable. Carl Belcher's basically empty head is at one and the same time *The Land of Plenty's* inadequate epistemological reach, and the institution of art has no need to absorb the novel as content, transforming it into the neutralization of critique, as Cantwell has in effect already forfeited his right even to neutralisation by failing to provide in the first place much in the way of substantive content to be transformed. Access to Belcher's integral, mathematical soul reveals nothing, because there is nothing there to be revealed. Even within the limits of the novel's fictional space Belcher realises the workers already know all they need to know about him. And he knows they know he knows.

The limits of the proletarian grotesque lie along the border it shares with the disillusioned modernisms of such self-styled aristocrats of the will as the fictional Richard Somers and the real Ezra Pound, particularly in that sense of bitter amusement that spills over so easily into disdain for the popular. If *Yonnonadio* has been rescued from guilt by association from the more extreme entanglements of cultural production with both Stalinism and Fascism, this is for more substantial reasons than historical accident alone will dictate. The story of *Yonnonadio's* recovery is an engaging enough narrative in its own right, no doubt, but almost without exception the whole corpus of 1930s radical literature arrives on the contemporary scene mediated by the critical interventions of the late sixties and early seventies. As Olsen goes to some length to emphasise in *Silences*, discontinuities in the writing process are hardly unusual, even within the range of the established canon. The vagaries of textual reconstruction, moreover, are understood to form a constituent part of the reception of texts such as *Ulysses* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* without anyone suggesting that, should the urtext mysteriously reveal itself, it would do so in the form of

straight realism. There are, however, clear reasons why Olsen's prose should accommodate itself so securely within the scope of a critical praxis informed by the neo-avant-garde, with its privileging—as Foster has it—of collage, assemblage, and the readymade. If the strategies of proletarian writing as a general form tend towards exclusion, a brittle defensiveness that refuses depth as an indulgence, then the writing in *Yonnonidio* works against this template, and thus proves a far more expansive affair. The novel answers its own question about noise by making a virtue of receptivity, and with these levels of volume also come density and warmth. Above all, perhaps, there is just so much *stuff* in the book that Adorno's conception of form as sedimented content is realised as a kind of triumph of determinate negation.⁴⁴

The citizens of Olsen's Nebraska Hooverville subsist beyond the limits of capitalist production, in a liminal space where the right of salvage supersedes the laws of commodity exchange. In the long chapter that closes the novel, against a background of accidents and disputes at the slaughterhouse, Mazie brings offerings home: 'A rusted waffle iron, clothespins, blackened forks and spoons, coils from a crystal radio set, a solderable pot' (*Yonnonidio*, p. 156). There is use value here to be sure, but Anna makes her own cathectic investment in these cast-offs: in the ink bottle she soaks and scrubs a dozen times, 'beautiful [...] for the light shining through'; in a saucer, 'its cracks adding a ghost mysteriousness to its landscape' (*Yonnonidio*, p. 156). As Olsen's prose moves away from a mere cataloguing—by becoming itself a kind of collage—we also move away from the general form of the proletarian novel: the limits of bitter amusement are crossed. The more intensely the narrative piles up debris, the more miserable the lives of its characters become, and the further this content is disavowed. The useless is transformed into the useful; the worthless into value. One adolescent inhabitant of the dump, Ginella, distinguishes herself by the 'pagan island' of her tent, where 'Flattened tin cans, the labels torn off to show the flashing silver, are strung between beads and buttons to make the shimmering, showy entrance curtains' (*Yonnonidio*, p. 157). Ginella is an avid consumer of recycled commodities, and when Mazie visits she pays tribute in the form of 'Anything that

⁴⁴ 'Aesthetic success is essentially measured by whether the formed object is able to awaken the content [*Inhalt*] sedimented in the form. In general, then, the hermeneutics of artworks is the translation of their formal elements into content [*Inhalt*]. This content [*Inhalt*] does not, however, fall directly to art, as if this content only needed to be gleaned from reality. Rather, it is constituted by way of a countermovement. Content [*Inhalt*] makes its mark in those works that distance themselves from it. Artistic progress, to the degree that it can be cogently spoken of, is the epitome of this movement. Art gains its content [*Inhalt*] through the latter's determinate negation' (*Aesthetic Theory*, pp. 139-140).

dangles, jangles, bangles, spangles.’ The commodities Ginella relishes above all others, however, are her ‘text: the movies’, and through her voice, lines from popular cinema are interpolated into the novel: ‘O my gigolo, my gigolo. A moment of ecstasy, a lifetime of regret’ (*Yonnondio*, p. 158). The proletarian grotesque is above all an aesthetic of damage, and as Ginella reroutes the clichés of 1920s mass culture through the forms of literary modernism something emerges that, by means of its internal contradictions, projects an outward appearance so disfigured as, paradoxically, to approach the sculptural. To some extent this must be—as commentators such as Wald and Turow have in their own ways suggested—a side-effect of Olsen’s biography as much as a matter of conscious technique. Yet even in the earliest published versions of the novel, attention is drawn to the pathos of Mazie’s efforts to bring about concrete, determinate effects through the prior abstractions of language. In the ‘complete’ work passed down to us now, this process is reduplicated in the shape of a text in which deformations familiar from Woolf, Joyce and their epigones appear as a textural analogue to economic damage inflicted on the Depression decade’s surplus populations. The moments of ecstasy experienced by the likes of young Johnny Hagen may—in their immediate aftermath—have seemed only to have succeeded in ushering in lifetimes fought out on the margins. But as we shall see in the next chapter, sometimes comically idealistic attempts to fuse modernist forms with labour activism during the New Deal era led to the emergence of cross-disciplinary currents with sufficient momentum to carry the flotsam of the proletarian avant-garde on towards the mass cultural celebrations of the post-war years.

Chapter 3.

Crisis of Demand: Modernism Meets the New Deal

‘NMQR ... will do more for U.S.A. than the N.R.A.’, composer Charles Ives wrote to colleague Henry Cowell in March 1934.¹ Franklin Roosevelt’s National Industrial Recovery Act was amongst the lynchpins of New Deal legislation, and included the infamous Section 7(a), enshrining employees’ rights to organise and bargain collectively through representatives ‘of their own choosing’. Cowell’s *New Music Quarterly Recordings* series was advertised in fliers at the time as a ‘non-profit organisation for the purpose of issuing recordings of modern American serious composers, including chamber, orchestra, solo works and choruses.’² Ives’s enthusiasm for Cowell’s recordings series came from out of the depths of the Great Depression, and his quip registers amazement at the news that seventy or so people in mid-thirties America ‘had dollars for a record’ and managed a subscription to NMQR. Just a little beneath the surface, however, lies a more serious point. Ives’s comment sets what he clearly perceives as two very distinct forms of autonomy against each other. Committed to the idea that freedom from the profit motive was the only effective way to guarantee artistic integrity, as a matter of principle Ives refused payment for the reproduction or recording of his work, and reacted explosively when publishers registered copyright restrictions - in his name but against his will - on his own compositions.³ This uncompromising individualism, however, did not mesh well with the kind of discipline and deferral to a common purpose implicit in trade union organisation. Ives’s compositions are difficult, not only in the sense of being technically demanding, but also to the extent of seeming plain awkward or even—for a full orchestra—wasteful of resources. This kind of difficulty, even had the demand been there to stage

¹ Quoted in Rita Mead, *Henry Cowell’s New Music 1925-1936: The Society, the Music Editions, and the Recordings* (Ann Arbor: UMI University Press, 1981), p. 265.

² Flier reproduced in Mead, p. 308. The recording of Siegmeyer’s composition can be heard on *Songs for Political Action: Folk Music, Topical Songs, and the American Left 1926-1953*, produced by Ronald Cohen, Dave Samuelson, Richard Weize (Bear Family Records, 1996).

³ In his book on Ives, Henry Cowell recalls the composer’s fury on discovering *New Music* had – as a matter of routine – taken out copyright on sections of Ives’ Fourth Symphony published in the review: ‘EVERYBODY who wants a copy is to have one! If anyone wants to copy or reprint these pieces, that’s FINE! This music is not to make money but to be known and heard. Why should I interfere with its life by hanging on to some sort of personal legal right in it?’ Henry Cowell and Sidney Cowell, *Charles Ives and His Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), p. 121.

Ives's symphonic works in all their extravagant, idiosyncratic glory, meant that musicians' union regulations effectively debarred a significant part of his *oeuvre* from public performance in the US until well into the 1960s.⁴ Behind the scenes, though, forces were at work that would collapse the inherited distinctions between the various kinds of labour represented by, on the one hand, modernist art, and on the other, organised industrial manufacturing. Despite the best efforts and intentions of artists and workers to meet each other halfway, it would be technological change that, ultimately, was to mediate these shifts in the relations of production.

Musicians during the 1930s were hit hard not only by the Depression but also by increasing mechanization. Radios and phonographs were favoured over live performances, and sound in film led to mass redundancies. In 1934 the American Federation of Musicians estimated that seventy per cent of America's musicians were unemployed.⁵ Despite all this, optimism as to the potential of recording technology was widespread amongst listeners who from the perspective of the twenty-first century may appear to have been most likely resistant to change during the years leading up to WWII. Adorno, whose barbed critique of the emergent culture industry now seems hopelessly anachronistic, if not altogether indefensible, waxed lyrical in the thirties as to the virtues of the 78-rpm disc. In the essay 'The Form of the Phonograph Record' (1934), published under the pseudonym Hektor Rottweiler, the full panoply of objections cultural studies has conditioned us to anticipate Adorno *would* raise about recorded music—its reification, its non-immediacy, its commodity status—are pointed to as markers of genuine worth. Whilst the flattened shape of the phonograph record somehow embodies the two-dimensionality of a society come to enshrine in its systems of exchange the dominance of things over people, 'the contours of its thingness' embody a paradox:⁶

There is no doubt that, as music is removed by the phonograph record from the realm of live production and from the imperative of artistic activity and becomes petrified, it absorbs into itself, in this process of petrification, the very life that would otherwise vanish [...] Therein may lie the phonograph record's most profound justification, which cannot be impugned by an aesthetic objection to its reification.⁷

⁴ Ibid., pp. 116-118. Ives' *Symphony No. 4* was first performed in its entirety in 1965.

⁵ Kenneth J. Bindas, *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1995), pp. 1-2.

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Form of the Phonograph Record', in *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. by Richard Leppert (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002) pp. 277-282 (p. 278).

⁷ Ibid., p. 279.

Weighed down by the responsibility of its space in social history, art can only relax its critical stance and unfold a redemptive quality in another context. For Adorno the truth contained in art *is* the hope it holds out to be meaningful somewhere else, later. The potential of recorded, totally objectified music—because a moment of evanescence can be transported through space and time—is to be ‘an archaic text of knowledge to come’.⁸ Moreover, the ‘thingness’ of the gramophone record has something significant to tell us in the here and now. Thomas Y. Levin, in his reading of the Adorno essay, shows that this meaning relates to the spiral scratch of the phonograph record itself, the physical inscription on the surface of the disc. What is lost in the commodification of the musical event is gained in ‘the nonarbitrariness of the acoustic groove produced by the indexical status of the recording.’⁹ For Adorno, in other words, the technological advance by means of which it becomes possible actually to etch sounds onto a two-dimensional surface liberates music from the arbitrary system of musical notation. Unlike, say, literary work, music now takes on the character of ‘true’ language in the extent to which its material inscription, indecipherable to the eye, enables it to bypass ideological mediation.

If Adorno’s argument seems to open itself out to a metaphysics of presence, it is important to note that the potential of the phonograph record as anterior to the limits of representation must remain for the moment precisely that—only a possibility. The condition of that possibility is silence. For Ives just as much as for Adorno, the connection between sound and music is purely conventional. ‘That music must be heard is not essential—what it *sounds* like may not be what it *is*’, Ives writes in *Essays Before a Sonata* (1920).¹⁰ If music itself is not identical with the sounds produced either by means of recording technology or by musical instruments, any musical performance is thus always to some extent a representation, a reproduction of an already existent composition. But this is not to say that the sounds in a composer’s head are only ever manifestations of a degradable ideal. In Adorno’s writing music is objective insofar as it exists independently of the listener, material insofar as the act of composition itself takes place within the constraints both of the state of development of existing musical materials and of society. ‘While works of art hardly ever attempt to imitate society and their creators need know nothing of it,’ he

⁸ Ibid., p. 280

⁹ Thomas Y. Levin, ‘For the Record: Adorno on Music in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility’, *October*, 55 (1990), pp. 23-47 (p. 33).

¹⁰ Charles Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata and Other Writings* (New York: Norton, 1962), p. 84.

writes in *Philosophy of Modern Music* (1947), ‘the gestures of the works of art are objective answers to objective social configurations.’¹¹ As for Ives, there is more than a hint of the Ideal in his outpourings, to be sure. All the same, his glimpses of transcendence are firmly rooted in the texture of everyday life. The influence of Emerson and Thoreau, made explicit in his *Concord Sonata* (1920), was foreshadowed by a childhood epiphany, early on a Memorial Day morning, as the sound of a marching band outside his window brought the young composer to an intuition of hidden connections beneath the surface of phenomena.¹² As Henry Cowell put it, Ives’s music came into being as an experimental method for investigating ‘the relations between things, testing out music by life and life by music, and building abstract musical structures like concrete events.’¹³ This sense that Ives’s working method somehow embodies simultaneously a high degree of abstraction and also a kind of realism, the working out of a profoundly mimetic impulse, finds expression in the composer’s own theoretical writings: ‘is not pure music, so-called,’ he asks, ‘representative in its essence?’¹⁴

Whatever else it may be charged with, in Ives’s compositions music is given the task most often of representing itself. His carefully developed use of quotation reaches its apotheosis in the *Concord Sonata*, where fragments of the opening phrase of Beethoven’s *Fifth Symphony* are interspersed as a key to understanding what otherwise eludes comprehension as a coherent development of the sonata form. Ives’s quotations are not merely allusions to the work of other composers, however. In his *Holidays Symphony* snatches of popular tunes are figured as elements in an exploration of the contours of childhood memory. ‘Barn Dance’, a section from the *Washington’s Birthday* (1913) movement, was recorded for the *NMQR* series in May 1934.¹⁵ A montage of disjointed phrases, ‘Camptown Races’ and ‘For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow’ amongst them, the recording achieves a formal realism by the route of self-reflexivity. More than an empty gesture, music about music, the piece is suggestive of movement through a falteringly remembered, carnivalesque landscape. This blend of high and popular sources, moreover, is characteristic of the American modernism developed by both Ives and Henry Cowell. In the

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 98.

¹² See *Essays Before a Sonata*, pp. 30-31

¹³ Cowell (1969), p. 6.

¹⁴ Quoted in Cowell (1969), p. 82.

¹⁵ The *NMQR* recording was reissued in 1971 on an American Orion LP, Nicolas Slonimsky, *History Making Premieres* (ORD 7150).

early piece *The Tides of Manaunaun* (1917), Cowell counters a traditional-style melody with rolling, dissonant chords. It takes no great leap of the imagination to hear these ominous waves of sound as directly mimetic. But the piece, written as a prelude to an opera based on Irish mythology, also functions as a kind of meditation on temporality, an argument about cause and effect. The tides in question are those of the god of motion, who, as Cowell explained in 1963, on a Smithsonian/Folkways recording of his work, was said to have animated the constituent particles of the universe.¹⁶ There is thus a double movement at work: whilst the huge, chromatic chords, often left to decay, threaten to submerge the faltering melody line, the melody itself comes to stand for a figurative tradition arising as the congealed residue of an elemental abstraction.

The conviction that self-conscious experimentation had as its aim the discovery of material elements residual in experience lay behind Cowell's musical formulations from an early age. The role of technological development in bringing the latent to the fore was central. 'The reason for reviewing certain scientific and historical aspects of music is not to bring out new facts, but to present these facts in a new light,' he wrote in the piece eventually published in 1930 as *New Musical Resources*.¹⁷ Because of improvements in methods of construction, modern instruments are rich in overtones, dissonant tones generated in mathematical ratios. The modern ear, therefore, 'cannot help being aware [...] of sounds which would formerly have been called discords' (pp. 4-5). The unconscious influence of these overtones makes their relations the basis of a new musical theory, the idea being to develop new harmonic relations based on the natural ratios of these intervals. As tones of higher frequencies are plotted, intervals become smaller: 'Dissonant tones [...] are those for which the ear, in a certain state of musical development, demands resolution' (p. 10). Harmony, in other words, is relative to the point of musical development reached in any given time; consonance, dissonance and discord are historically mediated values. Whilst past composers adding new intervals have been considered 'dangerously extreme' (p. 14), for Cowell the process is not to be denied.

Cowell's theory had immediate implications for practice. His great innovation in technical terms was the systematic use of 'tone clusters': chords built from major and minor

¹⁶ Henry Cowell, *Piano Music* (Smithsonian/Folkways recordings, 1993).

¹⁷ Henry Cowell, *New Musical Resources* (New York: Something Else Press, 1969), p. 3. The book was originally drafted between 1916 and 1919, when Cowell was a student at Berkeley. Three consecutive references are included here in the text.

second intervals, instead of the thirds and fifths of conventional harmony. As tone clusters are played on consecutive keys on the piano, he developed a playing style involving the use of the whole arm or the fist. This made it seem that he was physically attacking the piano, and so by extension assaulting the genteel expectations of his audience. The *Greenwich Villager* reported that by the end of a 1922 Whitney Club concert, ‘three women lay in a dead faint in the aisle and no less than ten men had refreshed themselves from the left hip.’¹⁸ Yet Cowell evidenced little enthusiasm for confrontation for its own sake. Reflecting on the ‘riots’ greeting the French and American debuts of George Antheil’s *Ballet mécanique* (1924), he noted how derivative the composition itself had been. It was only upon such ‘sensationalisms’ as the Liberty motors and mechanical pianos that Antheil’s ‘reputation as a devilish radical [was] built.’¹⁹ In contrast to the superficiality—as he saw it—of Antheil’s approach, Cowell worked to erode naturalised procedures from the inside, sometimes quite literally, as in *The Banshee* (1925), where the performer delves into the body of the piano. Rather than settle, as Antheil had done, with the intention ‘to amuse Paris for a day—never to consider lasting values’, Cowell developed new systems of notation, providing instructions for complex manipulations of the actual strings of the piano with, variously, the flat of the hand, the flesh of the finger and the fingernails.²⁰ As John Corbett notes, Cowell’s piano techniques had the effect of ‘abstracting the major icon of Western art music and turning it into an *objet retrouvé*’.²¹ Moreover, the increasingly unconventional demands made upon performers, and the difficulty of representing on paper what was actually being asked of them, led, as David Nicholls has suggested, to a semi-improvisational music in which baffled performers had to decide which notes to play.²²

The Banshee is a staple of the avant-garde repertoire today, yet the pathos of this tableau, the concert pianist, alienated from the norms of the bourgeois spectacle—getting it so hopelessly *wrong*—must have held a special resonance, for any who cared to reflect on

¹⁸ Louise Vermont, ‘Musical Note: Butcher’s Paper and Cold Feet’, *Greenwich Villager*, April 15, 1922, quoted in Mead (1981), p. 23.

¹⁹ Henry Cowell, ‘Trends in American Music’, in *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium*, ed. by Henry Cowell (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1962), pp. 3-13 (p. 6).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

²¹ John Corbett, ‘Experimental Oriental: New Music and Other Others’, in *Western Music and Its Others: Difference, Representation and Appropriation in Music*, ed. by Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), pp. 163-186 (pp. 168-169).

²² David Nicholls, *American Experimental Music, 1890-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 134-174. As Nicholls points out, the effect of all this is a situation in which ‘the traditional performer-interpreter becomes a performer-creator making fundamental decisions concerning the music’s public appearance’ (p. 166).

it, during the early days of the Depression. The sense of ‘mass befuddlement’ that gripped the nation in the wake of the stock market collapse, Mary McComb argues, struck not only at the livelihoods but the identities of the middle classes, forcing the realisation that ‘if one’s personal worth could be measured in dollars earned, so too could one’s personal worthlessness.’²³ Prior to 1933, unemployment relief in the US was by and large comparable with the provisions of the Elizabethan Poor Law.²⁴ From May 1933 the Roosevelt government allocated half a billion dollars to be distributed by the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). The relatively meagre average payments of \$6.50 a week did little to stimulate economic recovery. The social embarrassment of compulsory means-testing, moreover, threatened the success of the New Deal as an ideological project. Kenneth Bindas notes that Roosevelt’s strategy to rescue capitalism was intimately bound up with the promotion of America’s self-image as a hard-working nation. The stigma of relief seemed only to reinforce a ‘national despair [which] might erode the drive necessary to overcome the social and economic devastation of the depression.’²⁵ Alfred Hayes captured the listlessness of the newly stigmatised in the falling cadences of ‘In a Coffee Pot’:

We’re salesmen clerks and civil engineers
We hang diplomas over kitchen sinks
Our toilet walls are stuck with our degrees
The old man’s home no work and we—
Shall we squat out our days in agencies?²⁶

It was in an effort to counter this state of socio-economic torpor that the Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects were inaugurated in 1935. Whilst the Federal Writers’ Project managed to find gainful employment for such radicals as Nelson Algren and Ralph Ellison, and the Federal Theatre Project earned the dubious distinction of being closed down by an early, pre-cold war intervention on behalf of Congressman Martin Dies’s House Committee on Un-American Activities, the Federal Music Project (FMP) was a more reactionary operation by far. Director Nikolai Sokoloff, equating patriotic duty with cultural conservatism, adopted a policy which—in theory at least—favoured the

²³ Mary C. McComb, *The Great Depression and the Middle Class: Experts, Collegiate Youth and Business Ideology, 1929-1941* (Hoboken: Routledge, 2006), p. 1.

²⁴ Ralph Purcell, *Government and Art: A Study of American Experience* (Washington DC: Public Affairs Press, 1956), p. 47.

²⁵ Bindas, p. ix.

²⁶ Alfred Hayes, ‘In a Coffee Pot’, in Hicks, ed., *Proletarian Literature in the United States*, pp. 162-165 (p. 164).

‘cultivated’ over the vernacular, classically trained musicians over jobbing professionals, and which, whilst offering work to African American and Mexican American musicians, enforced strict segregation. Despite the high-brow veneer of the FMP’s symphonic show pieces, in actuality the can-do ideology underpinning the project led to novelty acts in cowboy costumes performing at baseball games, or opening car parks. Sokoloff’s insistence that ‘music has no social value unless it is heard’, privileged absurdity over aesthetics, making a mockery of the aspirations of a Henry Cowell or a Charles Ives, for whom, paraphrasing Emerson, ‘silence is a solvent...that gives us leave to be universal.’²⁷

The experimentalism of Cowell’s New Music Society was profoundly egalitarian in its intellectual roots, even if it was not always understood in this way, and even if in practise the society’s activities manifested themselves as ostentatiously cryptic displays of a perverse exclusivity. The same observation might—and indeed was—made of the cultural activities of the organised left during the first half of the 1930s. The conviction that articulation of universal experience demands the destruction of the ego, ‘an abdication of all our past and present possessions’, is reflected in the intuition that music need not be heard to be understood.²⁸ We all share the same imaginative capacity; we all move through similarly fragmented experiential landscapes. The narratives we use to make sense of these potentialities are extrinsic to experience—real or imagined—and so more often than not are a poor fit. The ‘difficulty’ of modernism, in this sense, is simply an acknowledgement of the limits of representation, of the inevitability of failure. But there is also a central ethical dimension to aesthetic self-reliance, an imperative to refuse the inessential, and this overrides economic self-interest. The commercial appeal of an artistic statement is no more a guarantee of its validity than the correct spelling of a proposition is a measure of demonstrable truth. During the mid-1930s, The New Music society, with its concerts and workshops, quarterly review and recordings series, was synonymous with the promotion of a kind of compositional avant-gardism easily, and to some degree accurately, seen as elitist. What is surprising is that this was equated by some with a kind of socialism. Rita Mead points out that in the politically charged Depression era hostile critics used the words ‘radical’ and ‘left wing’ to describe the music Cowell was publishing when once they had

²⁷ Nikolai Sokoloff, *The Federal Music Project* (1936), quoted in Bindas, p. 9; Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*, p. 84.

²⁸ From ‘Intellect’ (1847), in *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed., by Richard Poirier (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 176-185 (p. 184).

branded it ‘ultra-modern’.²⁹ In part this was most likely a reflection of the defensive, almost cabalistic stance taken by Third Period Communists, pressured to dismiss non-Party members as ‘social fascists’. But for those less concerned with the posturing of class-warfare, there was a real sense in which the projects of avant-garde cultural production and an inclusive left politics coalesced. Common to both impulses was a refusal to accept existing conditions as inevitable. There was a politics of form at work, and in itself this pointed forwards to a new form of politics. Cowell’s continuing to release ‘complex, dissonant, iconoclastic’ works in the face of a general orientation towards conservatism, Mead notes, was ‘one of his most powerful demonstrations of radical independence.’³⁰

Counter-intuitive though it may seem to make a connection between high-brow experimentalism and labour activism, a description of something quite like it comes from a somewhat surprising source, Clara Weatherwax’s 1935 proletarian novel *Marching! Marching!*. Here a direct analogy is drawn between formal and political radicalism. Steve, a college friend of Pete Hancock, one of the novel’s rank and file labour organisers, combines the roles of musical and political vanguardist: both ‘the guy that plays the piano’, Pete explains, and ‘the one that first got me going this way, giving me stuff to read, taking me places.’³¹ When Steve arrives at a northwest lumber town’s workers’ centre on the eve of co-ordinated strike action, he ‘[doesn’t] look much as if he’d ever seen the inside of a college’ (p. 195). Shoulders hunched, he walks ‘like a woodsman, going straight to the piano, apparently beginning to take it apart, lifting off the top, and, to everyone’s surprise, removing the rack’ (pp. 195-196). Given the incidence of brutal violence already unleashed within the community during the lead up to the strike, it is hardly surprising that no one feels the need either to refresh themselves from the left hip or to faint. All the same, Pete warns the waiting crowd that although no actual pianos will be damaged during the performance, Steve has abandoned the old-fashioned ways: ‘This music fits our times’, he insists. ‘It’s revolutionary. You never heard anything like it before’ (p. 196). Suitably prepared, the working-class audience awaits the performance ‘feeling no discomfort, but sitting fresh with interest’ (p. 196). As Steve begins to play it becomes clear that what

²⁹ Mead, (1981), p. 267.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 327.

³¹ Clara Weatherwax, *Marching! Marching!* (Detroit: Omnigraphics, 1990), p. 148. Seven further references are here included in the text.

Weatherwax is presenting—some thirteen years since Cowell had shocked the bourgeoisie at the Whitney Club—is the strategic deployment of tone clusters:

Steve seemed suddenly to fall on the lower range of keys. His motion brought forth a gentle roar. He repeated the slow fall; the piano responded, the volume increasing, swelling like a storm, louder, louder every time he leaned on the keys. They saw that he was playing with his whole left forearm, beginning at the elbow and rolling gradually wavelike to his wrist, sounding half the keys of the piano at a time. Now his right hand began playing chords and a melody while the left forearm kept up the rich surging background. (p. 197)

This is as fine a description as any not simply of what one of Cowell's performances would have looked like, but of how it would have sounded. Esoteric though the elaborate theorisation of *New Musical Resources* may be, Cowell's expression of endangered emergence, of the new growing out of the old, is not entirely lost on Weatherwax's audience:

A few of the young children started giggling, punching each other, and flapping their elbows; but the grown workers were leaning tensely forward, some beginning to stand to see better how he did it, while the music, moving faster, louder, flooded to a tremendous climax. Steve was using both forearms now, and occasionally a fist alone. Low excited whispers flew about: "The best I ever heard!" "It's like a battlefield" "Seems like all us longshoremen marching." Now the music made peace with its dissonances, and quieted to silence. (p. 197)

Were it simply the case that Steve's performance serves a purely inflammatory, agitational function, that crescendo is its sole workable effect, there would be nowhere left to go after the silence. No matter how literal, and how context-bound, the terms in which the music is interpreted, those present respond to it as music all the same, and Steve is invited to play three further pieces, all different, 'but with the same disturbing quality in common, the quality that made those listening set their teeth, determined to have their rights if it came to another revolution' (p. 197). The politics of Steve's performance, therefore, lie not so much in straightforward accumulation as in tension and complexity, in a non-discursivity that commands attention.³²

³² For an insightful reading of Weatherwax's novel see Jon-Christian Suggs, '*Marching! Marching!* and the Idea of the Proletarian Novel', in Casey, ed., pp. 151-171. Suggs argues that Steve's performance highlights a contradiction between political art and its purpose: 'The contradiction is that while it is the "conscious cooperation" of men and women with history that is to be imitated, the mode of imitation, "art," often leads us to feel its validity rather than know in any syllogistic way' (p. 167).

It was not only in the realms of fiction that Cowell's musical innovation and radical politics went side by side. Throughout the first part of the thirties, he was active in the New York Composers' Collective. Prominent member Charles Seeger was introduced to the collective in the winter of 1931 by Cowell, who told him about 'a little group of good musicians who are moved by the Depression and are trying to make music that can go right out into the streets and be used in protests and at union meetings.'³³ The project was an attempt to press avant-garde musical technique into the service of labour politics. For these classically trained musicians, there was a direct correlation between the jagged, ruptured shapes of what was then still known as the New Music, and organised revolutionary politics. Seeger had been Cowell's tutor at Berkeley, and he developed the principles of dissonant counterpoint as a teaching method.³⁴ The idea was the complete negation of the bourgeois tradition, a revolutionary overturning of all the established rules of harmony. Not that this meant liberation from rule-based systems; far from it, dissonant counterpoint was a prescriptive diagram whereby each tonal and rhythmic element was to be held in absolute tension, straining against the naturalised expectations of cadence and release. Once this method was established, any return to consonance, either as a compositional norm or as an accidental 'right' note within a single composition, would be a signal of defeat.

If radical composers saw no problem in making use of existing forms towards the project of a revolutionary art—they had, after all, developed those forms themselves—where there was doubt was in the realisation that the concert-hall model of performance was not only being drowned out but also rendered irrelevant by the loquaciousness of the culture industry. Instrumental music *per se*, in a society of cinema-goers and radio-listeners used to the combination of words and music, seemed to lack readily communicable meaning. Hanns Eisler, the European theorist of the mass song form, and a major influence on the Composers' Collective, visited the US in 1935.³⁵ 'Why continue the useless?' he asked:

Take a simple experiment—if you turn on the radio in a car driving along the street of a big city then you will realize that classical music does not fit

³³ Quoted in David K. Dunaway, 'Charles Seeger and Carl Sands: The Composers' Collective Years', *Ethnomusicology*, 24, 2 (1980), pp. 159-168 (p. 161).

³⁴ Nicholls, *American Experimental Music*, p. 90. See pp. 89-133 for a full account of Seeger's dissonant counterpoint theory.

³⁵ See Carol J. Oja, 'Marc Blitzstein's "The Cradle Will Rock" and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s', *The Musical Quarterly*, 73.4 (1989), pp. 445-475. Oja notes that Eisler 'became a role model for many in the Collective' (p. 453).

the modern way of life [...] Sound film is making the masses unaccustomed to listening to music in the abstract but accustomed to seeing pictures of real life while they hear the music.³⁶

The move away from abstraction was embraced by Seeger. ‘The proletariat has a clear realization of the content it wishes to have in the music it hears and in the music it will make for itself,’ he wrote, in ‘On Proletarian Music’.³⁷ This was ‘revolutionary content’, the expressions of class solidarity and struggle now familiar in the literary realm. Of course what the proletariat did not possess *en masse* was a fully elaborated theory of dissonant counterpoint. ‘The obvious thing to do’, therefore, was ‘to connect the two vital trends—proletarian content and the forward looking technic of contemporary art music.’³⁸ For Seeger the connection was already there, waiting to be made. This is the context that frames Collective member Elie Siegmeister’s choice to set to music Michael Gold’s ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’.

In the foreword to his collection *120 Million* (1929), which included ‘A Strange Funeral’, Gold made it clear that—inspired by a visit to Russia—he preferred to label his free verse compositions ‘mass recitations’ and ‘workers’ chants’ rather than poetry as such. ‘The Soviet poets have restored poetry to its primitive Homeric utilities’, he wrote, implying not only that his work was intended for performance rather than solitary contemplation, but also that it would recover something lost.³⁹ What Gold was attempting to recreate was in fact neither primitivism nor utilitarianism but rather a form of intense theatricality, ‘the heroic style’ attributed by Gold to Russian dramatist Vsevolod Meyerhold. Music had formed an integral part of Meyerhold’s complex anti-naturalism from the beginning of his career, which included a ten-year association with Petersburg’s Mariinsky Opera, directing productions of Wagner and Gluck. In his own smaller-scale experimental works such as *The Fairground Booth* (1906), improvisational techniques drawn from renaissance *commedia dell’arte* were thrown together with pantomime in an effort to achieve what Meyerhold himself described as the grotesque, a ‘harsh incongruity [...] [which] deepens life’s outward appearance to the point where it ceases to appear

³⁶ Hanns Eisler, ‘Some remarks on the Situation of the Modern Composer’ (1935), in *Hanns Eisler: A Rebel in Music*, ed. by Manfred Grabs (Berlin: Seven Seas, 1978) pp. 106-113 (pp. 110-111).

³⁷ Charles Seeger, ‘On Proletarian Music’, *Modern Music*, 11.3 (1934), pp. 121-127 (p. 124).

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

³⁹ Foreword to *120 Million*, (London: Modern Books Ltd, 1929) pp. 7-9 (p. 9).

merely natural'.⁴⁰ Meyerhold extended these defamiliarization techniques even to works without music, instructing actors to develop a repertoire of speech rhythms, gestures and pauses designed to unsettle, to counter theatrical illusionism. Thus Gold's mass recitation 'Strike!', in which personifications of Wealth and Poverty gate-crash a board of directors' general meeting, while a chorus of workers heckle from strategic positions amongst the audience, comes in its published form with instructions that 'The lines must be chanted, not spoken; in clear full sculptured tones [...] the vowels strongly emphasized.'⁴¹ The exaggerated artificiality of delivery, combined with the uncertainty as to who is or is not a performer, was designed to break down the division between actors and audience: 'before the recitation is over,' wrote Gold, 'everyone in the hall should be shouting: Strike! Strike!'

Despite Gold's insistence that this element of audience participation 'is what makes a Mass Recitation so thrilling and real', it is clear that a mass recitation or workers' chant remains to all intents and purposes a performance nonetheless, irrespective of any rhetorical pretension towards political efficacy. Meyerhold's development of his avant-garde techniques in a post-revolutionary context was aimed ostensibly at a democratisation of culture, the transformation of 'a spectacle performed by specialists into an improvised performance which could be put on by workers in their leisure time.'⁴² Beneath the scientific gloss of his work during the 1920s, notably his largely spurious concept of 'biomechanics', however, Meyerhold's innovations were rooted in a pre-revolutionary Russian symbolism which, as Edward Braun points out, 'sought a reunion of "the poet" and "the crowd" through a theatre delivered from the hands of its élitist audience and restored to its ancient origins in Dionysiac ritual.'⁴³ Similarly, Gold's 'Strange Funeral' predated his first-hand experience of Soviet cultural production, and belonged a little more securely, perhaps, to the era of his own manifesto 'Towards Proletarian Art' (1921), a document in

⁴⁰ Quoted in Edward Braun, *The Theatre of Meyerhold: Revolution on the Modern Stage* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 74. See also James M. Symons, *Meyerhold's Theatre of the Grotesque: The Post-Revolutionary Productions, 1920-1932* (Cambridge: Rivers Press, 1973), esp. pp. 59-79. 'For Meyerhold, then,' writes Symons, 'the theatre was not to be a mirror which reflects upon us our own daily lives, nor was it a place to depict life as viewed through glasses romantic, sentimental, comic, or tragic. It was, instead, *a place for confronting an audience, through conventionalized means peculiar to the theatre, with a synthesized distillation of life's extremities in conflict with one another* – and let the laughs, gasps, and squirming arise as unexpectedly as the events on the stage' (p. 67 [emphasis in the original]). Thus, Symons notes, 'the idea of the grotesque in the theatre was not for Meyerhold a choice of mode or convention; for him, the theatre was inherently a grotesquerie: i.e., "a deliberate exaggeration and reconstruction...of nature or the customs of our everyday life"' (p. 69).

⁴¹ *120 Million*, p. 171.

⁴² Quoted in Edward Braun, ed., *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 205.

⁴³ Braun (1986), p. 32. On biomechanics see pp. 166-168.

which, as he later acknowledged, he demonstrated ‘a rather mystic and intuitive approach.’⁴⁴ A latent transcendentalism, a version of Emerson’s ‘abdication of all our past and present possessions’, lay at the contradictory heart not only of Gold’s writing but also of the Russian Proletcult movement from which he drew early inspiration. Whilst the influence of Whitman, made explicit in the 1921 manifesto, looms large in Gold’s free verse, ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ also recalls the work of general secretary of the All-Russian Metalworkers union, Aleksei Gastev, whose ‘We Grow Out of Iron’ (1917) portrays the physical mutation of a factory worker into the structure of the factory building itself. As Mark Steinburg notes, whilst this imagery on one level proclaimed to highlight the moral primacy of collectivism, it was also, paradoxically, ‘an apotheosis of the individual man as inspired and heroic champion, as superman.’⁴⁵ Gold’s celebration of ‘Homeric utilities’, therefore, was compromised on two levels from the outset. On the one hand, the rituals of collectivism his work purported to invoke were far closer to Nietzsche’s sense that only ‘from the spirit of music can we understand delight in the destruction of the individual’ than to Marx’s vision of rationally organised collective labour.⁴⁶ On the other, the alignment of his aesthetic with the likes of Gastev—who abandoned poetry altogether to devote his energies to Lenin’s drive to introduce F. W. Taylor’s Scientific Management to the USSR—threatened complicity with the interests of the capitalist class rather than providing an effective counterweight to them.

Mark Seltzer has identified, in realist and naturalist writing of the turn of the nineteenth century and beyond, what he calls ‘melodramas of uncertain agency’.⁴⁷ The growth of industrial production, and in particular the regimentation and division of the workforce along the lines of Taylorism, enables ‘the “discovery” that bodies and persons are things that can be made’ (p. 3). This redrawing of the line ‘between the natural and the technological’ leads to ‘vicissitudes of agency’ (p. 4), worked out in a rewriting of the logic of representation. It is not difficult to see how ‘A Strange Funeral in Braddock’ could be read in this way, as it eulogizes a worker transfigured into a block of steel. Moreover, as

⁴⁴ Folsom, ed., p. 204.

⁴⁵ Steinberg, *Proletarian Imagination*, p. 112. For a detailed account (and translations) of Gastev’s poetry see Rolf Hellebust, ‘Alekssei Gastev and the Metallization of the Revolutionary Body’, *Slavic Review*, 56.3 (1997), pp. 500-518.

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy: Out of the Spirit of Music* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 79. For Marx on existing industrial production as a kind of template for socialism see, for example, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. III (London: Penguin, 1991) p. 276; pp. 288-289.

⁴⁷ Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), p. 18. Three consecutive references are included here in the text.

Seltzer notes, one of the ways this struggle makes itself felt is in the use of the technology of writing itself. The typewriter, breaking the link between mind and eye, dislocates agency. One way of reasserting the link between ‘conception and execution, agency and expression’ (p. 11) is to draw attention to the materiality of writing, and Gold’s frenetic capitalisation (‘LISTEN TO THE MOURNFUL DRUMS OF A STRANGE FUNERAL/LISTEN TO THE STORY OF A STRANGE AMERICAN FUNERAL’) is perhaps on some level symptomatic of this urge towards immediacy. In his setting of Gold’s text for baritone and piano, Siegmeister transposes this redrawing of the line between the natural and the technological through a series of exacting demands placed on the vocalist. At the point of Clepak’s accident—a moment of some dialogic complexity in the text, as the poetic voice reverses its direct address to the reader and instead apostrophises Clepak with a series of entreaties to ‘wake up!’—the tempo has doubled and the vocal locked in at fortissimo.⁴⁸ As a flawed lever cracks and ‘the steel is raging and running like a madman’, the baritone moves to another level of loudness but—as though the very limit of musical resources has been breached—is suddenly required to discard musicality altogether and switch to speech. The discovery that persons can become things is here presented as quite literally melodrama, a term etymologically derived - from the Greek - as the use of spoken word against a musical background. In the aftermath of the accident, as Clepak’s gruesome entrapment is described, the score again prescribes this heightened realism: ‘*Spoken (very rhythmic)*’.⁴⁹ Something of Meyerhold’s attack on illusionism is thus contained in the composition, where speech itself, an alien intrusion into the formalism of bel canto, is made to seem unfamiliar. As Daniel Albright has pointed out, one of the paradoxes of musical modernism is its ‘convergence of the artificial and the natural’.⁵⁰ Here this convergence is redoubled in a further convergence of form and content: the mannered authenticity of speech marked by pitch and fixed rhythm: a human being as by-product of the manufacturing process.

‘Siegmeister, I don’t understand anything about music, and I don’t understand what you did with my poem, but if the audience like it and it means something to *them*, I suppose

⁴⁸ Elie Siegmeister, *The Strange Funeral in Braddock* (Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: Theodore Presser Company, 1936), p.8.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵⁰ Daniel Albright, ed., *Modernism and Music: An Anthology of Sources* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 242.

it's all right,' Gold is reported to have told the composer.⁵¹ What Siegmeister had in effect done was to put into practice Charles Seeger's proposed fusion of the 'vital trends' of proletarian content with the forms of contemporary art music. This can have been no easy task. Siegmeister, a classically-trained pianist who spent five years in Paris studying composition under Nadia Boulanger, recalled that he had difficulty finding a professional vocalist willing to take on board what seemed 'the most crazy awful cock-eyed music in the world'.⁵² As musicologist Carol Oja explains, 'the vocal line is angular, with frequent disjunct leaps, and the accompaniment is filled with clusters, shifting ostinatos, and jolting accents'.⁵³ The piece, in other words, is highly abstract and—aside from a repetitive, dissonant figure in the bass, suggesting a direct analogy with the 'mournful drums' of the refrain—few concessions are made to representation. As Oja points out, this device owes more than a little to the influence of Ives, in particular his setting of Vachel Lindsay's *General William Booth Enters into Heaven* (1914), which opens with the mimetic 'piano drumming' style Ives had pioneered, supposedly, as a child.⁵⁴ *General William Booth* was recorded as part of the NMQR series in December 1934, but there is little doubt Siegmeister would already have known the song through his involvement in the Young Composers' Group, led by Aaron Copland, during 1932 and early 1933.⁵⁵ Ives's percussive, discordant piano technique is not all Siegmeister draws from the piece, which Ives referred to as his 'glory trance'.⁵⁶ Lindsay's portrait of the Salvation Army founder, leading 'Walking lepers [...] Drabs from the alleyways and drug fiends pale' towards physical and spiritual healing, echoes Gold's secular transfiguration of Jan Clepak into the material embodiment of revolution: bullets to be shot 'into a tyrant's heart'.⁵⁷ In both compositions spiritual connotations drawn from the hymnal tradition are brought to bear on subject matter detailing the material deformations of an urban proletariat. Again, as with

⁵¹ Elie Siegmeister, personal letter to the author, January 5, 1975, quoted in John Pyros, *Mike Gold: Dean of American Proletarian Writers* (New York: Dramatika Press, 1979), p. 68.

⁵² Quoted in Mead (1981), p. 353.

⁵³ Carol Oja, 'Composer with a Conscience: Elie Siegmeister in Profile', *American Music*, 6.2 (1988), pp. 158-180 (p. 161).

⁵⁴ For Ives's discovery of 'piano drumming' along with other details of his unconventional musical upbringing see Stuart Feder, *The Life of Charles Ives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. pp. 45-57.

⁵⁵ Oja, (1988), p. 163.

⁵⁶ Feder, p. 113. At the culmination of the song, Feder notes, 'Booth and his followers, Ives and his, the listeners, are all drawn into the trance as Jesus's miracle transforms the members of that "blear review"'.
⁵⁷ Vachel Lindsay, 'General William Booth Enters into Heaven' (1913), at *Modern American Poetry*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Bartholomew Brinkman. 1999-2011. Department of English, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. <<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/>> [accessed 16 February 2012].

Cowell's *Tides*, there is a dialectical movement at work. But here, tension between lyrical representationalism and musical abstraction sets in motion something more tangible, a solidity recalling Georges Bataille's assertion that 'there is an identity of opposites between glory and dejection.'⁵⁸

'Strange Funeral' was premiered in March 1934 as part of the 'International Music Week against Fascism and War', and performed again in June by Siegmeister and baritone Mordecai Bauman.⁵⁹ According to Siegmeister, Bauman went on to perform the song 'mostly at workers' meetings on the East Side and down around Fourteenth Street to collect money for the sharecroppers or the unemployed.'⁶⁰ Although the likes of Cowell and the Collective may have been cynical about self-conscious provocation *à la* Antheil, they cannot have helped being aware all the same that in the context of the concert hall innovation was somehow only to be expected. Notwithstanding the movement towards improvisational models implied in the difficulty of realising scores by Ives or Cowell, there still existed within the institutional framework of music production the quasi-idealist concept of an abstract structure held at arm's length. In the context of a union hall, a context loaded almost by definition with class antagonism, abstraction might very well seem to add insult to the injury of fundamental rights and necessities that remained out of reach. Despite Clara Weatherwax's fictional invocation of a militant, proletarian audience finding revolutionary significance in a tone cluster exercise, there is very little evidence to suggest that Composers' Collective performances were greeted by anything other than bafflement or derision. If for Charles Seeger the connection between glory and dejection had already been there, all that was necessary was to place the two electrodes together. But working-class audiences, it turned out, were just as bemused or even enraged by avant-garde music as anyone else. 'After the official program was over,' Siegmeister recalled, 'the fireworks usually began'.⁶¹

The modernism produced by the Composers' Collective suffered from the same sense of malaise—born of the experiences of WWI rather than those of the Depression-era—residual in the proletarian novel. The appeal of social realism, of an abandonment of

⁵⁸ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), pp. 144-145.

⁵⁹ Oja (1988), p. 178n5.

⁶⁰ Interview with Elie Siegmeister by Cole Gagné, January 31 1977, in the Cowell collection. Quoted in Mead (1981), p. 353.

⁶¹ Siegmeister, script for a radio show about his music, broadcast on WNCN, April 25, 1971, 6, quoted in Oja (1988), p. 166.

formal complexity, of epistemological scepticism, and a return instead to the empiricism of the nineteenth century has to be understood in this context. If Gold was placatory to Siegmeyer in private he was nevertheless damning in public, writing of modernist music ‘full of geometric bitterness and the angles and the glass splinters of pure technic.’⁶² In his *Daily Worker* column he denounced the Collective as ‘utopian’ in its application of the criteria of ‘Schoenberg and Stravinsky’ to culturally marginalized working-class Americans.⁶³ Gold’s attack was levelled directly at Seeger, who, writing in the *Daily Worker* under the pseudonym Carl Sands, had implied precisely the opposite to Gold’s viewpoint that ‘if the audience like it’ it must be alright. Indeed in his review of *Songs of the American Worker* (1934), an anthology compiled by protest singers the Auvilles, a group whose ‘folk-feeling’ Gold had already praised, Seeger railed against the idea that popularity alone could equal revolutionary efficacy. Whilst the revolutionary content of the songs was deemed satisfactory, the melodies were so out of date as to reveal ‘how low and uncritical is the present level of American taste’ and, further, to represent ‘concentrated bourgeois propaganda of a peculiarly vicious sort.’⁶⁴ Barbara Zuck notes that Seeger was later to acknowledge Gold’s prescience ‘in recognising folksong as a proper vehicle for leftist protest in the United States [and] [...] time has borne out Gold’s inclinations on this subject.’⁶⁵ This narrative, whereby folk emerges as a populist negation of the excesses of modernism, however, is one that makes a greater appeal to common sense than to historical accuracy. Robbie Lieberman, for instance, concludes that the Collective could hardly be accused of placing politics above aesthetics, but ‘Ironically, the particular aesthetic mode in which the collective chose to work made its compositions even more inaccessible than were proletarian novels, plays, and films.’⁶⁶ Gold’s point in his response to Seeger’s review, however, was not so much about accessibility, or the lack of it, but rather about the function of criticism. ‘It may shock you,’ he wrote, ‘but I think the Composers’ Collective has something to learn from Ray and Lida Auville, as well as to give them.’⁶⁷ What that was

⁶² Quoted in Robert Cantwell, *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 93.

⁶³ Quoted in Barbara A. Zuck, *A History of Musical Americanism* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), p. 137.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 133

⁶⁶ Robbie Lieberman, “*My Song is My Weapon*”: *People’s Songs, American Communism, and the Politics of Culture, 1930-50* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), p. 29.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Zuck, p. 137. It is interesting to note that since the Auvilles never recorded, their music is irretrievable today. ‘Somewhere along the way, the Auvilles seem to have disappeared from the scene. None

Gold had already rehearsed in his writing on the development of proletarian theatre. Both instances involved competing artistic and critical claims for separate but simultaneous forms: in music, the folk protest song as against the workers' chant; in theatre the full-length drama as against the agit-prop sketch. As James F. Murphy has pointed out, in a case where what was indirectly involved 'was the question of whether the one form should supplement the other or replace it [...] Gold felt that both should be promoted and that separate criteria should be applied to each.'⁶⁸

Henry Cowell was fiercely resistant to any theories of social realism, but this does not place him at such a remove from Michael Gold as might be imagined.⁶⁹ As David Nicholls notes, Cowell's early experiments with non-Western sources of music led him in the 1930s to the 'awareness that radicalism did not exist *per se*, but as a function of difference measured against contemporaneous norms.'⁷⁰ Cowell was not alone, moreover, in his fascination with folk forms. Even on his journey to Paris, Siegmeister had taken a copy of Carl Sandburg's iconic anthology *The American Songbag* (1927).⁷¹ After 1934 he began transcribing traditional music, working with Aunt Molly Jackson and Leadbelly, and provided piano and vocal arrangements for Lawrence Gellert's now controversial anthology of African-American vernacular music, *Negro Songs of Protest* (1936).⁷² In his impressive historical overview *Music and Society* (1938), Siegmeister bemoaned a contemporary professional musical and media apparatus united in affirming 'that music is a mystery [...]

of the various books about folk music and radical politics refer to anything about the Auvelles after 1936, when a couple of their songs about the Spanish Civil War were printed in mimeographed song-books. Apparently, like Lawrence Gellert, they were in effect "written out" of the "approved" history of the radical song movement. Since no recordings of the Auvelles exist, it is difficult to speculate on whether the short lifespan of their musical influence reflected a lack of musical and songwriting talent or some other internal conflict in the radical movement.' Dick Weissman, *Which side are you on?: An inside story of the folk music revival in America* (New York: Continuum, 2005), pp. 43-44.

⁶⁸ Murphy, *The Proletarian Moment*, p. 117.

⁶⁹ For Cowell's dismissal of social realism see Richard A. Reuss, 'The Roots of American Left-Wing Interest in Folksong', *Labor History* 12.2 (1971), pp. 259-279 (p. 271).

⁷⁰ David Nicholls, ed., *The Whole World of Music: a Henry Cowell Symposium* (New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 8. 'Thus, radicalism was capable of pushing the boundaries of acceptance not only forwards (i.e. prospectively, into the "advanced" territory of dissonance and complexity, as in the ultra-modern music of Cowell and his associates) but also backwards (i.e. retrospectively, into apparent conservatism) and—most importantly—outwards (i.e. extraspectively, into the exploration of musics other than those of the Eurocentric art music tradition).'

⁷¹ Oja, p. 169.

⁷² Lawrence Gellert, *Negro Songs of Protest* (New York: American Music League, 1936). For a recent account of Gellert's controversial anthology see Steven Garabedian, 'Reds, Whites, and the Blues: Lawrence Gellert, "Negro Songs of Protest," and the Left-Wing Folk-Song Revival of the 1930s and 1940s', *American Quarterly*, 57.1 (2005), pp. 179-206. It was Michael Gold, Garabedian notes, who named the body of music 'Negro songs of protest' when Gellert first published song transcriptions in *New Masses* (p. 186).

essentially a “spiritual” thing (hence not to be comprehended in “material” terms) [...] and that society and the environment have little or no influence on “great” music.’⁷³ The purpose of his investigation into the autonomy status of music is ‘to find out who benefits from this separation, with its attendant mystification and confusion.’⁷⁴ At the same time—as one of his manifesto points—he notes the role of the individual composer as ‘crystallizing, bringing into focus and giving specific form to social tendencies heretofore latent, amorphous, unconscious.’⁷⁵ Listening backwards from here, what on one level in the vocal part for *The Strange Funeral* seems like declamation in the style of Meyerhold, also resembles the one or two note melodies Siegmeister notated for the ‘protest’ blues in Gellert’s collection.⁷⁶ Overall, there is a sombre, bluesy feel to the composition, which places it in the lineage, most obviously perhaps, of Billie Holiday’s recording of Abel Meeropol’s *Strange Fruit* (1939).

Siegmeister’s analysis of the means of musical production itself reflected a shift in the status quo taking place during the second half of the 1930s, and this shift was directly linked to New Deal policies. Ives’ interest in NMQR, as Cowell’s sole financial backer, was more than simply musical. But Cowell and Ives’s interest in what Cowell referred to as the ‘cause’ was never based on monetary gain.⁷⁷ Where the Composer’s Collective had received, albeit through a series of removes, financial and administrative assistance from the CPUSA, and the later federal projects were backed by Congress, NMQR’s autonomy from political influence was of no small significance.⁷⁸ Not everyone wanted to work for the WPA. Not only was government sponsorship, for some, a threat to artistic autonomy,

⁷³ Elie Siegmeister, *Music and Society* (New York: Critics Group Press, 1938), p. 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷⁶ In his Preface to the anthology, Gellert claims the melodies not to have been ‘arranged’ in the usual sense but rather ‘faithfully set down with hours of painstaking labor, exactly as sung into the records, or as nearly as conventional music notation is adaptable for notating ¼ tones, slides, curleues [sic], indefinite pitches, irregular shifting rhythms, intentional striking of notes off beat by way of embellishment by the singer, and other peculiarities characteristic of genuine Negro folk music.’ Gellert, Preface to *Negro Songs of Protest*, no page numbers. Siegmeister’s work is thus presented as a directly mimetic realism, and features such as the minimal tonal range and time signature shifts in ‘How Long, Brethren?’ (pp. 16-17), and the spoken sections in ‘Way Down South’ (p. 25) are mirrored in the *Strange Funeral*.

⁷⁷ When Cowell used a monthly check sent by Ives to *New Music* for his own personal expenses he wrote back to Ives explaining that once he received payment from teaching work at Stanford University he would return the money to the ‘cause’. Mead, p. 271.

⁷⁸ Both Oja (1988), (p. 165) and Zuck (p. 116) note that the Collective was an offshoot of the Pierre Degeyter Club, itself affiliated to the Communist-sponsored Workers Music League. Seeger was later a little vague about the actual extent of CPUSA funding, recalling that the Party paid the rent on the lofts where the Collective met: ‘Once we got organised, I think we contributed 25c a meeting, or something like that. I think we paid our own rent after a while. But they paid for the songbooks...’ Quoted in Dunaway, p. 164.

but thanks to government intervention artists now identified themselves as members rather than affiliates of the labour movement. New Deal relief schemes such as the Federal Music Project did give people regular paid work as long as they could prove their destitute status (or pull enough strings), but as rumours spread that funding was to be withdrawn these organisations themselves became the locus of protest. If art now became, in accordance with early proletarian writing's aims, a kind of work, it also became clear that as such it left artists open to exploitation, and when their right to work was threatened they went on strike. In June 1937 musicians employed in the FMP staged a sitdown strike at the Works Progress Administration theatre in New York. Members of the Federal Dance Project went on hunger strike in solidarity.⁷⁹ Meanwhile, the Chicago local of the American Federation of Musicians still barred members from recording.⁸⁰

'Take a second-hand car, put on a flannel shirt, drive out to the Coast by the northern route and come back by the southern route. Don't stop anywhere where you have to pay more than \$2.00 for your room and bath.'⁸¹ This 1937 invitation to middle-class America to take to the road comes not from some proto-beat bohemian fringe figure but from a radio address given by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. By the late thirties the imperative to seek out authentic American experience in what Gold had once called an 'undiscovered continent' lay firmly in the mainstream agenda of public life. In 1938 Charles Seeger signed up to the WPA Federal Music Project as an administrator of the folk and social music division. 'There was very little thought in the Collective of people singing our songs', he told David K. Dunaway in 1976. 'The emphasis was on writing things for them to listen to.'⁸² If, in *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*, it is apparent that Siegmester put into practice Seeger's theory of proletarian music, what becomes equally clear is the absurdity of Seeger's notion that this kind of composition could in any real sense come to represent the music the proletariat would 'make for itself'. Seeger's disavowal of Collective methodology even went as far as their choice of instrument: 'We should have sat around and sung to banjos and guitars and ukeleles [sic], no piano in sight. Piano is a killing thing.

⁷⁹ See Ellen Graff, *Stepping Left: Dance and Politics in New York City, 1928-1942* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 101.

⁸⁰ Bindas, pp. 1-2.

⁸¹ Quoted in p. 113.

⁸² Dunaway, p. 163.

It so dominates the voice that it just takes over.’⁸³ Moreover, as he noted elsewhere, what worker could carry a piano on a march?⁸⁴

The location of the *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*’s fantasy of insurrectionary violence somewhere in the Pennsylvania steel belt is prosaically accurate. Industrial disputes in the US were exceptionally violent by any standards, and nowhere was this more the case than in the company towns of Pennsylvania and Illinois, where steel barons wielded dictatorial power. Unskilled workers were excluded from membership of American Federation of Labour craft unions, and when strike action was taken it was viciously suppressed by heavily-armed private security forces. The term ‘industrial warfare’ was no exaggeration: as Bert Cochran points out, ‘Labor history was dotted with the tombstones of lost strikes and crushed organisations.’⁸⁵ In the same month as the NMQR release of Siegmeyer’s *Strange Funeral*, the breakaway Congress of Industrial Organization made its first objective organisation of the steel industry. The ensuing struggle, to no small degree, was fought out on a national level through the manipulation of cultural forms. Although New Deal legislation guaranteed workers the rights of collective bargaining, including peaceful picketing, Section 7(a) was vigorously contested by employers, was rarely enforced and so remained for several years a largely symbolic piece of legislation.⁸⁶ When the CIO-sponsored Steel Workers’ Organising Committee (SWOC) was formed in June 1936, the immediate response of the American Iron and Steel Institute was a declaration of war in full-page advertisements carried in 375 metropolitan newspapers, stating that ‘The Steel Industry will oppose any attempt to compel its employees to join a union or to pay tribute for the right to work’.⁸⁷ John L. Lewis, CIO leader, fought back in an NBC radio broadcast. ‘Let him who will,’ he challenged, ‘be he economic tyrant or sordid mercenary, pit his strength against this mighty upsurge of human sentiment now being crystallized in the hearts of thirty millions of workers.’⁸⁸

Despite the rhetoric on both sides, the insurrection began while the leaders were looking the other way. The wave of sit-down strikes that swept America in late 1936 began

⁸³ Ibid., p. 164.

⁸⁴ Paraphrased in Dunaway, p.160.

⁸⁵ Bert Cochran, *Labor and Communism: The Conflict that Shaped American Unions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), p.98.

⁸⁶ Richard A. Lester, *Labor and Industrial Relations: A General Analysis* (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 306-309.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Cochran, p. 103.

⁸⁸ John L. Lewis, *Industrial Democracy in Steel*, CIO pamphlet No.7, quoted in Cochran, p. 104.

not in steel but in the rubber and auto industries. The occupation of the General Motors plant at Flint, Michigan began on 30 December and ended in victory forty-four days later as GM agreed to the demand for union recognition. A sit-down strike looked from a certain angle a lot like the expropriation of private property and although, as Sidney Fine notes, the strikers' aim was to secure 'meaningful collective bargaining [...] not to transform property relationships⁸⁹', the sitdown was laden with cultural significance all the same, and strikers lost no opportunity to exploit this. A range of events were staged, from plays and baseball games to kangaroo courts.⁹⁰ A Pathé news crew was allowed into the factory, and on at least one occasion the strikers' orchestra left the plant to give a performance in town.⁹¹ Strikers underscored the theatricality of their victory by punching time clocks and blowing the factory whistle as they left. Despite this superficial diversity, all of the performances at Flint had in common a single characteristic that in one sense defined them. This was not a shared revolutionary content, but rather the extent to which, as Kirk W. Fuoss notes, each performance enacted some form of appropriation.⁹² Workers' songs, for instance, were—far from the forward-looking experimental pieces imagined by Charles Seeger—in reality a straightforward resetting of words to existing popular tunes or hymns: adaptations in the style of Ralph H. Chaplin's 'Solidarity Forever' (1915), a classic of the IWW songbook, sung to the tune of 'John Brown's Body'.

In 1936, with the Collective disbanded, Siegmeister was working on transcriptions of Aunt Molly Jackson's collection of rural ballads and Seeger doing fieldwork in North Carolina. Sales for classical recordings had all but collapsed during the Depression. Major labels RCA Victor and Columbia were undercut by Englishman Ted Lewis's Decca, whose cheaply priced popular recordings were destined for jukeboxes rather than parlour gramophones. Cut-throat business practice combined with the repeal of prohibition in 1933 meant that by 1936 over half of US record production was destined for the jukebox.⁹³ It is

⁸⁹ Sidney Fine, *Sit-down: The General Motors Strike of 1936-1937* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 174.

⁹⁰ Kirk W. Fuoss, *Striking Performances/Performing Strikes* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), p. 154.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 155.

⁹³ Andre Millard, *America on Record: A History of Recorded Sound* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 168-169. 'The Depression had moved the focus of the recorded-sound industry from providing music to be enjoyed in the home to cheap public entertainment' (p. 170). Alan Lomax writes: 'I am not exaggerating when I say that this neon-lit, chrome-plated musical master was for the people of the Delta not only their chief source of new songs but also an important symbol of democracy.' Alan Lomax, *The Land Where Blues Began* (New York: The New Press, 1993), p. 38.

tempting, therefore, to recast the April 1936 NMRQ recording of *The Strange Funeral in Braddock* as itself a kind of archival event. '[E]xplosive music', one contemporary reviewer wrote.⁹⁴ There are deep contradictions in the assimilation of Gold's revolutionary manifesto to the gramophones of bourgeois America, in its transformation into a highbrow cultural artefact bought by probably less than a hundred people, few if any likely to be active in the labour movement.⁹⁵ Cowell's tone clusters may—in a fictional context such as the union meeting in *Marching! Marching!*—punch their way through, like Gold's capital letters, to a reassertion of collective agency, yet beyond the rationalism of the theory of the overtone series there is a psychological dimension to the employment of dissonance. In a piece such as *The Tides of Manaunaun*, dissonant intervals figure as a kind of heterogeneity, a collapsing of hierarchical distinction. In *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*, although some of the angular leaps in the melody imply a certain range of subjective freedom, this is always held in check by the compressed intervals in the chord clusters. If dissonance can in some sense be understood as a carving out of space, in Siegmeister's *Strange Funeral* there is only an oppressive, claustrophobic quality. Indeed, the furthest reach of the melody, the major seventh interval from D to D-flat on the word 'strange', because it falls a semitone short of a full octave, suggests the closing down of sensuous space as much as its liberation.

The NMRQ series, including works by Siegmeister and Ives, are nowadays available piecemeal in various formats, but to this extent they are now like field recordings themselves. What was 'new' now sounds totally archaic, whilst much of what is considered 'traditional'—blues music in particular—sounds utterly contemporary. Ives's music that need not be sounded, an ideal configuration, has been brought to the surface in the development of a tradition claiming to be about expression, surface and texture. But behind the valorisation of the popular lies a further ideal, that of the 'folk' itself, a concept rooted in nineteenth-century romanticism which, as folklorist Robert Cantwell notes, 'half perceives and half creates [...] a frame of reference that locates the real even as it renders it ideal.'⁹⁶ Ives's artistic awakening began with a fragmentary experience one Memorial Day

⁹⁴ 'Pioneering in America', *Boston Evening Transcript* (1936), New Music Collection, quoted in Mead, p. 353.

⁹⁵ The majority of subscribers to the NMRQ series in 1935 were either composers themselves, or connected either as students or teachers to university departments. Mead (1981), p. 342.

⁹⁶ Cantwell, *When We Were Good*, p. 38. See also 'Folklore's Pathetic Fallacy', *Journal of American Folklore*, 114.451 (2001), pp. 56-67.

morning. For strikers from Republic Steel South Chicago and their families, Memorial Day 1937 began with the performance of speeches and songs and ended with forty hospitalised with gunshot wounds and ten dead.⁹⁷ There were 477 sit-downs in 1937, and this had not escaped the attention of the steel barons.⁹⁸ Republic Steel boss Tom Girdler declared that sit-downs had nothing to do with legitimate demands over working conditions but were ‘conducted for political purposes.’⁹⁹ As SWOC began organising the Republic Steel workforce, company police bought 75,650 rounds of ammunition.¹⁰⁰ On Wednesday 26 May SWOC called a strike and a walkout began. Girdler responded immediately by housing non-union workers inside the plant along with a fifty-strong contingent of Chicago Police, who were supplied with tear gas grenades by the company.¹⁰¹ As historian Mike Davis notes, this was a pre-emptive lockout, a ‘reverse sitdown’.¹⁰² Tom Girdler had re-appropriated the form of the sit-down strike and turned it back against itself. On Sunday 30th as 1000 or so demonstrators moved out to join colleagues on a picket line outside the Republic Steel plant they marched behind American flags on a day set aside to remember the dead of WWI. Chicago Police met them at the gates of the mill, refused them their legal right to peaceful picketing and most had turned back when the police opened fire. Approximately 200 shots were fired in around fifteen seconds. As the demonstrators fled police pursued them over scrubland and beat them to the ground with clubs. Aside from those shot, a further twenty-eight were hospitalised and another thirty or so received emergency medical treatment. As one war veteran and Memorial Day survivor commented, in WWI ‘both sides at least had an equal chance.’¹⁰³

If it is unlikely that any of the protestors at Republic Steel South Chicago would have heard *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*, it is nevertheless inconceivable that anyone who bought the record would not have heard of the Memorial Day Massacre. In its

⁹⁷ The number of wounded varies according to accounts but the number of dead is a constant.

⁹⁸ Fine, p. 331.

⁹⁹ Quoted in Benjamin Blake, ‘Ohio’s Steel Mill War’, *Crooked River: Exploring Social and Urban History*, 3 (2001), Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio.

<<http://academic.csuohio.edu/clevelandhistory/Issue3/articles/steelpage4content.htm>> [accessed 18 July 2008].

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ The claim about Republic Steel arming of Chicago Police is made by Blake and also by William Bork, ‘Massacre at Republic Steel’. 2010. Illinois Labor History Society, Chicago. <

<http://www.illinoislaborhistory.org/articles/267-massacre-at-republic-steel.html>> [accessed 20/06/2012].

¹⁰² Davis, *Prisoners of the American Dream*, p. 64.

¹⁰³ Unknown informant quoted in St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), p. 322.

immediate aftermath the strike was called off and Chicago Police claimed their use of force appropriate as the strikers had intended to invade the plant. A smear campaign was conducted in the mainstream press and Republic Steel issued a public relations booklet containing a selection of editorials praising police action.¹⁰⁴ The campaign to reveal the truth of Memorial Day would have remained on the fringes of public life were it not for the fact that a Paramount cameraman had filmed the event. Paramount, however, refused to give the newsreel a general release. News Editor A.J. Richard stated that ‘whereas newspapers reach individuals in the home, we show to a public gathered in groups averaging 1000 or more and therefore subject to crowd hysteria when assembled in the theatre.’¹⁰⁵ The La Follette committee, charged with investigating the Memorial Day event, impounded the film as evidence, but in June details were leaked to the press and allegations printed in *Time* magazine. A *New Masses* editorial on 29 June pointed out that audiences ‘trained’ on gangster films were unlikely to stage a demonstration at the sight of the police beating people into insensibility, and that the real reason behind the film’s suppression—and this was confirmed by the findings of the commission—was ‘its decisive evidence that virtually every newspaper in the country lied [...] about the responsibility for violence in the strike areas.’¹⁰⁶

The strikers from Republic Steel, and others like them, were not just victims of police brutality. They also suffered from the mistruths and evasions of the mainstream press. Both the CIO and the steel industry, moreover, were exposed to the full duplicity of the President’s New Deal rhetoric when in the wake of Memorial Day he refused to take a stand and instead declared ‘a plague on both houses’. If legislation such as Section 7(a) raised false expectations, the same could be said of the speeches, songs and demonstrations of the labour movement, cultural performances which, despite appearances, sprang out from an aesthetic of loss. Behind the bravado of ‘Solidarity Forever’ lay the cult of IWW martyrs such as Joe Hill. Alfred Hayes gained far more recognition for ‘Joe Hill’ (1936), his collaboration with Earl Robinson, than for ‘In a Coffee Pot’.¹⁰⁷ *The Strange Funeral in*

¹⁰⁴ Blake, ‘The Little Steel Strike’.

¹⁰⁵ Quoted in ‘Frightful Film’, *Time*, June 28, 1937.

<<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,788070,00.html>> [accessed 18/09/2008].

¹⁰⁶ *New Masses* (June 1937) editorial, quoted in, ‘The Memorial Day Massacre’, *Progressive Historians: History for our Future*, ed. by Andrew McMichael. 2007.

<<http://www.progressivehistorians.com/2008/05/memorial-day-massacre.html>> [accessed 18/07/2008].

¹⁰⁷ See Denning, *Cultural Front*, pp. 270-271 on the influence of Hayes and Robinson’s ‘Joe Hill’ on Woody Guthrie’s ‘Tom Joad’. There is also some anecdotal evidence to suggest that strikers at Memorial Day may

Braddock defamiliarizes this mourning function, and it enjoyed a surprising longevity after the NMQR recording. Anna Sokolow transformed the piece into modern dance, and her reworking even received a Broadway debut in November 1937. According to contemporary reviews the performance relied on a montage of images figuring the transformation of flesh into steel, and at one stage a dancer was held aloft as funeral procession crossed the stage.¹⁰⁸ The choreography, however, has been lost. And although in Gold's papers there is another setting of the poem by Waldemar Hille, a leading figure in the People's Songs movement in the 1940s, there is no evidence of any recording of Hille's version.¹⁰⁹ The NMQR recording of *The Strange Funeral in Braddock*, therefore, remains a vital document of a phase of modernism that has been all but erased, severed from its ties to political struggle.

Listening to NMQR's *Strange Funeral* whilst watching Paramount's footage of the Memorial Day Massacre is an unsettling experience. Something of the solidity of social residue embedded in autonomous art becomes tangible in *The Strange Funeral*'s aptitude as a soundtrack. Siegmeister's disjointed piano is an uncanny fit for the flickering, hand-held images in the opening moments, and as the camera performs rapid sweeps across the scene police and demonstrators seem to merge and the American flags on display chime with the refrain. Whatever sparks the conflagration happens off-camera, but as the police open fire and the protesters flee back over the scrubland the score begins to work against the grain.¹¹⁰ Clepak's journey to work is delivered 'gaily' and strikers are clubbed to the ground as he remembers the fields of sunny Bohemia. After three minutes or so, police begin to load the wounded into the backs of waiting vans, and as Bauman intones the description of Clepak's encasement in hard steel, protestor Al Carvey is shown bleeding to death by the side of the road.

have performed the song. Novelist Howard Fast, author of *Spartacus* (1951), wrote in a 1947 *New Masses* article, '[t]hey sang the deathless tale of Joe Hill, the song-maker and organizer whom the cops had killed'. Howard Fast, 'Memorial Day Massacre', *New Masses* 63.10 (1947), p. 6. Available at <http://www.trussel.com/hf/memorial.htm>, [accessed 18/07/2008].

¹⁰⁸ See Stacey Prickett, 'Dance and the Workers' Struggle', *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, 8.1 (1990), pp. 47-61; Larry Warren, *Anna Sokolow: The Rebellious Spirit* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998), pp. 49-52; Mark Franco, *The Work of Dance: Labor, Movement, Identity in the 1930s* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2002), pp. 113-119.

¹⁰⁹ Hille's version is far less experimental than Siegmeister's, but it is interesting to note that Gold's free verse makes any setting of the poem a difficult task: Michael Gold and Waldemar Hille, 'A Strange Funeral' (1936), Mike Gold (Irwin Granich) and Mike Folsom Papers, Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

¹¹⁰ Meyer Levin's novel *Citizens* is set around the massacre. Even with the freedom of novelistic technique, however, Levin leaves the immediate cause of the conflagration an enigma. Meyer Levin, *Citizens* (New York: The Viking Press, 1940).

‘Steel-making is simply a pretext for profit-making’, according to Marx. ‘The steel furnaces, rolling mills etc., the buildings, machinery, iron, coal, etc., have something more to do than transform themselves into steel. They are there to absorb surplus value’ (*Capital*, Vol. I, p. 373). The United States in the late 1930s, however, was a society undergoing radical transformation from the mid-nineteenth-century European model analysed by Marx in *Capital*. The development of technology, both in industrial production and in mass communications media, at the same time as extending the reach of commodity fetishism ever further into the everyday lives of Americans also opened up new channels for expression and so renewed opportunities for cultural critique. During the 1930s Henry Cowell’s theorisation of the overtone series still seemed a part of the avant-garde; post-WWII high frequency ‘overtones’ became part of exaggerated promotional claims for the ‘high fidelity’ of home entertainment systems: ‘high-tech’ rhetoric that mystified the same 78-rpm players sold before the war with names such as the ‘Golden Throat’ loudspeaker system and the ‘Magic Brain’ automatic turntable.¹¹¹ My placing side-by-side here of the recording of Siegmeyer’s *Strange Funeral* and the events of the Memorial Day massacre may seem an arbitrary juxtaposition; *The Strange Funeral in Braddock* is not *about* the events of May 1937. But what I have tried to explore here is the paradoxical effect that the closer cultural production attempts to attach itself to historical events the more distant it becomes from those events with the passing of time. For Adorno, ‘phonograph records are not artworks but the black seals on the missives [...] rushing towards us from all sides in the traffic with technology’.¹¹² What have usurped modernism’s fractured forms are the flickering absences and distortions of newsreel footage, the scratches on the surface of old discs: not simply mediations, but gradual erosions of historical time. In the next chapter, I map some of these issues back onto the literature of the period, and examine some of the implications of the revolution brought about, not by political activism, but by the explosion of mass-market publishing.

¹¹¹ Millard, p. 202.

¹¹² Adorno, in Leppert, ed., p. 280.

Chapter 4.

***The Bastard* as Art Object Bastardized: Erskine Caldwell's Fine Art of Standing Still**

Erskine Caldwell is now regarded, if he is regarded at all, as a marginal figure, yet at the height of his fame, during the 1950s, he was one of America's most widely selling authors. Paperback reprints of Caldwell's backlist made him a mass-market phenomenon, and by the 1960s his *God's Little Acre* (1933) had outsold fellow Georgian Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*.¹ The horrible fascination of Caldwell's career, reading contemporary critical responses to his work, is that he somehow moved from avant-gardist to realist and then on to purveyor of potboilers all, from an artistic standpoint, by standing completely still. The early, experimental work *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, initially printed piecemeal in *Pagany* and *New American Caravan*, was included in its entirety in the first edition of the 1931 collection *American Earth*, and published in its own right in a 1936 edition illustrated with a series of wood engravings by artist Ralph Frizzell. Kenneth Burke noted approvingly the writing's 'quality of otherworldliness'.² By 1966 the title was available for sixty cents in a Macfadden-Bartell pocket book edition, its lurid cover featuring a young woman in bra and pants, sucking her thumb on an unmade bed (see Fig.2). 'PEYTON PLACE GONE SOUTH', promised the blurb. 'A RAW SCORCHING SHOCKER ABOUT SMALL-TOWN MEN AND WOMEN FIGHTING LONELINESS WITH ALCOHOL OR SEX ... OR BOTH'.³ And yet *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, with its numbered paragraphs and self-consciously artsy musings, remains something of an exception. If the jacket art of the 1966 printing seems to reduce the modernist artefact to a vulgar, fetishized version of itself, there is something fitting nevertheless in the rendering of a Caldwell text as a frozen image. There is a nightmarish aspect to Caldwell's portrayal of the tenant farms, factories and sawmills of the southern states of the US, an invocation of social paralysis rendered in prose always seeming to withhold more than it discloses.

¹ Sales figures quoted in Chris Vials, 'Whose Dixie? Erskine Caldwell's Challenge to *Gone with the Wind* and Dialectical Realism', *Criticism*, 48.1 (2006), pp. 69-94 (p. 70).

² Kenneth Burke, 'Caldwell: Maker of Grotesques', *New Republic* (1935), in *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3rd edn (Berkeley: University of California Press), pp. 350-360 (p. 352).

³ Erskine Caldwell, *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* (New York: Macfadden Books, 1966).

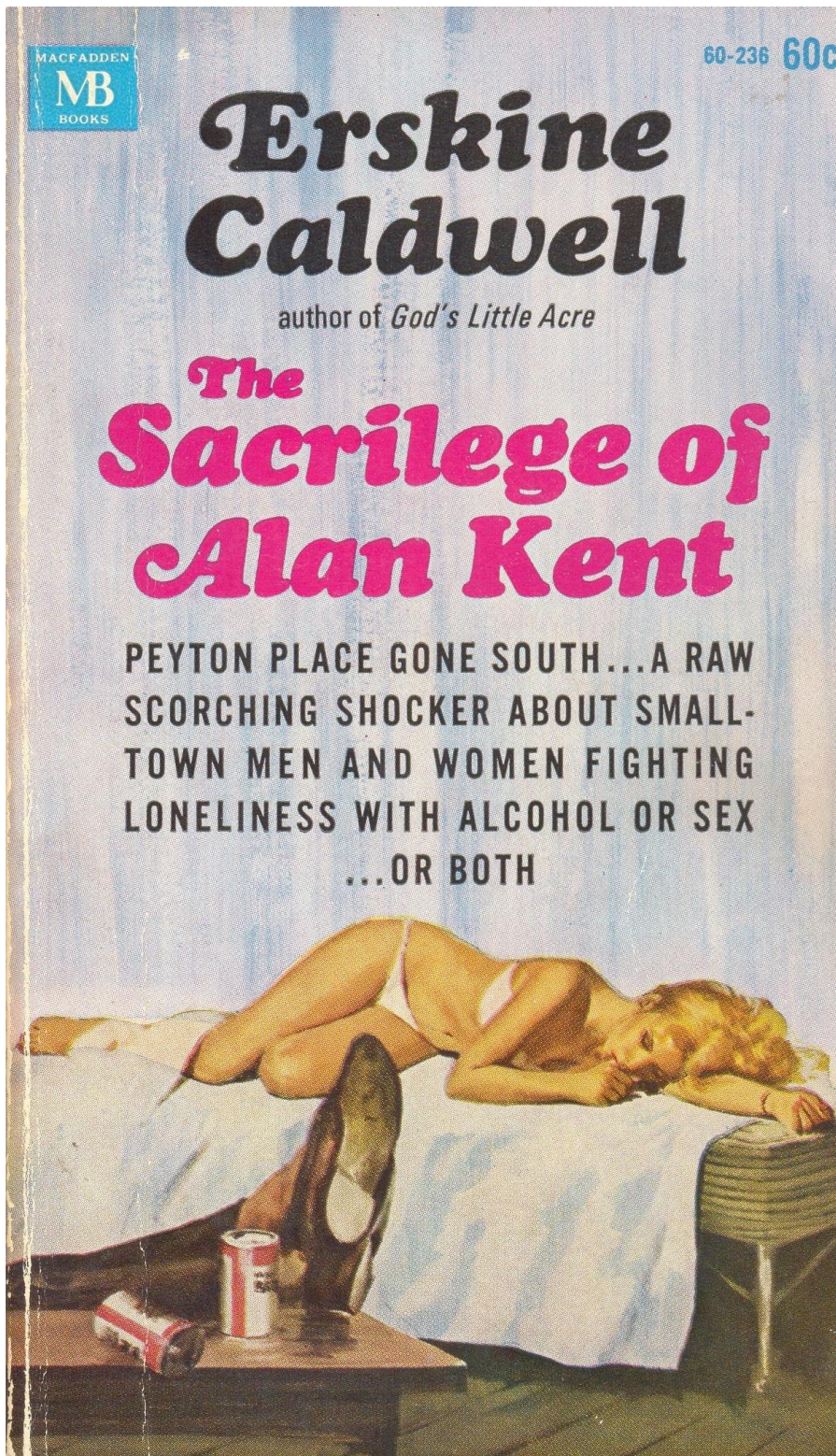


Fig. 2: *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* (1966 edition). Scan from paperback.

Reviewers of *American Earth* portrayed Caldwell as a transitional figure, emerging from out of the archetypal breeding grounds of American modernism but at the same time in revolt against stylistic excess. He was moving things forward by moving back, paring materials down, exposing what lay beneath the surface appearances of art. This process of uncovering what one critic dubbed the ‘primal germ plasm of narrative’ was labelled by others the ‘primitive’, even the ‘new barbarism’.⁴ Within the space of two years, however, the conviction that there was anything new to what Caldwell was doing had been all but forgotten. For poet and critic Edwin Rolfe, writing in *New Masses*, Caldwell’s limitations were ‘crystallized’ in *God’s Little Acre* (1933).⁵ Just as Caldwell’s characters remained static, so the author himself had become stuck, mired in caricature. Rolfe drew particular attention to what he saw as Caldwell’s exaggerated preoccupation with sex, noting that elements of *God’s Little Acre* ‘smack[ed] too much of D. H. Lawrence’.⁶ In so doing, Rolfe reversed the initial trajectory Caldwell’s work was understood to be taking: away, that is, from high modernism. To anyone familiar with Caldwell’s work, the comparison to Lawrence must seem odd. Whilst each shared a thematic interest in frank sexuality, their prose styles could hardly have been more different. There is a dense materiality in Lawrence’s mature work; elaborate symbolism, the layering of description, a strong, at times over-intrusive, sense of narrative voice, all give the writing a distinctive texture. People are always *feeling* things in Lawrence: emotions, surfaces, the play of sunlight over the skin.⁷ Caldwell, on the other hand, makes no effort to achieve anything like this sense of presence. His work is flat, untroubled by elegant variation, and a kind of blankness manifests itself on two levels: first with the minimizing of any authorial intrusion; second

⁴ In the *New Republic*, T. K. Whipple argued that *American Earth* represented a kind of protest against excess. Caldwell, emerging from the pages of *Pagany* and *transition*, archetypal breeding grounds of American modernism, was at the same time at the forefront of ‘revolt against the overelaborate and artificial productions of recent art’. He enacts this critique not by looking forward but looking back, discarding all but the essential, paring down his material to ‘the primal germ plasm of narrative [...] to some unexhausted original rootstock.’ Norman Macleod, writing in *New Masses*, seemed to confirm this analysis, noting ‘Caldwell has turned to the “primitive” in his prototypes.’ The paradoxical trajectory of this headlong descent out of obscurity was summed up by Gerald Sykes in *The Nation*, who wrote ‘Mr Caldwell is one of that group of young writers who have surpassed even the hard-boiled generation in callousness; in fact he has been called one of our “new barbarians.”’ Robert L. McDonald, ed., *The Critical Response to Erskine Caldwell* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 18; p. 21; p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33. In his *American Earth* review, Whipple characterised Caldwell’s treatment of sex as ‘somehow pre-adolescent’. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁷ See for example the short story ‘Sun’, in which all three are intertwined: in D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Short Stories*, ed. by Brian Finney (London: Penguin, 1982), pp. 424-443.

by the withholding from the characters of any capacity for affect. Whether engaged in sex or in unspeakable acts of violence, his characters feel nothing.

Those characteristics of Caldwell's writing seen as marks of failure by his contemporaries have been reassessed in recent scholarship redrawing the limits of his preoccupations. Sylvia Cook points out that, even within the scope of the revisionary modernist criticism practised by Rabinowitz, Foley and Denning, 'there is a certain realm of recalcitrance in Caldwell's writing [...] that resists assimilation.'⁸ For Cook, what makes Caldwell's writing difficult, modernist insofar as it disrupts the linear flow of narrative, is 'the extremity of its banality.'⁹ Both Christopher Metress and Chris Vials, like Cook, draw attention to Caldwell's deployment of repetition. 'Only of late have critics come to appreciate Caldwell's use of repetition as a distinctive technical innovation employed for rich thematic ends', Metress notes.¹⁰ Dialogue patterned from incessant inanity, characters and plots that go nowhere all work towards a debunking of the myth of material success founded on freedom of movement, a false promise in a Depression-era America which 'no longer represented a place where mobility was possible.'¹¹ Caldwell's characters, as Vials argues, 'do not develop or grow', and this places his work in an uncomfortable relation to a 1930s literary left informed by a Lukácsian model of dialectical realism whereby 'character types were to be shown in a process of becoming within a complex and shifting social environment.'¹² Far from rendering his work difficult in Cook's sense, however, Caldwell's use of repetition, as in the catchphrases he assigns to his tragi-comic protagonists, infuses his work with mass cultural forms kept well at arm's length by most left writers and critics. Caldwell dares to mix pleasure and politics, and if the reiteration of salient images serves on one level to reinforce his critique of class and race hierarchies by fixing them in the reader's memory, it is ironic all the same that, in comparison, the historical sweep of politically conservative Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* makes the latter work 'much more in line with Marxian literary forms' (p. 87).

⁸ Sylvia J. Cook, 'Erskine Caldwell: Modernism from the Bottom Up', in *Reading Erskine Caldwell: New Essays*, ed. by Robert L. McDonald, (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland, 2006), pp. 58-76 (p. 59).

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

¹⁰ Christopher Metress, 'Repetition as Radical Critique in Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre*', in McDonald, ed. (2006) pp. 165-182 (p. 167).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

¹² Vials, p. 82; p. 81. One further reference here is given in the text.

In Mitchell's nostalgic vision of antebellum plantation life, 'raising good cotton, riding well, shooting straight, dancing lightly, squiring the ladies with elegance and carrying one's liquor like a gentleman were the things that mattered.'¹³ In Caldwell's contemporaneous portrayal of the South, not only has this catalogue been thoroughly subverted, but to the list may also be added incest, rape, official corruption and recreational violence, in any and all combinations. These are not isolated incidents, moreover. The function of repetition in Caldwell is to show how deeply ingrained, below the level of conscious thought, such behaviours are rooted. In 'Saturday Afternoon', from the *American Earth* collection, the story on the surface is one of workaday routine. Butcher Tom Denny is first seen resting on his meat block, 'fairly comfortable with a hunk of rump steak under his head.'¹⁴ Even the flies that populate his shop have had time to get 'used to coming in and filling up on the fresh blood on the meat block', and the folksy, inclusive tone of the narrative is brought out through the use of second person address: 'You walked in and said, "Hello, Tom. How's everything today?"'¹⁵ The language of everyday life, however, is inadequate to the task of describing the town's main attraction on the Saturday afternoon in question, the lynching of Will Maxie. Denny drinks whisky, and bottles of Coca-Cola are on sale as Maxie is tied to a tree and set on fire. In the closing lines of the story, disembodied phrases from the beginning reappear, set adrift from their referents and mildly distorted: 'While you were waiting for Tom to cut the meat of the hunk of rump steak you asked him how was everything.'¹⁶ The protagonists here are not only able to remain unmoved, they are unable to become moved, and fragments of language revolve around this vacant experiential centre. Words and phrases reassert themselves against their inadequacy to represent, but they fail, leaving only the suspicion that the real is accessible only in some space beyond the referential.

This sense of something out of reach, something unsaid in Caldwell, was understood by some on the left as a form of perverse Utopianism. Writing in *New Masses*, Norman Macleod noted that behind what he described as the 'hardboiled' style of *American Earth*, 'one often perceives a fine strain of sensitivity to human emotions. [Caldwell] is in

¹³ Margaret Mitchell, *Gone With the Wind* (London: Pan, 1974), p. 6.

¹⁴ Erskine Caldwell, 'Saturday Morning', in *The Stories of Erskine Caldwell* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 28-33 (p. 28).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 33.

reality an idealist of the finer sort who [...] hesitates to admit it'.¹⁷ This residual idealism places Caldwell's early writing in a dynamic relation both to proletarian writing and to modernism. For Walter Rideout, a distinct sub-genre of the proletarian novel, one whose revolutionary message is only ever implicit, was exemplified by Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* (1930). Writers such as Dahlberg, Nelson Algren and James T. Farrell, 'refusing the assistance of slogans, resolutions, and other revolutionary gestures, [...] ambush the reader from behind a relentlessly objective description of life in the lower depths.'¹⁸ Here, with the naturalism of Zola an explicit historical reference point, we are a long way from the textured aesthetic of a D. H. Lawrence. It is a perhaps surprising twist of literary history, then, that Lawrence himself supplied the introduction for *Bottom Dogs*. In his autobiographical portrayal of coming of age amongst a ghetto population of itinerant shysters, prostitutes and orphans, Dahlberg limns a connection between social alienation and a kind of blank impressionism. Lorry Lewis, Dahlberg's fictional surrogate, is banished to a Cleveland orphanage. He finds a way out through summer high school and night-shift work in an American Express warehouse, but when he is fired from the job finds himself 'dazed and walk[ing] through the streets of Cleveland like an escaped convict.'¹⁹ Further humiliated by the attentions of a prostitute he has no money to pay, Lorry escapes down an alleyway and jumps onto a streetcar:

The car racketed along the uptown tracks, carrying the Lake Erie wind, lighted stores, fruit stands, awnings, people doing their late marketing through the open window. His eyes, veiled in a film of reverie, seemed dissociated from the head hanging out of the window, passed over completely into all the objects passing before him, liquefying the buildings, houses, macadam, into impressions.²⁰

This sense of dissociation evidenced by Lorry and his friends shocks Lawrence. 'The amount that they are *not* aware of is perhaps the most amazing aspect of their character', he writes.²¹ Dahlberg's novel 'reveals a condition that not many of us have reached, but towards which the trend of consciousness is taking us, all of us, especially the young. It is, let us hope, a *ne plus ultra*.'²²

¹⁷ Norman Macleod, 'A Hardboiled Idealist' [review of *American Earth*], in McDonald, ed., (1997), p. 21.

¹⁸ Rideout, p. 185.

¹⁹ Edward Dahlberg, *Bottom Dogs* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1961), p. 123.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

²¹ D. H. Lawrence, 'Introduction' to *Bottom Dogs*, p. xiv (emphasis in the original).

²² *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

Elsewhere, in his writing on post-impressionist art, Lawrence highlights absence or blankness as the site of a potentially transformative negative charge. In the ‘Introduction to These Paintings’ (1929), first published alongside reproductions of his notorious Warren Gallery exhibition, Lawrence argues that Anglo-Saxon culture has become ‘paralysed by fear’ of the instinctual, and that this retreat from physicality ‘distorts vision’, effectively reifying representational conventions.²³ There is an explicitly political dimension to this paralysis; politics deals in abstractions which have supplanted primordial forms of being. The political and the aesthetic are intertwined in a reading of art history as a kind of fall from ‘the intuitional perception of the *reality* of substantial bodies’ (p. 559 [emphasis in the original]) into the ‘optic vision, a sort of flashy coloured photography of the eye’ (p. 560). This latter tendency reaches its apotheosis in French impressionism, where ‘the body was at last dissolved of its substance, and made part and parcel of the sunlight-and-shadow scheme’ (p. 563). Although describing impressionism’s ‘discovery of light’ as ‘the most joyous moment in the whole history of painting’ (p. 564), Lawrence argues that, because this represented a fundamentally escapist impulse, it is no surprise that post-impressionism has ‘come back to form and substance and *thereness*, instead of delicious nowhere-ness’ (p. 564). This tension between ‘thereness’ and ‘nowhere-ness’ is elaborated in Lawrence’s assessment of Cézanne, the first of the post-impressionists to take a significant step back towards ‘objective substance’ (p. 567). Cézanne’s still lifes reveal themselves as the work of an artist engaged in ‘a bitter fight’ (p. 567) with conventional forms. In these sketchy, incomplete studies, the artist struggles to avoid cliché altogether, ‘just leaving gaps through which it fell into nothingness’ (p. 577). At the same time, by the omission of naturalistic detail, in the apparent artlessness of the brush-strokes, Cézanne brings to the surface an intuitive sense of what is usually absent: ‘all-roundness [...] for ever curving round to the other side, to the back of presented appearance’ (p. 579).

Modernist art is an art of renunciation, a generative praxis with pretensions beyond mimesis. In order to transform the social structure, without falling back into the ready-made forms of past hierarchies, absence and blankness become essential moves for the Utopian thinker. But loss of self, for the individual, is a terrifying prospect. The gesture of modernist art, then, as in Lawrence’s readings of both Dahlberg and Cézanne, is to mediate

²³ Lawrence, ‘Introduction to These Paintings’, in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. by Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 551-584 (p. 551). Nine consecutive references are included here in the text.

these positions, to offer an objective framework through which the imagination is free to range in relative security. In this chapter I look to Caldwell's work a little in this way. And just as, for Lawrence, the real point of interest in thereness and nowhere-ness is neither position in itself but rather the slide between the two, my particular focus here is on the movement between avant-garde and mainstream.

In the first short chapter of *The Bastard* (1929), Caldwell's debut novel, drifter Gene Morgan murders a stranger who unwittingly shows him a photograph of Denver Sal, an itinerant prostitute who also happens to be Morgan's mother. Morgan, it emerges, has previously spent the night with Sal, 'but she did not know he was her son, or if she did know she didn't care'.²⁴ Once the stranger is shot and his body dumped in the river, Morgan, now on the run, both from the killing and from the voices in his head that whisper 'the rhythm of his mother' (*Bastard*, p. 13), compounds his evident lust for self-destruction by returning to his hometown of Lewisville. Beyond this initial criminal act, Morgan's almost total passivity marks him out as observer far more than protagonist; the degeneracy of small town life inscribes itself on his blank surface. Finding work in a cottonseed-oil mill, which does more business, it seems, as a site for illicit liaisons than in the production of openly marketable commodities, Morgan discovers that in this sexualised space the gaze functions as a means of exchange. He is employed to keep watch while the night-watchman transacts with the foreman's wife, and in turn Morgan watches the night-watchman's wife, whom he notices—of course—because she is already watching him. Unbeknown to her husband, she exposes herself to Gene, 'her round white body gleam[ing] in the pale yellowish light from dingy windows of the mill like a statue [...] unveiled in the airway' (*Bastard*, p. 22). It is not immediately clear how we are supposed to respond to this act of revelation. Although, a little later into his shift, Gene is unable to get the image out of his head, and is driven into a kind of cathectic frenzy, he shows no immediate response. In the moment of objectification, as a textual presence, Gene to all intents and purposes dematerialises. We cannot identify with him because there is nothing there to identify with. The same, of course, may be said for the night-watchman's wife, whose subjectivity ends before it begins. In the image of the unveiling of the statue, how far we are from psychological or social realism is drawn attention to self-reflexively, in the automimetic gesture of art imitating art

²⁴ Erskine Caldwell, *The Bastard and Poor Fool* (London: New English Library, 1983), p. 12. Further references are to this edition and included in the text as *Bastard*.

This early instance of a distinctive device of Caldwell's, the use of tableaux situated within the dramatic space of the text, foreshadows the subsequent use of a narrative frame whereby as readers we are made complicit in the secretive performance, brokered by the night-watchman, of an erotic dancer. *The Bastard*, like *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, emerged from out of the avant-garde, but where the *Sacrilege* was a fragmentary event, reconstituted post factum, *The Bastard*, published in an illustrated limited edition of 1100 copies, was from the outset a privately produced art object. As such, there is a patina of originality, an aura, surrounding the artefact, through which the burlesque performance is viewed obliquely. The dancer was 'accomplished [...] and placed amidst finer surroundings she would have no doubt achieved with the motions of her hips and breasts an effect not quite as crude and obscene' (*Bastard*, p. 26). Obscenity, we are reminded, in a rare moment of intrusion, is measured in relation to its surroundings, but there is a double edge to this reminder. In diegetic terms, the night-time mill building—the proletarian workspace—is an unpromising location for the aesthetic, which resides by necessity elsewhere. In the same movement as this pointing beyond itself, however, the modernist artefact, slyly aware of its own haptic allure, implicitly offers itself—and its access to the space of literariness—as a redemptive context in which to frame what elsewhere counts only as abjection. Something of the duality of the relation is realized in Ty Mahon's illustration of the Caldwell scene (see Fig. 3). The men's faces are distorted as they reach out towards the statuesque dancer. Consumers of the spectacle, they threaten the integrity of the object; the performance produces its consumers as expressionistic grotesques. The pathos of this mutual alienation seems to speak for the fate of the modernist artefact itself, impassive to the baying of the mob, yet at the same time leading an unfulfilled existence as a sop thrown out to the connoisseur.



Fig. 3: Illustration from *The Bastard* (1929 edition), available at <http://portlanddailysun.me/index.php/opinion/columns/7098-erskine-caldwell-banned-in-portland> (accessed 27.09.12)

Tradition invests a good deal of authority in the art object, but this authority may jeopardize the autonomy of the work, and this contradiction emerges through the phenomenon of censorship. *The Bastard* was banned by the city of Portland, Maine, where Caldwell ran a bookstore, and charges of obscenity threatened against him. ‘I did not write this novel with obscenity, lewdness and immorality in mind,’ he insisted. ‘I wrote the book because I have a deep sympathy for the people in it.’²⁵ This may or may not have been the case, but it is interesting nevertheless that, given his ostensibly *laissez-faire* approach to narrative technique, the only way Caldwell finds to represent feeling of any sort is by rather heavily-handedly flagging up its absence. Once the dancer has finished her performance, several miniature photographs drop from a locket around her neck and Caldwell allows one to fall face up. It is a photograph of a small child, which, while the men form a queue ‘down at the other end of the shed yonder’ (*Bastard*, p. 25), the dancer replaces ‘unemotionally’ (*Bastard*, p. 27). Towards the end of the novel, Morgan, as he wordlessly contemplates the murder of his own incestuously conceived, intellectually underdeveloped and freakishly hairy child (whom he has taken for a walk in the park) kicks gravel into a stream, ‘unemotionally watching the stones strike the calm surface of the bluish cold water’ (*Bastard*, p. 73 [emphasis added]). Indeed as the plot grinds on, it is not so much the

²⁵ Quoted in Wayne Mixon, *The People’s Writer: Erskine Caldwell and the South* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1995), p. 36.

escalation of violence as the lack of affect that becomes horrific. After a night in the drunk cell Morgan wakes to the sound of a girl crying. He finds her attractive, and so when the guard offers to let him into her cell ‘for about ten minutes’ he readily accepts, rapes the girl, steals her gold ring and goes home for dinner, ‘whistling all the way’ (*Bastard*, p. 37). When sawmill owner John Hunter takes exception to an African-American worker eating watermelon while operating a rip saw, he beats him around the head with a piece of wood and runs to the tool shed to fetch a crowbar. Morgan, meanwhile, sees that in the fray the man has been fatally wounded by the saw. ‘[I]n a moment of compassion’ (*Bastard*, p. 47) Hunter orders Morgan to allow his victim a drink of water, and watches fascinated as the water trickles to the ground from a gaping stomach wound. For Hunter, this is ‘the funniest thing I ever saw’, and Morgan—being Morgan—helps him dispose of the body, now cut into two, by driving it to the man’s cabin and dumping it outside for his wife to find. Hunter confides in Morgan that the year before he had forced another black worker to straddle a saw which had ‘split him wide open [...] up and down instead of crossways’ (*Bastard*, p. 48).

Two major historical reversals impacted on the career of Erskine Caldwell, significantly altering the contexts in which such apparently motiveless violence could be understood. The first of these was the fact that, in the southern states of the US at least, the New Deal was a political disaster. From the publication of his first mainstream novel *Tobacco Road* (1931), Caldwell was criticised for his unflattering portrayal of tenant farmers. Jeeter Lester, patriarch-protagonist of *Tobacco Road*, ‘postponed nearly everything a man could think of, but when it came to plowing the land and planting cotton, he was persistent as any man could be about such things.’²⁶ What stands in Jeeter’s way, leaving him ‘sunk each year into a poverty more bitter than that of the year before’ (*Tobacco*, p. 65), is the collapse of the credit system underwriting his productive relationship—as a tenant farmer—to his landlord, Captain John Harmon. Whilst a sharecropper was obliged to hand over half of the crops they produced each year to the landlord, a tenant farmer could keep up to two thirds or three quarters. Neither could avoid crippling debt, however, as food, farming implements and fertiliser were all supplied on credit arrangements at extortionate rates of interest. Eventually, soil depletion due to overproduction made even these conditions unprofitable for landlords, who sold up what—

²⁶ Erskine Caldwell, *Tobacco Road* (Athens and Georgia: The University Press of Georgia, 1995), p. 78. Further references are included in the text as *Tobacco*.

if anything—was left and moved out to the towns. All of this is explained with total clarity in Caldwell’s narrative, so much so, in fact, that the ingenuousness of Caldwell’s analysis left him open to inevitable attack. ‘Bad sociology does not improve fiction’, noted Jack Conroy—rightly, obviously—in a *New Masses* review of the novel.²⁷ Conroy’s objection was that Caldwell implies that the Lesters fall into poverty ‘because a benevolent landlord has moved out of the vicinity, leaving his hapless serfs to fend for themselves. If the landlord had stayed and taught them “cooperative farming” he would have “saved them all.”’²⁸ Conroy’s paraphrasing misrepresents Caldwell’s text, which reads ‘Co-operative and corporate farming would have saved them all’ (*Tobacco*, p. 63) without reference to Captain John’s patronage. It is true that Jeeter ‘d[oes] not blame Captain John as much as he d[oes] others’ (*Tobacco*, p. 62), and also that he explains away his misfortunes to his family by claiming that ‘[The Lord] must be aiming to do something powerful big for me, because He sure tests me hard’ (*Tobacco*, p. 69). But Jeeter’s outward piety masks his inner resolve—his refusal to abandon the land—that is both his ultimate downfall and his finest quality. No fool, moreover, he ‘could never think of the loss of his land and goods as anything but a man-made calamity’ (*Tobacco*, p. 62).

Jeeter Lester, of course, is a fictional character, and Conroy’s critique revolves around a point of doctrine rather than a literary category. It is worth noting, however, that despite Conroy’s assertion, the reason Caldwell gives that Jeeter is unable to ‘raise good cotton’ is not a failure of *noblesse oblige*. Jeeter’s predicament, rather, anticipates what historian Pete Daniel has more recently called the Southern Enclosure. During the Depression, Daniel explains, ‘the old cotton culture caved in, crushed by the untimely confluence of government intrusion and mechanization.’²⁹ Agricultural Adjustment Agency (AAA) policy led to the increasing concentration of land, while at the same time farmers were ‘drawn into the cycle of debt and dispossession’ (p. 163). New Deal rhetoric promised to save the old system of tenancy and sharecropping by encouraging tenants to buy land, or by establishing federal colonies of sharecroppers, but there were vast contradictions between ‘what federal programs were supposed to do and what they actually did’ (p. 164). In reality, farmers were unable to pay off loans and creditors foreclosed, leading to a

²⁷ Jack Conroy, ‘Passion and Pellagra’, in McDonald, ed., (1997), pp. 27-28 (p. 28).

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Pete Daniel, *Breaking the Land: The Transformation of Cotton, Tobacco and Rice Cultures since 1880* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), p. 156. Four consecutive references are given here in the text.

massive shift in ownership from farmers to institutions. A WPA survey revealed that in 1935 more than 84 per cent of the land in the old plantation Piedmont section of Georgia was owned by ‘credit companies, banks, and mortgage corporations’ (p. 169). AAA subsidies went directly to landowners for cooperation in the acreage reduction programme, and so some \$7 million went to large corporations, including life insurance companies, rather than to farmers or their tenants (p. 173). Caldwell’s unflinching portrayal of social paralysis presents a more nuanced and rigorous explanation of the relations of production during the period than the tendential fantasies of working-class insurrection promoted by some critics. Robert Cantwell, author of *The Land of Plenty*, wrote in 1957 that it was ‘only in retrospect, or in view of Caldwell’s novels as a whole’, that the violence and hopelessness portrayed in them could be related to ‘psychic barriers’ imposed on rural populations by the collapse of the productive cycle.³⁰ In a seminal 1965 essay, ‘The Rhetoric of Exhaustion and the Exhaustion of Rhetoric’, Jay Watson made a case for the listlessness of Caldwell’s characters as symptoms of both economic and ‘chronic, *clinical* depression.’³¹ As Wayne Mixon notes, post-WWII Caldwell continued to chronicle the lives of those for whom progress was still far out of reach: ‘The repetition so denounced by critics resulted in great measure from his insistence on imagining the lives of people who were being left out of the postwar boom.’³²

The apparent glee with which Caldwell embellished his grisly tales made his political intentions difficult to place. Caldwell wrote no manifestos, yet in his memoirs insisted he was driven to cover this ground involuntarily. ‘In my mind, there was a foreordained story to be told [...] something I was impelled to do,’ he recalled of the writing of *Tobacco Road*.³³ During the early 1930s he was regarded by mainstream critics as in essence a regional writer, most often placed in the context of the so-called ‘southern realism’ associated at that time with the work of William Faulkner.³⁴ To those on the left,

³⁰ Robert Cantwell, ‘Caldwell’s Characters: Why Don’t They Leave?’, in McDonald, ed., (1997), pp. 171-181 (p. 176).

³¹ Jay Watson, ‘The Rhetoric of Exhaustion and The Exhaustion of Rhetoric’, in McDonald (ed.) (1997), pp. 285-295 (p. 293).

³² Mixon, *The People’s Writer*, p. 137.

³³ Erskine Caldwell, *Call It Experience: The Years of Learning How to Write* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1996), p. 103.

³⁴ Caldwell’s work has never fully managed to shake off the association with Faulkner’s. For example, a recent series of reprints by The University of Georgia Press feature on their covers the quotation, attributed to the *Chicago Tribune*: ‘What William Faulkner implies, Erskine Caldwell records.’ More perniciously, perhaps, public discussion of Caldwell’s work has been clouded by the false assumption that it represents a dilution if not a commercialisation of Faulkner’s more sensationalist moments. This error is presumably a

however, Caldwell was a proletarian, no matter how unruly, and throughout the Depression decade he did little publicly to divest himself of the label. He supported Communist William Z. Foster's campaign in the 1932 presidential election, signed the Call for an American Writers' Congress in 1935, and in the same year he used a series of reports in the *New York Post* to counter allegations that the accounts of human existence at 'its lowest depths' given in his work were a product entirely of his imagination.³⁵ Happy to enlist his pioneering 1937 collaboration with photographer Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces*, in the cause for increased collectivisation of the tenant-farming system, Caldwell was defensive of his native ground to some degree. He nevertheless described the South as 'a retarded and thwarted civilization.'³⁶ Caldwell may have been an idealist, but he also demonstrated a profoundly anti-romantic streak, leading him into an ambivalent attitude towards both dispossession and reform:

Now that the landlords have inveigled their tenants into wearing tight shoes that pinch the feet, what the South has most to fear are well-meant but irresponsible plans for its regeneration. The American mind is by this time so accustomed to weeping over lost causes that in this instance there is likelihood of the sharecropper becoming just another figure in a sentimentalizing nation.

The everyday sharecropper is anything but a heroic figure at present; if he continues being the nation's under-dog, that is what he will become. As an individual, he would rather be able to feed, clothe, and house his family properly than to become the symbol of man's injustice to man.³⁷

Caldwell biographer Dan Miller suggests that Caldwell's collaborative journalistic work was undertaken partly as a means of assuaging feelings of guilt inspired by critics' attacks on his portrayals, in his early work, of degradation. Yet by the late 1930s, it was clear that idealism was to provide no solution either to aesthetic or social problems.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, Caldwell later disavowed *The Bastard*, and acknowledged the limitations of his technique: the book's tendency towards excess. 'You have to learn to

result of too restricted a sampling of publication dates. Whilst it is true that Faulkner's notorious *Sanctuary* (1931) preceded the publication of *Tobacco Road* by one year, as I hope to demonstrate here, Caldwell was by this date already well versed in the presentation of lurid details of sexual violence set against a brooding southern backdrop populated by bootleggers, prostitutes and hapless debutantes. Indeed, had Faulkner needed a template for his excursions into mass acceptability he might have done worse than to cast a critical eye over some of Caldwell's earliest efforts.

³⁵ 'Georgia Poverty-Swept, Says Caldwell', *New York Post* (1935), rpt. in MacDonald (ed.), p. 97.

³⁶ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

control your imagination,' he told Edwin T. Arnold in 1986.³⁸ Caldwell's excess, however, was never fully reigned in, and the banning of *The Bastard* prefigured the more famous 1933 action against *God's Little Acre*, a book Judge Benjamin Greenspan of the New York Magistrates Court ultimately ruled not to be a work of pornography. Rather than intend to 'inspire its readers to behave like its characters', the novel represented an attempt 'to tell the truth about a certain group in American life.'³⁹ *God's Little Acre* itself, however, is a work peculiarly indisposed to the demands of representationalism. In a famous scene, striking cotton mill worker Will Thompson tears his sister-in-law's clothes off and shreds them into tiny pieces, 'blowing the flying lint from his face,' before dragging her away to the bedroom.⁴⁰ This was the point at which Edwin Rolfe found Caldwell's writing beginning to smack too much of Lawrence. What made this aesthetic regression all the more frustrating was that it came alongside a direct attempt to address the labour politics *New Masses* critics such as Rolfe—and Macleod, who in his review of *American Earth* two years earlier had urged Caldwell to 'go left'—clearly regarded as endangered by 'the decadent possibilities latent in such writing' as the clothes-shredding scene.⁴¹ That Will, a skilled loomweaver, who, as he says himself in the immediate run-up to the act, has 'woven cloth all [his] life, making every kind of fabric involved in God's world' (*Acre*, p. 156), is now engaged instead in wanton destruction, however, opens the scene to a radical reading unavailable to Rolfe, with his emphasis on that 'higher sphere of dialectical development of characters' which Caldwell seems incapable of aspiring towards.⁴²

Caldwell's apparently compulsive return to images of degradation is highly suggestive of the theory of 'unproductive expenditure' put forward by Georges Bataille. The target of Bataille's attack is idealism in any form. Even materialism is idealistic insofar as it elevates 'dead' matter to the summit of an ontological hierarchy of 'facts'.⁴³ Capitalism, for Bataille, has already elevated the idea of capital to the highest possible level of abstraction, rendering any appeal to still loftier heights themselves regressive and, moreover, fundamentally self-destructive. There is nothing 'in the will to rise above social

³⁸ Arnold, ed., p. 272.

³⁹ 'People v. Viking Press, inc., et al', in *Critical Essays on Erskine Caldwell*, ed. by Scott MacDonald (Boston, Massachusetts: G. K. Hall, 1981) pp. 27-31 (p. 31).

⁴⁰ Erskine Caldwell, *God's Little Acre* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p. 156. Further references are included as *Acre*.

⁴¹ McDonald, ed., (1997): p. 21; p. 33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁴³ Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 15. Four consecutive references are included here in the text.

conditions,' he suggests, 'if one excludes the unconscious pathological desire to be struck down violently like Icarus and Prometheus' (p. 37). This basically nineteenth-century conception of the Icarian hero, which Bataille attributes to Nietzsche, is easily overwritten onto the ignominious defeats inflicted on the strikers of novels such as Cantwell's *Land of Plenty*. In that novel, which begins with a power cut bringing production to a halt, workers' ability to navigate the darkened space of the factory symbolises their collective intimacy with the production process in terms uncomfortably poised between embodiment and something like its opposite, an idea of collective consciousness that proves insubstantial in the harsh glare of daylight. As I argued in Chapter 2, in Cantwell's rendering the limits of workers' occupation are the limits of the proletarian novel itself, and the final scene on the rain sodden beach, with its echoes of Homer and Shakespeare, exposes the hubristic investment of the form. For Bataille, science, in its attack on myth and religion, has subordinated humanity, 'emptying the universe of its human content' (p. 81). But there is no turning back from this point. The avant-garde may expose the origins of bourgeois high culture in ritual and myth, but—in so doing—so what?

The problem is that the desacralization of culture is in itself a kind of celebration of enlightened scepticism: that the disinterested gaze actually makes sense in a world in which gods or monsters are revealed as products of the imagination. Science and morality enter into a pious alliance, and—since any return to the mythic or magical is emptied of the significance afforded instead to cool rationality—it is impossible to go any further forward without losing critical purchase. One means of challenging this relation of subordination, as Bataille demonstrates, is to make use of the prohibition on the irrational itself: 'the affective charge of an obscene element whose obscenity derives only from the prohibition levelled against it' (p. 81). Bataille's unproductive expenditure is a way of reinterpreting capitalist economy in a way that generates repugnance, 'such a horrifying ignominy that the pleasure found by the rich in measuring the poverty of others suddenly [becomes] too acute to be endured without vertigo' (p. 127). A literature of excess, therefore, does not aim to shock purely for the sake of it. The exuberant sexuality and graphic violence in Bataille's novels, most famously *The Story of the Eye* (1928), invoke a *jouissance* intended to put to shame the penny-pinching mean-spiritedness of middle-class morality. In the *God's Little Acre* clothes shredding scene, then, it is not simply Will Thompson's sexual voraciousness, but his destruction of the products of his own labour that signal his excess. The men from the

cotton mill have been out on strike for a year and a half, and as Rosamond, Will's wife, explains to her sister, '[Will] talks about turning the power on at the mill when he's drunk, and when he's sober he won't say anything' (*Acre*, p. 45). If *God's Little Acre*, published one year before Cantwell's *Land of Plenty*, deserves some credit as one of the earliest novels of the thirties to deal sympathetically—nominally at least—with striking workers, Will Thompson, gunned down in the end by company police, must figure amongst the fictional prototypes of the sacrificial proletarian hero.

If Caldwell's blankness, his absence of affect, had so far insulated his work from the bitter amusement, the *ressentiment* infecting so much radical writing of the 1930s, this was perhaps difficult to see from the immediate vantage point of overt political commitment. His portrayal of Thompson—a cartoon character at best—threatened further to inflame those of his critics who had already held their hands up at his apparent reluctance to spell out exactly his position. Will is no hard-bitten proletarian who, in Joseph Freeman's limited sense 'knows the facts', but is represented rather as a kind of omniscient visionary. Critics have noted the bizarre image in *God's Little Acre* of female mill operators leaving their shift: 'When they reached the street, they ran back to the ivy-covered walls and pressed their bodies against it and touched it with their lips' (*Acre*, p. 68). Cook, for example, notes that 'The women mill workers in the novel have not only metaphorically embraced the world of industrial technology but, in a more grotesque and literal fashion they press their bodies and touch their lips to the factory walls.'⁴⁴ What she does not mention is that the following lines in the novel describe the women being dragged home by their menfolk and beaten 'unmercifully for their infidelity' (*Acre*, p. 69). Caldwell's sexual politics—evidenced nowhere more graphically than in the paperback jackets with which he was more than willing to allow his work to be marketed—were even by the standards of the day Neanderthal. Even Caldwell, however, could not seriously suggest the actuality of daily, ritual domestic violence on such a scale without some kind of mitigation and in the following line we are told 'Will woke up with a start' (*Acre*, p. 69). Similarly, on the morning of the strike, the barbed wire fence of the mill is already uprooted in Will's imagination before the occupation begins. The mill town sequences of the novel, in fact, represent Caldwell's most experimental writing in terms of narrative perspective, his more customary 'plain style' augmented by faltering shifts into free indirect discourse and what

⁴⁴ McDonald, ed., (2006), p. 73.

would nowadays be understood as magic realism. As Loren Glass notes, it is this lack of a stable perspective in the novel—the absence of an authorial presence, the illusion of a locus of stylistic mastery which ensures the continuing critical cachet of contemporaries Hemingway and Faulkner—that ‘enabled *God’s Little Acre* to slide from the literary to the pornographic to the forgotten.’⁴⁵

It was this difficulty of locating Caldwell, an ironic difficulty given that he was for an author perceived by so many critics as producing essentially the same work over and over again, that Kenneth Burke addressed in 1935. To some degree sympathetic with the charge of repetitiveness—sometimes when reading Caldwell, Burke writes, ‘I feel as though I were playing with my toes’—in ‘Caldwell: Maker of Grotesques’, Burke reads Caldwell’s treatment of sexual themes as a matter less of sensationalist content than of literary form, evidence of Caldwell’s ‘deft way of putting the wrong things together.’⁴⁶ In the clothes shredding scene, Will’s assault on his sister-in-law is prefaced by a hyperbolic verbal ejaculation: ‘I’m as strong as God Almighty Himself is now,’ he thunders. ‘And I’m going to lick you, Griselda’ (*Acre*, p. 157). Burke’s insight is that what is remarkable here is not that its author but that its characters seem to have been reading D. H. Lawrence.⁴⁷ The heightened sensibility of Will’s speech, delivered in his sitting room in front of his wife and another sister-in-law together with her hapless suitor, Pluto Swint, lends the scene an unsettlingly formal, distinctly theatrical aspect. It is Will’s overacting is which is foregrounded rather than the actual sex, which takes place anyway offstage. As Burke points out, it is Caldwell’s confusion of the public and private realms, his habit of ‘altering the customary situation [so] that people are looking on and commenting in the blandest fashion’ (p. 353) that lend his best work a complexity beyond the merely prurient. This kind of framing device, in which intimate behaviour of one form or another is witnessed by apparently disinterested onlookers was Caldwell’s real art of standing still, and its edgy, uneasy quality proved resilient. Writing in 1965, Louise Y. Gosset saw Caldwell’s transgression of the proper limits of public performance as another layer of violence inflicted on his economically deprived characters. ‘Privacy is a luxury unknown to the

⁴⁵ Loren Glass, ‘Erskine Caldwell: Modernist Manqué’, in *Modernist Star Maps: Celebrity, Modernity, Culture*, ed. by Aaron Jaffe and Jonathan Goldman (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), pp. 81-92 (p. 90).

⁴⁶ Burke, *Philosophy of Literary Form*, p. 360; p. 353. Four further references are given here in the text.

⁴⁷ ‘Towards the end of [Caldwell’s] longer works,’ Burke writes, ‘the goad of balked religiosity provokes grandiloquent moralistic passages wherein his subnormal manikins, strangely elated by the story’s symbolism, transcend themselves and speak of vital purpose with almost evangelical fervor (plus a slight suggestion that they had read D. H. Lawrence).’ *Ibid.*, p. 352.

poor,' she noted. 'They lack the dignity of being able to withdraw and be aware of their own individuality.'⁴⁸ More recently, both Vials and Laura Hapke have drawn attention to the controlling male gaze in *God's Little Acre*.⁴⁹ Caldwell's framing devices are, amongst other things, however, a way of distancing the reader from the action, and as Vials argues, with reference to the racial rather than gender politics expressed in the novel, some distance is necessary; with characters as unenlightened as these, 'complete empathy would be dangerous.'⁵⁰

With a backward glance it is possible to re-read the characters' moral failings in *The Bastard* as the book's partial success, and for those perspicacious enough to take this on board reward comes in the ambivalent pleasure of being provoked by the material whilst to an equal degree cushioned by technique. The erotic dance is most easily read in this way; we are not so much enjoying a striptease, as being invited to bear witness to the men in the mill, producers nominally at least, co-opted into the consumption of a spectacular commodity. But the prison rape, too, is in a sense a kind of performance, initiated by the lascivious guard, and it is John Hunter's fascination with the wounded body of the labourer that provides the focus of that scene rather than the wounding itself. Given some room to manoeuvre, we are at the same time forced not only to watch a callous murder, but also to stand by as somebody laughs. If it is true that Caldwell's narrative frames serve as self-reflexive devices encouraging a second glance at the mechanisms of artistic production, then it follows that it is the disinterested contemplation implicit in a model of cultural autonomy which separates art out from life that, paradoxically, is revealed as obscene.

The second historical event, or process, which impacted on Caldwell's career was the development of mass paperback publishing. During the Depression, no one could possibly have predicted the extent of Caldwell's subsequent success. *Journeyman* (1935), in which the ominously named travelling preacher Semon Dye steps up a rural revival meeting into a full-on orgy of frottage, sold badly. After a five-year gap, *Trouble in July* (1940) was the product of a new publishing deal which included an aggressive marketing campaign. In 1945 paperback rights were sold to US Penguin, whose twenty-five cent edition became an immediate success, with 350,000 copies selling in less than six weeks—more than the

⁴⁸ Louise Y. Gosset, from *Violence in Recent Southern Fiction* (1965), in McDonald, ed., (1997) pp. 182-191 (p. 190).

⁴⁹ See Laura Hapke, *Daughters of the Great Depression: Women, Work, and Fiction in the American 1930s* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995), pp. 20-23; Vials, pp. 85-86.

⁵⁰ Vials, p. 78.

combined total for all Caldwell's other books to date.⁵¹ That *Trouble in July* should be the first of Caldwell's works to sell in anything like these quantities is fitting, as the novel itself enables a moment of considerable dialectical tension between politics and mass culture. The title nods towards Faulkner's *Light in August* (1932), but, whilst covering much of the same ground, Caldwell does so in a way far more suited to the needs of a mass market, interrogating the ideology of racism and its representation in terms few could fail to understand.⁵² The first Caldwell text in which the word 'political' plays any significant role, *Trouble in July* examines the interrelationship of cynicism and sentimentality through the character of Jeff McCurtain, Sheriff of Julie County.

'The people on the inside [are] no different than those on the outside,' McCurtain, who lives in rooms adjoining the jailhouse, tells his wife.⁵³ All of the book's characters, indeed, allow themselves to be coerced by the demands of narrative, despite the evidence of what is objectively placed in front of them. This collective refusal to see leads to the lynching of Sonny Clark, a young black man no one in town really believes guilty of the rape of sharecropper's daughter Katy Barlow. *Trouble in July* purposively revisits the concerns of previous works. Early on in the novel, a housefly crawling on the head of the indolent McCurtain recalls the opening of 'Saturday Afternoon'. Above all, however, it is to the setting of *The Bastard* that *Trouble in July* returns, in two striking instances of Caldwell's art of standing still. In the first of these, a crowd begins to gather in Shep Barlow's yard, most of who—like Shep—are tenant farmers. With the arrival of a barber from the nearby town of Andrewjones it becomes obvious that the lynch party, as in 'Saturday Afternoon', is becoming a major event, powerful enough even to draw characters from Caldwell's earliest fictional outings, such as Oscar Dent, a sawmill owner from the lower end of the county who, with his reputation for murdering black men 'on every pretext he could find' (*Trouble*, p. 79) is clearly *The Bastard*'s John Hunter by any other name. Such, then, is the audience and backdrop for Katy's provocative appearance—still wearing the ragged dress torn, supposedly, during the rape—on the brightly-lit porch of the Barlow house. Katy supports herself on a post and smiles down at the men, fingering her torn dress,

⁵¹ Dan B. Miller, *Erskine Caldwell: The Journey from Tobacco Road* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), p. 333.

⁵² It is probably difficult to overestimate the extent to which paperback copies of Caldwell's work created a new market.

⁵³ Erskine Caldwell, *Trouble in July* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1999), p. 4. Further references are included in the text as *Trouble*.

which falls open from time to time, and giggling. For several pages, as the crowd surge forward ‘in an effort to get a closer view of her when she moved the opening in the garment’ (*Trouble*, p. 87), we get a kind of running commentary on Katy’s backstory and recent exploits. Katy’s upbringing, we learn, has been horrific; her father’s violence makes even John Hunter’s excesses pale in comparison. She is also being manipulated by a white supremacist crank. All the same, the explicit message of the scene is that several of the men present will have had intimate knowledge of Katy’s proclivities derived from immediate experience, and that this seriously compromises their readiness to believe the allegations against Sonny.

In the erotic dance scene from *The Bastard*, we are urged to maintain critical distance: something in the composition exceeds the limits of the frame. Here, in the Barlow’s front yard, there is nowhere else to go: even if Katy’s hardest of stations redeems her weakness, if there is some space where her performance appears less crude and obscene, the innocent Sonny will still underwrite such a context in his blood, the collective response of the crowd taking ‘disinterest’ to a murderous extreme. This sense of the implosion of imaginative possibility is doubled in a further tableau in which McCurtain’s quandary as an elected official in the face of brewing racial tensions is anatomised. Caught between, on the one hand, a white population dedicated to upholding a dominant ideology through intermittent blood-letting, and, on the other, a powerful minority of plantation owners who cannot afford to see their predominately black workforces panicked, McCurtain’s customary response to brewing racial tension is to keep the situation ‘politically clean’ by making himself scarce. On this occasion, however, McCurtain is ordered by his Democratic Party boss to make a show of taking action to prevent the lynching. Like Sonny, McCurtain is on the run, and his affection for the hapless Sam Brinson, a frequent inmate of McCurtain’s jail cells on minor charges, signals that he is not a racist. The sentimentality McCurtain shows in his attitude towards Sam, however, is the other side of the complacency that allows him to do nothing about his deputies’ habit of locking up young black women in the cells and molesting them, and which leads indirectly, therefore, to his own humiliation. Deciding to fake his own false imprisonment at the hands of the mob, McCurtain locks himself in one of his own cells, but fails to check that it is empty.

When McCurtain wakes up to discover a screaming girl on the bunk opposite him, the masked faces gazing in through the bars of the cell look ‘exactly like the ones he had imagined so clearly when he was locking himself in the cage’ (*Trouble*, p. 100). The limits of McCurtain’s imagination are flagged up in his catchphrase: intervening directly to stop the lynch party ‘would have been a foolish, far-fetched thing for me to do’ (*Trouble*, p. 98). But as the plot moves on inexorably towards the inevitable, the ability to use imagination, to countenance the far-fetched takes on something of the force of a moral imperative. Like Katy, McCurtain faces an impossible dilemma as he pleads with his gun-toting audience. Even if his story is believable, nobody cares, they just want to murder Sonny Clark, and in his absence they take Sam Brinson who, being black, will do. Once the machinery of summary justice grinds into action the outcome is known in advance, and McCurtain’s ‘political future’ (*Trouble*, p. 103) depends on him being seen not to be lying about harbouring Sonny, which of course he isn’t. McCurtain, as far as the mob is concerned, has effectively been caught in the act of doing his duty. The presupposition that the Sheriff seeks to enforce the law is as much a part of the ideology of race as that young black men are fundamentally criminal or that, in damaged young women, vulnerability plays itself out as passivity. Passivity, in point of fact, throughout Caldwell’s work is, with varying degrees of explicitness, directly equated with violence, and what goes entirely without saying in the scene is that the right of law enforcement officers to use state powers and property systematically to rape young black women cannot in any sense interfere with, and, moreover, constitutes a basic if unspoken tenet of the rule of law.

Caldwell’s use of tableaux, the art of standing still I have tried to elucidate in this chapter, takes place against the historical failure of democracy in the southern states of the United States adequately to protect victims of an economic collapse beyond their own making from the rapacious opportunism of financial institutions. Caldwell, in this sense, speaks very much to the present moment, and his emphasis on repetition and stasis serve as timely reminders about the complacencies and misplaced ideals of official optimisms, most especially those of the ‘we’re all in it together’ variety. Far more importantly, though, the paradoxical sense in which standing still can also imply a kind of looking forward comes only through repetition and reproduction on a mass scale. Caldwell comes to us, not through the gatekeepers of the literary tradition, who – in a relationship of mutual contempt – never really seemed to pay much attention anyway, but through the mass marketplace. In

1931 critic T. K. Whipple was right, although in a totally unforeseeable manner, to find in *American Earth*, ‘the primal germ plasm of narrative’. Caldwell texts proliferated at an exponential rate, each containing in microcosm the basic pattern of the whole. Moreover, aside from the generally accepted observation that his work eventually tailed off in quality—and Caldwell could hardly be seen as unique in that regard—there is little in the way of a coherent, overarching narrative to explain the development of Caldwell’s writing across the career. There is no obvious sense of linear progression from *The Bastard* to *Trouble in July*; rather than teleology, random mutation, if anything, seems to gain explanatory force.

Caldwell may be all but forgotten, yet the physical existence of tens of millions of paperback books cannot signify other than the presence of his name as part of the texture of everyday life for a significant part of the last century. This privileged—because certainly unique—position in cultural history invests Caldwell’s narrative frames with the authority to act as windows onto a complex and largely occluded relation between mass culture and the avant-garde. Resistant, as recent criticism has noted, to assimilation to institutional agendas, Caldwell’s emphatically pictorial writing is more readily accommodated within extra-literary frameworks. Unadorned in comparison to the more florid outpourings of a Lawrence, Caldwell’s writing exhibits a flatness, a blankness in the consciousness of his characters, but his use of tableaux—because the act of watching itself is foregrounded—suggests an all-roundness nevertheless. This automimetic gesture, a kind of primal scene revisited throughout Caldwell’s work, bears the authenticating stamp of a modernist preoccupation with the aesthetic as a redemptive space, above, beyond, outside — whatever—the limits of the quotidian. Perhaps it is because Caldwell returns time and again to this scene, then, that under such intense scrutiny the model begins to break apart. *Trouble in July* adds nothing to the argument, such as it is, of ‘Saturday Morning’: that lynching is bad; that the terror it inflicts on the black population is matched by the degradation by association it inflicts on the white. Consciously aimed at a mass audience, however, the presupposition of critical disinterest implicit in Caldwell’s art of standing still falters.

When Sheriff Jeff McCurtain arrives too late at the scene of the lynching of Sonny Clark, his initial reaction to his deputy’s suggestion they take down some of the names of the men still lingering is, as usual, ‘not to get mixed up in this thing politically’ (*Trouble*, p. 236). It is not clear, given his *modus operandi*, whether he has ever actually witnessed a lynching before, and although he is a little saddened he is basically unmoved by the sight of

Sonny's body swinging lifelessly from a willow tree. When Katy Barlow emerges, muddied, from the swamp, and begins to scream Sonny's innocence to all present, something new—in terms of Caldwell's art of standing still—happens; people begin actually to take notice. As Sonny's body stops moving for a moment, and then begins to swing in the opposite direction, the men, at first entirely blank, 'as if they were in a trance' (*Trouble*, p. 237), look up, 'gazing upon it as though they had not seen it before' (*Trouble*, p. 238). McCurtain, too, is changed in that moment, and although he and his deputy fail to intervene as the mob stone Katy to death, once the dust clears and he rubs his 'burning eyes' (*Trouble*, p. 240), he quietly resolves to work towards the unthinkable: 'alone' (*Trouble*, p. 241). What marks this solitary realisation, a realisation in itself of solitariness, as at the same time the irruption of a moment of solidarity is the sense in which Caldwell, the former literary outsider now in the advance guard of the mainstream, is united both with his character, an authority figure now coming to terms with a social conscience, and also with an emergent readership poised between sensation and disinterest. Each of these relations encompasses divergent moments within a dialectic of individual to collective, of personal to institutional authority.

Placed side by side, the images from the 1929 limited edition of *The Bastard* and the 1966 mass-market paperback of *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* suggest something of the gulf between the early, radical Caldwell and the later, politically deracinated cultural collaborationist. But if, instead of supplanting one another, avant-gardist and populist are seen to overlap, a number of things become clear. The modernist artefact, for one thing, exhibits a certain modesty, its layers of ambivalence discretely folded away, concealed in the complex relation of an inside to an outside. The mass market commodity, on the other hand, presents itself as entirely a matter of surfaces. In place of guarded self-reflexivity, comes brazen self-promotion: self-consciousness without a conscience. The quality of otherworldliness Kenneth Burke spoke of during the mid-thirties, that poetic transcendence he noted in Caldwell's *Sacrilege*, has all but evaporated by 1966, with the prosaic location of the action—such as it is—in small-town America. The modernist artefact plays peekaboo with absence and presence, sustains itself on a dialectic between appearance and essence, object and ideal. What can never materialize *is* the aesthetic itself: elusive, unsullied beauty, 'delicious nowhere-ness', as Lawrence put it, writing of impressionist

art.⁵⁴ The generic specificity of the 1966 blurb speaks to another world altogether, the world of marketing demographics and statistical modelling, and this represents a bastardisation in more ways than one. It is not just that the marketing of *The Sacrilege* as a desacralized commodity reduces the work, forces it to conform to a predetermined standard. Rather to the contrary—and in the most objective of senses—the marketing of this commodity as *The Sacrilege* is not only reductive but intentionally evasive, closing down, flattening out the real dimensions—spatial and historical—of the object.

The artefact represented here by *The Bastard* takes up space in three dimensions. The same is true, of course, of the 1966 copy of *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, although what comes to light in turning the book over is perhaps quite surprising. What is truly sacrilegious about this *Alan Kent*, what constitutes a real act of misappropriation, involves more than a shift in patterns of distribution, but also the self-identity of the object *per se*. The mass cultural commodity has exchange value not simply because it conceals the alienated labour power of its producers, nor solely because it may be bought and sold, mediated through the bewildering abstractions of the money system. Mediation, in fact, is all but squeezed out in favour of the spurious guarantee of interchangeability underwriting the experience of consumption: that every read will be just as good if not better than the last. The twisting, slippery quality of exchange is captured—crystallised—on the back cover of the McFadden-Bartell *Alan Kent* (see Fig. 4). The broken blue line around the head and shoulders of the young woman, reproduced from the front of the jacket is suggestive simultaneously of some kind of crime scene and also the blue pencil of the censor. Both have some relevance but it is as the evidence of a cut and paste job that the graphic leaves its most pertinent clue. New American Library (NAL), publishers of the Signet imprint, took over American Penguin's backlist – and hence numerous reprints of Caldwell novels - in the late 1940s. *The Bastard*, though, was largely unheard of until the mid-fifties when new imprint Hillman Periodicals issued an edition, emblazoned in jacket art which mimicked distinctive Signet designs. NAL responded by attempting to convince wholesalers that they would be the target of censors if they stocked the title. Caldwell objected, and forced NAL into an agreement to publish the title – along with another early effort, *Poor Fool*. An internal report shows that executives, convinced by their own

⁵⁴ D. H. Lawrence, 'Introduction to These Paintings', in *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, ed. by Edward D. McDonald (London: Heinemann, 1967), pp. 551-584 (p. 564). Further references are included here in the text.

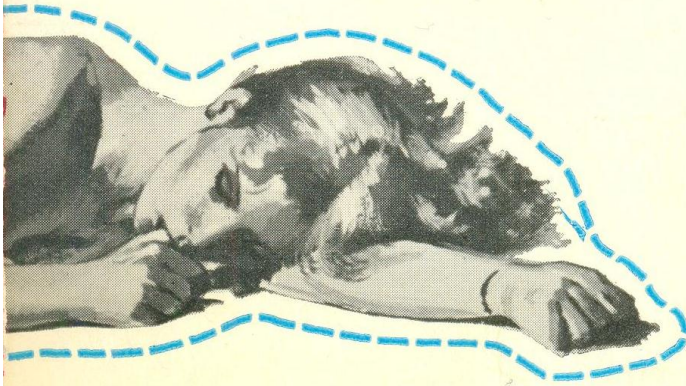
propaganda, favoured holding the books off the market ‘for an indefinite period of time’.⁵⁵ In 1958 all three titles were issued as *The Sacrilege*. Exactly how MacFadden-Bartell, publishers of *Physical Culture* and *True Confessions*, ended up with the rights is not clear. What is, however, is that the blurb describing what presents itself as *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent*, is actually a description of the plot of *The Bastard*. The woman on the front of the book now appears under the text: ‘The Carny stripper was giving a private performance’. That this private performance, nestling inside the frontispiece in the 1929 art object, is now the stuff of the cigar-store spin rack represents an inversion of the relation of public to private. This thing that only wants to be a thing tells the most lies about its selfhood. That what was literally a closed book on the eve of the Great Depression becomes an open secret during the mid-1960s, moreover, tells us something about the times: not simply that the representation of sexuality had been liberated over the space of thirty or so years, but also that the struggle of small-town men and women to use alcohol and sex—or both—to overcome loneliness had been semi-officially sanctioned as part of everyday life. In a covert manner, it is sociology—not sex—that sells. The modernist emphasis on critical distance seems anachronistic by comparison: after all, why bother to defamiliarize, to make such a fuss out of something as banal as alienation? As James Korges, one of the first critics to take Caldwell seriously post-WWII wrote in 1969, *The Bastard* is ‘more important, perhaps, for its place in the development of the clichés of alienation in modern fiction than for its literary art.’⁵⁶

Yet *The Bastard* still carried—and carries—something of its original charge. Critics in the early thirties were right to see Caldwell as a writer in transition; but the timeframe they were working with was too limited. Taking Caldwell’s career as a whole it becomes obvious that the avant-garde and the mainstream are not discrete categories, but moments in a dynamic totality that includes not only the work itself but the viewpoint within which it is framed. The formal qualities of Caldwell’s work—his flatness of tone, that primal germ plasm—change their meaning, become understood in the late sixties not as form as such but as content or theme. The transformation of the modernist

⁵⁵ See Thomas L. Bonn, *Heavy Traffic and High Culture: New American Library as Literary Gatekeeper in the Paperback Revolution* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), pp. 201-202. Bonn notes that NAL’s control over Caldwell’s backlist was ‘feudal’ (p. 202).

⁵⁶ James Korges, *Erskine Caldwell* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969), p. 13.

The Carny Stripper was Giving a Private Performance



All the men on the midnight shift at the mill were invited. Most of them came early, dollar in hand. Even before the girl was nude, the shed was in an uproar. She smiled and began her dance. Her skin flashed white in the semi-dark. Every motion was calculated to inflame the men.

When she finished her dance the men ran wildly to the end of the shed to form a long, waving line, shoving and excited.

A small space had been cleared for the rest of the girl's performance....

A MACFADDEN-BARTELL BOOK

PRINTED
IN
U.S.A.

Fig. 4: *The Sacrilege of Alan Kent* (1966 edition). Scan from paperback.

artefact into the mass market commodity brings along with it a degree of destabilisation of the relationship of appearance and essence, of words to things: an actuality the art object of the late 1920s could only gesture towards. In some senses the mass market makes good on the promises of modernism. Although the jacket art of the 1966 *Sacrilege* appears kitsch, exploitative even, it is difficult to avoid the sense that this partial view—the beer-stained shoes intruding into the foreground—situate us inside the frame. No longer connoisseurs, whose secret desire anyway is to become lost in the grasp of the elusive object, we find ourselves all the more effectively for that positioned as agents.

In the final chapter I examine the intersection of the avant-garde with the popular, the literature of excess with the politics of the everyday, in the work of a writer simultaneously the most critically acclaimed to have emerged from the proletarian scene of the 1930s, yet also the least likely to be associated with it: Ralph Ellison

Chapter 5.

Ralph Ellison and the Weight of the Real

In February 1963, about to turn fifty, Ralph Ellison was invited to Washington as a guest of John F. Kennedy's Panel on Educational Research and Development, a public committee charged with addressing educational underachievement. As his biographer Arnold Rampersad explains, Ellison, despite limited expertise in the field of educational policy making, was chosen for the role, amongst other reasons, because he was seen as a political moderate.¹ It must have come as some surprise then, Rampersad notes, that amongst the expert sociologists and educationalists, representatives of government agencies and philanthropists, Ellison was 'almost alone in defending the main target of this liberal project: black youth' (Rampersad, p. 395). Asked to take part in further meetings over the summer and then in September at Dedham, Massachusetts, Ellison remained firm in his belief that, despite the history of slavery, segregation, and migration to northern urban centres, there remained a set of core black values, a product in itself of resistance to that history, which no one should threaten to erase. 'If you can show me how I can cling to that which is real in me,' he concluded his speech to the panel, 'while teaching me a way into the larger society, then I will not only drop my defenses and my hostility, but I will sing your praises and I will help you to make the desert bear fruit' (Rampersad, p. 396). It was no accident, surely, that Ellison, National Book Award winner of 1953, visiting professor of writing and comparative literature and writer-in-residence at Rutgers University, should see fit to establish key educational needs implicitly to be met by the reading and writing of fiction.

What seems peculiarly literary about Ellison's formulation is his insistence on the location of the real in the subjective. Not only is the real not simply already out there, it is something evanescent, something difficult to grasp or to hold in the mind. Insofar as Ellison's statement can, as I propose, be taken as some measure of his ideas about literary production, then it can be heard as echoing to some extent proposals put forward by Alain Robbe-Grillet in *For a New Novel*, published in the same year. Robbe-Grillet's defence of

¹ Arnold Rampersad, *Ralph Ellison: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007), p. 394. Further references are included in the text as Rampersad.

the *nouveau roman* rested on the assertion that it represented an experimental, in the sense of exploratory, technique, entirely alien to that academic criticism both in the West and in the USSR which used ‘the word “realism” as if reality were already entirely constituted [...] when the writer comes on the scene.’² Noting that it is in the name of a replenished realism that ‘each new literary school has sought to destroy the one which preceded it’, Robbe-Grillet argues instead that, far from attempting to stand outside the world, the role of the novel is to problematize such distinctions as subjective and objective: ‘[the novel] never knows what it is seeking, it is ignorant of what it has to say; it is invention, invention of the world and of man, constant invention and perpetual interrogation.’³ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood note that Robbe-Grillet’s position is ‘characteristically Modernist [...] [insofar as] the commitment of the artist is realized through a primary engagement with the problems of the medium rather than the problems of society.’⁴ For Harrison and Wood, modernism is explicitly identified with a model of art as an exemplary realm: ‘What might be done, seen, experienced within this realm would have a critical bearing upon the actual conditions of social existence, but only in so far as art maintained a moral independence from those conditions.’⁵ Whether or not this is a fair assessment of Robbe-Grillet’s position is beyond the scope of this study, but what I do hope to be able to show is that as far as Ellison is concerned the appeal to formal autonomy does not amount to a claim for political or moral immunity for the artist. On the contrary, Ellison’s longstanding engagement with modernism was premised on a deep, if at times profoundly self-contradictory, sense of ethical weight.

Ellison’s investment in the received tradition of literary modernism presupposes a commitment to future possibility, not in the sense of endless novelty but rather in the conviction that the most radical, transformative potential of both individual and nation lies dormant in experience. This potential, anchored in the past, may only be brought to presence in a conscious process, a struggle towards shaping that unrealised promise into tangible form. In an address delivered at the Library of Congress early in 1964 and subsequently published as ‘Hidden Name and Complex Fate’, Ellison remembered his first

² Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1989), p. 160.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 157; p. 161.

⁴ Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 744.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

exposure, as a music student at Tuskegee Institute, to Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a transitional moment, even though he was unaware of either the significance of the experience or indeed of much of the poem at the time. 'I was intrigued by its power to move me while eluding my understanding', he recalled.⁶ Reeled in by Eliot's complex mesh of allusions, Ellison takes to the library, and so begins his self-education in literary history. But the self-consciousness of this act, this wilful learning of the way in to the larger society, brings into focus a process whereby, just as the initially impenetrable object of study fades from view, so the reading subject solidifies itself at the hitherto unseen nexus of a social and historical formation:

The more I learned of literature in this conscious way, the more the details of my background became transformed. I heard undertones in remembered conversations which had escaped me before, local customs took on a more universal meaning, values which I hadn't understood were revealed, some of the people whom I had known were diminished, while others were elevated in stature. More important, I began to see my own possibilities with more objective and in some ways more hopeful eyes. (*Collected Essays*, p. 203)

For Ellison the reader, this circular trajectory leads him on through 'Pound, Ford Madox Ford, Sherwood Anderson, Gertrude Stein, Hemingway and Fitzgerald and "round about 'til I was come" back to Melville and Twain'. For Ellison the writer, clear that writing is in a real sense no more than this retrospective process of self-transformation objectified, the discovery of a literary vocation—'a sense of purpose'—is the uncovering of an obligation to the self-realisation of literary form. For the American novelist in particular, this ethical imperative is to be met both by addressing 'the specific details, the moods, the landscapes, the cityscapes, the tempo of American change', and, further, by honouring 'the full weight of that burden of conscience and consciousness which Americans inherit as one of the results of the revolutionary circumstances of our national beginnings' (*Collected Essays*, p. 206).

But what if this entanglement of personal and national destiny is an illusion, the product of a pernicious and especially cruel variety of mystification? What if this sense of weight brought to bear is simply the pressure of alienation, and this reading subject, newly aware of its place in a hierarchical structure—some diminished, some elevated—a reified version of itself? What if, finally, this sense of hope in future possibility is no more than the

⁶ John F. Callahan, ed., *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), p. 203. Further references to works in the collection are included in the text as *Collected Essays*.

false promise of ideology? To be sure, Ellison's promotion of familiarity with the Western literary canon as a formula for good citizenship was ill at odds with many people's ideas of what it meant to be in any way progressive in the United States in 1963. The same year saw the publication of James Baldwin's polemic *The Fire Next Time*, where he wrote that 'the Negro's experience of the white world cannot possibly create in him any respect for the standards by which the white world claim to live.'⁷ Some ten years younger than Ellison, and riding the wave of the critical and commercial success of his 1962 novel *Another Country*, preacher's son Baldwin threw himself wholeheartedly into the role of firebrand spokesman for civil rights that Ellison fought shy of, and had indeed interrogated mercilessly in *Invisible Man* (1952). As far as Baldwin was concerned, educational underachievement amongst his own generation of Harlemites was the result of an entirely reasonable understanding of school as 'a child's game that one could not win' (p. 25), an acceptance of limitations he resisted against his own better judgement, having known 'too many college-graduate handymen.' Like Ellison, Baldwin explained formative experience in terms of the recovery of a repressed unconscious, but the buried history revealed to Baldwin's black American youth was uncovered not in the library but 'in the sudden, uncontrollable note of fear heard in his mother's or father's voice when he has strayed beyond some particular boundary' (p. 31). The brute fact of white supremacy renders any appeal to moral responsibility sheer hypocrisy. 'We are capable of bearing a great burden,' he writes, 'once we discover that the burden is reality and arrive where reality is' (p. 78). That reality is quite simply the acknowledgement of 'the fact that life is tragic' (p. 79), and the only note of hope to be rung is that black Americans seize the advantage of disbelief in white America's cherished myths: 'that their ancestors were all freedom-loving heroes, that they were born in the greatest country that the world has ever seen' (p. 86).

Looked at in this light, Ellison and Baldwin stand at opposite ends of the political spectrum. Yet for Irving Howe, in 'Black Boys and Native Sons' (1963), both writers, since their emergence as major novelists in the early 1950s, sceptical as to the claims of political protest made by some for the novel, had articulated a distinctive outlook, 'a post-war liberalism not very different from conservatism.'⁸ The way Howe understood it, this 'note

⁷ James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), p. 28. Further consecutive references are here included in the text.

⁸ Irving Howe, 'Black Boys and Native Sons', in Irving Howe, *A World More Attractive: A View of Modern Literature and Politics* (Freeport: Bookstar Libraries Press, 1963), pp. 98-121 (p. 109). Seven further references are included here in the text.

of willed affirmation', epitomised in *Invisible Man* and detectable too in Saul Bellow's *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953), was the result of a fatal miscalculation as to the potential for self-creation invoked in literary practice, a mistaken belief that 'one could decide one's deepest and most authentic response to society' (p. 109 [emphasis in the original]). In his early writing, Baldwin had broadened the thematic scope of the African-American novel, beyond the template laid out by Richard Wright with the urban proletarian grotesque of *Native Son* (1940), to encompass, in *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), religious experience and, in *Giovanni's Room* (1956), homosexuality. In the latter work he had even eschewed the portrayal of black characters. Looking back on the 'hard and dismal decade' (p. 118) of the 1950s, Howe notes only pathos in what he sees as Baldwin's efforts to distance himself from 'the burden or bravado of his stigma' as a black American. '[W]e do not make our circumstances,' Howe writes, 'we can, at best, try to remake them' (p. 119). If, with the publication of *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin has made the belated discovery that 'to assert his humanity he must release his rage' (p. 121), he remains all the same confused, flirting with black nationalism and yet still 'a national figure' (p. 120) by implication located firmly within the mainstream.

Although privately disparaging about Baldwin's motivations in taking up his newly found public role, Ellison, in his immediate published response to the Howe piece, maintained at least the appearance of solidarity.⁹ In the essay 'The World and the Jug', first published in December 1963 in *The New Leader*, Ellison defended Baldwin against what he saw as Howe's reductive approach to the complexities of double consciousness and the particular difficulties posed thereby to the African-American writer. 'Evidently', Ellison submits, 'Howe feels that unrelieved suffering is the only "real" Negro experience, and that the true Negro writer must be ferocious' (*Collected Essays*, p. 159). To make this assertion, however, is either to forget or simply not to notice that 'there is also an American Negro tradition which teaches one to deflect racial provocation and to master and contain pain.' For Ellison, the experience of cultural oppression does not release the subject from moral responsibility but on the contrary intensifies the pressure of transforming that experience into art, and thus the black American writer is in the grip of a powerful double bind. On the one hand, knowledge of modern literature is essential in enabling the transcendence of the

⁹ Rampersad notes that Ellison was especially uncomfortable with Baldwin's public espousal of homosexuality, which, Ellison suggested, represented an attempt 'to inflate his personal problem to the dimension of a national problem' (p. 389).

limits of the cultural ghetto, and Ellison makes no bones about the fact that Baldwin ‘is not the product of a Negro-store front church but of the library, and the same is true of me’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 163). On the other, black American consciousness is already mediated through that other tradition which, self-reflexive in the extreme, strains toward formal autonomy from white hegemony and ironic distance from the experience of suffering itself. Although Ellison does not name it as such in ‘The World and the Jug’, it is clear from his voluminous writings on the subject elsewhere that this other tradition is the blues.

In his writings on the blues, Ellison exhibits what might be understood as a kind of passion for the real, strongly resistant to categorisations adhering too rigidly to the surface levels of social life, and committed instead to the uncovering of underlying mechanisms and motivations. In a review of LeRoi Jones’ *Blues People* (1963), for instance, Ellison bemoans what amounts above all, he suggests, to a lack of nuance in Jones’ implication of socio-economic factors in the reproduction of cultural taste: ‘The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the blues the blues’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 279). Jones had argued that the emergence of a black middle class after World War One led to a split between older, ‘autonomous’ forms of the blues rooted in folk history, and more modern forms, overlapping with mainstream American culture precisely in line with the movement by the new middle class towards assimilation. He even quoted Ellison for a definition of the blues people—‘those who accepted and lived close to their folk experience’—who lent their name to his book.¹⁰ But for Ellison the distinction between entertainment and folklore is false. For one thing, he argues, ‘it would be impossible to pinpoint the time when [black American musicians] were not shaping what Jones calls the mainstream of American music’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 285). For another, the commercial recordings of the twenties and thirties served either function depending on the context in which they were used:

Bessie Smith might have been a “blues queen” to society at large, but within the tighter Negro community where the blues were part of a total way of life, and a major expression of an attitude toward life, she was a priestess, a celebrant who affirmed the values of the group and man’s ability to deal with chaos. (*Collected Essays*, pp. 286-287)

¹⁰ LeRoi Jones, *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: Morrow Quill Paperbacks, 1963), p. 176. Since the book was published before Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka, and so the quotation from Ellison refers to ‘Jones’, I have retained Baraka’s original name in order to avoid unnecessary confusion.

It is in this sense of the blues as ‘a total way of life’ that Ellison’s concept of cultural production as process makes most forcefully its claim to the refusal of imposed boundaries, and, in the response to Irving Howe, what is true for the blues is also true for literature. In his narrowing of the focus of criticism to political protest alone, Howe has presented a fragmented, reified image of life, giving the impression that ‘when he looks at a Negro he sees not a human being but an abstract embodiment of living hell’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 159). To place this limit on the fullest possibilities of individual development, even in the face of political suppression, is for Ellison not only to deny to black Americans their humanity, ‘but to betray the critic’s commitment to social reality’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 160).

The Howe/Ellison exchange, centred though it is on issues of ethnicity, recalls in many ways some of the broader debates of the 1930s concerning literary form and radical politics, especially the furore surrounding Henry Roth’s 1935 novel *Call it Sleep*, which, with its Joycean use of stream of consciousness and symbolic patterning, inspired a torrent of invective and counter-attack in the left press. In both instances the controversy seems ultimately to reside in the contested extent to which, in the absence of any overtly revolutionary political statement, the content of everyday life may yet offer up radical potential.¹¹ But if the exchange looks back it also points forward. Writing in 2005 in *Dissent*, where ‘Black Boys and Native Sons’ was originally published, Darryl Lorenzo Wellington points out that if, ‘insofar as the Howe-Ellison squabble pitted the values of the committed artist against the values of aesthetic purity, it appears hackneyed,’ this is because nowadays writers and artists are far less likely to feel the pressure of binary logic, and more likely to be attuned to ‘the insufficiency of either/or categories.’¹² Certainly what is drawn into sharp relief now is that in the Ellison/Howe dialogue there is no longer room for any workable distinction between the mainstream and the avant-garde. For Howe, authentic critique lies in protest, in marginality, in maintaining some critical purchase outside the mainstream; for Ellison, outside the mainstream is the ghetto. ‘The circle’, as Wellington notes, ‘goes round and round.’¹³ This is why, I think, Ellison with his blues hat on cuts such an important figure, not simply because his notion of the blues as already

¹¹ For contrasting accounts of the reception of *Call it Sleep* see Rideout, pp. 189-190 and Murphy, pp. 131-133.

¹² Darryl Lorenzo Wellington, ‘Fighting at Cross-Purposes: Irving Howe vs. Ralph Ellison’, *Dissent*, 52.3 (2005), pp. 101-105 (p. 101).

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

given side-steps the aporia of Huyssen's great divide, but more so because Ellison's blues realism, that measured doubleness which cannot help but insist that behind whatever mainstream society claims to be the case, things are not what they seem, whilst maintaining for itself the appearance of a relatively unassuming appeal to hidden continuity, in effect plays havoc with received understandings of the timelines and therefore the meanings of cultural history.

When, in 'Hidden Name and Complex Fate', Ellison remarks that on his first reading of *The Waste Land* it struck him that 'its range of allusions was as mixed and as varied as that of Louis Armstrong' (*Collected Essays*, p. 203), he effects a subtle displacement of disciplinary hierarchy at the same time as marking that moment of entry, retrospectively, as the prefiguring of his own radical rewriting of literary history. As Alan Nadel has pointed out, Ellison's allusions in *Invisible Man* to nineteenth-century American literature, and especially to Melville's 'Benito Cereno' (1856) and *The Confidence Man* (1857), function as a kind of revisionist literary criticism that seeks to recover and so hold to account 'a cultural violence [...] [which] erased the role of the black in American literature at the same time that the American canon was being formed.'¹⁴ Later in this chapter I return to *Invisible Man*, but for now it is important to suggest that Ellison's appropriation of modernist technique has ramifications extending far beyond the relatively parochial concerns of national canon formation. Amongst contemporary critics indebted to Ellison's, as it was perceived by many in the 1960s, somewhat *outré* commitment to the past as at the very least a negotiable territory, Paul Gilroy is, from this side of one great divide perhaps, only the most visible. Ellison's famous description, in the prologue to *Invisible Man*, of listening to Louis Armstrong as the experience of 'a slightly different sense of time [...] those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead' forms one of the cornerstones of Gilroy's conception of the black Atlantic.¹⁵ For Gilroy, the redrawing of geographical boundaries allows for 'a utopian eruption of space into the linear temporal order of modern black politics which enforces the obligation that space and time must be considered relationally in their interarticulation with racialised being.'¹⁶ In other words, as Tanya Barson explains, 'Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic describes a

¹⁴ Alan Nadel, *Invisible Criticism: Ralph Ellison and the American Canon* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), p. 4.

¹⁵ Quoted in Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 202.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

counterculture to European modernity and modernism [...] a shared, though heterogeneous culture that joins diverse communities in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe and Africa.’¹⁷

My own concerns are a little less globally expansive, although this is not to say that I am working with a picture of modernism as exclusively Eurocentric or indeed of the blues as necessarily black; history, cultural or otherwise, is littered with the evidence of unlikely, unstable alliances. Post-WWII white artists as diverse as Allen Ginsberg, Jackson Pollock, Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band, and John Fahey made productive use of what Richard J. Powell has called the ‘blues aesthetic’, a cultural but not racial designation for ‘work that identifies with grassroots, popular and/or mass black American culture’.¹⁸ All the same, the definition of an aesthetic alone could go only a little way towards constituting an artistic avant-garde, let alone solving any of the social issues facing the Panel on Educational Research and Development in 1963. Eloquent though Ellison no doubt was as an orator, as Rampersad points out, ‘Perhaps he was underestimating the psychological need among blacks for a form of catharsis’ (Rampersad, p. 396). If, in a sense, the civil rights movement, with its sit-ins and freedom rides, could be understood as a project to reappropriate the contexts of everyday life, the backlash against it saw the southern states of the US revert to scenes reminiscent of the apocalyptic unrest of the thirties. Powell notes that the period between August 1963 and September 1964 ‘was an especially volatile moment in Afro-American history, with almost daily reports of church bombings, student boycotts, race riots, and the murdering of civil rights workers by Southern white segregationists.’¹⁹ For some scholars and activists, however, the blues represents far more than an aesthetic movement. Clyde Woods argues that the blues is a working-class black epistemology: ‘the embodiment of African American daily life, social explanation, and social action.’²⁰ This assertion of the blues as social praxis speaks to ‘the dialectical ability of working-class communities to revitalize themselves using their own historic

¹⁷ Tanya Barson, ‘Modernism and the Black Atlantic’, introduction to Tanya Barson and Peter Gorshclüter, eds., *Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic* (Liverpool: Tate Liverpool, 2010), pp. 8-25 (p. 9).

¹⁸ Richard J. Powell, ‘The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism’, in Richard J. Powell, ed., *The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism* (Washington Project for the Arts, 1989), pp. 19-35 (p. 23).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 34. For a concise account of the civil rights struggle in Alabama, see William Warren Rogers et al., *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994), pp. 545-565; for the origins of the movement and a detailed analysis of the Montgomery Bus Strike see Sarah Woolfolk Wiggins, ed., *From Civil War to Civil Rights: Alabama 1860-1960* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1987), pp. 463-519.

²⁰ Clyde Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta* (London: Verso, 1998), p. 103.

development agenda forward, ever forward.²¹ Thus, for Woods, Martin Luther King's turn, late in 1967, away from a pragmatic reformist approach towards a more radical agenda signalled a 'blues transformation.'²² This is the sense of the blues I want to explore further here, but in order to do so I need to move back to the late nineteen-thirties and forties, to the period when Ellison, beginning his writing career in New York City, was struggling, as were so many others at the time, to find a way of accommodating the aesthetic transformations of modernism within the broader social ambitions of the left.

1. Practical Mystic

Ever-present, yet defined by its sinuous meditations on absence, *Invisible Man* forms the event horizon of Ellison's fictional universe; there is no escape from its gravitational pull. By now a critical commonplace is that the short story 'King of the Bingo Game', first published in the journal *Tomorrow* in November 1944 and anthologised in the late nineteen-sixties, is prototypical of the later work. The last new fiction Ellison published before November 1947, when what was to become the first chapter of *Invisible Man* appeared in a special edition, dedicated to American art, of Cyril Connolly's London-based *Horizon*, the bingo game story has been seen as prefiguring the primarily existential concerns of the novel. Hence, for Edward Guereschi, the story's unnamed protagonist, stepping into the shoes of the narrator of Dostoyevsky's *Notes from the Underground* (1864) and thus into the shadow of Ellison's own underground man, is 'an existential hero [...] in the same mould'.²³ All three are conflated as 'embodiments of protest against the limiting elements of an unauthentic selfhood'. For Patricia Chaffee, likewise, it is the bingo player's slippery sense of self that, paradoxically, enables him to be identified with the invisible man: 'He does not know who or what he is; he is unable to perceive himself in relationship to objective reality, past or present'.²⁴ What both critics draw attention to is less a matter of personal integrity than of literary technique. Ellison himself recalled the

²¹ Ibid., p. 140.

²² Ibid., p. 187.

²³ Edward Guereschi, 'Anticipations of Invisible Man: Ralph Ellison's "King of the Bingo Game"', *Negro American Literature Forum*, 6.4 (1972), pp. 122-124 (p. 122).

²⁴ Patricia Chaffee, 'Slippery Ground: Ralph Ellison's Bingo Player', *Negro American Literature Forum*, 10.1 (1976), pp. 23-24 (p. 23).

writing of the short story as a breakthrough insofar as it marked the emergence of ‘the realism that goes beyond and becomes surrealism’ (Rampersad, p. 183). Somewhere in ‘The King of the Bingo Game’, then, a line is crossed, and this moment of transgression, as John F. Callahan writes, ‘anticipates the tithe paid to fluidity, violence, chaos, and the surreal throughout *Invisible Man*.’²⁵

The difficulty with these approaches is not that they are in any sense inaccurate—there are obvious parallels between the two pieces of writing—but rather that they cleave too rigidly to one side of the line separating what happened after the bingo game story from what came before. Solely to view ‘King of the Bingo Game’ as a forerunner of a post-WWII American modernism concerned only with the negotiation of an authentic, autonomous identity is to downplay or disregard the extent to which the story represents the culmination of Ellison’s experimentation with that other, less celebrated form of American modernism: proletarian literature. Artistic success, this version of events seems to suggest, comes only with the acknowledgment of political failure. There are at least three good reasons, I would argue, to call for a problematisation of this narrative. For one thing, the notion that the radical writing of the 1930s was unconcerned with the contestation of identity is false. One need look no further than Ellison’s early work, indeed, to show that debate over the location of individual consciousness—and conscience—within the broader collectivities of race, nation and social class was fundamental to radical writers. For another, accepting Ellison’s personal testimony that surrealism only entered the frame as a workable solution to the limits of realism in 1944 might lead the uninitiated too prescriptively to suppose that prior to that date the use of avant-garde techniques was unheard of by those on the left. Yet by 1938 Ellison was in the habit of copying out extracts from James Joyce and Gertrude Stein by hand, as Rampersad puts it, ‘the better to grasp their genius’ (Rampersad, p. 109). Too literal an adherence to dates, moreover, and the extrapolation thereby of a linear progression from one work to the next, may prove profoundly inhibiting not only—as in this instance—to a particular understanding of the circular historical sense implicit in Ellison’s working practice, but also to the productive and indeed progressive elucidation of literary history *per se*.

‘The King of the Bingo Game’ is a story about failure: failure of ambition; a failure of nerve; the failure of individual agency in the face of a hostile collectivity; the failure,

²⁵ John F. Callahan, ‘Introduction’ to Ralph Ellison, *Flying Home and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage International, 1998), p. xxxv.

ultimately, of success. That it is also a story that fails to achieve what it set out to do is no necessary measure of inexperience on Ellison's behalf. Nevertheless, 'The King of the Bingo Game' is a story that did not want to end up as a set of working notes for a depoliticised existentialist epic. The central character does experience alienation, but the roots of his self-estrangement lie in the economic basis of the ritualised spectacle he is compelled to undergo.²⁶ A recent migrant from the South, with no birth certificate and a seriously ill wife, he is unable either to find work or pay medical bills. The \$36.90 jackpot at a bingo game in a city picture house is too lucrative an opportunity to ignore, and he is prepared to do anything in his power to increase the odds of his winning. Even with five separate bingo cards, though, he realises 'he [doesn't] have much of a chance.'²⁷ When, against all expectation, one of his cards yields a winning combination, he climbs up to the brightly lit stage to take his turn pressing the button that spins the wheel of fortune. Already half-delirious through hunger and lack of sleep, the bingo player is overwhelmed by the moment and finds it impossible to let go of the button, accept his fate, and return to his place in the auditorium. As the lights spin and the audience grow increasingly hostile, two uniformed goons emerge from backstage, 'walking in step, slowly, like a tap-dance team returning for a third encore' (*Flying*, p.134). They overpower the bingo player who, as the curtain descends and blows begin to rain down on his head, sees 'without surprise' (p. 136) that the wheel of fortune has stopped on the winning number.

Period detail in the story anchors it firmly in the 1930s. The picture house bingo game, sometimes known as the 'screeno', in which the wheel of fortune was projected onto the cinema screen, was designed to combat dwindling audiences during the Depression.²⁸ But Ellison's story resonates on a far broader historical stage. For Houston A. Baker, Jr.,

²⁶ Robert J. Butler applies a more firmly sociologically grounded framework than do the 'existentialist' readings of the 1970s. The teleological pull of *Invisible Man*'s world of infinite possibilities is detectable still, however, in Butler's 1998 assertion that the bingo game story 'is a classic study of anomie'. Robert J. Butler, 'Ellison's "Black Eye": Transforming Pain into Vision', in Robert J. Butler, ed., *The Critical Response to Ralph Ellison* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2000), pp. 142-146 (p. 144).

²⁷ Ralph Ellison, 'King of the Bingo Game', in *Flying Home and Other Stories*, pp. 123-136, p. 126. Further references to stories in the collection are included in the text as *Flying*.

²⁸ The picture-house bingo game is also dealt with by Delmore Schwartz in a story written in the late thirties but not published until after his death. In 'Screeno' an unemployed poet, having won a \$425 jackpot, first recites an extract from Eliot's 'Gerontion' before handing the money away to an impoverished musician who claims the management have cheated him out of his winnings. See Delmore Schwartz, *Screeno: Stories and Poems* (New York: New Directions, 2004). Ellison and Schwartz's stories make an invaluable addition to a distinct subgenre dealing with quasi-gladiatorial Depression-era popular entertainment, also including representations of dance marathons: most famously in Horace McCoy's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1935), also in James T. Farrell's *Judgement Day* (1935).

the blues is the always already of black American culture, ‘demonstrably anterior to any single instance of its cultural-explanatory employment.’²⁹ Indeed for Baker, blues signifiers—crossroads, train whistles, and so forth—need not actually be present in any given text for that text’s connections with the ‘blues matrix’ to be traced. ‘Like the freight-hopping hobo,’ he writes, ‘[the blues] are always on the move’ (p. 8), and this gift of perpetual motion, in Baker’s avowedly Hegelian formulation, by energising a dialectic of absence and presence enables the reinscription of a hidden history. Crucially, blues performance ‘mediates one of the most prevalent of all antinomies in cultural investigation—creativity and commerce’ (p. 9). Thus, on the one hand, Baker as ‘blues detective’ is able to fathom, in the ostensibly depthless slave narratives of Olaudah Equiano and Frederick Douglass, a ‘unified economic grounding’ (p. 39), a shared subtext open to a symptomatic reading informed by Marx’s theory of surplus value. On the other, he identifies in the work of twentieth-century black American writers a form of self-reflexivity, ‘an ironic, symbolic, fictive (blues) manipulation’ (p. 137) of extant materials which, in drawing attention to its own complicity in the commodification of culture, and so its location within culture as an active agent, complicates the dichotomy of art to life. The phylogenesis connecting ‘King of the Bingo Game’, a story in which the taking part in a game of chance is revealed as a life or death struggle, to what Baker calls ‘the economics of slavery’ is barely hidden enough to warrant uncovering. Less immediately apparent in the story, however, are the more oblique allusions Ellison makes to the blues tradition, and in particular the bingo player’s reverie of ‘train whistles [...] sounding in the distance’ (*Flying*, p. 125), a childhood memory that soon (re)turns to nightmare.

The mythology of the railroad is, of course, foundational in the narrative of American nationhood, and no cultural signifier more mobile therein than that of the freight train. In Woody Guthrie’s *Bound for Glory* (1943), the boxcar is appropriated as both literal and metaphorical vehicle of Popular Front-era propaganda. ‘I could see men of all colors bouncing along in the boxcar’, Guthrie begins his memoir, as he and ‘ten fifteen of us guys’ finish a few rousing choruses of the eponymous spiritual:

This train don’t carry no gamblers,
Liars, thieves and big-shot ramblers;
This train is bound for glory,

²⁹ Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 9. Four consecutive references are here included in the text.

This train!³⁰

The words of the traditional song here fulfil a certain ironic function, as the boxcar in actuality plays host to an unholy combination of drinking, smoking, card-playing, dangerous practical jokes and, ultimately, mass-brawling: ‘Mixed-up, screwed-up people. A crazy boxcar on a wild track’ (p. 25), as Guthrie puts it. When, eventually, police escort the battered, dust-caked occupants from the container, an avuncular captain, matched only in sardonic wit by Guthrie’s own laconic asides, elects not to hold the men or press any charges. Before he can deliver a lecture on the evils of free-loading, however, one by one the men run to climb onto another train, bound this time for Seattle and the rumour of work building ships for the navy. “Did Mr A. Hitler say we was a nation of sissies?” (p. 317) one cries as, clinging to the sides of locked boxcars in the pouring rain, some sixty or so men set out into the storm on their fifteen-hundred-mile journey.

Implausible though some of the details of Guthrie’s recollection may seem, he at least paints the boxcar experience in an ambivalent light. The dangers of riding the rails, along with the possibilities of freedom, are simply subsumed by the moral imperatives of national defence: “What th’ hell d’ya want in a war, boy, a big soft ass cushion?” (p. 318) By 1957, in Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*, freight hopping in the 1930s has been entirely romanticized as some form of lost idyll. “During the depression,” a cowboy tells Kerouac surrogate Sal Paradise, “I used to hop freights at least once a month [...] Brakemen never bothered you in those days.”³¹ This sanitised version of history— itinerant underclass as frequent travellers—effectively erases the more troubling representations of migratory poverty recorded closer to the events themselves. Proletarian writers in the early-to-mid-1930s, especially those based in the mid-West, set down the experience of enforced rootlessness as one of profound degradation and violence. In Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* (1933), protagonist Larry Donovan first encounters the pitfalls of freight-hopping when, working as a repairman in a railway yard, he finds a hobo locked inside a freezer compartment. When Donovan takes to the rails himself, he is shaken down for a bribe by a detective, shot at, and narrowly avoids falling between two carriages and so

³⁰ Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 19. The song, sometimes known as ‘This Train’, is attributed as traditional. Three consecutive references are here included in the text.

³¹ Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), pp. 22-23.

being ‘ground to hamburger meat.’³² Nelson Algren’s *Somebody in Boots* (1935) also features hobos trapped in a boxcar; equipped only with a broken jackknife, they are forced to burn their way out, nearly suffocating in the process. Of all the works of the interwar proletarian grotesque, *Somebody in Boots* is amongst the closest to a fully realised literature of excess, and it is no accident that Algren locates the means of unproductive expenditure in the material and moral dissolution of the lumpenproletariat. When Algren’s antihero Cass McKay, dodging armed railway police, leaps down the hatch of a boxcar and finds that the ‘softness’ he has landed on is the belly of a heavily pregnant woman, his life becomes ‘all unreal as nightmare, for the thing had happened too quickly to be understood clearly.’³³ Trapped in the boxcar, now ‘a cess-pen running with blood, stinking of urine and strewn with rags’ (p. 114), Cass spends the night transfixed as the miscarried baby, wrapped in newspaper, moves with the swaying of the carriage: ‘Sometimes it seemed to raise itself, sometimes it rolled toward the wall. Once, when the car buckled violently, it worked whole inches toward him just as though it lived’ (p. 115).

William J. Maxwell points out that the ‘double inheritance’ of *Somebody in Boots* from both surrealism and naturalism is shared by Wright’s *Native Son*.³⁴ Algren and Wright were close colleagues in the Chicago John Reed Club, and Wright drew his title from Algren’s work. Wright, in turn, encouraged Ellison to try his hand at fiction and this double inheritance provides one immediate literary context for Ellison’s early writing. In ‘Hymie’s Bull’, his first short story, written around 1937, the tension between the demands of realism and those of the avant-garde works itself out in an uneven balance between expressionistic detail and a kind of vernacular impulse toward the ironic. In the opening paragraphs the young narrator, one of a group of southern black youths drifting around the country, having abandoned all hope of finding work, describes the violence meted out by the bulls (railroad security) in workaday terms. Police clubs crack heads like walnuts, boots grind fingers ‘like you’d do a cockroach’, and backbones concertina ‘like the old collapsible drinking cups we used when we were kids’ (*Flying*, p. 83). When Hymie, ‘an ofay bum [...] from Brooklyn’,

³² Jack Conroy, *The Disinherited: A Novel of the 1930s* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1991), p. 183.

³³ Nelson Algren, *Somebody in Boots* (New York: Berkley Medallion, 1965), p. 111. Two consecutive references are given here in the text.

³⁴ William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African-American Writing and Communism Between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 191.

becomes ill, no one is confident of an accurate diagnosis, and this uncertainty disrupts the regular flow of comparison:

But anyway, Hymie was sick and riding on top. It was hot and the flies kept swarming into the car so fast that we stopped paying them no mind. Hymie must have caught hell from them though because his dinner kept coming up and spattering the air. He must have been plenty bothered with the flies because we could see his dinner fly past the door of the car where we were. Once it was very red like a cardinal flying past in the green fields along the tracks. Come to think of it, it might have been a cardinal flying past. Or it might have been something else that smelled like swill from a farmyard. (*Flying*, p. 84)

In the turn to self-awareness here, as the act of narration itself ('come to think of it') transforms the raw phenomena of experience, it is possible to detect the inflections of Houston Baker's blues voice. Wry, self-deprecatory, yet delivering a pungent ('swill from a farmyard') kick, this voice resists its own tendency to aestheticize. Far better, after all, once a red butterfly enters into the frame, that it be real than some mere product of the poetic imagination. In drawing attention to itself, the blues voice points beyond itself.

Wright, associate editor of New York-based *New Challenge*, commissioned the piece from Ellison but once the manuscript was handed over kept it in his briefcase for two months, by which time it was too late to publish, *New Challenge* having folded (Rampersad, p. 100). Ellison had better luck with a review of Waters Edward Turpin's novel, *These Low Grounds* (1937), already included in what it turned out would be the last number of the journal. In the review, Ellison's first published writing, he praises what he sees as 'a certain kind of realism' in Turpin's work.³⁵ This realism 'demands sincerity on the part of a writer', and in his portrayal of southern characters Turpin has achieved a picture of life 'free of superficialities'. Elsewhere, and especially in bringing his characters north and into the twentieth century, he fails. The responsibility of the black American writer, according to Ellison, is 'to utilize yet transcend his immediate environment [...] [and] [t]his cannot be accomplished with dull sensibilities, or by lagging in the cultural, technical or political sense.'³⁶ For Harold Cruse, writing in the late 1960s, Wright's brief stint at the *New Challenge* represented a last-ditch opportunity to recoup the radical potential of the Harlem Renaissance, lost to the literary left; once again, independent black radicalism was to lose out, its most promising writers and intellectuals sidelined by the self-

³⁵ Ralph Ellison, 'Creative and Cultural Lag', *New Challenge*, 2.2 (1937), pp. 90-91 (p. 90).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

interested machinations of white Marxists.³⁷ In Cruse's version of events, Ellison was amongst those most heavily to fall into the arms of an unholy alliance between New Deal capitalism, the CPUSA and 'Left-oriented Negro middle-class elements'.³⁸ This fall was precipitated to no small degree by the fundamental inability of 'new arrivals' such as Ellison and novelist William Attaway—'possessed with problems of "craft," but tongue-tied in terms of ideas'—to match the 'fiery polemic' of the white left wing.³⁹

Certainly Ellison is never less than fully composed on paper, but given the substance of his comments in the Turpin review, his measured yet firm rejoinder to 'dull sensibilities', it could be argued that Cruse's subsequent assessment of the state of black writing in the mid-1930s is an echo rather than a contradiction of Ellison. The latter's refusal, moreover, to separate out aesthetics and politics comes as a direct consequence of immersion in a modernism corrosively sceptical as to the kinds of alien orthodoxy Cruse marks out along the road to inevitable perdition—again. Whether the publication of 'Hymie's Bull' in *New Challenge* could have done much to halt this circular trajectory must remain an unknown, yet what is clear is that in the story Ellison is at pains to establish an immediate layer of appearance to be revealed as second nature, punctured by the intrusion of symbolic devices. Hymie's apparent weakness is set up through the first wash of blood-flecked spray. Climbing onto the roof to watch the sun go down, the narrator feels sympathy for the hobo. But when bulls board the train and Hymie, unexpectedly, proves more than a match for his assailant, the narrator watches the ensuing fight, 'almost too excited to move' (*Flying*, p. 86). As the bull lands blows from his nightstick, trying to prise Hymie from the roof of the refrigerator car, Hymie pulls a knife, slashes the bull's wrists and throat, stabs him and throws him from the roof of the train: 'Something was warm on my face, and I found that some of the bull's blood had blown back like spray when a freight stops to take on water from a tank' (*Flying*, p. 87).

Ellison rode the rails himself, on his way to Tuskegee from his hometown Oklahoma City in 1933, and in 'Hidden Name and Complex Fate' recalls being 'taken off a freight train at Decatur, Alabama' (*Collected Essays*, p. 205). Despite a notoriously oblique allusion in his response to 'Black Boys and Native Sons' there is no evidence, however, that Ellison ever encountered violence like this at such close quarters in real life, or that

³⁷ Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, pp. 181-189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

‘Hymie’s Bull’ is intended as a documentary account.⁴⁰ Rather what seems to be at stake is a process of discovering a formal mechanism for realising that transcendence of environment mentioned in the Turpin review. Knowing that an attack on the bulls will inevitably bring lethal repercussions, the boys are fearful for their lives as they move into the yards at Montgomery, Alabama, only to find two armed guards waiting. Luck, for once, turns out to be on their side as, just at that moment, a storm breaks, the train moves away and they are able to make their escape on the roof, uncomfortable but ‘happy as hell’ (*Flying*, p. 88). What invests this soaking the boys receive with more than incidental significance is the way it fits into a sequence initiated by the image of the hobo’s airborne dinner. For the narrator in particular there is more than a passing suggestion that, after the ritual blood letting of the fight scene, the deluge in Montgomery doubles up as both accident of fate and as some form of spiritual cleansing. The downpour itself, moreover, passes without the need for any self-conscious figuration or stylistic excess.

Ellison’s writing throughout the late thirties and early forties registers a profound entanglement within the literary left of two distinct aesthetic schools, each with identifiable connections to European and Soviet avant-gardes but also easily and perhaps more readily translatable in terms of the nativist scene: on the one hand a tendency towards understatement, codified by Henry James in his Prefaces, typified by Hemingway, and popularised in the hard-boiled writing of Dashiell Hammett and James M. Cain; on the other an aesthetic of shock, as evidenced in the proletarian grotesques of Wright, Caldwell and Algren, but found also in Hemingway, Faulkner and Cain as well as in the more melodramatic expressions of mainstream fiction. Increasingly each begins to rely for its effect on the other, and this tension demands some reconciliation. The grotesque, which Kenneth Burke associated with surrealism, tends, he noted, to merge into ‘something like mysticism’. Writing in France in the mid-forties, philosopher Henri Lefebvre also identifies mystification as a consequence of the surreal. For Lefebvre, the dominant current in nineteenth-century literature was established by Baudelaire, who ‘abandoned the

⁴⁰ ‘What does Howe know of my acquaintance with violence, or the shape of my courage or the intensity of my anger? I suggest that my credentials are at least as valid as Wright’s, even though he began writing long before I did, and it is possible that I have lived through and committed even more violence than he’ (*Collected Essays*, pp. 162-163). Rampersad records that Ellison regularly carried a knife when taking his dog for a walk in New York City (p .474).

metaphysical [...] to immerse himself in the everyday'.⁴¹ Whereas for Baudelaire, whose detailing of the corrupted banalities of a degraded modernity took place on an intensely physical level, critique was essentially immanent, taking the everyday on its own terms, the surrealists, Lefebvre maintains, exhibit a contradictory desire 'to belittle the real in favour of the magical and the marvellous' (p. 110). This strategy, because it accentuates a duality between the everyday and the imaginary, is a failure: 'doctrinal Surrealism, which started off with such enormous pretensions—to be a new mysticism, a method of knowledge of the "interior abyss" ended up as nothing more than a lot of superstitious nonsense' (p. 113). Dangerously, this attack on the everyday leads to a 'contempt for man and his real life' (p. 127), a tendency epitomised in the writing of 'the despicable and in a sense brilliant Louis-Ferdinand Céline.'⁴²

Lefebvre's critique of modernist literature, which is also an attack on existentialism, works its way out through what he sees as a break implicit in contemporary confusion between 'the real in capitalist terms and the real in human terms' (p. 127). In the pre-history of capitalism, 'The mysterious, the sacred and the diabolical, magic, ritual, the mystical' (p. 117) were lived with intensity as day to day realities, but with the rise of consumer fetishism transformed in their relationship to everyday life, set apart in the realms of poetry and games, reduced to the status of the weird and the bizarre. Lefebvre puts dialectics to the task of collapsing the dualities of reified existence so to effect '*a rehabilitation of everyday life*' (p. 127 [emphasis in the original]). It is more than coincidental, surely, that Ralph Waldo Ellison, whose 'hidden name' punningly references the founder of transcendentalism, writing in the late thirties and early forties from within the editorial expectations of an institutional Marxism, also attempts a secularisation of the mystical inspired by an analysis of nineteenth-century literature. Raymond Nelson has drawn attention to a strand of mysticism in American writing, embracing Thoreau, Whitman and Williams, whose proponents can be identified by 'their ability to release immense amounts

⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. I (London: Verso, 2008), p. 106. Six further consecutive references are here included in the text.

⁴² In his *American Mercury* review of *Invisible Man*, William Barrett claimed that the novel's 'combination of nightmare and realism [...] can only be compared with the Frenchman Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, that great poem of nihilism of the 1930's.' William Barrett, 'Black and Blue: A Negro Céline', in Butler, ed., pp. 23-25 (p. 24). Barrett's principal reservation as to Ellison's achievement is that 'he is divided within himself' (p. 25) about his central theme of contested identity. 'Céline committed himself to his revolt against mankind,' Barrett continues, 'taking the train of disgust to its last stop: Ellison is much too warmly attached to life for any such ultimate commitment' (p. 25). Taking Céline's notorious anti-Semitism and Fascism as a measure, Ellison's apparent prevarication, and subsequent reputation for political moderateness, may perhaps be seen in a more generous light.

of energy into contemplation of mundane detail, [...] often presented without restraint or fastidiousness.’⁴³ A 1939 piece in *New Masses* suggested how strongly Ellison was implicated in this tradition. In ‘Practical Mystic’, a review of a biography of Sojourner Truth, slave, religious fanatic and leader of the abolitionist underground railway by turn, Ellison accuses its author of ‘a confused historical approach and a static philosophy’.⁴⁴ Objecting to the assertion that nineteenth-century African Americans, unlike their white puritan counterparts, were unable fully to subjugate their ‘expressive’ personalities to the rigours of asceticism, and so were more likely to develop ‘a healthy paganism’, Ellison argues that this is to presuppose ‘a set of fixed qualities, which allows no scope for development and change [...] through dynamic contact with the social and economic factors constituting environment.’⁴⁵ This cultural stereotyping, he goes on, ignores in general the inadequacies of the established black church as an institution and in particular the way in which Sojourner Truth, once the limits of her religious activism were made clear, turned to the material struggle of abolition whilst holding on to a transformed mysticism, ‘used [...] as a weapon with which to realize her own heroic will in the struggle against slavery.’⁴⁶

If the wording of the article, implying as it does that mysticism is now to be enlisted into the left’s increasingly unwieldy arsenal of weapons in the class war, looks like an attempt to placate the *New Masses* editorial team, Ellison’s fiction of the period leans away from the ‘bottom dogs’ sensationalism of the proletarian avant-garde towards a more meditative, sceptical approach to social issues. ‘I was having a hard time trying not to hate in those days’ (*Flying*, p. 91), says the narrator of ‘I Did Not Learn Their Names’, who, like the narrator of ‘Hymie’s Bull’, is riding the rails, this time, however, perhaps a little more in line with the experience of his creator, to raise funds for school in Alabama. Altogether more measured in tone, ‘I Did Not Learn Their Names’ is more open-ended,

⁴³ Raymond Nelson, *Kenneth Patchen and American Mysticism* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1984), p. 8. Kenneth Patchen, like Ellison, made a name for himself in the 1950s by blending writing with jazz, but through performances of his poetry to jazz accompaniment rather than critical work. For an intriguing account see Holly Farrington, ‘“I Improvised behind Him...Ahead of Time”: Charles Mingus, Kenneth Patchen and Jazz/Poetry Fusion Art’, *Journal of American Studies*, 41.2 (2007), pp. 365-374. Like Ellison, Patchen emerged from the proletarian avant-garde of the 1930s. His ‘Joe Hill Listens to the Praying’, printed in the 1935 *Proletarian Literature in the United States* anthology, is a surrealist paean to the martyred IWW leader set to ‘the clean rhythm of the wheels/on a fast freight’ (Hicks et al, eds., p. 182).

⁴⁴ Ellison, ‘Practical Mystic’, review of Arthur Huff Fauset, *Sojourner Truth: God’s Faithful Pilgrim* (1938), in *New Masses* (August 1938), pp. 25-26 (p. 26).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

too, in its construction. The climactic knife-fight and cloudburst are gone, and in their place a delicate account of an awkward boxcar encounter between the narrator and an elderly white couple: ‘not the kind of people you usually saw on the freights, even in those days’ (*Flying*, p. 92). Although we are given lyrical descriptions of the narrator’s travels, including the mist-shrouded mountains of Denver, ‘high and mysterious and psychic before the sun came’ (*Flying*, p. 93), and insights into his tortured negotiation of the psychopathology of everyday life under Jim Crow, the main interest of the story lies in the ordinariness of the couple, and the consequent strangeness of the details of their domestic routines when transplanted to the alien environment of the boxcar. The narrator is fascinated to watch the old man strip brown paper from the walls of the boxcar to make a bed for his wife, wondering ‘why no one had thought to do it before’ (*Flying*, p. 90), and when he mistakenly finds himself interrupting the couple eating, he is taken aback by their insisting on him sharing their sandwiches. The simplicity, resilience and generosity of spirit of the couple later haunt the narrator, who, during a brief spell in jail, reflects he is ‘sorry that [he] had not learned their names’ (*Flying*, p.96), a closing line bringing us back to the title on one level, yet on another pointing beyond the page with the suggestion of anonymity as the condition of possibility for the existence of a strain of secular spirituality, irreducible, somehow, to individual identity.

Throughout these early, unpublished stories Ellison is at pains to suggest that black Americans are as likely to suffer from the preconceptions generated by institutionalised racism as anyone else. In ‘A Hard Time Keeping Up’ what to two southern Pullman porters on a stopover in Chicago looks like a racially motivated shooting turns out to have been a good-natured bet between a local underworld boss and a professional football player, involving a woman, a Singapore Sling, and a dollop of tomato ketchup. As the title hints, the reader is fully implicated in misjudging the events, a failure upon which the story depends for its—negligible—success. Robin Lucy has recently explored the extent to which Ellison implicated *himself* as the reader of his characters’ consciousness. Both Ellison and Wright, he notes, saw themselves during the 1940s as ‘knowing outsiders’, intellectuals on the margins of a black culture understood as ‘the materialization of the inner, invisible, and often inarticulate cultural and political imagination of the black folk and working-folk.’⁴⁷ The central issue both addressed in their interpretation and articulation of this separate

⁴⁷ Robin Lucy, ‘Flying Home’: Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and the Black Folk During World War II’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 120.3 (2007), pp. 257-283 (p. 261).

black culture and history, with its roots in slavery and in the South, was whether it would survive transition to the urban North. For Wright, folk culture is a relic of pre-history, ‘an element of an unusable past that cannot be translated into modernity’; but Ellison—particularly, Lucy argues, as a result of his work in the late 1930s on the Federal Writers’ Project in New York City, recording urban and industrial folklore—moves away from this position towards ‘a theory of the black folk focused on what they were becoming and not on what they must necessarily leave behind.’⁴⁸ The turning point, for Ellison, is marked in a review of William Attaway’s proletarian novel, *Blood on the Forge* (1941).

In the review, published in a new journal, *The Negro Quarterly*, and titled simply ‘Transition’, Ellison identifies a cultural movement emerging around the end of WWI, a response to and at the same time a product of industrial capitalism. Born of the displacements of the machine age, plagued by disorientation and madness, and driven ultimately into exile and silence, this movement transcends the limits of the autonomous art form in its expression of ‘a new attitude, the blues.’⁴⁹ In Attaway’s novel this new attitude is given utterance by Melody Moss, one of three brothers driven north from their Kentucky farm to the mills of the Pennsylvania steel belt. At home in Kentucky, Melody’s slide guitar playing is fundamentally mimetic: when hungry he plays the hungry blues, and he is only aware of what he is playing when self-consciously imitating the night-time sounds of birds and crickets. When the brothers, on the run from a lynch mob, are recruited by—as Ellison puts it—‘an agent of a perverse Underground Railroad’ (*Transition*, p. 88), the experience of being smuggled out of the state in a sealed, overcrowded boxcar deranges Melody’s senses:

The rattle and jar of the wheels kept Melody from singing, although he had his box with him. The wheels seemed to be saying crazy things, laughing crazy laughs, trying to draw him into the present, trying to make him crazy like they were. Whatever came into his head was copied by the wheels.

Once he called out: “Big Mat, where you?”

The wheels swallowed up the cry and clicked it out, louder and louder, faster and faster. It made his head spin to try and keep up with the fast-talking wheels. He had to shift to another word in order to keep sane. Soon the wheels had him racing along with the new word.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 263; p. 264.

⁴⁹ Ralph Ellison, ‘Transition’, review of William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (1941), *Negro Quarterly*, 1.1 (1942), pp. 87-92 (p.89). Further references are included in the text as *Transition*.

⁵⁰ William Attaway, *Blood on the Forge* (New York: Collier, 1970), p. 39. Further references are included in the text as *Blood*.

Something in the circular motion of the wheels, and the way Melody is drawn into their presence as if from outside of history, effects a total reversal of his relationship to an external reality which, no longer effortlessly internalised, mirrors his innermost thoughts, garbling them in the process and so leaving him struggling for ‘a new word’. Thus denuded of an expressive vocabulary, after a few weeks at the steel mills Melody abandons slide guitar altogether: ‘That was for back home and the distances in the hills. Here [...] it felt right to find quick chords with the fingers—a strange kind of playing for him, but [...] right for that new place’ (*Blood*, p. 62).

Attaway, it has to be said, is distinctly ambivalent about Melody’s talents. ‘He don’t play so good,’ he has Melody’s elder brother Mat say. ‘Jest make the music what in him’ (*Blood*, p. 66). Eventually, consumed by jealous love, Melody wearies of the guitar, ‘knowing it could never plunk away the craving that was in him’ (*Blood*, p. 127), and half-deliberately allows his ‘picking’ hand to be crushed in an accident at the blast furnace. At the end of the novel, with Deputy Big Mat killed by a striker, Melody boards the train for Pittsburgh, carrying, as Ellison notes, ‘not a new consciousness, but a symbolic watch fob [...] and Big Mat’s old backless Bible. Even his guitar is left behind’ (*Transition*, p. 91). Writing in Spring 1942, Ellison is more concerned with the outbreak of war—and with labour politics—than he is with the development of blues music as such. All the same, it is clear from his review that the potential for agency he is increasingly to locate in the cultural realm is formulated to a significant extent in response to what he sees as missing in Attaway’s work and, by extension, from proletarian writing in general. ‘Attaway’, he writes, ‘grasped the destruction of the folk, but missed its rebirth on a higher level [...] [he] did not see that while the folk individual was being liquidated in the crucible of steel, he was also undergoing fusion with new elements’ (*Transition*, p. 90). Hardly the first to point out the tendency for radical writers to pour down defeat on the heads of their working-class characters in the name of the coming revolution, Ellison notes that, as a result of his limited understanding of the dynamics of class formation, ‘[Attaway] is so struck by the despair in his material that he fails to see any ground for hope for his characters’ (*Transition*, p. 91).

As Lucy points out, in the Attaway review Ellison ‘uses metallurgical metaphors to invoke a dialectical process that produces a type of sublation.’⁵¹ Like Russian poet Aleksei Gastev, whose ‘We Grow Out of Iron’, in which a worker becomes entwined with the steel

⁵¹ Lucy, p. 273.

girders of his factory, became a cornerstone of the Soviet Proletcult movement, and like Michael Gold, whose Jan Clepak bridged the post-WWI avant-garde with Broadway, Ellison draws on a strand of quasi-mystical modernist imagery which, as Mark D. Steinburg notes, ‘was not simply aesthetic and emotional or ideological but part of a mythic psychocultural (and stereotypically masculine) identity in which proletarians merged with machines.’⁵² Despite this impeccably radical (if androcentric) lineage, however, Ellison’s telling of the story of the blues looks, from a certain angle at least, like the narrative of an avant-garde in reverse. After all, if, as in Bürger’s formulation, the project of the avant-garde is to destroy the institution of art, sublating its energies into the praxis of everyday life, then what is to be gained from the separating out of an instinctive and as Ellison puts it ‘almost formless [...] quicksilver’ (*Transition*, p. 88) personality such as Melody’s into its constituent parts as so many products of alienated labour? Moreover, disappointing though Ellison ultimately finds the novel, from the evidence of *Blood on the Forge* it is difficult to see what this ‘new attitude, the blues’, as embodied in Melody with his hesitancy, self-absorption and lack of commitment, actually consists of over and above a mildly rebellious form of urban insouciance.

When Ellison locates the birth of the blues around the time of WWI, or draws parallels between the techniques of T. S. Eliot and Louis Armstrong, he makes use of a counter-intuitive strategy that *works*—both in the sense of operating and in the sense of being right—on two levels: the historical and the economic. Although the use in American literature of the term ‘the blues’ to denote a state of depression or dread can be traced as far back as Washington Irving, the blues as an art form first enters the historical record in the 1910s with the publication a series of compositions by W. C. Handy: ‘Memphis Blues’ (1912); ‘St. Louis Blues’ (1914); ‘Yellow Dog Blues’ (1914); ‘Jogo Blues’ (1915); ‘Joe Turner Blues’ (1916); ‘Beale Street Blues’ (1917).⁵³ ‘[T]he weirdest music I had ever heard’, was Handy’s description of the slide guitar playing he first encountered, so the legend goes, stranded at a Mississippi railroad station in 1903.⁵⁴ His subsequent Tin Pan Alley success, however, led to a rapid process of normalisation, and by the end of the decade a burgeoning recording industry capitalised on the blues craze. Okeh’s 1920

⁵² Steinburg, *Proletarian Imagination*, p. 195.

⁵³ Albert Murray, *Stomping the Blues* (New York: DaCapo, 1976), p. 64; William Barlow, *Looking Up At Down: The Emergence of Blues Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), p. 123.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Barlow, p. 31.

recording of Mamie Smith singing Perry Bradford's 'Crazy Blues' sold seventy-five thousand copies within the first month of release, and more than a million within a year.⁵⁵ These early, so-called vaudeville blues recordings may seem inauthentic when heard against the keening and wails of the country blues, now understood as the very essence of the genre, but they predate by at least a decade famous recordings made by, say, Charlie Patton between 1929 and 1934, or Robert Johnson between 1936 and 1937. Moreover, these country blues recordings were not made widely available until the blues revival of the 1960s.⁵⁶ In much the same way that the reputations of many of the 'major' figures now associated with high modernism, little known at the time, have received disproportionate attention in the post-war academy, many of the artefacts of the old weird America are thus, as Greil Marcus has pointed out, in a real sense products of the cold war.⁵⁷

Houston Baker's formulation of the blues as 'the always already of Afro-American culture' speaks to the historical record as much as to his reading of Derrida.⁵⁸ For Baker, the blues withstand Handy's (and others') reduction of them to the limited status of a 'found' folk signifier because they already exist, 'not as a function of formal inscription, but as a forceful condition of Afro-American inscription itself.'⁵⁹ All the same, as William Barlow notes, the commodification of blues culture in the 1920s 'was bound to have its drawbacks': not only were musicians paid a pittance as profits rolled into 'the coffers of the white businessmen who owned or managed the record companies', but the music itself,

⁵⁵ Barlow, p. 128. For a provocative reading of 'Crazy Blues' as 'an insurrectionary social text [...] that transcends its moment by contributing to an evolving discourse of black revolutionary violence in its broadest sense' see Adam Gussow, "Shoot Myself a Cop": Mamie Smith's "Crazy Blues" as Social Text, *Callaloo*, 25.1, Jazz Poetics: A Special Issue (2002), pp. 8-44 (p. 10). In the last verse of the recording Smith sings 'I'm gonna do like a Chinaman...go and get some hop/Get myself a gun...and shoot myself a cop.' Whilst Gussow acknowledges that this places the song in the 'badman' folk tradition, along with such hardy perennials as 'Stagolee', he also claims the popularity of the 1920 recording spoke more or less directly to tensions following directly in the wake of widespread rioting during the 'Red Summer' of 1919.

⁵⁶ The original liner notes for Columbia's *Robert Johnson: King of the Delta Blues Singers* (1961) state that in the 1930s the recordings the LP draws from were unavailable outside the South: average sales of 'race' records were 'in the low thousands, often only in the high hundreds.'

⁵⁷ See Greil Marcus, *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (London: Picador, 1997), esp. pp. 87-126.

⁵⁸ For an update on the always already of blues recordings see Mark Fisher's *k-punk* blog, especially 'Phonograph Blues', where he ruminates on Robert Johnson, Tricky and Burial, amongst others, all through the lens of Derridean 'hauntology'. 'Phonograph Blues', *k-punk*, Mark Fisher 2006. <http://k-punk.abstractdynamics.org/archives/008535.html> [accessed 8 February 2011]

⁵⁹ Baker, *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, p. 4. This sense of popular music—and the culture surrounding it—as the site of a complex mediation of past and present is succinctly articulated by Greil Marcus, writing of The Band's negotiation of folk traditions in the late sixties: 'There is no feeling of being dragged into the past for a history lesson; if anything, the past catches up with us.' Greil Marcus, *Mystery Train: Images of America in Rock 'n' Roll Music* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 55.

under the pressure of commercialisation, was forced to conform to European musical conventions and so deprived of its ‘more radical content.’⁶⁰ This raises the question, however, of whether the blues, either musically or lyrically, have ever been a ‘content’ at all. Indeed, if the blues is, as Baker suggests, demonstrably anterior to any instance of its employment, this is not to overlook the fact that those instances of employment themselves are intimately bound up with technology and private enterprise; the blues is in this sense always already a commodity. The problem with the ‘always already’ formulation, though, is that it makes no allowance for agency; Houston’s ‘blues matrix’ as total system predetermines the subject, bourgeois or otherwise. So, in the 1920s and 1930s, the blues performer faces an impossible choice: either to stay within the limits of a static tradition or, in stepping beyond that template, to take their chances with the capricious demands of a commercial machine already working to recast that tradition in its own image. As Clyde Woods notes, the popularity of blues and jazz amongst Northern whites in the 1920s ‘represented both the acceptance and the degradation of African American culture.’⁶¹ The period between the mid-1930s and the late 1940s, however—roughly the period separating the setting of Ellison’s bingo game story from the time of its composition—witnessed a further transformation. Although the depression saw a sharp decline in record production, black populations in northern urban centres swelled. Between 1940 and 1950 the black population of Chicago nearly doubled. These new audiences, nurtured in rent parties or at sidewalk jam sessions, fed on a radicalised version of the blues, looking back at the same time as it looked forward, amplified and electric.⁶² Post-WWII what Woods calls ‘blues epistemology’ comes into its own in its position as ‘the counter-narrative of the American Dream’.⁶³

Despite appearances to the contrary, the more Ellison’s writing settles itself into a reading of the rhythms of everyday life in the city, the more political a writer he becomes. His conflicting impulses, on the one hand to embrace modernity and all that may entail, including modernism, on the other to retain something of the folk, now raised to ‘a higher level’, open up his work to a symptomatic reading practice attuned to a key ideological struggle of his time, and if this interstitial location is seen to compromise Ellison’s

⁶⁰ Barlow, p. 124.

⁶¹ Woods, p. 117.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 145-147. See also Barlow, p. 310.

⁶³ Woods, p. 167.

authenticity then so much the better. Lefebvre, anticipating the objection that the everyday realm he proposed to investigate and so transform was simply an inauthentic layer of existence, and precisely that which philosophy should ignore, argued that: 'Everyday life per se is neither the authentic nor the inauthentic. Instead it could be seen to define the milieu and the moment in time where they come into conflict'.⁶⁴ Ellison's 'King of the Bingo Game' explores and so dramatises both this milieu and this moment. Towards the end of the story, with the bingo player hell-bent on appropriating the evening's entertainment for his own ill-defined purposes, he begins to feel, despite all appearances to the contrary, that rather than providing an object of derision he is in fact commanding the stage: 'The vague faces in the bingo lights gave him a sense of himself that he had never known before. He was running the show, by God! [...] This is *me*, he thought' (*Flying*, p. 132). But this elevation to presence, because it involves a letting go of past experience, is at one and the same time an emptying out of identity, a descent into anonymity: 'It was a sad, lost feeling to lose your own name, and a crazy thing to do.' Bereft of a personal history, cut adrift in the here and now, any distinction between the authentic and inauthentic is out of bounds to Ellison's narrator, whose sole claim to self-knowledge lies in the realisation that 'as long as he pressed the button he was The-man-who-pressed-the-button-who-held-the-prize-who-was-the-King-of-Bingo' (*Flying*, p. 133).

The banality of this epiphany needs to be understood in relation to the tawdriness of the situation from which it springs. Yesterday, on leaving the picture house, the bingo king noted 'a bedbug on a woman's neck as they walked out into the bright street' (*Flying*, p. 125); today, in an albeit fleeting burst of exaltation, he will conclude that the bingo game 'is the really truly God' (*Flying*, p. 130). This dialectic of degradation and the ecstatic plays itself out, in characteristic Ellisonian style, around a double meaning—in this instance a pun on the word 'fixed'. 'Everything was fixed' (*Flying*, p. 124), the bingo player reflects, as he tries to concentrate on the movie melodrama which precedes the screen, and which he is now watching for the fourth time. The secondary meaning of 'fixed', only significant in retrospect, since the bingo game—other than in the title—has not been introduced yet, is that the game itself has been rigged. In this sense there is the implication of a predetermined fate for the player, and he goes along with this to the extent that he comes to the picture-house ritual armed in advance with the secular totems of his five, secretive

⁶⁴ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday* (London: Verso, 2008), p. 24.

bingo cards. Prior to this, though, is a far more literal description of the beam from the projection room, which ‘always landed right on the screen and didn’t mess up and fall somewhere else. But they had that fixed.’ As Ellison’s allusive, elliptical narrative unwinds, it is this initial, ostensibly unequivocal use of the term, which takes on a further meaning. Throughout the story, and indeed *without* the story, insofar as Ellison’s thematic concerns lend a shape to the whole, a powerful tension is registered between stasis and movement, fixity and its release. Most obviously, in the opening section, the bingo king is entirely passive, rooted as firmly in his place as the girl he watches on the big screen: he in his cinema seat, she ‘tied to a bed, her arms and legs spread wide, and her clothing torn to rags’ (*Flying*, p. 124). Tormented by the smell of roasted peanuts a woman in front of him is eating, distracted by the gurgling of the whisky bottle two men next to him pass back and forth, he relates his inability to assert his material needs to the peculiar anonymity of city experience, a powerlessness diametrically opposed to what he either remembers or imagines as the benign impersonality of rural collectivity: ‘If this was down South, he thought, all I’d have to do is lean over and say, “Lady, gimme a few of those peanuts, please, ma’m,” and she’d pass me the bag and never think nothing of it’ (*Flying*, p. 123). The same would be true, he reflects, of the whisky drinkers: ‘Folks down South stuck together that way; they didn’t even have to know you’ (*Flying*, p. 123-124).

Incapable though he is of furthering his own physical sustenance, and struggling to ‘involve himself in the scene’ (*Flying*, p. 124) playing out before him in the movie (the hero enters through a trapdoor and—to the dismay of the whisky drinkers—unties the girl) the bingo player is at liberty nevertheless to imagine another scenario altogether, one in which ‘the girl started taking off the rest of her clothes, and when the guy came in he didn’t untie her but kept her there and went to taking off his clothes’ (*Flying* p. 125). At this point not only does the bingo player demonstrate his unwillingness to follow the basic plot of the movie, but also the narrative itself manifests a resistance to remaining entirely self-identical, ramifying in a number of directions simultaneously. Despite the strictures of the Hayes Code, under the terms of which such a scene as that produced in the player’s fevered imagination would be impossible to realise, he is no doubt right in his assessment that ‘If a picture got out of hand like that [...] there’d be so many folks in here you couldn’t find a seat for nine months!’ All the same, if his redirecting of the scene would be institutionally unworkable it is unclear too how this fantasy of reciprocity—the girl removing her own

clothes—would make sense given that she is already bound hand and foot. The key to this basic inconsistency lies in the fact of repeated viewing. The bingo player's vague re-imagining of the scene rearranges only immanent details. Nothing new as such is added, rather the constituent elements of the story within a story are destabilised and mutate according to their own internal potentialities. Either as in the 'official' story the hero rescues the girl, or as in the bingo player's extemporisation he doesn't. At this strategic moment, at the limits as it were of reiteration, memory becomes inseparable from invention, and Ellison deploys the first of his all-important blues signifiers:

The bottle gurgled again. He closed his eyes. Now a dreamy music was accompanying the film and train whistles were sounding in the distance, and he was a boy again walking along a railroad trestle down South, and seeing the train coming, and running back as fast as he could go, and hearing the whistle blowing, and getting off the trestle to solid ground just in time, with the earth trembling beneath his feet, and feeling relieved as he ran down the cinder-strewn embankment onto the highway, and looking back and seeing with terror that the train had left the track and was following him right down the middle of the street, and all the white people laughing as he ran screaming. (*Flying*, p. 125)

This train knows no boundaries, and its irruption into the milieu of the bingo game—plainly, after all, somewhere at the blunt end of the culture industry—effects the resurgence of folk epistemology even into this temple of profane illumination. In 'King of the Bingo Game' the accumulated paraphernalia of railroad mythology is sifted through, pulled to pieces, and the discarded fragments scattered around in an urban setting where stasis and movement coexist. The railroad whistle signals a warning to the bingo player. No longer 'sounding in the distance', the wordless cry is a reminder of the same grisly momentum that propelled Cass McKay in *Somebody in Boots* to a place 'all as unreal as nightmare', the same wrenching force that for Melody Moss in *Blood on the Forge* meant 'He had to shift to another word in order to keep sane.' But this momentum, generated by the collision of pre-industrial consciousness with the forms and content of the technical apparatus, is precisely what the bingo king succumbs to when he enters into his pact with the wheel of fortune:

Trembling, he pressed the button. There was a whirl of lights, and in a second he realized with finality that though he wanted to, he could not stop. It was as though he held a high-powered line in his naked hand. His nerves tightened. As the wheel increased its speed it seemed to draw him more and more into his power as though it held his fate; and with it came a deep need

to submit, to whirl, to lose himself in its swirl of color. He could not stop it now, he knew. So let it be. (*Flying*, p. 129)

Deeply sceptical as to the chances of winning, driven to the game by desperation, the player suspends his resistance to the moment of spectacle. But the moment itself, once grasped, turns itself inside out. The spinning of the wheel of fortune, of course, merely reiterates the maddening grind of the wheels of the runaway train, and what seems for an instant like letting go is at the same time revealed as the lived impossibility of release, the total failure of deviation from the tracks of the always already.

For some seven out of the fourteen pages of the story the bingo player is frozen in this state of suspended animation: stasis on the level of figuration; movement on the level of text. My point is not so much that with this overlapping of tropes Ellison achieves a kind of symbolic valency—that much goes without saying—but rather to suggest that, because of the rhythms of iteration running through the story, coupled with the weaving in and out of the text of elements of discourse drawn from principally extra-linguistic sources—sounds, textures, even the ‘inarticulate imagination’—the words on the page, through the inertia generated by the burden of these internal and intertextual correspondences, take on a quality of materiality that grounds the instability of signification in what feels, for the moment at least, substantive. For the isolated figure of the bingo player, picked out by the glare of the stage lighting, clinging on to the remnants of his subjectivity while all the time sinking deeper into the phantasmagoria of the capitalist real, only on the subconscious level of the slip of the tongue, along the crossed wires of miscommunication can the human meaning of his predicament be voiced. ‘I got nobody but YOU!’ (*Flying*, p. 133) he screams, and although in his own mind he addresses his ailing—and absent—wife it is clear nonetheless that with this unintentional moment of identification with the audience, the accidental reconstitution of the lost pre-industrial collective amongst the unseen faces and now silenced voices of the crowd, he loses his mind, no longer taking a part in but fully inhabiting and inhabited by the illusion of the screen, at the same time the crystallisation of the everyday real.

All of this, needless to say, is a little much for one poor soul to bear. If Ellison’s allusions thus far to proletarian literature and the blues tradition, his trying out of techniques drawn from realism, modernism and the avant-gardes have amounted to a process of selection and rejection, a weighing up of potentialities, a kind of *measurement*,

what follows next is a full-blown ritual purgation. Tears streaming down his face and screams tearing his guts, the bingo player fears ‘his head [will] burst out in baseball seams of small red droplets, like a head beaten by police clubs’ (*Flying*, p. 133). Voided of consistency, as his nose trickles blood onto his shoes, he becomes a conduit for ‘the whole audience [which] had somehow entered him and was stamping its feet in his stomach and he was unable to throw them out.’ But what he struggles to throw out is not the audience or its stamping feet but the insistent rhythm of its hunger and desperation, and in his embodiment of that struggle, which is also the desire for its emancipation, he gives voice to an urban, electric blues:

He had to get away, vomit all, and his mind formed an image of himself running with Laura in his arms down the tracks of the subway just ahead of an A train, running desperately vomit with people screaming for him to come out but knowing no way of leaving the tracks because to stop would bring the train crushing down upon him and to attempt to leave across the other tracks would mean to run into a hot third rail as high as his waist which threw blue sparks that blinded his eyes until he could hardly see. (*Flying*, pp. 133-134)

Like Hymie the ofay bum from Brooklyn, whose tubercular outpourings serve as the symbolic prefiguring of collective redemption through violence, the bingo king, heaving his guts up onto the stage, is transfigured. Blood and puke are the sacraments of this everyday Eucharist, and its sign not the cross but the unbroken—unbreakable—circle: circularity of form; recurrence of content. As the player regurgitates elements of a tradition—both cultural and historic—of which Ellison’s very earliest, unpublished writing forms a part, the specifics are transformed. Boxcars become A trains, the fatal earth rushing past the third rail, but still the parallel lines recede into an unknowable horizon, twin poles of a dialectic without resolution. And as if to underscore the pathos of this dilemma, as the picture-house goons bear down, the bingo king realises the impossibility of evading his fate without letting go of the cord controlling the wheel of fortune, the umbilical link without which he falls back into the role of spectator:

He ran, but all too quickly the cord tightened, resistingly, and he turned and ran back again. This time he slipped them, and discovered that by running in a circle before the wheel he could keep the cord from tightening. But this way he had to flail his arms to keep the men away. Why couldn’t they leave a man alone? He ran, circling. (*Flying*, p. 135)

If the role of spectator is also the role of victim, the shit literally beaten out of him after the curtain falls, then the fate of the bingo king, perhaps, is there to remind us that this tragicomedy played out on the stage on some level belongs to us all.⁶⁵

‘The King of the Bingo Game’ is neither a work of literature that protests the limits of unauthentic selfhood nor a character study of a protagonist unable to perceive himself in relationship to objective reality, past or present. On the contrary, the material interconnections of the bingo king figure with a personal and collective history of disenfranchisement, his objectification in the moment of a gaudy and sordid celebration of the spectral elusiveness of the commodity form, conspire to make this a story not about ‘self’ at all, but rather a formal experiment in the plotting of the shifting coordinates of the ontology of the categories of political economy. At the same time, the piece resists any attempt to pin it down as a work of political protest alone, at least insofar as that function is understood as a mode of instrumentality. For one thing, the comic dimensions of the narrative, and in particular the bingo king’s grim refusal to take himself and his situation in anything but tones of the highest seriousness, deflate any pretensions a critical reading may take in the direction of the hortatory. Ellison’s sly allusiveness, his ironic meanderings in and out of engagement place his work at several steps’ remove from the standpoint of bitter amusement presupposed in much of the proletarian fiction he was well schooled in. There is one sense, though, in which the bingo game story does indeed point a finger. The imbrication throughout the text of fragments of blues and folk traditions, the formal nods to assorted modernisms and avant-gardes, to surrealism and the literature of excess, instigate a certain extradiegetic orientation, support the intuition that what is in actuality at stake lies not within the text at all but somewhere outside: other voices; centrifugal forces; buried lineages and forgotten futures. Moreover, Ellison’s at times infuriating addiction to double meanings, his dogged reiteration of the same but different, suggest that even within the parameters of the narrative alternatives are contained. Just as the bingo king is able to recast the banalities of melodrama from the discomfort of his own pseudo-directorial chair, so too as active readers we are able to piece together another narrative, one where the outsider is not a loser and where being inside is not a precondition of passivity. Meshed into ‘The King of the Bingo Game’ is a counter-narrative of the American dream, a critical

⁶⁵ The final line of the story reads: ‘He only felt the dull pain exploding in his skull, and he knew even as it slipped out of him that his luck had run out on the stage’ (*Flying*, p. 136). According to Rampersad, Ellison ‘made clear elsewhere [that] the man is shitting as he falls’ (Rampersad, p. 183).

epistemology by means of which the history of slavery and exploitation are not effaced, and the constituent shibboleths of a radical, workable democracy are reconfigured not on some higher level but, like the A train, deep underground.

2. The Weight of the Real

In the seven years (1945-1952) between Ellison starting work on what was to become *Invisible Man* and the novel's eventual publication, the United States succumbed to successive waves of conformity and disillusionment. If WWII had seen America united in a single cause to an unprecedented degree, the end of hostilities signalled an explosion of unrest at home. Wartime production stimulated an economy flagging since 1929, but inflation continued to soar in peacetime. The shock of the rising cost of living hit demobilized troops hard. Add to this the difficulties of finding employment in a job market still geared up for the demands of war, and some former GIs gave up looking for work at all, simmering instead in resentment.⁶⁶ For those in work, moreover, and especially those industrial workers who, bound by the wartime no-strike pledge had endured declining wages in real terms for some four years, enough was enough; in the year following V-J Day some five million workers went on strike. President Truman's response was to adopt a trenchantly anti-labour stance and, in response, millions of workers boycotted the 1946 congressional elections. Thus, with only a thirty per cent turnout in the election, CIO candidates were crushed, the New Deal Democrats decimated, and the first Republican Congress since Hoover took office. Socialism in America, it seemed, had failed. The CPUSA, rendered absurd by its defence of Stalin's USSR, which placed it to the right of the most reactionary elements of the labour movement in its support of the wartime speed-up of production and the no-strike pledge, formally dissolved itself in 1944. The cohesive—and coercive—effects of wartime nationalism were carried over in the late 1940s with the introduction of universal military service, an increasingly bureaucratized CIO threw in its lot with the upper echelons of the Democrat hierarchy, and repeated experiences of disillusion and failure discouraged working-class participation in politics at

⁶⁶ Daniel Snowman, *America Since 1920* (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 119-126.

any level.⁶⁷ So, as Mike Davis argues, whilst moments during the thirties and forties—the successes of the sit-down strike at Flint for instance—suggested that the struggle for union organisation had created ‘an alternative culture and a new mode of daily life’, the discontinuity of the war years meant what was created instead was a workplace sufficiently co-ordinated to ensure the survival of the union, ‘while outside the plant the working class continued to find its social identity in fragmentary ethnic and racial communities, or in a colonized leisure.’⁶⁸

‘Once you get used to it,’ the invisible man reflects, towards the end of a novel which has seen him move from the agrarian South to the industrial North, the nineteenth century to the twentieth, the waiting rooms of the power centres of Wall Street to his own expropriated subterranean antechamber, and suggestively embodied these movements in the shifting forms of naturalism, expressionism and surrealism, ‘reality is as irresistible as a club’.⁶⁹ But this robust declaration of the fundamental violence at work in history, in the economic, the political and the social, pre-modified as it is by such an appealingly laconic though vague conditional clause, brings along with it a problem: what exactly is ‘once you get used to it’ intended to signify? Does it denote passivity or dexterity: the development of a skill or simply giving up? And what, for that matter, are we to make of the word ‘irresistible’? Is it that the sum total of experience—not all of it necessarily adverse—the invisible man has accumulated is *inevitably* to be redeemed in a moment of saintly acquiescence, which would seem to some a profoundly reactionary agenda, or, more provocatively, that once a certain necessary engagement with the actual has taken its course, knowledge produced can meet the expectations of more radical *desires*, and do so, moreover, with all the performativity of a blunt instrument? These perplexing ambiguities, questions after all to do with language, culture and learning, suspend cognition before it can get to be a route into political praxis, leaving the invisible man unsure as to whether ‘accepting the lesson has placed [him] in the rear or in the *avant-garde*’ (*IM*, p. 572).

This state of confusion is amplified by the structural ambiguity of the location of the protagonist’s self-analysis in both the prologue and epilogue of the novel. The invisible

⁶⁷ Davis, pp. 74-98. For a detailed account of the CPUSA’s temporary re-branding of itself as a Political Association (a tactical move which lasted only one year), see Joseph R. Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis, 1943-1957* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 51-70.

⁶⁸ Davis, pp. 98-99.

⁶⁹ Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 572. Further references are included in the text as *IM*.

man's early, Eliot-inflected warning that 'the end is in the beginning' (*IM*, p. 6) suggests that his first action in the book will follow the last. Since this first consists in a brutal attack in which he accidentally knocks into then head butts and stops short of cutting the throat of a stranger, simply because 'he called me an insulting name' (*IM*, p. 4), the allusive inversion implies that the reflections of the epilogue, high modernist paradox duly noted, precipitate random violence. But this is to take the text, perhaps, a little too much at its own word. 'Most of the time', we are assured, '[...] I am not so overtly violent' (*IM*, p. 5). Most of the time, moreover, Ellison is being far from so literal minded. Just as the invisible man's prologue projects forwards to become a commentary on the events of the narrative proper—'But that's getting too far ahead in the story, almost to the end' (*IM*, p.6)—so the voice of the epilogue ranges back to its furthest limit, the end in the beginning, and becomes a meta-commentary on the prologue itself. Only on the last pages are we made aware that what we are reading is the culmination of a written memoir; the narrative is rendered in retrospect a facsimile, and so the experiences of radical action—those irresistibilities of reality's club—synthesised at the close already once mediated through self-conscious artifice. None of it, in other words, has been either real or irresistible: 'even before I finish I've failed [...] The very act of putting it down has confused me and negated some of the anger and some of the bitterness' (*IM*, p. 579). More than just an issue of perspective, such as might be expected in a text doing so much with tropes of degrees of visibility and from the work of an author already well-practised in the manipulation of narrative point of view, this endless regress effectively closes down the dialectical tension of the hard-won lesson above: that the material will get you at the same time as you get used to it. If a state of acquiescence—of getting used to it—is figured here only within the limits of a cultural artefact, yet the self-willed act of narration itself—of seizing the material and really *getting* it—acts as a counterweight to strong emotion and *produces* acquiescence, then the issue of agency and the question of realising it in the aesthetic is made so contradictory as to be undecidable. And further, if, after all is said and done, reality presents itself as an essential and yet artfully manufactured, thus phenomenal and so one way or the other a *sensible* club—what are the conditions of its membership?

The evasions of the invisible man's logic, the sense that a lot of words are spent on apparently saying so little that is ultimately tangible, are presumably to be understood as

one of the advantages of being unseen he alludes to early on.⁷⁰ Like the confidence man Rinehart, whose presence in the novel is so slight as to be a kind of optical illusion created by a pair of dark glasses and a white hat, the invisible man shields his fragility behind an impenetrable veneer. But this pervasive defensiveness—‘I denounce and I defend’ (*IM*, p. 580) he (almost) concludes—has been taken up by some critics as evidence of a deeper if parallel disavowal. Barbara Foley has devoted considerable scholarly attention to Ellison’s manuscripts, notes, early drafts and outlines for the novel in support of her thesis that whilst Ellison began writing from within the horizons of expectation of the radical left, over the long course of the novel’s development, under pressure from the demands of mainstream publishers and in a context increasingly dominated by a cold war ideology of anticommunism, his commitment wavered and he systematically deformed his own work. Thus instead of the ‘well-wrought urn awaiting exegesis’ received by generations of academics, university students and—in the United States at least, where the novel enjoys supreme canonical status—school children, Foley reads *Invisible Man* as ‘a conflicted and contradictory text bearing multiple traces of [Ellison’s] struggle to repress and then abolish the ghost of his leftist consciousness and conscience.’⁷¹

Foley’s in many ways remarkable achievement is indebted not only, as she acknowledges, to the generosity of John F. Callahan, literary executor of Ellison’s estate, but also to what begins to emerge as Ellison’s own almost obsessive compulsion towards revision. ‘I have a certain distrust of the easy flow of words and I have to put it aside and wait and see if it’s really meaningful and if it holds up’, he told Allen Geller in 1963 by way of explanation for the protracted gestation of *Invisible Man* and, implicitly, perhaps, the eleven year delay of the never to be completed follow up.⁷² Certainly this statement, with its suggestion of Ellison as meticulous to the point of self-immolation, runs against the grain of the more conventional portrait of the artist as free-wheeling celebrant of jazz as ‘an endless improvisation upon traditional materials’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 267) and, by extension, the task of American culture as ‘trying, in the interest of a futuristic dream, to impose unity upon an experience that changes too rapidly for linguistic or political exactitude’ (*Collected Essays*, pp. 515-516). Indeed from Ellison’s assertion in the Geller

⁷⁰ ‘I am not complaining and I am not protesting either. It is sometimes advantageous to be unseen’ (*IM*, p. 3).

⁷¹ Barbara Foley, *Wrestling with the Left: The Making of Ralph Ellison’s Invisible Man* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 6-7. Further references are included in the text as *Wrestling*.

⁷² Alan Geller, ‘An Interview with Ralph Ellison’, in Maryemma Graham and Amritjit Singh, eds., *Conversations with Ralph Ellison* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), pp. 70-86 (p. 70).

interview that ‘society [...] [is] man-made, and man plays it by ear far too often’, it seems to follow that the ethical weight of both cultural and social production falls squarely on the shoulders of those willing to embrace the necessity of incorporating change within an existing structure—be this the novel or the commodity form—even if that process entails the painful recognition that any definitive imprint may later, by that same law of necessity, appear contingent.⁷³ For Foley, however, Ellison’s constant redefinition of his own subject of enquiry, far from signalling a conscientious effort to achieve mimetic fidelity to a historical dynamic, is always an article of bad faith. Reading forwards from his review of Attaway’s *Blood on the Forge*, where Ellison insisted that Attaway—grasping the destruction of the folk but missing its rebirth on a higher level—had presented an incomplete dialectic, Foley superimposes the same flawed logic onto the invisible man’s meta-commentary in the epilogue, reviving Ellison’s earlier formulation to confront him with the singular evidence of the spectre of Marx underpinning his assumption of liberal pluralism.

Aside from one or two fairly oblique references to his time as a member of the Brotherhood – clearly, despite Ellison’s repeated denials, a fictionalised CPUSA – the bulk of the epilogue consists of the invisible man’s attempts to make sense of the mysterious dying wish passed on by his grandfather, a former slave, early in the first chapter: ‘I want you to overcome ’em with yeses, undermine ’em with grins, agree ’em to death and destruction, let ’em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open’ (*IM*, p. 16). Having misunderstood this advice in the context of the Jim Crow South as the advocacy of ‘meekness as a dangerous activity’, the invisible man now seeks to re-evaluate his grandfather’s barbed espousal of affirmation in the light of his own experiences in a metropolitan centre where dangerous activity resides not so much in cowed if bilious deference to white supremacy as it does in buying into the rhetoric of democracy as anything more substantial than window dressing. ‘[H]e *must* have meant [...] that we were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men, or at least not the men who did the violence’ (*IM*, p. 574 [emphasis in the original]), he reflects. Yet, as a guide for everyday living, affirming the principle but not the men leads to an uncomfortable disjuncture of theory and praxis. Aware that his own misreading of situations has driven him into his hole in the ground just as much as the basically disinterested machinations of

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

others, the invisible man is unwilling fully to give himself over either to negativity or affirmation: 'So it is that now I denounce and defend, or feel prepared to defend. I condemn and affirm, say no and say yes, say yes and say no' (*IM*, p. 579). For Foley, rather as for America's industrial workers constrained by the no-strike pledge, the cessation of hostilities brings forth the conviction that enough is enough. Elaborate chiasmus betrays the emptiness of a cynical formalism, contradiction is downgraded to mere paradox, and 'like a New Critic, the invisible man cherishes the ambivalence that enables him to oscillate between the poles of antinomy and avoid the dull certainties of political commitment' (*Wrestling*, p. 344). Not only has Ellison effaced his wartime credo that 'contradiction requires not just conflict but sublation' (*Wrestling*, p. 343) by erasing an earlier draft including detailed rumination on that very point, but the placing of the 'coercive' (*Wrestling*, p. 328) framing device of the epilogue, denuded of politically progressive content, enforces on the reader the re-cognition 'that the sphinx-like old man always already had the answer the invisible man has been seeking' (*Wrestling*, p. 339). As we have seen, however, the 'always already' formulation is not entirely without historical valency in the blues tradition from within which Ellison insisted his work needed to be understood.⁷⁴ Christopher Z. Hobson argues that it is mistake to read *Invisible Man* either as ahistorical or, as Foley does, through the lens of cold war ideology. The ambivalences of the novel's conclusion are symptomatic of Ellison's engagement throughout the Harlem section of the book with the complexities of African-American radicalism before and during WWII. The drift away from the CPUSA is an accurate reflection of this historical context, as the invisible man discovers 'the deep irrelevance of politics, at least in the Brotherhood's sense, to most people's lives'.⁷⁵ In the final section of the narrative the invisible man catches glimpses of what a politics of everyday resistance might look like, in the eccentrics and outcasts of Harlem street life, in the zoot-suiters he can only understand in the moment as 'outside the groove of history' (*IM*, p. 443). But not until the epilogue, as he re-works his grandfather's deathbed words, is he 'thrown back on

⁷⁴ After the prologue to *Invisible Man* was published in *Partisan Review* in January 1952, Ellison wrote to Albert Murray that '[it] has caused some comments, but I don't think [Philip] Rahv has decided what he thinks about the book as a whole. He does know that it isn't Kafka as others mistakenly believe. I tell them, I told Langston Hughes in fact, that it's the blues but nobody seems to understand what I mean.' Albert Murray and John F. Callahan, eds., *Trading Twelves: The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), p. 31.

⁷⁵ Christopher Z. Hobson, 'Invisible Man and African American Radicalism in World War II', *African American Review*, 39.3 (2005), pp. 355-376 (p. 361). Further references are included in the text as Hobson.

conceptions of struggle that have traditional currency among African-American common people' (Hobson, p. 362). Parsing the monologue virtually line for line, Hobson concludes that the invisible man first comes to an unequivocal rejection of actually existing liberal pluralism, then negotiates 'a claim of cultural-historical—rather than genetic—racial superiority' (Hobson, p. 365) for black America, based on an ethical transcendence of the condition of slavery, before finally arriving at a 'non-racial and internationalist' valorisation of 'street-corner men, prostitutes, higglers [...] of all nationalities, whom [the Brotherhood] disregard as lumpen proletarians' (Hobson, p. 366), 'a liminal world below the political radar and the world beyond US borders' (Hobson, p. 367): a projected alliance, in other words, of the colonised both at home and abroad.

On the face of it the disparities between these two readings—Foley's and Hobson's—reflect conflicting emphases on in the case of the former social class and in the latter ethnic identity as sites of critical agency, and insofar as this is the case the imbrication of these two approaches within the parameters of responses to a shared text opens up the relatively limited sphere of modernist hermeneutics to far more wide-ranging political resonances. In his working notes for *Invisible Man*, written sometime late in 1945, Ellison defined the 'underlying assumptions' behind the guiding metaphor of invisibility in terms of 'two basic facts of American life.'⁷⁶ First he identifies the 'racial conditioning which often makes the white American interpret cultural, physical, or psychological differences as signs of racial inferiority'. This is the sense in which the invisible man's condition is most widely understood: the reduction of individual personality to stereotype. Second comes Ellison's counterstatement to this reductionism, his assertion of a 'great formlessness of Negro life wherein all values are in flux'. As in the Attaway review, Ellison explains this 'formlessness' as both a response to and an effect of the displacement of the Great Migration:

Its tempo of development from the feudal-folk forms of the South to the industrial urban forms of the North is so rapid that it throws up personalities as fluid and changeable as molten metal rendered iridescent from the effect of cooling air. Its class lines are fluid, its values unstable, and it is in conflict with the white world to which it is bound.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ 'Working Notes for Invisible Man', in Callahan, ed., *Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man: A Casebook*, pp. 24-30 (p. 24).

⁷⁷ Ibid.

To this analysis of the black metropolis as ‘a world psychologically apart’, Ellison appends one important proviso. The internal dynamics of invisibility are subject to a presupposition of class division external to the black community: ‘only the lower-class Negroes create their own values, the middle class seeks to live up to those of the whites’.⁷⁸ It is this emphasis on the radical potentialities of proletarianization, substituted in the published epilogue by a de-contextualised and nebulous reference to ‘infinite possibilities’ (*IM*, p.576), that Foley insists marks, by its conspicuous absence, the irruption into the (un)finished text of cold-war ideology. Ellison’s sins of omission, moreover, are multiplied by Foley’s unearthing, buried even further in the text’s unconscious, of a draft of an episode making explicit that the setting of the underground scenes is during WWII. For Foley this specificity is central to the projected novel’s historical sense, and Ellison’s rejection of this episode ‘dehistoricizes his protagonist’s meditation’ (*Wrestling*, p. 340) on the meaning of diversity, and thus conflates the personal with the social (*Wrestling*, p. 341). Emptied of the content of the fight against Fascism, shorn of reflections on ‘the historical dialectic whereby one mode of production transforms another’ (*Wrestling*, p. 188), and scarred by the ‘denial of classes and the diffusion of the class struggle’ (*Wrestling*, p. 344), the invisible man’s conception of contradiction—typified by the empty gesture of ‘I denounce and I defend’—is ‘homeostatic, entailing a ping-pong motion within overall stasis’ (*Wrestling*, p. 344). However, if Ellison’s ultimate representation of the state of invisibility as not singularly defined by class formation but—as from the working notes it is clear he originally intended—also the result of a socially-conditioned failure of perception of a complex interplay of cultural, physical and psychological factors, as, in other words, overdetermined, then it is possible to understand his apparent reluctance to attempt a sublation of these tendencies into the unitary figure of some newly emergent radicalism, along with his resistance to the chronological and empiricist constraints of literary realism, not as a retreat from the left but, on the contrary, as anticipating developments in critical theory beyond the scope of what he always insisted were the limits of the proletarian novel.

For Louis Althusser it is not so much that the absence of historical specificity disables the workings of the dialectic, but rather that the dialectic itself is incapable of fully encompassing the specificity of lived experience. Indeed, as he makes clear in the conclusion to his 1962 essay on ‘Contradiction and Overdetermination’, the historical fact

⁷⁸ Ibid.

of Stalinist atrocities—despite Althusser’s much-trumpeted anti-humanism—suggests an ethical imperative that the Hegelian logic of sublation be rejected.⁷⁹ The gaps and elisions of *Invisible Man*, in this historical context, may be felt less as an evasion of political conscience and more as a welcome relief from totalization. This sense of incompleteness, in Hobson’s reading of *Invisible Man*, is what lends the text its continuing relevance more than half a century after its publication. Ellison’s refusal of specific historical placing does not render his investigation static; rather, the stasis he manages the difficult task of representing is itself historically specific. By taking the ‘three-part political meditation’ of the epilogue—which Hobson reads as a thinking through of the 1940s ‘double V’ strategy of African American participation in the war effort alongside the continuing struggle for civil rights in the US—out of its wartime context, ‘Ellison achieves a philosophic political coherence and social prescience rare among novelists’ (Hobson, p. 367). Noting that the epilogue, with its yeses and noes, its noes and its yeses, is often read ‘as ending in confusion and exhaustion’, and thus as both politically and formally ‘unsatisfactory’, Hobson argues instead that the invisible man’s hole in the ground ‘cries out to be seen as a symbolic *social space*’ (Hobson, p. 368 [emphasis in the original]). Explicitly located on the borders of Harlem, in an all-white building but in a basement section abandoned in the nineteenth century, ‘it is a spatial metaphor for the social position of African Americans in the first half of the twentieth century’ (Hobson, p. 368). All of Ellison’s preoccupations are here: the history of slavery; the criminally botched Reconstruction; the persistence of economic segregation in the urban centres of the North. And not only does this threefold temporal layering—location, location, location—enable a retrospective embrace of a history of radicalism stretching back at least as far as Frederick Douglass, but also in the reflective space it maintains for ‘the tension between artistic and political goals’ (Hobson, p.369) it embodies ‘a substratum in the protagonist’s outlook [that] remains influenced by utopian hopes (Hobson, p.370). Each stage of the invisible man’s rethinking of what it means ‘to overcome ’em with yeses’, from the limited sense of an autonomous consciousness within the bounds of racial suppression, all the way through to the projective

⁷⁹ ‘I shall not evade the most burning issue: it seems to me that either the whole logic of ‘supercession’ must be rejected, or we must give up any attempt to explain how the proud and generous Russian people bore Stalin’s crimes and repression with such resignation; how the Bolshevik Party could tolerate them; not to speak of the final question - how a Communist leader could have ordered them.’ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 116. The term ‘supercession’ is strategically used by Althusser, in preference to the German *Aufhebung*, as a means of refuting Marx’s claim to have ‘superceded’ the Hegelian dialectic.

ascension of the wretched of the earth, were inherent, Hobson insists, ‘in the position of African Americans at the end of the period of radicalisation in the 1930s and 1940s, on the eve of the renewed struggle of the later 1950s’ (Hobson, p.370). The accumulation of these alternatives, by no means infinite but possibilities for social action nonetheless, within the overlapping temporalities of the memoir within the memoir, is strongly suggestive that it is the recording of these various strands, rather than some heavy-handed attempt at synthesis, that points forwards to a realisation of their radical potentialities. As Hobson points out, ‘while expressing these contradictory possibilities and the social stasis that partly conditions them, the novel also forecasts—necessarily provisionally and prospectively—the end of stasis’ (Hobson, p. 370). The invisible man’s basement dwelling, in other words, is the symbolic figuration of a particular kind of sojourner’s truth: only because he has placed himself in the rear is he able to begin to arrive at some point of departure from which it could even make sense to speak of an avant-garde.

Foley is, of course, quite right to foreground what Ellison is either unwilling or unable to say, but she takes an unnecessarily hard line. Moreover, her working method betrays a distinctly non-dialectical approach, treating the extremes of the invisible man’s wavering between condemnation and affirmation less as moments of dynamic contradiction than as a binary opposition, and as such, as Fredric Jameson reminds us, ‘the paradigmatic form of all ideology [...] to be tracked down and eradicated as the fundamental mechanism of all false consciousness and social and political error.’⁸⁰ Despite Foley’s insistence on the ‘overall stasis’ of the invisible man’s reflections in the epilogue, her interpretation of the text clearly works to uncover a covert hierarchy. Thus each of the invisible man’s spatially privileged terms—denunciation, condemnation, saying no—disguises its asymmetrical relation to its neighbour, and Foley deconstructs these binaries by suggesting that what counts is the defending, the affirmation and the saying yes. All of these terms are then subsumed under the overarching sign of Ellison’s political co-optation. As Jameson notes, however, ‘the elimination of the opposition as such is not always desirable in situations in which it is somehow the dissymmetry itself which is productive and which is to be preserved’ (p. 21). An example of such a productive dialectic could be ‘the incommensurability of plot and style in the novel, in which neither the macro-level of the narrative nor the micro-level of language can be reduced to the other’ (p. 22). This dialectic

⁸⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 18. Three consecutive references are here included in the text.

is often ‘less visible’ in the early novel, when language is given over to the storytelling function, as it is—conversely—in modernism, where the materiality of form somehow cancels the momentum of plot. ‘But practical criticism’, Jameson warns, ‘faces an insurmountable problem when these two levels take on equal weight’ (p. 22).

In the modernist strike novels of the mid-1930s this incommensurability worked itself out in the disjunct between moments of radical consciousness—Johnny Hagen’s ‘bitter amusement’ in Cantwell’s *Land of Plenty*, for instance—and the coercive momentum of plot, leading the strikers to their inevitable defeat. The proletarian grotesques of Olsen, Wright and Algren countered this limit to the revolutionary imagination with shock tactics designed to heighten awareness of the insubstantiality of realist narrative, and Erskine Caldwell’s use of tableaux dramatized motion within stillness. In *Invisible Man*, the confessional narrative is both fluid and dense at the same time, and a baroque, circular interiority solidifies around what—from the invisible man’s restricted point of view—turn out to be key conceptual absences; it is the invisible man himself who fails to see. His propensity for accumulation is not restricted to the disparate collection of radical ideologies he sifts through in the epilogue; throughout the novel he amasses a number of physical objects, into each of which is imbued some sense of cultural, historical or psychological significance. It is in the nature of these objects, how he comes by them and what the invisible man *does* with them that the politics of identity merge with the categories of political economy. The ‘gleaming calfskin brief case’ (*IM*, p. 32) he is presented with in chapter one is the reward for a repeat performance, for the drunken amusement of his hometown’s ‘big shots’ (*IM*, p. 17), of his high school graduation speech. The honour of this grotesquely debauched audience, however, comes as the pay-off for participation in a grizzly, blindfolded boxing match followed by a humiliating scramble for fake coins tossed onto an electrified carpet. Echoing Booker T. Washington’s Atlanta Compromise, the speech is delivered by a confused and wounded orator, ‘swallow[ing] blood until [he is] nauseated’ (*IM*, p. 30), and when the briefcase first passes into his hands a ‘rope of bloody saliva forming a shape like an undiscovered continent drool[s] upon the leather and [he] wipe[s] it quickly away’ (*IM*, p. 32). Emily Dickinson’s ‘undiscovered continent’ was the mind, and this unthinking effacement of the prize’s compromised origin in violence and degradation, in the ‘complete anarchy’ (*IM*, p. 23) of the battle royal, will be reversed later as Harlem explodes into riot and, after fastening a tourniquet—‘made of what had been a

brand new tie' (*IM*, p. 551)—onto the gunshot arm of a man, 'his face grey with shock, watching the jetting pulsing of his blood spurting into the street', the invisible man wipes his own 'bloody hands' on the briefcase.⁸¹ Between these two instances of the intimate relations of blood, erasure and luxury goods, the novel develops a counter-argument to the logic of the commodity form, to those laws of exchange which, as Lukács had it, 'confront [humankind] as invisible forces that generate their own power.'⁸²

During the night following the battle royal the invisible man dreams his grandfather orders him to open the briefcase. Inside, within an endless series of envelopes within envelopes, he finds 'an engraved document containing a short message in letters of gold' (*IM*, p. 33). Although the obscene, if succinct, injunction to 'Keep this Nigger-Boy Running' prefigures in sentiment the seven letters of recommendation college president Bledsoe gives to the invisible man, and which effectively bar him from finding work (and therefore next year's fees) during his sabbatical in New York, it is not so much his briefcase's contents as the case itself that leads to his ultimate downfall. On his arrival in New York, '[his] prize brief case [...] still as shiny as the night of the battle royal' (*IM*, p. 157), he aspires to a level of self-presentation rivalling the calfskin bag in terms of surface gleam: 'My shoes would be polished, my suit pressed, my hair dressed (not too much grease) and parted on the right side; my nails would be clean and my armpits deodorized'. The invisible man's dreams of self-transformation, of freedom of movement amongst the circles of 'some of the most important men in the world' (*IM*, p. 163), are externalised in his desire (a desire he never for one moment considers anything but a necessity) for consumer goods: 'Yes, and I would have to get a watch.' These dreams, of course, prove illusory, the letters keep him running and, with the exception of a single day's work in a paint factory where, through a mix of his own incompetence with bad management, he destroys not only a batch of paint but almost the factory itself, he remains unemployed. Finding lodgings in Mary Rambo's Harlem rooming house, he 'earn[s] a few dollars waiting table' (*IM*, p. 258), but only when he throws in his lot with the Brotherhood, in fact, does the invisible man earn the disposable income he needs to buy himself into the mainstream culture of the commodity.

⁸¹ 'Soto! Explore thyself!/Therein thyself shalt find/The "Undiscovered Continent" -/No Settler had the Mind.' *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 403.

⁸² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 87.

Whether or not a starting salary of \$60 a week (plus a \$300 cash payment up-front) is an accurate representation of CPUSA remuneration in depression-era Harlem is beyond the scope of this study. Certainly from the working notes it is clear that Ellison always intended his protagonist, on joining the Brotherhood, to find ‘he has been given an identity, a salary, and a great deal of prestige.’⁸³ How far this prestige is paid for by identification with predominately white, bourgeois models of consumption seems to be Ellison’s point, however, rather than affirmation of the cold war mythology of Moscow gold. By the end of WWII the proportion of middle-class whites in the New York CPUSA rose to over fifty per cent.⁸⁴ This process of gentrification, however, simply reflected and anticipated changes on a far more expansive scale. By the end of the 1950s the US became the first nation in the world to reverse the ratio of blue to white-collar workers.⁸⁵ Even within the ranks of the semi-skilled working class, moreover, consumption was increased to previously middle-class or skilled worker thresholds.⁸⁶ The United States, all the same, remained a deeply divided society. Between 1944 and 1961, whilst the poorest fifth of American families earned five per cent or less of total income, the richest twenty per cent received almost one half. In 1953 more than 80% of corporate stock and 90% of corporate bonds were in the hands of just 1.6% of the adult population.⁸⁷ The ‘most important men in the world’ on Wall Street, then, were indeed likely to remain as elusive as the quarter to one-third of the population, including most African-Americans—excluded from the boom—were to remain invisible.⁸⁸

The invisible man’s route into conspicuous consumption is paved, with classic Ellisonian irony, by his identification with the cause of the dispossessed. Lost and disillusioned, aimlessly wandering the frozen streets of Harlem, and not even sure how much back rent he owes Mary, he stumbles across the ongoing eviction of an elderly

⁸³ Callahan, ed. (2004), p. 27.

⁸⁴ Mark Naison points out that, as a result of this demographic shift, ‘white Communists in Harlem no longer appeared to be an undifferentiated mass of impassioned street agitators and youthful idealists; some were hard-nosed, pragmatic reformers who were confident in the exercise of power and commanded a visibly higher standard of living than the average Harlemiter.’ Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 326.

⁸⁵ Snowman, p. 133.

⁸⁶ Davis, p. 191.

⁸⁷ Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States, 1492-Present* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001), pp. 441-442.

⁸⁸ ‘Another quarter to one-third of the population, however, including most Blacks and all agricultural labourers, remained outside the boom, constituting that ‘other America’ which rebelled in the 1960s.’ Davis, p. 191.

couple. Transfixed by the objects strewn on the sidewalk— a hair straightening comb, a ferrotype of Abe Lincoln and manumission papers amongst the household bric-a-brac—he senses ‘[himself] [...] being dispossessed of some painful yet precious thing which [he] could not bear to lose’ (*IM*, p. 273). As Sara Blair notes, ‘these bent and faded objects comprise a material history [...] of black life in America, in all its richness and impoverishment of opportunity.’⁸⁹ Inspired by the pathos of this discovery, the invisible man is moved to a spontaneous display of solidarity, and so attracts the attention of Brotherhood activists. In the initial stages of his recruitment into the movement, however, he is unable to dissociate his desires for the trappings of material success from the more unsettling implications of the embodiment of social history in the detritus of market economy. As preparation for his inaugural address—in which he warns ‘We’ll be dispossessed of the very brains in our heads’ (*IM*, p. 343)—he selects ‘a more expensive suit than [he’d] intended’ (*IM*, p. 331). The invisible man’s extravagances of expenditure, in this early stage of his political awakening, are shadowed by an accidental accumulation of objects that, with their associations with the traditions of minstrelsy, suggest the persistence of slavery not so much in the conditions of economic segregation as in libidinal investment in the fetishism of the commodity. The morning after his first experience of Brotherhood socialising—the party ‘in an expensive-looking building in a strange part of the city’ (*IM*, p. 299), where he is handed his cash advance—he wakes back in Harlem to the sound of knocking on the steam pipe, a signal that the communal heating system is out of order. Hung-over, anxious that ‘there [is] some shopping to do’ (*IM*, p. 318) before he can continue his Brotherhood commitments, and aware that he needs to settle his debt, he loses patience with the rituals of Mary’s place and begins to pound back on the pipe with the heel of his shoe:

Then near the door I saw something which I’d never noticed there before: the cast-iron figure of a very black, red-lipped and wide-mouthed Negro, whose white eyes stared up at me from the floor, his face an enormous grin, his single large black hand held palm up before his chest. It was a bank, a piece of early Americana, the kind of bank which, if a coin is placed in the hand and a lever pressed upon the back, will raise its arm and flip the coin into the grinning mouth. For a second I stopped, feeling hate charging within me, then dashed over and grabbed it, suddenly as enraged by the tolerance or lack of discrimination, or whatever, that allowed Mary to keep such a self-mocking image around, as by the knocking (*IM*, p. 319).

⁸⁹ Sara Blair, ‘Ralph Ellison, Photographer’, *Raritan*, 24.4 (2005), pp. 15-44 (p. 31).

‘Why don’t you act like responsible people living in the twentieth century? [...] Act civilized!’ (*IM*, p. 320) the invisible man yells, as he smashes the ‘kinky iron head’ (*IM*, p. 319)—full of coins—against the pipe. When the figure explodes, ‘scattering jagged fragments of painted iron among the coins’ (*IM*, p. 321), and the invisible man sees ‘a small trickle of blood’ on his hand, he ‘wipe[s] it away, thinking, I’ll have to hide this mess!’ In a letter to Albert Murray, Ellison claimed the novelty bank image was an allusion to Black Guinea in Melville’s *Confidence Man*.⁹⁰ In Melville’s novel, Black Guinea’s abject condition—a disabled freed slave, catching coins in his mouth for a living—provides a moral compass by which to judge the responses of onlookers to his predicament. The intertext thus allows for the re-inscription, in the figure of the minstrel, of the ‘guilt’ Ellison argued was generated by the contradictions of Jeffersonian democracy ‘from the very beginning’ (*Collected Essays*, p. 206). This ‘unease of spirit’, dealt with in the nineteenth-century novel, Ellison regarded as all but driven ‘underground’ in the twentieth century. The invisible man, feeling responsibility only towards the face value of the scattered coins and oblivious to his disavowal of history, pays Mary off with a hundred dollar bill, the provenance of which—readily agreeing to her assumption he has won it playing the numbers—he effaces: ‘I take that an’ try to change it and the white folks’ll want to know my whole life’s history’ (*IM*, p. 325) she protests. The invisible man, though, is unable so easily to shake off the past. Leaving Mary’s place for good, he takes his briefcase, which, though ‘still as new as the night of the battle royal [...] sagged now as I placed the smashed bank and coins inside and locked the flap’ (*IM*, p. 327).

A victim of his own success in drawing publicity to the plight of Harlem residents, the invisible man is offered the choice of suspension from duties or re-assignment to the ‘Woman Question’ (*IM*, p. 406). But this demotion from street-level activism takes the form of a *promotion* from the slums of Harlem to the uptown meeting halls (and bedrooms) of the more affluent. He is on his way back, ‘of all things’ (*IM*, p. 429), from a shoe-shopping spree on Fifth Avenue, when he bears witness to the incomprehensible fall from grace of Harlem Brotherhood youth leader Tod Clifton, peddling paper Sambo dolls off Forty-second Street. Outraged, the invisible man spits on one of the dolls, but when police arrive to break up the scene, instead of crushing the doll underfoot, he examines it,

⁹⁰ ‘I guess I told you that the bank image in Invisible was suggested by the figure of Black Guinea. That son of a bitch with his mouth full of pennies!’ Murray and Callahan, eds., p. 79.

‘strangely weightless in [his] hand’ (*IM*, p. 434), and drops it into his pocket. Dazed, ‘[his] mind grappling for meaning’ (*IM*, p. 435), he walks away, but he is forced to bear witness for a second time as Clifton is gunned down in the street. On this occasion the invisible man is unable to efface the traces of the pool of blood now ‘form[ing] slowly’ (*IM*, p. 437) on the sidewalk: ‘What does it mean, I wondered, turning back to that to which I did not wish to turn.’ This turning back, indeed, marks the turning point of his engagement with the Brotherhood. Berated once more, this time for his officially unsanctioned speech at Clifton’s funeral, he realises: ‘Some of me, too, had died with Tod Clifton’ (*IM*, p. 478). *En route* to his final assignation with Brotherhood ideologist Hambro, a journey surreally interrupted by his out-of-body experience as Rinehart and the further accumulation of the emblematic dark glasses and white, floppy hat, he concludes: ‘My pocket was getting overloaded’ (*IM*, p. 500).

By the time the invisible man has descended beneath the streets of Harlem, the meaning he has searched for in his conscious and unconscious appropriation of commodities has become clear. During the climactic riot scene his briefcase contains—in addition to various documents, Mary’s broken bank and the coins, Clifton’s doll and the Rinehart glasses—a broken link from a forced-labour leg chain, given to the invisible man by Harlem stalwart Brother Tarp so ‘it might help [him] remember what we’re fighting against’ (*IM*, p. 388). Although he does wrest some use-value from the latter by employing both it and the briefcase during the riot as weapons, it is the bulging briefcase itself that attracts the attention of white vigilantes who, by keeping the invisible man still running, cause him to fall through an open manhole:

Someone hollered down the hole, ‘Hey, black boy. Come on out. We want to see what’s in that briefcase.’

‘Come on down and get me,’ I said.

‘What’s in that briefcase?’

‘You,’ I said, suddenly laughing. ‘What do you think of that?’

‘*Me?*’

‘All of you,’ I said.

‘You’re crazy,’ he said.

‘But I still have you in this briefcase!’ (*IM*, pp. 565-566)

The identification of these baseball-bat wielding thugs with the contents of the briefcase suggests on one level the invisible man’s recognition of the congealed traces of violence and domination embedded in these particular commodities. But at the same time the

levelling out of cultural specificity, the slippage implied by the embodiment of non-black identity in Clifton's doll, in Mary's bank, makes available a more general point about the role of the commodity form in the construction of identity *per se*. Left alone in the dark, the invisible man's first—dramatically necessary—action is to set light to the papers contained in his briefcase. First to be torched, 'with a certain remote irony' (*IM*, p. 567), is his high school diploma, but when he sets the flame to Clifton's doll 'it burn[s] so stubbornly that [he] reach[es] inside the case for something else' (*IM*, p. 568). That the slip of paper bearing his Brotherhood name, and the letter 'from a friend' warning him off going '*too fast*' (*IM*, p. 383 [emphasis in the original]) in his activities in Harlem are both in the same handwriting leads him, with horror, to the realisation he has been cynically manipulated all along by the Brotherhood hierarchy. But there is more than the recognition of political double-dealing in his reaction. Both the anonymous letter and Brotherhood pseudonym burn quickly, and so if there is some resilience in the embodied, historical identity in Clifton's doll, the evanescence of contingent nomination, its simultaneous absence and presence, triggers an onrush of existential *angst*, an 'anguish' (*IM*, p. 569) culminating in the symbolic castration of the surrealist dream sequence. Later, in the epilogue, the inauthenticity of heteronymous identity is rationalised as the condition of possibility of invisibility: 'after years of trying to adopt the opinions of others I finally rebelled. I am an *invisible* man' (*IM*, p. 573 [emphasis in the original]).

Following the lead of Ellison himself, stating that in the epilogue the hero 'must assert and achieve his own humanity' (*Collected Essays*, p. 221), critics have, to varying degrees, accepted this invocation of narrative autonomy as the existentialist core of the novel.⁹¹ This assertion of the freedom, against the imposition of external constraints, somehow to choose one's own identity, a notion Irving Howe dismissed in 'Black Boys and Native Sons' as the fallacy 'one could *decide* one's deepest and most authentic response to society', has more recently been recast, rather than a mark of resistance, as a necessary precondition of the logic of consumer capitalism. Slavoj Žižek notes that 'the impossibility of

⁹¹ See for example Valerie Smith's 'The Meaning of Narration in *Invisible Man*', where she argues convincingly that it is in self-conscious act of narration itself that the invisible man 'resolves to sever his connections to society, to all of the organisations on which he had relied for self-definition, and accepts the responsibility for creating his own identity.' In Callahan, ed. (2004), pp. 189-220 (p. 208). See also Frederick T. Griffiths, 'Copy Wright: What is an (Invisible) Author', *New Literary History*, 33.2 (2002), pp. 315-341, where Ellison is provocatively read alongside Foucault: 'Where Foucault debunks the writing subject, Ellison depicts a subjectivity forming itself in the act of writing – or perhaps unforming itself into an invisibility that may not be so far from the self-erasure that Barthes and Foucault find in Mallarmé, Proust and others' (p. 337).

identifying oneself as an object (that is, of knowing what I am libidinally for others) is constitutive of the subject.’⁹² The formulation is drawn from Lacan, but readily translatable, surely, into the terms of invisibility. The narrator is invisible not, as he initially claims, ‘simply because people refuse to see me’ (*IM*, p. 3), but, on the contrary, because he refuses, *literally cannot recognise* the impossibly contradictory roles forced upon him throughout the course of the novel. For Žižek, ‘good old existentialism’, by insisting on the dubious claim that ‘man is what he makes of himself’ as a radical freedom, and by linking this freedom to existential anxiety, posits that self-same anxiety as ‘the authentic moment at which the subject’s integration into the fixity of its ideological universe is shattered.’⁹³ But this tentatively optimistic, if hard-won, conjecture, figured in Ellison’s narrator’s sense of invisibility as ‘another frightening world of possibilities’ (*IM*, p. 507), downplays the coercive role of enforced consumer choice in the effective colonisation of whatever it might mean to be free to choose in the first place. As Žižek points out, what dissolves across the ruptured space of the de-integrated subject reappears in Adorno’s critique of what the latter characterised as the jargon of authenticity: ‘namely how, by no longer simply repressing the lack of a fixed identity, the hegemonic ideology directly mobilizes that lack to sustain the endless process of consumerist “self-re-creation”’ (pp. 64-65).⁹⁴

‘Gin, jazz and dreams were not enough’ (*IM*, p. 573), muses the invisible man in the epilogue, reflecting on his subterranean predilections for sloe gin poured over vanilla ice cream, the recordings of Louis Armstrong, and his collaborative project with ‘a junk man [...] a man of vision’ (*IM*, p. 7) to cover every surface of his basement room with light bulbs. Neither this alliterative, unambivalent—and eminently quotable—admission of defeat nor the plainspoken claim ‘that even an invisible man has a socially responsible role to play’ (*IM*, p. 581) were enough, however, to convince some contemporary critics that Ellison’s appropriation of the discourse of the literary left represented any less opportunistic an ‘act of sabotage’ (*IM*, p. 7) than his protagonist’s illicit re-routing of electricity from Monopolated Light & Power. Reviewing the novel in *Masses and Mainstream* (the post-war reincarnation of *New Masses*), Lloyd L. Brown levelled positive reviews of the book in the mainstream press against Ellison, as evidence of cynicism:

⁹² Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 64.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

‘Whence all this passion toward conformity?’ asks Ralph Ellison at the end of his novel, *Invisible Man*. He should know, because his whole book conforms exactly to the formula for literary success in today’s market. Despite the murkiness of his *avant-garde* symbolism, the pattern is clear and may be charted as precisely as a publisher’s quarterly sales report.⁹⁵

Sadism, sex and shock, for Brown, provide the winning elements, and that ‘*Invisible Man* is already visible on the best-seller lists’ is an uncomfortable truth to be held against its author. Proof positive, if further proof were needed, of the book’s ‘source in upper-class corruption’ (p. 32), is Ellison’s *Saturday Review* revelation of T. S. Eliot as formative influence, a damning indictment of Ellison’s alienation from his social responsibility as a black American author: ‘there is nothing in common between the wailing eunuchs of decay on the one hand, and the passionate strength and beauty of Negro poetry on the other.’ Ellison, in short, with a ‘renegade’s malice’, has sold out ‘the Negro working masses’ in the service of anti-Communism, and will make a tidy profit into the bargain, all the while ‘spit[ting] out at the world from a hole in the ground’ (p. 33). What is interesting here is not so much Brown’s qualified accommodation of ‘avant-garde symbolism’ within the ‘formula’ of mainstream fiction; by the mid-thirties, after all, the innovations of Joyce, Stein and Hemingway, if in watered-down form, had already found their way onto the best-sellers lists, and those few leftist critics still ready to bemoan the popularisation of such techniques were more likely to do so on the grounds of over-familiarity than cultural elitism. Far more revealing is Brown’s easy equation of sex, sadism and shock—the mainstays of the proletarian grotesque—with cultural conformity, as if the literature of excess was by the early 1950s serving as guarantor of commercial viability rather than catalyst of estrangement. Insofar as Brown’s barbed treatment of Ellison, then, registers by association the assimilation of the full panoply of avant-gardist technique within the economic determination of the marketplace, his argument runs a close parallel to Adorno’s critique of the culture industry. The difference, of course, is that whilst Brown holds on to the hope of some separation between the wailing eunuchs of decay and ‘the growing renaissance of the Negro people’s culture-writers, playwrights, poets, singers, musicians, dancers, artists, and actors, who are linked with their people’ (p. 33), Adorno singles out those singers, musicians and dancers themselves as wailing eunuchs, if not of decay then of stasis.

⁹⁵ Lloyd L. Brown, ‘The Deep Pit’, *Masses and Mainstream* (1952), rpt. in Butler, ed., pp. 31-33 (p. 31). Three consecutive references are here included in the text.

Adorno's riffs against jazz have been well rehearsed. In his 1953 essay 'Perennial Fashion—Jazz', he expresses total bemusement as to how a form some fifty years old can still be passed off as a thing of the moment. All of its gestures of rebellion are entirely superficial, its improvisation a sham, its appeal to authenticity via African roots negated by the role of the white lumpenproletariat in its development and the bourgeoisie in its patronage, and as to its claim to the status of art: 'Anyone who allows the growing respectability of mass culture to seduce him into equating a popular song with modern art because of a few false notes squeaked by a clarinet [...] has already capitulated to barbarism.'⁹⁶ So perplexing, indeed, is the ubiquitous appeal of jazz that Adorno resorts to psychoanalysis. Jazz, he explains, 'is the mechanical reproduction of a regressive moment, a castration symbolism', and as evidence he cites composer and critic Virgil Thompson, who 'compared the performances of the famed jazz trumpeter, Louis Armstrong, to those of the great *castrati* of the eighteenth century.'⁹⁷ On the face of it there is unlikely to be much common ground here between Adorno and Ellison, who once told Robert G O'Meally, '[m]y strength comes from Louis Armstrong'.⁹⁸ Some critics, however, have drawn attention to not insignificant points of contact.⁹⁹ When the invisible man listens to Louis Armstrong, the vocabulary he uses to describe the experience may be all his own, but his musical analysis is fundamentally on a par with Adorno's. It is the meaning of that experience that is contested. Certainly there is nothing especially mystical or transcendent about the 'slightly different sense of time' (*IM*, p. 8) the invisible man 'hear[s] vaguely in Louis' music.' Armstrong's phrasing, his trademark placing of notes either fractionally ahead of or behind the beat, was characteristic of blues and jazz across the board, but

⁹⁶ 'Perennial Fashion – Jazz', in Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1967), pp. 119-132 (p. 127).

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 129; p. 130.

⁹⁸ Robert G. O'Meally, ed., *Living with Music: Ralph Ellison's Jazz Writings* (New York: Modern Library, 2002), p. 286.

⁹⁹ See James Martin Harding, *Adorno and A Writing of the Ruins: Essays on Modern Aesthetics and Anglo-American Literature and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), esp. pp. 97-116. Paul Allen Anderson notes that, in his discussions of bebop, 'Ellison's criticisms moved halfway towards Theodor Adorno's disenchanting judgement of jazz as "the amalgam of a destroyed subjectivity and of the social power which produces it, eliminates it, and objectifies it through this elimination."' Paul Allen Anderson, 'Ralph Ellison on Lyricism and Swing', *American Literary History*, 17.2 (2005), pp. 280-306 (p. 300). Most provocative of all, perhaps, is Paul Gilroy's wholesale appropriation in *The Black Atlantic* of Adorno's meditations on art after Auschwitz as 'strikingly in harmony' with 'the vernacular art of children of slaves' (p. 38).

Armstrong was the undisputed master of the form.¹⁰⁰ The effect is cumulative and, especially when enhanced—as in the invisible man’s listening—by the synaesthetic properties of pot, creates the impression that the solo line is separated out not in time but in space: suspended above the rhythmic contours of the ground beat. It was precisely the illusory quality of this emergence of individual autonomy, however, that Adorno found so depressing. In ‘On Jazz’ (1936), he insists that this effect, anyway already established in the European classical technique of syncopation, because it relies upon the regular structure of the composition to achieve its appearance of free-floating, ‘is purposeless; it leads nowhere’.¹⁰¹ Alienated subjectivity, granted temporary reprieve, is kept on a tight leash all the same. For Adorno, the pre-packaging of this false freedom, its easy adaptability to the marketplace, is symptomatic of one of the most deep-seated contradictions of capitalism: ‘it is a system which must simultaneously develop and enchain productive power’ (*On Jazz*, p. 479). Thus, far from achieving spiritual elevation, in jazz ‘a disenfranchised subjectivity plunges from the commodity world into the commodity world; the system does not allow for a way out’ (*On Jazz*, p. 478).

The plunge from the world of commodities for the invisible man, of course, ends in his hole in the ground. But even here it is only by means of a commodity—one Adorno once hailed as ‘the scriptal spiral that disappears in the center [...] but in return survives in time’—that the invisible man arrives at an understanding of the hidden topography of commodification itself.¹⁰² Listening on his phonograph to Armstrong’s recording of ‘What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue’, the invisible man hears ‘not only in time, but in space as well’ (*IM*, p. 9), and his navigation of the music’s depths leads him, in a hallucinatory yet meditative passage, to the auction block: ‘*I saw a beautiful girl the color of ivory pleading in a voice like my mother’s as she stood before a group of slaveowners who bid for her naked body*’ [emphasis in the original]. In a famous passage from *Capital*, Marx attempts to explain the fetishism of the commodity as analogous to the act of (not) seeing: ‘the impression made by a thing on the optic nerve is perceived not as a subjective excitation of that nerve but of the objective form of a thing outside the eye’ (*Capital*, Vol. I,

¹⁰⁰ ‘This practice of setting the notes of the melody at odd points in relation to the beat was of course something that every jazz musician practiced. Some, like Sidney Bechet, had carried it out to a considerable degree. But by 1927 Armstrong was not merely setting the notes ahead or behind the beat; he was setting whole phrases in time schemes irrelevant to the beat, or in no time schemes at all.’ James Lincoln Collier, *The Making of Jazz: A Comprehensive History* (London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 151.

¹⁰¹ In Leppert, ed., pp. 470-495 (p. 490). Further references are included in the text as *On Jazz*.

¹⁰² Adorno, ‘The Form of the Phonograph Record’, in Leppert, ed., p. 280.

p. 165). The analogy with the commodity form is that the physical thing that is the commodity is understood only in terms of the material properties of that object; what remains unseen is the subjective dimension of the actual physical labour that has gone into its making, and which constitutes its market value. On the first page of Ellison's novel, invisibility is explained as the product of 'a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I come into contact' (*IM*, p. 3). In the invisible man's vision of the slave girl, at the explanatory core of his 'new analytical way of listening to music' (*IM*, p. 8), a direct parallel is drawn between invisibility and commodification. What the slave traders fail—or refuse—to see, beyond the 'ivory' commodity displayed before them, is her humanity. Adorno, for whom 'Psychologically, the primal structure of jazz [...] may most closely suggest the spontaneous singing of servant girls' (*On Jazz*, p. 478), sees the concealed rigidity of that structure as suppressing 'precisely those human claims [...] laid to it.' From the celebration of this 'regression through suppression', mediated through the exchange mechanisms of the culture industry, it follows that 'The decisive intervention of jazz lies in the fact that this subject of weakness takes pleasure precisely in its own weakness' (*On Jazz*, p.490). But for Ellison, famously, 'an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain' (*Collected Essays*, p. 129), is precisely what he understands as the blues.

'When I listen to a folk story I'm looking for what it conceals as well as what it states', Ellison revealed in 1967. If the invisible man's descent, 'like Dante' (*IM*, p. 9), through the scriptal spiral of Armstrong's recording can be read as a negotiation of the unconscious architectonics of the folk, then it is worth noting that a substantial portion of this exploration takes the form of the call and response patterning of the revivalist meeting.¹⁰³ The sermon on the 'blackness of blackness', in which blackness is equated first with the darkness '*In the beginning*' [emphasis in the original] and next with a blood-red sun, is a kind of object lesson in illogic:

'Black will git you ...'
'Yes it will ...'
'Yes it will ...'
'... an' black won't ...'
'Naw, it won't!'
'It do ...'
'It do, Lawd ...'

¹⁰³ Quoted in Graham and Singh, eds., p. 121.

‘... an’ it don’t.’
‘Halleluiah ...’ (pp. 9-10 [emphasis in the original])

The blank irresolution of this antiphonal exchange, the end because it comes at the beginning, marks out the template for what Foley describes as the epilogue’s ‘ping-pong motion within overall stasis.’ For Foley, as we have seen, Ellison’s contradictions go nowhere largely because he left out of the published manuscript a draft episode locating the underground sections of the novel within the historical specificity of WWII. In a happy accident of the editorial process, however, the missing section, the absence of which irrevocably scars the work, went by the provisional title of ‘Blues’ (*Wrestling*, p. 335).

Blues music’s antecedents in what Albert Murray calls ‘the dithyrambic ebullience of the Sanctified or Holy Roller church’ have long been a point of contention.¹⁰⁴ William Barlow notes that the ‘antiphony, cross-rhythms, and important thematic material’ of blues have their origins not in religious ritual but in the secular praxis of work song.¹⁰⁵ Alan Lomax, however, argues that the traces of manual labour, embodied in the ‘wayward strains’ of the field holler, were effaced in the commercialisation of blues culture: ‘first hidden by jazz, then by Tin Pan Alley, and then submerged in the floodtide of the urban blues, to which they had given birth.’¹⁰⁶ For Lomax, recalling his first exposure to the singing of forced labourers, at Mississippi State Penitentiary in 1933, ‘The only American sound that could match theirs was Louis Armstrong’s trumpet’.¹⁰⁷ For this emphasis on sound rather than signification to maintain its political valence, blues needs to be understood as something that happens in non-discursive space. It is the form of the blues, not its lyrical appeal to protest—however explicitly or not that may be embedded in blues texts—that connects it to a lineage of critique based on social class as an explanatory factor, alongside its more readily accepted roots in faith communities and ethnicity. What the blues may lack in terms of the abstract complexity of formal, academic composition, it makes up for in the singular nuance of expression. For Ellison’s narrator, Armstrong’s poetry of invisibility is ‘a beam of lyrical sound’ (*IM*, p. 8). Ellison, however, did not originally

¹⁰⁴ Murray, p. 36. Murray points out that not only were ‘Conventional downhome Baptists and Methodists’ uncomfortable with ‘reconciling exuberant expression with religious devotion even when it was an indisputable part of a church service’, but ‘downhome church elders [...] have always been completely certain that [the blues] [...] is also a call to the Devil himself to come forth and reign on earth as in pandemonium’ (p. 24).

¹⁰⁵ Barlow, p. 24.

¹⁰⁶ Alan Lomax, *The Land Where Blues Began* (New York: The New Press, 1993), p. 275.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

intend the invisible man to be listening to Armstrong at all, but rather to legendary improviser Buddy Bolden. In Foley's reading of the text, this substitution is yet more evidence of Ellison's deference to cold war ideology. Armstrong, she notes, quoting Steven C. Tracey, was berated by the left 'for gleefully reaping the benefits of the capitalist system by abandoning his New Orleans roots for commercial appeal and not retaining his artistic integrity' (*Wrestling*, p. 425, n. 13). But as David Yaffe points out, Bolden ceased performing in 1907, never made any recordings, and so resides in folk consciousness as a mythical figure. Ellison's initial impulse, then, was to invoke 'a history that was not only invisible, but unheard.'¹⁰⁸

Unlike his narrator—spellbound by the zoot-suiters, night-time incursionist and guerrilla *littérateur*—Ellison made no effort, in maturity at least, to stand outside the intellectual mainstream. Ellison, Houston Baker maintains, on the evidence of *Invisible Man*, was never avant-garde.¹⁰⁹ 'Sincerely' infatuated with the transformative potential of the 'ideals of "industrial democracy" as the be-all and end-all of global modernity', Ellison failed to inscribe any prophetic vision of black activism—missing the reality coming into being all around him in the civil rights movement—and settled instead for cold war hibernation and a naïve 'presentist simplicity'.¹¹⁰ As Barbara Foley has done us the service of demonstrating beyond all reasonable doubt, however, the intellectual roots of Ellison's masterpiece lie not in the cold war period at all but rather in the Great Depression, not in the heyday of industrial democracy's post-war recovery but in its state of near-total collapse, not in black power but in Popular Front Marxism. Whether or not, in the stifling environment of McCarthyite America, Ellison's backtracking on youthful rebellion, the deforming of his work to cover his traces was fully intentional—and an index, moreover, of personal weakness—is ultimately undecidable and anyway beside the point. Like so many intellectuals of his generation, Ellison cannot have helped but respond with a kind of numbed horror to the failure of the left to prevent the reconstitution, limb by grubby limb, of a fundamentally discredited market capitalism, a nightmare scenario making a nonsense of avant-garde strategies both politically and artistically. During the 1960s, no doubt, as the nation's youth took to the streets, Ellison's recalcitrant urbanity can only have added fuel to

¹⁰⁸ David Yaffe, *Fascinating Rhythm: Reading Jazz in American Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 66.

¹⁰⁹ Houston Baker, 'Failed Prophet and Falling Stock: Why Ralph Ellison Was Never Avant-Garde', *Stanford Humanities Review*, 7.1 (1999). <<http://www.stanford.edu/group/SHR/7-1>> [accessed 20/07/2012].

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

the fire. But at the present moment as, in the US, Christian fundamentalism and the suburban right have appropriated the discourse of revolutionary politics, forging an unholy alliance at the head of which sit figures as cartoonish and sinister as any of Ellison's fictional extremists, and, in the UK, mass civil disobedience is portrayed in the media—and what is infinitely worse understood and practiced at ground level—as the expropriation of designer sportswear, something of Ellison's sceptical yet expansive moderateness could not fail to go amiss. As T. J. Clark has recently argued, political discourse is at a point of unprecedented infantilism: 'optimism is now a political tonality indissociable from the promises of consumption.'¹¹¹ The implications of political 'presentism' far exceed the designation of 'simplicity', and for Clark the necessity for the left of remaking its emancipatory project in some workable form is as much a search for a new tone as for anything else: a tone in which the failure of the Utopian imagination can be registered, a tone which is 'grown up'.¹¹²

To point to Ellison's meticulous honing of his prose, his false starts and fumbblings in the process of realisation of some original, ideal vision as evidence of the singular failure of *Invisible Man* is as much as to say that the text is deformed by nothing more nor less than language itself. For Baker, what enables Ellison's 'politics of silence' is the '[L]ayer upon layer upon layer' of allusion, which 'serve [...] to obscure rather than prophesy the actual, engaged, advanced-guard, public sphere effectiveness of American blacks already at work, bringing real inklings of modernity to the United States.'¹¹³ The book is thus overwritten in a double sense; Ellison's slavish devotion to the masters of the white literary canon imposes a kind of ingratiating self-consciousness onto the narrative, and this toxic wordiness, in its turn, strangles the voice of the subaltern at its putative moment of enunciation.

On the subject of the extent to which Ellison's deployment of modernist technique militates against the politics of his work I have two final points to make. First, insofar as *Invisible Man* attempts a reconciliation of modernism and left politics post-WWII the book invites the possibility of situating it at the very limit of the project of the proletarian novel. That self-consciousness which can be so frustrating in *Invisible Man*, indeed, may in itself be read as symptomatic of such a location. I think that critics have underestimated the

¹¹¹ T. J. Clark, 'For a Left with No Future', *New Left Review*, 74.2 (2012), pp. 53-75 (p. 72).

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 59.

¹¹³ Baker (1999).

degree of struggle implied in Ellison's negotiation of modernism, a struggle proletarian writers were engaged in from the outset, and which, as Lawrence Hanley points out, forced them into an impossible position. The public crossing of class and cultural boundaries exposes deep-set insecurities, and these work themselves out in self-reflexivity as a strategy to limit and control the potential damage inflicted by misinterpretation.¹¹⁴ Ellison's fingering of the jagged grain of the blues is amplified, not effaced, in reflexivity.

Second, the engagement with modernism is not the wholesale affirmation of some monolithic content. Rather modernism is employed by Ellison as a temporal mode, as a point at which culture catches up with itself, and his allusions go back a lot further than Eliot. Whilst no doubt more advantageously placed for the accumulation of cultural capital than were the vaudeville blues, in the thirties and forties modernism as such had by no means established itself as an institution too big to fail. Ellison takes a considerable risk with his edgy manipulation of modernist forms from below, and this demands a reciprocal move towards a new historical rigour in criticism, a defamiliarization of the reified narratives of literary history, specifically a reinterrogation of a line of argument that seldom reaches back further than WWI or *fin de siècle* Paris. The world moves, according to the invisible man, by contradiction: 'Not like an arrow, but a boomerang' (*IM*, p. 6). Allusions in the novel running back through Dickinson, Melville and Hawthorne are aimed directly towards the place in mainstream American culture where it hurts the most, the discursive roots of the failed promise of the Constitution. It is the apologists of this degraded enterprise, therefore, that need above all to heed the invisible man's admonition: 'Keep a steel helmet handy' (*IM*, p. 6).

Ellison's attempt to democratize modernism is at the same time a modernist critique of democracy, not in that sense of faux aristocratic pretension overindulged in by Lawrence and Pound, but rather in that Ellison uses form to gain some critical purchase on what otherwise goes unremarked. Danielle Allen has brilliantly shown that the political concerns of *Invisible Man* lie not in the macro-level of institutions and events—the shadowy Brotherhood, for instance—but in the detail of everyday interactions, particularly the

¹¹⁴ 'As one of the great meditations on this paranoia, Ellison's *Invisible Man*, shows us,' Hanley writes, 'for those who move from the margins to the centers, the problem of visibility—through representation and performance—can be as unnerving and painful as the problem of visibility.' Hanley, 'Smashing Cantatas', p. 135. Baker in fact makes a related point himself, in *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature*, where—by means of an allusion to Velázquez—he paints Ellison's reflexivity in confrontational rather than affirmative terms: 'Instead of solacing himself with critical distinctions, [Ellison] employs reflexively mirroring narratives to multiply distinctions and move playfully across categorical boundaries' (p. 198).

interactions of strangers.¹¹⁵ The novel thus takes as its theme a paradox located not within the machinations of radical politics but within democracy itself: that the citizen is nominally empowered, and yet in practical terms powerless: a sovereign without sovereignty. Yet it is *form* that enables Allen's reading of the narrative structure of the text in terms of key points, such as the battle royal, where everyday (as opposed to institutional) interactions are presented in terms of the ritual enactment of citizens confronting their own powerlessness. This productive tension between narrative—the story-telling voice we already know—and the invitation to reflect over and over again on the more resonant inflections of that familiar accent, ultimately, is the function of repetition throughout *Invisible Man*, and it is deeply bound up both with the circular expressive progressions of the blues and with Ellison's understanding of the progressive potentiality of latent experience.

Although the invisible man's listening to Louis Armstrong's blues takes place in the prologue, we are explicitly invited, through the reference to 'gin, jazz and dreams', to replay the experience for ourselves at the novel's conclusion. The figure of the apparently autonomous subject, sovereign without sovereignty, pinned down again and again by the vagaries of circumstances, describes exactly the trajectory the invisible man takes throughout the book. It also, of course, meshes with the experience of the reader, constantly placing the needle back on the record, searching for some form of interpretative agency beyond the well-worn grooves. It is not simply a case, moreover, of endless expanse along the diachronic; one of the invisible man's dreams is 'to hear five recordings of Louis Armstrong playing and singing [...]—all at the same time' (*IM*, p. 8). No realist narrative could represent the history of an entire nation—even one as relatively young as the US—through the perspective of a single consciousness. What makes *Invisible Man* a modernist text and a distinctive product of the twentieth-century, therefore, is just that: the 'maximal interiority', in Badiou's formulation, of the novel's treatment of history. But this is no strategy of containment. Gaps are inevitable in such a project, indeed the comprehensive scope of the effort highlights the extent to which gaps must be always inevitable, no matter how modest the intention. The invisible man could never realise his desire, for instance, to hear five recordings at the same time, not, at least, using the relatively antiquated technology of his day. The closer you try to line up separate recordings, the more distorted the results, and this is a lesson the literary critic could learn from the historical hi-fi buff.

¹¹⁵ Danielle Allen, 'Ralph Ellison on the Tragicomedy of Citizenship', *Raritan*, 23.2 (2004) pp. 56-74.

Distortions of form testify to a kind of ravished objectivity, and behind them is always a silence. What motivates the recovery of those silences, and also what puts them there in the first place, is the irresistible pressure of the weight of the real.

Conclusion

‘If the novel is dead’, the poet George Oppen wrote to his sister June in 1959, ‘it seems likely to me that people just can’t bear narrative, with its implication of the incomprehensibility of time, of the non-existence of what’s past, and such.’¹ The experience of the Cold War had brought to the public’s attention the possibility—‘just naturally on our minds’—of the destruction of the world. For Oppen, the thought that the world ‘might just sort of cease’ made a nonsense of either reading or writing about it. The beginnings, middles and ends of narrative, no matter how disguised in formal experimentation, serve simply as reminders of the reality of global finitude, and remembrance alone becomes an absurdity with no one and nothing left either to remember or be remembered. His own poetic methodology, moreover, was profoundly challenged by the sense that matter was somehow impermanent. In his first collection, *Discrete Series* (1934), modernist form is used as a kind of measure of materiality; fragmentary observations and distorted syntax gesture towards a phenomenology of perception. Since then, however, Oppen had abandoned literary production altogether, choosing instead political activism, military service and exile. His return to writing in the late 1950s was haunted by a sense of the lost opportunity of the modernist project. What should have pointed forwards to a new way of being in the world had regressed into the egotism of rarefied sensibility. Above all, in the letter to his sister, Oppen worries that in his new writing he is carrying over his old working methods—once a break with habitual ways of knowing the world—as in themselves ‘a habit of form, rather than a conviction.’ Yet the twenty-four-year silence between *Discrete Series* and his next collection would lend a distinct shape to his career and, in so doing, bear the weight of unrealised possibility.

The title *Discrete Series*, drawn from the discourse of statistics, indicates Oppen’s aversion to the linearity of narrative as form. A discrete series, he explains, is one ‘in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term.’² Each of the short, disconnected poems in the collection registers sense impressions of the urban—and occasionally suburban—scenes: boats on a river; a fridge; a man glassed-in behind the

¹ Letter to June Oppen Degnan, (January 14, 1959) in *The Selected Letters of George Oppen*, ed. by Rachel Blau DuPlessis (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), pp. 18-20 (p. 19).

² Letter to Rachel Blau DuPlessis (October 4, 1965) in *Selected Letters*, p. 122.

windscreen of his car. Even when the verse is at its most self-reflexive, as in the fragment ‘Drawing’, the materiality of the page itself is offered up as both form and haptic content:

Not by growth
But the
Paper, turned, contains
This entire volume³

This refusal of sequential causality implies a high modernist claim for an autonomous aesthetic impervious, or at least resistant, to mediation by socio-economic categories, as if it were possible to isolate discrete, singular entities outside of historical determination. It may be useful, therefore, to locate Oppen’s method within its own immediate context: Objectivism.

An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology (1932) included poetry by T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, but the task of theorizing the movement fell to the then unknown poet and critic, Louis Zukofsky. In his preface to the anthology Zukofsky builds on the aesthetics of this older generation of established figures—Pound especially—in order to develop a methodology more in keeping with the imperatives of the Depression. An objective, as Zukofsky defines it, is a ‘desire for what is objectively perfect,/Inextricably the direction of historic and contemporary particulars.’⁴ What these particulars are will be determined by critical acuity, attention to detail, the ability to work sense impressions into form: ‘poetry’, as Eliot puts it, ‘and not something else’.⁵ But whereas Eliot’s nostalgia for Augustan neoclassicism nominates as arbiter of aesthetic value the distant past, Zukofsky’s Marxist sympathies direct the concrete particularities of historic and contemporary life—‘along a line of melody’, as he puts it elsewhere—towards future recuperation.⁶ What enables this rerouting is a selective appropriation of Pound’s assertion of technique as ‘the test of a man’s sincerity’.⁷ Substituting for Pound’s claim to personal integrity an appeal to a distinctly dialectical materialism, Zukofsky retains the framework of an experimental method in literary production, whilst jettisoning any claim on behalf of the poet or critic to greatness.

³ George Oppen, ‘Drawing’, in *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2003), p. 33. Further references to poems in the collection are given here in the text as *NCP*.

⁴ Louis Zukofsky, ‘Recencies’ in Poetry’, preface to *An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology*, ed. by (Norwood Editions, 1977), pp. 9-25 (p. 10).

⁵ Eliot quoted in Zukofsky, ‘Recencies’, p. 11.

⁶ Zukofsky, ‘Program: “Objectivists” 1931’, in *An ‘Objectivists’ Anthology*, pp. 203-205 (p. 204).

⁷ Ezra Pound, ‘A Retrospect’ in *Literary Essays*, ed. by T. S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 3-14 (p. 9).

Zukofsky's materialism is founded on the conviction, drawn from Pound, that language, ultimately, cannot be dissociated from its referents. 'Words, writes Mr Pound,' writes Zukofsky, 'do not function in this manner. They are like the roots of plants: they are organic, they interpenetrate and tangle with life'.⁸ If language as a system of reference, subjective insofar as it is understood as a faculty of the observer rather than as a quality of the observed, nevertheless contains residua of objective substance, then it follows that there are absences in the fabric of everyday experience, places where meaning has been pulled up by the roots. As with Lawrence's theory of Cézanne's painting, language here has the capacity reach to the back of presented appearance. Zukofsky uses his desk to illustrate: 'even a desk has something to do with capillaries and veins the dissection of which at a certain stage is no longer possible—The desk then as a piece of work, the parts, the process of making it'.⁹ Language, in other words, by means of its innate substantiality, has the potential not merely to stand in for but actually to make present what is experientially closed off. This is the sense in which formal experiment in poetry—in 'difficult' poetry, refusing linearity, demanding a concentrated process of re-reading—may be said to achieve 'objectification': 'the apprehension satisfied completely as to the appearance of the art form as an object [...] writing (audibility in two dimensional print) which is an object or affects the mind as such.'¹⁰ The labour of literary production—the larger part of which, as Eliot pointed out, is critical labour—when carried out in sincerity, meaning without self-regard as far as is possible, makes tangible what has been spirited away in the abstract economy of commodity exchange.¹¹

In *Of Being Numerous* (1968) Oppen revisits these tenets of Objectivism at the outset of a long poem structured, in part, around a series of quotations. Yet it is clear that in these opening lines Oppen's earlier work is referenced—if obliquely—as part of that source material:

There are things
We live among 'and to see them
Is to know ourselves'.

Occurrence, a part

⁸ 'Recencies', p. 13.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁰ 'Program: "Objectivists" 1931', p. 204.

¹¹ In 'The Function of Criticism' Eliot writes that 'the larger part of the labour of an author in composing his work is critical labour; the labour of sifting, combining, constructing, expunging, correcting, testing: this frightful toil is as much critical as creative.' *Selected Essays*, p. 30.

Of an infinite series,

The sad marvels. (*NCP*, p. 163)¹²

The foregrounding here of historic and contemporary particularities—the ‘things/We live among’—registers both Zukofsky’s definition of an objective and Oppen’s own observation that the American modernists, rejecting ‘the terrible thin scratching of the art world’, had restored to poetry engagement with the phenomena of everyday life, ‘the sense of the poet’s self among things.’¹³ There is an important difference of emphasis between Zukofsky’s notion of what goes into constituting a significant particularity, however, and Oppen’s. For Zukofsky the role of the poet is chiefly analytic; the term ‘objective’ is drawn from the discourse of optics, and its connotations therefore involve precision and clear-sightedness. Oppen’s drawing on the categories of statistics for the conceit of his *Discrete Series*, however, implies the necessity of estimation if not downright guesswork. The poet’s role is the presentation of insight, but it is impossible to tell in advance where the source of this lies. ‘It is the arbitrary fact, and not any quality of wisdom literature,’ Oppen notes, ‘which creates the impact of the poets.’¹⁴ Thus, in the 1934 collection, images—the river, the fridge—are selected to all intents and purposes at random, the idea being to undercut generalisation. When, in ‘Of Being Numerous’, Oppen restates the premise of the ‘discrete series’—the series, remember, ‘in which each term is empirically justified rather than derived from the preceding term’—because he reiterates the concept in the terms of an infinite series, self-reflexivity becomes a kind of auto-critique. Form enacts content; it is as if nothing has really changed, as if the refusal of deriving from the preceding term leads only to stasis. On the one hand, there is the crushing weight of generalisation, on the other the risk of infinite regress.

Oppen’s problem is that his working method, fine in close-up, loses focus when confronted with the mimetic demands of continuity. What actually take place in the infinite series of occurrence, of course, are the ‘sad marvels’: human lives dispersed across space and time. And what Oppen most resists comes flooding through in the attempt to encompass these dimensions: a sense of narrative. ‘We are not coeval/With a locality’

¹² The quotation marked here is from Robert Brumbaugh’s *Plato for the Modern Age* (1962). For more detail on the intertexts in ‘Of Being Numerous’ see John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2006), pp. 192-229.

¹³ George Oppen, ‘The Mind’s Own Place’, in *Selected Prose, Daybooks, and Papers*, ed. by Stephen Cope (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), pp. 29-37 (pp. 31-32).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

(*NCP*, p. 164), he writes, 'But we imagine others are'. This imagining of the lives of others as rooted in a particular place is one way of controlling the potential chaos of infinite occurrence; the city limits are in this sense understood as markers of both location and temporality. But Oppen is too painfully aware that this conflation risks a gross oversimplification, that lives do not 'take place' as such, and that in actuality 'A populace flows/Thru the city.' It is in acknowledgement of this awareness that the form of the work grows. 'Of Being Numerous' is a serial poem—forty numbered sections of several stanzas each—and in the composition of it Oppen faces down the reservations he expressed about the major sequences of his contemporaries, Pound's *Cantos*, Williams' *Paterson* and Zukofsky's *A*.¹⁵ If the difficulty, for Oppen, is how to avoid breaking the taboo on imposing an overarching scheme on the whole, the solution he finds is to re-inscribe agency, away from the poetic ego, and instead into the material production of the poem as an object: 'This is a language, therefore, of New York'. But this depersonalised language, at some steps' remove from the individual subject, is radically destabilised. Not only no longer coeval with a locality, but uncertain as to whom 'we' represents, to imagine others 'are' becomes an act of desperation triggered by the revealed separability of the component parts of consciousness:

Obsessed, bewildered

By the shipwreck
Of the singular

We have chosen the meaning
Of being numerous. (*NCP*, p. 166)

The obsession with singularity, an almost pathological aversion to anything remotely like a narrative voice—to the 'organisation of the world around a character' Oppen so mistrusted in Pound—becomes a moment of crisis as the ego sinks amongst the alien shards of a

¹⁵ Oppen expresses these reservations most clearly in an interview with L. S. Dembo, *Contemporary Literature*, 10.2 (1969), pp. 159-177. For an analysis of Oppen's comments see Alan Golding, 'George Oppen's Serial Poems', *Contemporary Literature*, 29.2 (1988), pp. 221-240. Marjorie Perloff discusses Oppen's separation of his own work from Williams' in *The Dance of the Intellect: Studies in the Poetry of the Pound Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 119-134. For a more recent account of Oppen's career in the light of his complex negotiation of modernism see Peter Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Oppen's earliest work, Nicholls points out, 'contained the germ of a large-scale disassociation [...] from modernism broadly conceived [...] a sort of reconfiguring of modernism from within' (p. 10).

language rendered uncanny, haunted by the materiality of other voices.¹⁶ This crisis of identity, moreover, inspired by a kind of ethical imperative, is politically and historically motivated to its core.

‘I salute a serious craftsman,’ Pound wrote in the preface to *Discrete Series*, ‘a sensibility which is not every man’s sensibility and which has not been got out of any other man’s books.’¹⁷ By the early thirties, however, it became clear to Oppen that the sensibility he increasingly needed to distance himself from most was none other than that of Ezra Pound. As Peter Nicholls has pointed out, Oppen began to associate the excesses of modernism—the flamboyant gestures, the vanguardist posturing—with error.¹⁸ This sense of the fate of modernism as irrelevant to the realities of everyday life in Depression-era America, the conviction that ‘no one need fiddle precisely at the moment that the next door house is burning’, is felt by Oppen as personal, artistic and political failure.¹⁹ His abandonment of poetry for activism signals that shipwreck of the singular he replays in ‘Of Being Numerous’, at a time when the Vietnam war compels over again the old conviction that, as a response to the experience of suffering, writing poetry is fundamentally mistaken. ‘An eerie feeling writing poetry with the war going on’, he tells his niece Diane Meyer in 1965. ‘I don’t know if I can.’²⁰ Yet within ‘Of Being Numerous’ the struggle towards self-expression is partly alleviated, partly intensified by a flickering sensation of the interpenetration of past and present, as ‘Slowly over islands, destinies/Moving steadily pass/And change’ (*NCP*, p. 166). The image of clouds in motion works from above, in a kind of historical overview, as shadows crossing a landmass, and from below as the sudden emergence of shafts of sunlight, bringing us back to the particular, to ‘the singular/Which is the bright light of shipwreck’ (*NCP*, p. 167). This bifurcation of perspective illuminates, on the one hand, ‘New arts! Dithyrambic, audience-as-artists!’ But a return to the agit-prop forms of the thirties offers only a reminder of the political art Oppen was deeply uncomfortable with, the poetry, as his wife Mary explained, ‘we did not think [...] was any

¹⁶ ‘Pound’s ego system, Pound’s organisation of the world around a character, a kind of masculine energy, is extremely foreign to me.’ Interview with Dembo, p. 170.

¹⁷ Pound, ‘Preface’ to *Discrete Series*, in *NCP*, pp. 3-4 (p. 4).

¹⁸ Nicholls, *George Oppen and the Fate of Modernism*, p. 1.

¹⁹ ‘There are situations that cannot honorably be met by art, and surely no one would fiddle precisely at the moment that the house next door is burning. If one goes on to imagine a direct call for help, then surely to refuse would be a kind of treason to one’s neighbours.’ ‘The Mind’s Own Place’, p. 36.

²⁰ Letter to Diane Meyer (April-May, 1965), in *Selected Letters*, p. 114.

kind of art.²¹ After all, with the audience transformed into performers there is nobody left to listen, and this is to ignore both the present moment and the lessons of failures of the past. On the other hand there is ‘a light for the times’ (*NCP*, p. 168)—both then and now—a moment of simultaneity in which ‘One might wave to himself/From the top of the Empire State Building- //Speak//If you can//Speak’. What the past can learn from its future, as the present can learn from its past—‘So small a picture’ (*NCP*, p. 169)—is nothing perhaps of earth-shattering significance, the play of light, say, across a surface: ‘And it is not “art”’.

The difference between the pretensions of a failed avant-garde and the modest observation of ‘A spot of light on the curb’ is that, whilst neither achieves the status of art, this latter ‘cannot demean us’. In this ‘us’, resistant to the assumption of incorporation implied in the audience-as-artists model, Oppen invests the full value of what now emerges as the meaning of being numerous: ‘To talk of the house and the neighbourhood and the docks’. What Oppen talks about most, though, are people: about Phyllis—‘not neo-classic,/The girl’s name is Phyllis’ (*NCP*, p. 169)—coming home from her first day at work; about stone-age communists ‘gathered in council’ (*NCP*, p. 170); and about modern city dwellers, ‘shoppers,/Choosers, judges’. Oppen talks about the men he fought alongside in the Second World War and finally he talks of ‘The People’ (*NCP*, p. 171). But it is impossible now for the poetic I to disengage from the people and the people from the cities, ‘Wherein their cars//Echo like history/Down walled avenues/In which one cannot speak.’ At no point does Oppen attempt to speak *for* any of these people; that ‘It is not easy to speak’ (*NCP*, p. 173) becomes almost a refrain. Yet this failure of the single voice is what animates the voices of the many, and if this is true within the limits of a single city it is true also over the passing of time. The failure of the modernist avant-garde, as in Foster’s theory of deferred action, recovered *as* failure, effects a subtle displacement. What was not clear in amongst the shipwreck of the Great Depression, but that seems almost unnecessary to point out now, is that the grand narratives of the 1930s would conspire against all but the most resilient of individual voices. Here, as Oppen’s Objectivist method runs up against the limits of its own historical situation, it finds its most articulate moment:

Clarity

In the sense of *transparence*,

²¹ Burton Hatlen and Tom Mandel, ‘Poetry and Politics: A Conversation with George and Mary Oppen’ (June, 1980), in *George Oppen: Man and Poet*, ed. by Burton Hatlen (Orono: University of Maine, 1981), pp. 23-50 (p. 33).

I don't mean that much can be explained.

Clarity in the sense of silence. (*NCP*, p. 175)

In a letter written in the mid-1960s Oppen paraphrases Eliot on the point at which poetry no longer matters. 'There is a point at which one reaches what one meant to reach,' he explains, 'the thing that the poetry was for.'²² This is the meaning of avant-garde, 'if it means anything that matters.' Oppen's 'habit of form', his persistence and his struggle, enable his writing to reach this point. Whilst the official histories of political and economic conflict silence and marginalize dissenting voices, poetry—tentatively—is able to construct or at least record a counter-statement that emerges through time. Oppen's rewriting in *Of Being Numerous* of the public narrative of the 1930s as private recollection opens up a space in the subjective, phenomenal realm for the emergence of 'clarity' in the present—a silence that embodies a distinct shape, a non-discursive, collectively constituted site of production.

This clarity is at the same time, however—and I take completely seriously Oppen's insistence that this was never intentionally the case—a manifestation if not of obscurantism as such then certainly of the obscure in the sense of opacity.²³ Devotees of Oppen's work celebrate—rightly, in my view—his artistic integrity, the rigorous honesty and unflinching ethical focus of his work, yet it is important, I feel, without fear of reprisal, to acknowledge that to the untrained eye (or ear) much of his work is impenetrable. Partly, this confusion is due to the modernists' fascination with interdisciplinarity. No doubt the final blame lies with some overarching Jamesonian reification, whereby the term 'discipline' itself takes on all the force of a prohibition, but there is something that seems inescapably dilettantish about Lawrence's—intentionally, surely?—risible paintings, or Pound's interminable treatises on harmony. It is not so much that these figures dabbled amateurishly—indeed, who could begrudge them that?—but that something in modernism's necessary confrontationalism easily slips over into bullshiness, and that reputation in one field—the burden of great genius—becomes a kind of spur towards mastery across all of the boards,

²² *Selected Letters*, p. 122.

²³ In an interview with Reinhold Schiffer Oppen agonizes over the charge of incomprehensibility: 'But [in *Discrete Series*] I was doing my level best to speak as simply – in a sense I mean ... I don't want to become hysterical but I am speaking very simply. Well, I'm not talking about terribly simple matters. I certainly do not at any time, at any time take refuge in any policy of obscureness in the writing. I would completely reject this.' Reinhold Schiffer, 'Interview with George Oppen' (May 1, 1975), *Sagtrieb*, 3.3 (1984), pp. 9-23 (p. 15). For (what I take to be) an affectionate send-up both of Oppen's mythic status and of his sometimes tortuous syntax see Joseph Bradshaw, *In the Common Dream of George Oppen* (Exeter: Shearsman Books, 2011).

everywhere. Ellison, at least, had the common decency to leave his trumpet behind at Tuskegee. The sense of ‘rightness’ felt in music or the visual arts in the combination of certain tones or proportions is non-propositional, by no means synonymous with correctness or, worse still, truth. There is no guarantee whatsoever for writers that what happens at the level of phonology or graphology can carry over some positive remainder into the semantic field, a proposition nevertheless that at no matter how submerged a level seems to underpin Objectivist poetics. Nostalgia for some pre-classical union of music and language, as implicit in early Adorno as it is explicit in Pound’s *melopoeia*, is only one step removed from the assertion of some lost mystical alignment of sign and referent, an illusion it was Saussurean linguistics’ great insight to dispel, and part of modernism’s project in the first place, surely, to blast apart: a perniciously ideological reverie devaluing always and forever ordinary, everyday language.

It is, of course, to Oppen’s great credit that during the Depression he chose neither, as he saw it, to fiddle while the neighbour’s house was on fire, nor to give himself over to what he clearly regarded as—in proletarian writing—an inauthentic mode of creativity. The years of political exile during the McCarthy period, however, hardly seem voluntary, and it would be at the very least uncomfortable to recommend this kind of silence, with its overtones of suppression, as a method. There can be, moreover, no ethical privilege accruing to one form of literary composition over another. Oppen may have found the physicality of his technique—manual cut and paste, the Daybooks bound with pipe-stem cleaners, nails and wood—personally therapeutic, but there is no real way of knowing whether or not the results of constant revision, the famously obsessive attention to ‘the things that common words say, the words “and” and “but” and “is” and “before” and “after”’, could not have been achieved with far less labour simply by chance.²⁴ This is not meant as a dismissal, but rather as an attempt to give voice to a lingering suspicion that to match Oppen’s radical scepticism with something like blind faith, or devotion to a master, would be somewhat missing the point. Oppen’s reference in ‘The Mind’s Own Place’ to the ‘arbitrary fact’ is a telling one. What is at stake in choosing the meaning of being numerous is not so much democracy as the contingent; Oppen’s rigorous method is geared towards the illumination of historical accident. It is not meaning, but non-meaning that makes sense. Small wonder, then, that Oppen kept his poetry and his politics in discrete compartments.

²⁴ Oppen, ‘Statement on Poetics’ (1975), in Cope, ed., pp. 47-50 (p. 49). Cope itemises the Daybooks and their means of construction throughout his reproduction of the texts.

What *is* no accident is that Oppen's silence corresponds, more or less, to the period during which the works covered in this thesis were written. When these works, and others like them, products of the proletarian avant-garde, were abandoned to historical oblivion their absence itself masked a repression—not necessarily directly politically motivated—but mediated through an aesthetic agenda to a large extent predetermined by the appearance of neutrality and disinterest implicit in practical criticism and its empirical categories. The task of the academic critic was to retain what was valuable in the tradition, whilst remaining sufficiently attuned to new developments, preferably through one's own artistic practice, to uncover new interpretations, to maintain the perspective of the expert ready to impart new readings, new 'facts' in Eliot's sense, to a presumably undergraduate readership. But this model of the institution as gatekeeper and guardian has, in a society in which 'information' is no longer the privilege of an elite, been rendered hopelessly anachronistic. Knowledge as such is far more readily to hand than it was during the 1930s. This is not to say that now we are all, like Joseph Freeman's worker, in full possession of the facts; but most of us are in possession of at least some of them a lot of the time. Knowing stuff is important, but not in and of itself remarkable or even particularly interesting, and this is something, of course, that the likes of Eliot and Pound knew all along. Pound's notion of the image as 'an intellectual and emotional complex' just as much as Eliot's concept of the objective correlative employ more or less contemporary psychological and scientific terminology to defamiliarize the moralising, romanticised lexicon of nineteenth-century criticism, and to redirect the critical gaze along the lines of some more rigorous disentanglement of the threads of affect and meaning embodied in literary form.²⁵

It is against the background of the democratisation of knowledge, a development bound up with the expansion of further and higher education as well as in the spread of the mass media and, of course, information technology, that revisionist literary history takes place. But debates as to who or what should or should not be admitted into the canon are not always as motivated by aesthetic concerns as they perhaps might be. The democratisation of knowledge is also its commodification, and a commodity, as Marx showed, is not just a thing but also a form, and a very strange one at that. What the radicals of the thirties have to impart to us in terms of information is rather scant; the empirical data

²⁵ Pound, 'A Retrospect', p. 4.

on strikes and so forth in this thesis are taken from historiographical texts rather than novels. What literary texts seem primed to do, rather, is to challenge on some level the imagination, to engage us with how it might feel to experience a factory plunged into darkness, what it would be like to witness an erotic dance there, or even with what it would be like to step foot in a factory in the first place. The works of fiction and poetry in this thesis, from Gold's 'Strange Funeral' to *Invisible Man*, all share a critical engagement with the phenomenal, and an implicit questioning of what lies beneath surfaces. But it is often in their failures that these forms speak most clearly. Blind spots and stumblings, false starts and *non-sequiturs* embody the lesions of discursive struggle waged and lost. The politics of form, in this sense, demands an awareness, as evidenced so painstakingly in the work of George Oppen, that what is sometimes most significant in history, indeed in historicity itself, is not easily, if at all, translatable into coherent sentences.

But there is a danger here in connection with agency. Throughout this thesis my emphasis has been on form as determinate. Thus by mapping the musical or the visual onto the literary I have tried to flesh out the lines of a non-discursive politics, serving as a counter to official culture. This effort in itself should not be allowed to drift into a tactical evasion, however. The politics of the 1930s were in many respects naïve and certainly from the vantage point of the present moment outdated. The emphases on history as a redemptive force and the industrial working class as its agents have not survived post-Fordism intact. To obfuscate this reality by means of an idealization of all things obscure would be a failure of critical acuity. The rejection work with a political content *tout court* remains, I think, an error of critical judgment, but the political level is by no means the most fundamental available to writing. Criticism needs to be sensitive to what is singular in the text, but there is a real sense in which the allure of absences and aporia, silences and stillness is bound up not simply with contradiction and paradox but also overlaps with a desire for the annihilation of the self which can come only in death. In this uncomfortable truth the darker undercurrents of both communism and fascism cohere. The negotiation of the limits and boundaries of the canon, then, must remain intrinsic to the proper functioning of the academy. At the same time, it is important take care that the project of revision and recovery does not inadvertently valorise, instead of the restitution of the unjustly excluded, an aestheticization of repression itself, and thus the very denial of human agency it was that project's intention to redress in the first instance.

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