

MAKING A LIVING POETRY:
THE PROCESS OF POETIC VOCATION IN POSTWAR AMERICA

BY

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Vita

Jeffrey Paul Neilson was born on December 27, 1981 in Berkeley, California. There he experienced quite strange and wonderful configurations of the sacred and secular—from Telegraph Avenue to the eucalyptus groves of Tilden Park. He graduated from St. Mary's College High School in 1999 and then earned his B.A. in English at the University of California, Berkeley in 2003. At UC Berkeley, his honors thesis, *A Proposed World*, meditated upon Thomas Merton's poetry in light of Merton's complementary and conflicting vocations as a monk and writer. During these years, Jeffrey was an active drummer in various jazz ensembles, rock bands, jam sessions, and the Sunday drum circles that used to be held at UC Berkeley's Lower Sproul Plaza. After graduating from Berkeley, Jeffrey taught English in high schools and junior high schools for three years in Wakayama, Japan, where, among other adventures, he hiked the Kumano Kodō. At Brown University, he has received the Cogut Center for the Humanities' John Cargill MacMillan Graduate Fellowship, the Scholarship Award for Cornell's School for Criticism and Theory, and a fellowship for the Lumen Christi Institute's summer seminar on "Catholic Social Thought." Some of his research on Robert Duncan and the post-secular is forthcoming as an article in *Contemporary Literature*. Jeffrey has also been working on new research projects: one concerning the emergence of world music, cross-cultural experimental writing, and semiotic theory from the 1960s to the present, and another on radical Catholic writers and artists in the Americas during the Cold War. He has also been continuing the long process of writing two books of poetry, *Concrescence* and *The Hoarder of Things*.

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For Tom Behrman (1976-2006)

il miglior fabbro

Abbreviations

Chapter One

A = *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams*

CP I = *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume I: 1909-1939*

CP II = *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II: 1939-1962*

IAG = *In the American Grain*

P = *Paterson*

SE = *Selected Essays of William Carlos Williams*

SP = *Selected Poems*

Chapter Two

FC = *Fictive Certainties*

GW = *Ground Work: Before the War · In the Dark*

H.D. = *The H.D. Book*

L = *Letters: Poems 1953-1956*

OF = *The Opening of the Field*

RB = *Roots and Branches*

SP = *A Selected Prose*

Years = *The Years as Catches: First Poems 1939-1946*

Chapter Three

AWP = *A Wild Patience Has Taken Me This Far: Poems 1978-1981*

BBP = *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*

CEP = *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970*

DCL = *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974-1977*

DW = *Diving Into the Wreck: Poems 1971-1972*

LSS = *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978*

LP = *Later Poems: Selected and New, 1971-2010*

MS = *Midnight Salvage: Poems 1995-1998*

PC = *Poetry and Commitment*

TNP = *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2011*

TP = *Time's Power: Poems 1985-1988*

TRL = *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004-2006*

YNL = *Your Native Land, Your Life: Poems*

Chapter Four

PD = *Pleasure Dome: New and Collected Poems*

BN = *Blue Notes: Essays, Interviews, and Commentaries*

T = *Taboo*

W = *Warhorses*

CC = *The Chameleon Couch*

TDG = *Talking Dirty to the Gods*

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DOCTOR:

What was your son's work, Mrs. Venable?—besides this garden?

MRS. VENABLE:

As many times as I've had to answer that question! D'you know it still shocks me a little?—to realize that Sebastian Venable the poet is still unknown outside of a small coterie of friends, including his mother.

DOCTOR:

Oh.

MRS. VENABLE:

You see, strictly speaking, his life was his occupation.

DOCTOR:

I see.

MRS. VENABLE:

No, you don't see, yet, but before I'm through, you will—Sebastian was a poet! That's what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet and—vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can't separate them, I mean—well, for instance, a salesman's work is one thing and his life is another—or can be. The same thing's true of—doctor, lawyer, merchant, thief! —But a poet's life is his work and his work is his life in a special sense because—oh, I've already talked myself breathless and dizzy.

-Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer (1958)

The call asserts nothing.

-Martin Heidegger, Being and Time (1927)

-Keith Waldrop, Light While There Is Light: An American History (1993)

Process. Blind process.

-Srikanth Reddy, Voyager (2011)

INTRODUCTION

Included in “The Rock” and published in *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* (1954)—the last book Stevens saw published during his lifetime—“The Poem That Took The Place Of A Mountain” presents itself as a synecdoche for the poet’s life work:

There it was, word for word,
The poem that took the place of a mountain.

He breathed its oxygen,
Even when the book lay turned in the dust of his table.

It reminded him how he had needed
A place to go to in his own direction,

How he had recomposed the pines,
Shifted the rocks and picked his way among clouds,

For the outlook that would be right,
Where he would be complete in an unexplained completion:

The exact rock where his inexactness
Would discover, at last, the view toward which they had edged,

Where he could lie and, gazing down at the sea,
Recognize his unique and solitary home. (Stevens 435)

While the title announces the poem’s fully formed vastness, the rest of the poem protracts, modifies, and tempers Stevens’s sense of grand accomplishment—supreme fictions and all. By its ending, the poem has become something else: not a mountain exactly, but the vantage from a mountain. The first two declarative couplets trace this process of becoming something else, as they foliate into a series of reflections across the middle stanzas, moving along an ambivalent course from “how he had needed / A place to go” to “where he would” recognize a home. From this subjunctive outlook of suspended or “unexplained” completion, the speaker crosses a rhetorical threshold

indicated by the *promise* of closure, only to discover that, upon the “exact rock” of his poem, the inexactitude of what he “would discover” remains. In the poem’s final lines, the poet imagines a place “where he *could*” edge toward something like finality, and reaching that edge of that ending, enjoy a final resting place. But this is only a possibility, as Stevens himself was not yet done writing poems. The poet’s final predicament recalls Moses, looking out at Mount Nebo, who can gain only “a view of” the promised home “toward which they [the pines] had edged.” In this “word for word” sequence, the pines have become poems. Yet one cannot completely see the forest because of the “unique and solitary” tree standing in the way. Instead, one encounters a trail blazed by the poem among the wilderness of a lifetime, a course that somehow “takes the place” of a vast process one cannot behold all at once: the transfiguration of one’s work into something larger than one’s own life.

Looking back on this poem of looking back, we see that the hypothetical nature of the home arrived at takes on added significance when read in the context of Stevens’s career, and the “career” of American modernist poetry in general. Stevens abstained from publishing his *Collected Poems* for some time in the early 1950s. As Helen Vendler writes, “such a volume, Stevens must have felt, would impose a premature closure on his writing life” (*Last Looks* 25). Strangely enough, although any last poem might figuratively take the place of a mountain, a poet’s career cannot. For in breathing the poem’s “oxygen”—that is, in *living* this poem—more is entailed than the linear scansion of the path it creates from start to finish (and back to another start). More poems may be called for than can be written, and some of a poet’s published poems—written in stone, or in *The Rock* as it were—will erode or be erased in time. Stevens inscribes this sense of

ongoing labor into poem's prospective completion. The possibility of recognizing a career's resting place, where the last footfall "home" resides, brings one back to the everything-that-is-there at the beginning of the poem. In looking back on his career, Stevens intimates that the work of poetry constitutes an ongoing practice that had already begun before one actually started, and which will continue even after one is done taking a last look at the nearly finished product.

Making a Living Poetry traces different strains of American poetry from the end of World War II to the present in the context of poets' emerging and ongoing senses of their respective practices. In the past half-century or so since Stevens and his modernist contemporaries produced their career-culminating works (e.g. Stevens's "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" or "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven," T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson*, H.D.'s *Trilogy*, Langston Hughes's *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, and W.H. Auden's *The Age of Anxiety*, among others) a poetic career's loftier synonym—or a "vocation" to poetry—has equipped many poets with a malleable and yet durable concept for reconceiving poetic practice as a *non-economic* and *counter-professional* form of commitment. Vocation is certainly an old name for an old way of thinking about the special status and struggles of one's life work. But the term's animating presence in postwar American poetry calls attention to how massive socio-cultural transformations have precipitated new conceptions of poetry as a special form of life. Most notable in this historical period is the professionalization of "creative writing" through the establishment of MFA programs in American universities. From such programs emerges a social symbiosis of counter-, sub-, or alter-cultures

created and/or resisted within contemporary “PoBiz.”¹ Walter Kalaidjian succinctly sums up this history: “Verse writing in the postmodern era, it is plausible to claim, is less a visionary or sacramental art than a highly competitive industry” (*Languages* 15). But instead of resigning to this seemingly irreversible historical fact of postwar U.S. poetry, my study interrogates the creative possibilities and disharmonies between craft and calling that persistently reshape themselves today.

While for many poets the composition of poetry has become just another mundane profession within late capitalism (or the neoliberal “debt economy”), I argue that the process of *making a living* as a poet does not exclude the process of making a *living* poetry.² One major source of this exclusion is a secularist, technocratic logic that has naturalized the incompatibilities stressed in an older theological dyad of material and immaterial value. Within this predominately dualistic strain of secularism, poetic careers come to signify a superficial worldliness and status-seeking capitalist ethos, while a vocation retains the aura of a deeper commitment to personal, political, and/or cosmic tasks. In religious terms, poetic vocation has been understood, in recent incarnations, as an “antinomian” form of “mystical activism,” a singularity of purpose through which,

¹ I credit Aeron Kopriva for sharing this pithy coinage, “PoBiz,” amid our engaging and far-off-the-record conversations. For widely influential institutional and literary histories of creative writing in American universities, see McGurl (2009) and Myers (1996). McGurl’s account in *The Program Era* (2009) trenchantly appraises the reshaping of postwar American genres of fiction, but overlooks the genre-specific professional identity crises of poets in this period. Thus my primary concern—how social attitudes toward religious identification reshape the status of a poetic “vocation”—passes under McGurl’s radar. The line of literary critical and sociological work on contemporary American poetry that I have found most illuminating include Kalaidjian (1989), Grossman (1990), Bernstein (1992), Rasula (1996 and 2009), Perelman (1996), Rifkin (2000), and Craig (2007).

² Celebrity poets such as Billy Collins or poetry career-starting guides, emblemized by Gary Mex Glazner’s *How To Make a Living as a Poet* (2005) and *How To Make a Life as a Poet* (2006), are examples of what I see as poets capitalizing on, or encouraging other poets to capitalize on, something like the “careerification” of poetry—from Slam poetry tournaments to MFA workshops to expensive writing retreats to poetry marketing campaigns printed on pizza boxes. For a discussion of “debt” as the prevailing condition of subjectivity under neoliberalism, see Lazzarato (2012).

poet David Brazil writes, “subjective experience opens out into a dialectic with the social” (*Poetic Labor* Web). Vocational poetry not only “takes the place of a mountain,” but tries, however incrementally, to *move* them as well.

My investigation thus reorients two poetic domains of motivation (a professional “specialization” and “special” purpose for living) in terms of the co-implication and co-productivity of one another in the late-twentieth and twenty-first century. In this period, I claim, poets have repurposed the theological logics of vocation not only to regulate inherited social meanings of the sacred within secular frames of reference, but also to create radically new modes of living religiously with or without the sacred/secular binary. In short: the process of poetic vocation brings to light how modern secularity continues to afford its own kinds of religious regimes. The periods I traverse (from the Cold War to the Vietnam War to the War on Terror) and poets I study (from the late modernism of William Carlos Williams and Robert Duncan to Adrienne Rich’s and Yusef Komunyakaa’s *even later* modernist poetics) throw into relief how certain moral narratives of modernity have been maintained after World War II across poetic categories of historical and social difference.³ In much poetry of this period, such a secular reconstruction of poetic faith has been especially fraught by the sometimes blurred, sometimes stark boundaries drawn between one’s private beliefs and the plurality of common goods. This reconstruction does not simply seek an end in poetic belief, but further relates, juxtaposes, combines, or opposes conceptions of poetry’s privileged (or

³ See Webb Keane, “Secularism as a Moral Narrative of Modernity” (2013) for a shrewd analysis of this term (Keane defines the “moral narrative of modernity” as a “projection onto chronological time of a view of human moral and pragmatic self transformation”) (160). This intervention strongly disaggregates secular modernity from materialism (and scientific rationalism), thus elucidating the problems of equating religious ontologies in secularist discourse with propositional beliefs. Keane thus stresses the importance of distinguishing the semiotic form, or historical objectivity, that the ongoing practice of religion takes within these moral narratives of self-transformation and self-knowledge.

inconsequential, or degraded) form of life in more flexible and fragile ways than high modernist ideals of poetic impersonality could imagine.⁴

In his 1987 preface to *The Continuity of American Poetry* (1968), Roy Harvey Pearce argues that the emerging ethos in American poetry in the 1940s and 1950s reflects “a shift in concern from the Humanism of the One to the Humanism of the Many,” a shift which manifests a broadly pluralizing ethos of innovative poetry written since World War II (ix). However, I contend that a better account of the ethos of poetic pluralism in this period must re-evaluate the contemporaneous transmutations of vocational discourse—a shift of emphasis moving from the regulation of sacred totalities to the modulation of living tonalities. The poets I study all trouble the clear-cut notion of the secular as a socio-economic and moral order, an order in which the competitive industry of poetic “achievement” is all there is. Furthermore, my approach to late modern poetry’s vocational pluralism is rooted in a philosophical conception that William James calls a “living option...in which both hypotheses [a career and a vocation] are live ones,” and the writings I examine variously transcode the practical and the prophetic in order to relativize formal stability and instability, resolution or resolve, meaningful worldmaking and paradoxical perplexity (*Writings 1878-1899* 458). These qualities undoubtedly

⁴ Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” a touchstone for modernist poetic self-understanding, enshrines the “process of depersonalization” that a poet must undergo to recreate tradition: “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (*Prose* 40). On the other hand, Michael André Bernstein’s “Robert Duncan: Talent and the Individual Tradition” recognizes how Duncan had radically recalibrated modernism’s professional ethos, indeed, turning it on its head. For one, Duncan’s “individual tradition” is radically original and idiosyncratic: “[...] the tradition Duncan continues never existed before him, and its creation increasingly begins to seem like the central poem of his imagination, the ground-work from which all other texts ultimately derive” (180). Later in the essay Bernstein cites Duncan’s comment on this self-creative mode of reading tradition—“not to find what art is but through the art to find what life might be”—and thus lay out an argument that informs my reading of vocation throughout this study: “[...] the emphasis in Duncan’s poetry is on the *process* of discovery, on the ways in which he himself has been moved to a new understanding by the illumination of an often unexpected source, rather than on the hortatory truth-content of that source itself” (187).

inhere in vast amounts of lyric poetry in various historical eras and cultural contexts, but the “special sense” of poetic vocation I examine levels a critique of modern secularity even as vocation actively revives certain theological senses of temporality that have survived as a constituent part of secularism’s regime of cultural production. I thus articulate in each chapter how poets produce such critiques in terms of: (1) secularism’s social demarcation of the “sacred,” i.e. that religious beliefs and practices exclusively and tautologically refer to a separate *magisterium* (and in modernity these beliefs/practices must somehow remain a private matter); (2) historical claims that we *have become* secular, and that any religiously coded form of practice is either fundamentally anachronistic or mystifying, or both; and (3) the epistemological, affective, and ethical norms that secularism presumes to be universal in order to negotiate (or enforce particular understandings of) social difference. By way of examining certain radically process-oriented facets of vocational ideals in postwar American poetics, I demonstrate the need to continually rethink the contested meanings of *both* the secular *and* the sacred as convergent socio-aesthetic values in American poetry after modernism.⁵

Contemporary poetic vocations embody a form of pragmatic religiosity by which a poet’s life and work coordinate along pathways that have no single precedent or final logical terminus.⁶ But simply highlighting this unending process is not the stopping point

⁵ In contrast to those “subtraction stories” noted and scrutinized by Charles Taylor in *A Secular Age* (2007), a post-secular logic of “both/and” registers what Niklas Luhmann calls the “polycontextural” complexity of *secularization* as a process woven into various twentieth-century poetic practices (Taylor 27; Luhmann 205).

⁶ My process-oriented model of poetic vocation may resonate with theoretical discussions beyond literary practice. In *Contingencies of Value* (1988), Barbara Herrnstein Smith delineates a critical nexus of late-twentieth century developments in sociocultural and economic analysis, epistemology, and evolutionary biology—a nexus that synthesizes what I consider here as a kind of “general economy” of poetic vocation. In her critique of rigidly teleological accounts of human motivation, Smith writes:

of my project. Situating various poems and poetic corpuses in the context of a career's postponed achievements, I think through what contemporary poets are up to now, as claims of poetry's proximity to the sacred are still obliquely, ambivalently made. Looking anew at lines of poetic "descent" (to use a key term from Williams's later writings), I probe how what went down in late modernism is still going down, but do so in ways that force us to rethink the cultural and theoretical significance of terms like secularism or humanism in relation to poetic practice. In this respect, assumptions of a default secularity or a default sense of the sacred in contemporary poetry tend to collapse upon themselves, revealing more variegated and particularized attempts to produce new poetic forms of commitment as active, vital forces. This study thus also contributes to historical-poetic reconsiderations of the social and material work that has gone into constructing the lyric as an exemplary genre and/or mode of reading (such as the work of "historical poetics" scholars Yopie Prins, Virginia Jackson, Meredith McGill, et al.), an archive that has further differentiated, contextualized, and reoriented how scholars and readers understand late modern conceptions of the lyric not only in terms of a specialized form of craft, but as historical practices of duration seeking to provide what Kenneth Burke famously articulated as "equipment for living" (*Philosophy* 292-304).⁷

In a general formulation of the economics of activity (and, in this form, not confined to human or verbal agents), teleological accounts of motivation and behavior would be replaced by accounts of the ways that activities are sustained and transformed by their own past and current consequences for the agent...It [motivation] is...a matter of the continuous mutually modifying interactions between and among ongoing activities and current traces of past activities—structures, mechanisms, tendencies, impulses, desires, concepts, images, memories, plans, hungers, habits, and so forth—that operate at every level of the agent's organization and are continuously modified by their differential consequences under different sets of conditions. (*Contingencies* 145)

⁷ Burke's "sociological criticism of literature" undergirds the brunt of my theoretical archive. His various writings fuse together, or, to use one of Burke's verbs of choice, "alembicate" the dynamic elements of poetic form, the psycho-social dynamics of religiosity, and American pragmatist philosophy more than any critic to date. In addition, Burke's key theoretical concept of "dramatism" informs my methodological orientation of towards process-philosophical idioms. By extension, Allen Grossman glosses vocation's

Both formally and thematically, Williams, Duncan, Rich, and Komunyakaa engage modes of affective discipline, ethical reflexivity, and radically immanent senses of temporality. These poets wrestle with dilemmas similar to those encountered by contemporary religious, or spiritual, forms of life affirmation. This constellation of poets comprises a range of sympathetic and antipathetic orientations to the idea of a vocation—attitudes toward poetic practice that reveal how religious, artistic, and professional institutions intersect in late modern America. For many American poets who conceive poetry as a vocation (certainly not all poets do), vocation more often than not takes the open-ended form of a radically immanent process of becoming. Many extensions, modifications, and contradictions of this central claim undoubtedly exist, but preoccupations with poetry’s social status and political engagement *as a process* are pervasive in American poetry from the Cold War to the present. In a rigidly technocratic frame of reference, poetry might be seen as making nothing happen. Nonetheless, *Making a Living Poetry* continually bears in mind how something is always happening in the process of vocation.

Vocation’s Special Senses

Friedrich Nietzsche opens the third essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887) with a rhetorical answer to his titular question—“What is the Meaning of Ascetic

symbolic “envalorization” with the etymological root of drama, *dromenon*, or the ritual *process* (True-Love 47). As Christopher S. Wood writes: “The word *dromenon* is derived from *dramein*, to run. But *dromenon*, the running, designates not the bolt into futurity, nor the race to catch up with history, nor panicked flight, nor random errancy, but rather the repetitive action of ritual, whose meaning is not its destination but its patternedness. The ritual manages time. It is ‘a thing re-done, or pre-done.’ It does not show but really reproduces, and produces” (“Dromenon” 111). Thus *living* poetry does not necessarily entail organic unities or whole systems but patterned forms of “teleodynamic” work—as biological anthropologist Terrence Deacon describes it—that produce remainders and reminders of what goes unexpressed and unfinished in its patterned repetition. See Deacon (2012) 357-364.

Ideals?”—with the quip: “In the case of artists, nothing or too many things” (*Genealogy* 77). Nietzsche then provocatively hypothesizes the meanings of other all-too-human “cases” of asceticism: philosophers, women, the deformed and disgruntled, priests, and saints. All of these figures converge in a bracing summary pronouncement: “But *that* the ascetic ideal has meant so many things to man expresses above all the fundamental truth about human will, its *horror vacui*: *it must have a goal*—and it would even will *nothingness* rather than *not* will at all” (77). This assertion rings true in many ways for what a poet’s vocation has come to mean in the twentieth century. “Vocation” is now so referentially abundant a term that it seems to include every possible skill, trade, profession, office, task, project, sacred mission, or ultimate purpose. While it is now ubiquitous as an indicator of professional specialization or technical skill (in the sense of a vocational school), vocation also retains its original status as a form of religious life (from which its secular iterations derive). The multifarious secular conceptions of vocation are grounded in a sense of complete identification of one’s work with one’s life. Yet this total identification of worldly work and spiritual life (or vice versa) does not determine whether modern senses of vocation collapse sacred and secular domains of labor, or simply maintain a renewed opposition between the two. Whatever the case, so much depends upon a vocation. To be sure, “too many things” (individual poems, collections, entire careers) hinge upon the term’s multiple inflections. As Nietzsche reminds us, there are *too many* calls to process at once, or in one lifetime.

What living forms do vocational ideals take in American poetry from the mid-twentieth century to the present? Or to put the question in terms of Gilles Deleuze’s pertinent analysis of Nietzschean terminology, what “active” rather than “reactive” force,

what “force of metamorphosis,” does poetic practice affectively and aesthetically affirm today (*Nietzsche* 40-42)? And does it make sense to deem some expressions of this force explicitly or implicitly religious? My approach to these questions underscores certain Emersonian motifs that, however scrutinized, pluralized, and demystified, continue to filter and fiber the lifeblood of American poetic culture: experience over tradition; invention over convention; self-determination over termination; process over product; transition over foundation.⁸ In this vein, Nietzsche is not an arbitrary figure with whom to begin this study. J. Hillis Miller’s *The Poetry of Reality* (1965), a central study of literary modernism’s “journey beyond nihilism toward a poetry of reality,” frames the evolution of six major twentieth-century writers within Nietzsche’s philosophical and ethical challenges to modernity. As Miller claims, such challenges heralded the radical re-negotiation of material immanence and spiritual transcendence in the ensuing half-century or so (1). With a glance at my table of contents, you will notice that I pick up where Miller leaves off—with the late writings of William Carlos Williams. Yet this study does not purport to transpose Hugh Kenner’s magnum opus in terms of a “Williams Era.” Rather, I read the poetics of vocation differentially: across the pluralizing ethos of Williams’s polyvocal prosody and cross-generic projects (situating the lyric voice with an “acoustemology” of American soundscapes), Robert Duncan’s prismatic and centrifugal poetics of religious heresy, Adrienne Rich’s poetics of a “fierce and furthering” political

⁸ Richard Poirier has been the vital figure for promulgating an understanding of “Emersonian pragmatism” in modern American poetry and poetics, a lineage that extends through the work of William James to Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, and Gertrude Stein. See Poirier, *The Renewal of Literature* (1988) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1993). In *The Poetics of Transition* (1999) Jonathan Levin extends Poirier’s work to theorize transition or transitivity as a unifying term for twentieth-century modernism. In this light, I want to rethink transition in terms of transformation, or process—a move whereby the linguistic liminality, slippage, or the infinitely convertible aspects of what Peirce calls “semiosis” does not devolve into a certain kind of critical fetishization of change itself. Even if it is ongoing and emergent, process indeed involves certain beginning and ends which, as I will discuss later, Whitehead’s thought elucidates.

vocation, and Yusef Komunyakaa's formalist articulation of a post-Black Arts ethos of musical improvisation as self-construction. I present here a historical survey of vocation's "special sense" in the religious and literary imaginaries of the West, and how the term has come, under post-industrial capitalism, to mean the opposite of "special"—a meaning codified by its modernized cousin, functional "specialization." In turn, my critical reconstruction of the history of vocation offers a vantage from which to rethink accounts of the relationship between religion or spirituality and poetic practice in postwar America. As I claim, the social and aesthetic "functions" of religion and poetry are imbricated in such a way that secularist narratives of religion's attrition in postwar American literary culture, or its negative transmutation into something like belief in belief (or the nothingness of belief), fail to accurately interpret the forms of pragmatic religiosity that survive in some key poetic archives of today. An even briefer excursion through what I am provisionally calling the field of "process and poetry"—after Alfred North Whitehead's chief work, *Process and Reality* (1929)—will fill out the pragmatist-inflected theoretical tones of radical process that I examine in this study. By no means do I claim that the four poets I discuss represent a comprehensive conspectus of poetic vocation in the late-twentieth century. Rather, my readings seek to extend and further contest how American pragmatism operates in contemporary poetic and religious sensibilities, and to do so without a strict historical or formal dependence on the rhetoric of the secular.

As I consider it, poetic vocation marks a deep-rooted, yet historically and socially contingent reconstruction of one's artistic labor and life goals over time. American poetry derives this term from a predominately Christian narrative of conversion and

pilgrimage. Vocation has historically referred to a special task or role constituted by the experiences associated with Christian conversion and the hope for salvation.⁹ Similarly, a “career” literally refers to a road, track, or channel upon which one travels to pursue certain kinds of exchange—whether of material goods for economic gain, or to gain different forms of cultural distinction (fame, prestige, success, achievement, etc.) that may or may not be realizable in one’s lifetime. Practicing poetry as a vocation seems to demand that one attune oneself to both of the roles Søren Kierkegaard describes in “On the Difference Between a Genius and Apostle” (1847). Thus a vocational poet is a “genius” (who “has only an immanent teleology”) and also an “apostle” (one who has been “absolutely, paradoxically, teleologically placed”) (105). Note the enfolding of active and passive activities of vocation—of possession and dispossession. One must strive for certain poetic ends, and yet also leave those ends in a state of suspended incompleteness. In his essay on “Politics as a Vocation” (1919), Max Weber describes this distinction in terms of two ethics: an ethic of responsibility and an ethic of ultimate ends. The former demands that one to be able to “give an account for the foreseeable results of one’s actions” while the latter brings one, in an overtly religious key, to “do right, [and] leave the results in the hands of the Lord” (*For Max Weber* 120). Vocation’s teleological specificity, or lack thereof, has thus become a key factor in accounting for how a late

⁹ See *Oxford English Dictionary*, vocation, *n.*: “1a. The action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature, or to fill a certain position; divine influence or guidance towards a definite (esp. religious) career; the fact of being so called or directed towards a special work in life; natural tendency to, or fitness for, such work. b. The action on the part of God (or Christ) of calling persons or mankind to a state of salvation or union with Himself; the fact or condition of being so called. c. vocation of the Gentiles (cf. Acts x. 45, etc.) 2a. The particular function or station to which a person is called by God; a mode of life or sphere of action regarded as so determined. (Cf. calling *n.* 10.) b. One’s ordinary occupation, business, or profession. 3.a. A call *to* a public position. b. The action, on the part of an ecclesiastical body, of calling a person to the ministry or to a particular office or charge in the Church. 4. ? Designation, title. *Obs.* 5. The action of summoning an assembly or its members. 6. Appeal, entreaty, petition.”

modern poet's career adds up and/or leaves an indivisible remainder.

In modern poetry, the religious lineage of the concept often dissolves into the shorthand of artistic "inspiration." From Plato's discussion in *Ion* of the rhapsode's divine possession, to romanticism's preoccupations with poetic enthusiasm, to surrealist conceptions of the poetics of psychic automatism, poetic vocation has often been characterized as "heteronomous"—i.e. from above, outside, or even paradoxically within, oneself but nevertheless beyond one's control.¹⁰ But the traces of vocation's religious genealogy are helpful to bear in mind. In *The Vocation of the Artist* (1997), Deborah J. Haynes details vocation's derivation from the Latin *vocatio* (a call), itself a translation of the Greek *klesis*, which "in the Pauline and Johannine biblical literature, was interpreted as giving the Christian a special hope and destiny and would have contributed to the developing sense of new communal identity within the Greco-Roman and Hebrew contexts" (*Vocation* 33). Haynes cites a lecture by German theologian and church historian Karl Holl, "The History of the Word Vocation (Beruf)" (1924). Holl's study is a theological and philological corrective of Weber's important, albeit historically sweeping, writings on "the Protestant ethic" and its secular dispensation within industrial capitalism. Holl sifts through the scriptural and social history of the term in early monastic orders and the dogmatic teachings of early and medieval Christianity, noting that *klesis*, whereby we get the Latin *ecclesia* ("assembly" or "congregation"), designates "the advantage about which the Christian as a Christian might boast," or a "supramundane hope" in a singularly concrete destiny for a Christian ("History" 2). Holl then cites a key passage from I Corinthians 7:20 that "departs" from the strict sense of a

¹⁰ See T. Clark (2001) for a wide-ranging discussion of Romantic versions of poetic "inspiration," and Rasula (2009) for an account of the hyper-mediated technologies of inspiration within what he calls modernist poetry's "voice-overs."

Christian destiny to something “present in popular language” of today (i.e. vocation as a “position in life”): “Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called.”

Here *klesis* manifests the tautological structure of a calling—one is called to abide in the position to which one is called. It is a “form-of-life,” to use Giorgio Agamben’s phrase for early monastic orders.¹¹ One *is* called, marking a radically passive position that, over the course of the Protestant Reformation, colonial exploration and conquest, and the forging of new religious, national, and revolutionary identities, takes on a radically active, self-authorizing tenor of an “errand into the wilderness” or a sacred “mission” or historical purpose to be fulfilled.

With Weber and Holl’s commentaries in mind, it may also be illuminating to dig a little deeper than the vocational discourse derived from the Reformation. The first English usage of “vocation” comes from the Benedictine monk and poet John Lydgate’s 1426 translation of Guillaume de Deguileville’s *The Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*:

Thus thapostles, On by on,
Komē to hym euerychon),
Travayllyngē nyht & day:
As parfyt pylgrymes in ther way,
By choys & elleccïoun
And also by vocacioun
They kam to hym [...] (de Deguileville 296)

By choice, election, *and also* vocation. In Lydgate’s translation, the relationship between these terms is neither of identity nor opposition but *composition*. Life composes itself with these three interdependent threads of spiritual authorization, and vocation, according to Deguileville’s logic, mediates or interposes itself between individual choice and divine

¹¹ For Agamben, medieval monastic orders require “a life that is linked so closely to its form that it proves to be inseparable from it” (*Highest* xi). Agamben’s philosophical excavation of monasticism forms a peculiar, but provocative, challenge to the present. This challenge is part of his ongoing project of *Homo Sacer*, which involves “how to think a form-of life, a human life entirely removed from the grasp of the law and a use of bodies and of the world that would never be substantiated into an appropriation” (xiii).

election (between autonomy and heteronomy). In this sense, vocation occupies an interstitial position between pre- and post-Reformation conceptions of an individual's agency, thus grounding what has branched out into various theological, ethical, political, social, and *artistic* values invested in the form one's life and work assumes in time.

By the time of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), the modern concept of a vocation had accrued an entirely different set of meanings in relation to an individual's life. Weber's famous study delineates how "worldly asceticism" emerged from the Reformation and its inflection in modern capitalism. Weber's account, as Haynes notes, must be understood along a historical continuum of thinkers—such as Luther, Smith, Marx, and Arendt—who have in their respective eras articulated how "the process of increasing secularization has affected views of work in the world, the purpose of work, and problems such as alienation" (33). In the immediate context of this study, and nearly fifty years after Weber, American sociologist C. Wright Mills addressed the changing conditions for the new middle-class in *White Collar* (1951), a study that investigates the erosion of both instrumental and intrinsic values typically invested in work by Americans at mid-century. Mills identifies an alternative to the Protestant ethic in the Renaissance ideal of craftsmanship. This ideal imagines play and work as substantially united:

The simple self-expression of play [work for its own sake] and the creation of ulterior value of work combined in work-as-craftsmanship. The craftsman or artist expresses himself at the same time and in the same act as he creates value. *His work is a poem in action.* He is at work and at play in the same act [...] In the craft model of activity, 'consumption' and 'production' are blended in the same act; active craftsmanship, which is both play and work, is the medium of culture; and for the craftsman there is no split between the worlds of culture and work. (*White Collar* 222-223, my emphasis)

In addition, Mills argues that neither the Protestant ethic (the “secularized gospel of work as consumption”) nor the ideal of craftsmanship (centered on “the work process itself”) predominates in modern populations. Historically speaking, then, neither the backward-looking ideals of Tolstoy or Ruskin, nor the forward-thinking of Marx and Engels can stave off the evisceration of both work’s intrinsic and instrumental worth. This is brought about by the rise of white-collar work in the postwar reconfiguration of industry and technology. White-collar workers share, as Mills claims, a similar kind of alienation from work as wage laborers: “For the white collar masses, as for wage earners generally, work seems to serve neither God nor whatever they may experience as divine in themselves. In them there is no taut will-to-work, and few positive gratifications from their daily round” (219). Under these conditions, the ideal of craftsmanship will be seen as an oddity or a luxury, and adjusting to these shifting professional conditions is what gives many postwar American poets a perpetual occupational panic attack. With the rise of the new middle class, *earning* a living and *living* (work and culture broadly writ) come to be seen as in opposition with each other, or even incompatible. Thus poets of this period more and more register a felt need to reappraise and transform the systems of value—intrinsically, instrumentally, or otherwise grounded—by which their line of work is called, and to which it responds.

In this context, no late-twentieth-century poet or critic has grappled with the modern vocation to poetry as intensively as poet-critic-teacher Allen Grossman, whose writings on the term and its creative instantiations in Western poetic traditions offer an impassioned appeal to reflect on, and preserve, modernist poetry’s humanist legacies. Grossman’s influential writings on vocation, however, bespeak a deeply romantic notion

of poetry as the special human means of manifesting knowledge of the human image, or *eidos* (*Sighted Singer* 229-235).¹² Citing Walt Whitman's "Democratic Vistas" (a problematic foundational text for American poets that argues, among other things, against black suffrage) and elsewhere alluding to Whitman's singular role in fostering an American sense of poetry's vocation, predicated on the "poetics of union," Grossman attributes the emergence of a modern poet's vocation to the usurpation of divine knowledge—"the substitution...of human for divine agency..." "The priest departs, the divine literatus comes" (*True-Love* 85). Hence the originary vocational force of Walt Whitman's declaration, upon hearing the mockingbird's song in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking":

Is it indeed toward your mate you sing? Or is it really to me?
For I, that was a child, my tongue's use sleeping, now I
have heard you,
Now in a moment I know what I am for, I awake,
And already a thousand singers, a thousand songs, clearer,
louder and more sorrowful than yours,
A thousand warbling echoes have started to life within me,
never to die. (Whitman 392)

Earlier romantic instantiations of the idea of a visionary call to poetry abound prior to Whitman or Emerson's transcendentalist versions. German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin muses in "Dichterberuf" ("The Poet's Vocation") on how the absence of the divine from the space of poetic imagination *helps* the poet in his task:

But, if he must, undaunted the man remains
Alone with God—ingenuousness keeps him safe—

¹² In *Summa Lyrica*, Grossman places the human *eidos* (i.e. "form," "countenance," "visage," or "face") above all other terms of poetic representation. In Scholium 6.2 he writes:

The image prior to all other images in any work of the arts of language is the image of the person (the *eidos*). In poetry the person is prior to all worlds. [...] 'The eidetic function of language' refers to the human annunciatory or anthropophanic (cf. epiphanic, theophanic, hierophanic) content of speech. The eidetic function of language points to language insofar as it effects presence. (*Sighted Singer*, 229-230)

And needs no weapon and no wile till
God's being missed in the end will help him. (Hölderlin 237)

In the German, the poet remains “*einsam vor Gott*,” which ambiguously leaves the poet’s new calling either “alone” with or “before” (i.e. in the presence, or present absence, of) God. In a similar vein, William Wordsworth’s *The Prelude*, as M.H. Abrams argues, fashions the “office” of the poet with an “as-if providentialism,” or a “translated grace,” and *The Prelude* embodies this process of naturalized poetic salvation through its own “retrospective form” (*Natural* 85-86). However deep-rooted such romantic conceptions of poetic vocation are in modern and postmodern poetics, I contend that the philosophical, spiritual, and formal *topoi* of the poet’s vocation and the “vocational poem” (*The Prelude* and *Leaves of Grass* being prime examples) have been more radically transposed in the postwar period to creative and ongoing *practices* of poetry unmoored from the dream of a unified organic form or temporal fulfillment.

Hart Crane, another exemplary poet in Grossman’s archive of poetry’s “difficult” knowledge, inverts this dynamic of poetic divinity at the end of “To Brooklyn Bridge,” in which the poet “lend[s] a myth to God” (Crane 44). This is an image of Jacob’s ladder as a suspension bridge.¹³ Such a gesture, as Norman Finkelstein points out, leads to Crane’s “extreme orphic desire for cosmic unity” and produces a notion of poetic identity “more purely *sacrificial* than that of any other American poet” (*Mount Vision* 23). But rather than reading entirely with the grain of critics such as Grossman and Finkelstein—whose writings stress the difficult, sacrificial, and ultimately mystical knowledge of the sacred endowed by poetry’s singular role of regulating the human image—I shall highlight more pervasive (and more fraught) links between poetry and religion in postwar America

¹³ John Shoptaw, e-mail message to author, October 13, 2013.

through pragmatist-derived conceptions of immanent process. Such conceptions of process affirm the living values of creativity and emergence rather than the poet's melancholic desire for beatific reunion with the Beloved, fusion with the sacred, and the strenuous achievement of immortality. These living options for vocation foster a "tacit dimension" of poetry, in which the constructive dynamic between affective responsiveness and effective action is not hamstrung by such desires for monumentality (see Polanyi 2009). In turn, a more positive, even rigorous, articulation of a pluralistic mysticism—to paraphrase a late essay by William James—emanates from such radically immanent senses of poetry as process. As an inventive state of abiding in relation to oneself and society, vocation thus understood does not aim to achieve the poetic beyond (or a transcendent placeholder), but engages the interstitial aspects of personal and social life that have come to be understood as radically time-bound (both limited *by* and always going further *into* time).¹⁴

Vocation offers a phenomenological and hermeneutic dynamic of call and response, which is likewise rooted in the romantic religious and aesthetic philosophies, from Johann Gottlieb Fichte to Martin Heidegger to Giorgio Agamben.¹⁵ Jean-Louis Chrétien engages this tradition by yoking the two senses of the verb "to call"—as an act of naming and as an appeal to which one can respond—to apprehend an ontotheological "convocation" that submits one to endless vulnerability, thus exposing her to eternity. Although expressed in the language of neo-Platonism and Catholic mysticism, Chrétien's

¹⁴ In *Dying for Time* (2012), Martin Hägglund develops a concept of *chronolibido* wherein "both the subject *and* the object of desire are from the beginning temporal" (3). As he writes, the "co-implication of *chronophobia* [fear of losing temporal being] and *chronophilia* [attachment to temporal being]" make *chronolibido* a key theoretical concept for rethinking vocation as a process without an end, i.e. poetic immortality (9). In other words, "Poetry engages the desire for a mortal life that can always be lost" (2).

¹⁵ See Fichte (1987), Heidegger (2008) and (2001), and Agamben (2002).

depiction of a perpetually inchoate call resembles Grossman's appeal to the difficult knowledge of poetry. This renders poetic knowledge in terms of a calling's general failure, and its elliptical possibility for redemption:

What is involved is not one particular call as opposed to others, but the call par excellence that convokes us to our final destiny. The response we give to this provocation on beauty's part, if it is constituted by love, brings into play the totality of our being and becoming. Our task is not to give an answer that would in some sense erase the final provocation by corresponding to it, but to offer ourselves up as such in response, without assigning in advance any limit to the gift. Our gazes, our thoughts, our words and our songs, granted that they all contribute to this response, fail to fulfill the task, which is measureless. Art responds to the provocation only by redirecting it further [...] (*Call* 13)

Seeing Chrétien's pair of vocational totalities and raising him an additional pair, Grossman parses poetic vocation into a "quadrature of stations or callings": the call of/to (1) *poetry*, which "...calls to us from above, the 'outside.' We feel it, everybody feels it always calling...it is an affliction...the calling or vocation commits the person to the logic of the founding stories of poetic practice—the Orpheus story and the Philomela story"; (2) *poets*, who "call back to, or invoke, poetry from the beneath, or they "go up" (this is the *response* of the poet to poetry's call); (3) *poems*, which "point to poetry" in a horizontal, indexical manner, insisting upon "saying that poetry is *something like this, but not this*"; and (4) *readers*, who are "ourselves, the final callers and summoners and also the destination of the calling" ("The Calling" 221). These stations form a circular process, a kind of macro-hermeneutic circle for poetry's affective and ethical life. By way of interrogating the final stage of his model, Grossman offers an ethical justification for these callings as the foundational process of establishing the world of human persons and safeguarding such a world from vanishing:

But why should we call to poetry or to the poets whom poetry has called...why should we reply? Let us say (preliminarily) it is because 'poetry' (like all

representations whatsoever) intends to bring the world to mind, and *finally* intends to bring the Mind to mind, like the face which makes all faces recognizable—the smile which dignifies and explains and regulates the world of persons. (“The Calling” 221, my emphasis)

That “finally” is a curious move, indeed. For, as Grossman argues, poetic vocation comprises a double bind involving (a) the overcoming of paradoxes inherent in the desire for poetic representation (immortalization of the human through the preservation of its mortal image) and (b) the repetition of the violence inherent to overcoming these original paradoxes. And as universalizing as they sound or strive to be, the historical context of Grossman’s particular critical drama is postwar liberal thought. In particular, Grossman follows the lead of political theorist George Kateb, whose essays contemplate the possibility of human extinction while living on after the Holocaust and Hiroshima. Writing poetry in this “post-nuclear” context, and amid the rapid institutional professionalization (i.e. routinization, banalization, trivialization, alienation) of poetic craft, such disabling thoughts of humanity’s disappearance seems for many a concrete possibility.

But there are significant shifts in poetic orientation during this period, one of which is a turn from secular humanism’s spiritual desire for poetic immortality to the worldly “ambition and survival” of poets (as poet Christian Wiman frames it) who nonetheless perpetuate strange and complex variations of artistic religiosity.¹⁶ While Grossman and many likeminded humanists have lamented the loss or waning of modernism’s ideal of craftsmanship, and its poetics of totality (or union), the roads taken

¹⁶ Christian Wiman describes “poetry as process” in *Becoming a Poet* (2007) in a register similar to Burke’s “equipment for living”; that is, “art for the sake of life rather than vice versa” asserts a pragmatic value for poetic practice, insofar as such practices reanimate living forms of religiosity rather than refer poetic devotion to something wholly transcendent and outside of the sphere of living (76).

after Stevens and his ilk have led to an increasing functional specification of religious and poetic discourse with regards to the trope of vocation. Rather than attempt to recuperate a lost visionary role of poets, the poetics of process I outline reveals such functional specification to be neither an omen signifying the need to renew our sense of cosmic reverence for an unforeseeable All, nor an ironic and solipsistic call to be content with one's particular artistic choices as one bids for notoriety and prestige in the glutted marketplace of the unprofitable poetry business. Indeed, poetic vocation's ongoing social differentiation makes apparent how open the poetic field has become since mid-century in its affirmations of multiplicity. The "function" of religiosity in poetic practice in the past half century thus involves more than simply a return of or to whatever had been taken to be sacred.

Post-Secular Poetics and the Open Field

In "The Profession of Poetry and M. Maritain" (1959), art critic Harold Rosenberg analyzes the occupational impasse between secular conceptions of poetic expression and the deep historical affiliations of poetry with forms of religious authority. For Rosenberg as well as many poets of his day, adjudicating this ambivalent situation ultimately boils down to whether poetic "inspiration" is situated within or outside a supernatural frame of reference:

As a 'profession of inspiration,' poetry was thus faced with a hopeless dilemma. If it held to inspiration as a 'gift' from above, it would lag behind the productive organization of society, lack the method of a modern profession and, deprived of the material and spiritual support of the community, be left to pay itself with divine counterfeits. If, on the other hand, it abandoned the powers of the unknown, it would fall from its age-old prestige and have to hire itself out as a petty trade. In either case, it was bound to lose its status as a profession indispensable to the collective consciousness. (*Tradition* 105)

Rosenberg takes issue with the Catholic French philosopher Jacques Maritain, whose *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (1954) attempted to reinvigorate a spirituality of modern artistic practice in the context of individual and societal alienation in postwar life.¹⁷ Rosenberg's critique of Maritain (simply put: poets and critics must not attempt to bring modern poetry's "practical activity" into a "dangerous relation to spirit") strikes a chord with influential accounts of postmodern American poetry and religion that are faithful to a secularization narrative of postwar American culture (96). In the following section, I shall situate my project within critical discussions of modern and contemporary American poetry that, wherever such critiques fall with regard to "spirit" (i.e. for or against contemporary poetry's engagement with, or invocation of, religion and/or spirituality), remain unanimous to a great degree in assuming the respective self-understandings of poetic labor as a material practice or a poet's "soul adventures" to be incommensurate—manifesting, that is, the allegedly "non-overlapping magisteria" of science and religion (see Gould 1999).

For Rosenberg, any reclamation by poets of access to the "collective conscience"—a term he inherits from Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912)—must disengage from the "divine mania" of inherited paradigms

¹⁷ Russell Hittinger notes that Maritain "combined neo-Thomism and French existentialism into an intricate new theory of natural law, natural rights, human dignity, equality, and fraternity, which inspired the Universal Declaration of Human Rights" (*Teachings* xxv). In *Integral Humanism* (1936), Maritain laid the grounds for a "lay-oriented personalism," which grounded modern Christian social thought in the concept of subsidiarity, or a ground-up humanism: "Citing as evidence Mussolini's boast in 1926, 'everything in the State, nothing against the State, nothing outside the State,' Maritain contended that political Christendom is dead and that any practical program guided by nostalgia for a sanctified political authority would only fuel new despotisms and totalitarianisms. In its place, he advanced the idea of a 'new humanism' and a 'new Christendom.' Not by the imposition of political power, but rather, by the sanctification of ordinary life through the leaven of the gospel, the church should aim to reform society from below. The new Christendom should be personalist, pluralist, and peregrinal. The human person is constituted in the borderland of ends that are distinct but never entirely separated" (17).

of poetic inspiration and ally itself with modern science (96). Like scientists, but unlike religious believers, modern poets *must* maintain (for this kind of vocational theory operates in the imperative) that “‘making’ and the penetration of the unknown do not stand in opposition but dynamically advance one another” (112). On the verge of the social revolutions of the 1960s, Rosenberg’s call for a “new synthesis” of poetic practice (a historical process inaugurated by Rosenberg’s canon of modernist pioneers, Poe, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud) subsumes any traces of poetic “mysticism” into newfangled modes of poetic “mechanism.”¹⁸ Rather than “making room” for religious dispositions, practices, or beliefs (or recognizing how they continue to occupy a great deal of social space in the present)—as Maritain’s theistic, quasi-Bergsonian notion of “creative intuition” does (a compelling attempt, I might add, to attune religious orthodoxy to “secular” modes creative experimentation)—Rosenberg claims that all traces of religion in creative poetic production have dissolved to the extent that poetry’s only viable professional prospect—its only fighting chance to “rediscover the creative energies of the whole community”—is through a poetics of immanence through which inspiration remains active only insofar as it is “of” its particular historical moment.

Such an account stresses an irrevocable historical break between religious belief and poetic practice, accelerated by the material conditions of production under industrial capitalism and the historical atrocities of two world wars. Theodor Adorno’s widely cited writings on the ethical stakes of lyric poetry after World War II redound to a similarly oversimplified dialectical materialist account of poetry’s contemporary cultural fate. As Adorno writes in “Theses on Art and Religion” (1945), the “lost unity” of art and religion not only arises from the subjective conditions of modernity (i.e. to what

¹⁸ I adopt these terms from Bergson’s “Frenzy, Mechanism, Mysticism” in *Key Writings* (2002) 329-341.

Weber famously calls the *Entzauberung*, or “disenchantment,” of the world), but also from the “objective social reality” in which religion and art continue to function, however problematically (292). It is strange, however, to note that what Rosenberg and Adorno both aim toward is the reintegration, however damaged or ironically situated, of subjective life into the “collective *conscience*”—the domain that in Durkheim’s account manifests the social ontology of religion. Whether or not the “break” between religion and art ever definitively happened—in subjective life or in objective social conditions—what Rosenberg and Adorno appeal to are certain religious *functions* of art—i.e. performances of affective discipline and ritualized practice, as well as the experience and expression of personal freedom (and all of these minus the ideological trappings of belief in supernatural agents). But such accounts of religion and art in modernity effectively reduce religion to belief or propositional content. This obscures those modes of living that reflect religion’s radical mutability and adaptability to new contexts, characteristics that comprise aspects of any religion as much as (and in tension with) its foundational metaphysical claims for universal meaning or value.

While none of the poets in this study profess anything close to a traditional religious sense of vocation or belief, their peculiar modes of poetic religiosity make evident how the correlation of literary practice and religion in terms of doctrinal content calls for re-examination. In this light, Rosenberg’s objection to Maritain’s attempt to reclaim “art as a virtue of the practical intellect,” and the latter’s attempt to collapse the difference between a spiritual *habitus* grounded upon the normativity of crafts and the inspired possession of “creative intuition,” reflects the extensive pitfalls of theorizing the relationship between religion and postmodern American poetry in which “practice” is

subsumed into “belief,” or vice versa (97). Amy Hungerford’s investigation of this kind of tension in *Postmodern Belief* (2010) theorizes the persistence of religion in postwar American literature by centering on what she calls a pluralistic “belief in meaninglessness,” which equates to living “religiously” without any specific content and thereby “confers religious authority upon the literary in postmodernity” (xv). Through a counterintuitive logic positing that postwar American writers have evacuated religious content by embracing a purified notion of religious formalism, Hungerford argues that it is the “formal practice of belief...as distinct from the specific content of belief” that characterizes religion in postmodern American literature (xix). In other words, literature performs the special function of religious belief, but “in a more minimal and pragmatist sense—belief understood as those things we think are true about the world and the things in it or beyond it” (xv). Yet such a minimalist version of pragmatism with relation to “belief” (tellingly singular and tellingly Christian) recapitulates attempts like Maritain’s to fully harmonize practical and spiritual registers of artistic practice. If, as Hungerford claims, postmodern writers who engage religion attempt to “bridge the gaps between conviction and relativism, between doctrine and pluralism, between belief and meaninglessness,” they do so, as I argue, not as a way to successfully convert material fragmentation and epistemological contingency into “conditions for transcendence,” nor to affectively convert “irony” into “sincerity,” but in order to radically re-coordinate the categories of attraction and resistance that these values have produced, and the ends they have promised to fulfill (xxi). Why one might think it possible, and why one should attempt to seamlessly “bridge the gaps” between religion and literature, does not simply involve belief in literature’s staying power to console and comfort the individual in the

face of uncertainty. It involves, rather, extensive engagement over the course of a poet's career not only with the "attainment of belief" (to cite Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatist idiom), but also an approach to poetic production as the ongoing process of survival. Poetic survival, in this sense, does not merely entail "making room" for thematic content associated with religious belief (against the backdrop of late modern alienation), but of a sustained activity of self-transformation in which living religiously informs both what poems one produces and the spirit in which one practices poetry.

Hungerford's remarkable attempt to synthesize immanent and transcendent registers of postwar American literature into of a minimalist definition of belief echoes in other recent criticism focused specifically on lyric poetry. While not explicitly invoked in her title, a set of religious dispositions are central to Siobhan Phillips's study of the "quotidian poetics" of Frost, Stevens, Bishop, and Merrill. In *The Poetics of the Everyday* (2011), Phillips analyzes the role of repetitive daily processes as a way for twentieth-century poets to complicate, rather than obviate, "concerns about rights and relations of discrete individuals" in postmodernity (3). Phillips compellingly argues that poets who seize upon the routines of the everyday celebrate indeterminacy and thereby convert "the skeptical divide between self and world" in American literature's "mixture of romanticism and pragmatism" (3). Yet the "secular 'amen' to daily sameness" that Phillips claims to be a vindication of convention, tradition, and "creative repetition" seems not only anathema to legions of contemporary poets (who by now are congenitally allergic to the "lyric subject"), but also an inadequate account of how many quite conventional lyric poets conceive of the ongoingness of poetic practice in not-so-purely-secular ways (5). Moreover, to characterize pragmatism's significance to modern

American poetry as simply the persistent idea of “practical efficiency,” or romanticism as simply as the expression of “transcendent selfhood,” oversimplifies those traditions to the point of rendering their interaction illegible outside of an overly quietistic form of secularism in which religion is simply private matter (3). In short, Phillips secularizes the transcendent rather than transcends the secular. The latter movement is, I contend, what has been going on in a great deal of contemporary American poetry, *whatever* the religious or secular means and ends that poets claim for their work (including the work of some of the most quotidian and secular poets writing today). Rather than take at face value the notion that twentieth-century poetry happens under the aegis of secularism’s moral narrative—whereby a poem provides, as Frost puts it, a “momentary stay against confusion”—the formal practice of vocation of later modernist poetries plunges into that confusion. In doing so, these poets reveal that the contemporary functions of religion and poetry are intensively entangled with one another rather than easily parsed out in terms of literary religion’s private, discreet, and manageable terms of belief.

I mentioned the “function” of religion and poetry earlier, and will briefly elaborate the methodological implications of such a term before outlining each chapter of the present study. In *On Mount Vision* (2010), Norman Finkelstein asserts that, “[...] it seems to me even in a predominately secular society such as ours, poetry and the poetic vocation will always, at some level, be at work in the regulation of the sacred” (3). Certainly Finkelstein’s sense of “being religiously numerous” in postmodern American poetry permeates the “heterodox, syncretic, [and] revisionary” senses of religiosity that my readings further examine (7). Yet Finkelstein begs the question of whether the “regulation of the sacred” adequately describes the various functions of religion—

wherever and whenever it may be, and whoever practices it, or something like it. In a posthumously published collections of essays, *A Systems Theory of Religion* (2013), Niklas Luhmann highlights how, in the case of religion, the “functional specification” marking the modern societal division of labor does not enable a solution to the question of religion’s function, but establishes a *differential* understanding of religion based on its contingent options—its “alternativity” or “functional equivalence” (82). Studying these alternative possibilities of religion “makes the question of religion’s function so controversial” (82). Theological, philosophical, sociological, historical, and literary appeals to a fully integrated, non-problematically pluralistic notion of the “sacred” appear to resolve the paradox between religion’s individual and social ontologies. But, as Luhmann argues, any definitional exclusions prompted by the resolution of paradoxes (i.e. religion’s and poetry’s function, or vocation, is *X not Y*) remain present in those resolutions. Luhmann therefore concludes that religion’s functional loss entails more, not fewer, complications in the narrative of secularization: “The thesis of religion’s ‘functional loss’ [in secular modernity] no longer appears to be true or false, but rather too imprecise” (103). The process of vocation does not entail a single regulatory discourse in relation to the sacred, but more precisely locates *and* widely expands our picture of the evolution of whatever might now be considered sacred in the work of contemporary poets. What truth and life the sacred enjoys in these poets’ writings (however minimally or maximally conceived) is always relative to what point in time the reader occupies. On its own, the call asserts nothing.

Process and Poetry

While Miller's *Poets of Reality* offers one starting point for the critical conversation into which this project falls, an anthology of philosophical writings published in the same year as Miller's book, *Philosophers of Process* (1965), directs us to a theoretical archive from which this study has grown. The writings included in *Philosophers of Process* signal a gradual re-emergence of American pragmatism and related philosophies of radical immanence in the second half of the twentieth century. Process-oriented philosophy has made its way into postwar American poetics, despite its general disciplinary exclusion from predominately analytic philosophy departments. The authors included in the volume—Henri Bergson, Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Samuel Alexander, C. Lloyd Morgan, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and Alfred North Whitehead—present multifarious ways of approaching what I have earlier deemed a pragmatic sense of religion that is alive in important strains of postwar American poetics.

What may sound incorrigibly mystical throughout my discussion of process poetics is expressed in a theistic tenor in Charles Hartshorne's introduction to *Philosophers of Process*. As the first exponent of "process theology," Hartshorne announces his metaphysical "contributionism" as a way to affirm the religious and ethical implications of this process-oriented tradition (in which "[p]rocess is creative synthesis, the many into a new one producing a new many—and so on forever"), a position akin to Buddhist concepts such as "dependent origination" as much as it is to Whitehead's notion of Divine creativity (*Philosophers* xviii-xix). But while Hartshorne's universalization of process vis-à-vis Whitehead speculative metaphysics will sound to most contemporary

ears like a muddled jumble of new age theology, many of the strands of process-oriented thought contained in the volume present non-theistic or non-universalizing facets of a pragmatic mysticism. This attitude interlines the poetics of process into which I venture. Similarly, Gilles Deleuze's "transcendental empiricism" offers a turn of phrase and line of thinking that helps to relativize the connections between a poetry of reality and an indeterminate commitment to process—between the vital energies and forms of single poems and the ongoing process of a poet's lifelong work (*Pure Immanence* 11).¹⁹ In order to differentiate the theological and empirical vectors of "process and poetry" I now return briefly to Whitehead's work as a provisional stopping point for this introductory chapter.

In *Process and Reality* (1929), Whitehead offered a speculative intervention into post-Kantian metaphysics that has garnered more and more attention in the field of literary and cultural studies in recent years.²⁰ In the years leading up to *Process and Reality* (his first years in the U.S. as a Harvard professor), Whitehead gave two different series of lectures in Cambridge that were subsequently published as *Science in the Modern World* (1925) and *Religion in the Making* (1926). While the latter is not widely

¹⁹ As John Rajchman writes, Deleuze's philosophy stresses the "always indefinite" nature of a life, for "in contrast to a self, a life is 'impersonal and yet singular,' and so requires a 'wilder' sort of empiricism—a transcendental empiricism" (*Pure Immanence* 8-9). In this sense, the poets I examine throughout face the problem of "how our lives ever acquire the consistency of an enduring self" through the merging of the indefinite nature of "a life" and radical immanence (13). Rajchman further posits: "Immanence and a life thus suppose one another. For immanence is pure only when it is not immanent *to* a prior subject or object, mind or matter, only when, neither innate nor acquired, it is always yet 'in the making'; and 'a life' is a potential or virtually subsisting in just such a purely immanent plane. Unlike *the* life of an individual, *a* life is thus necessarily vague or indefinite, and this indefiniteness is real" (14). Deleuze, in his final essay, renders the same point with an allusion to Fichte's romantic philosophical *topos* of vocation as "pure immanence": "We will say of pure immanence that it is A LIFE, and nothing else...It is to the degree that he goes beyond the aporias of the subject and the object that Johann Fichte, in his last philosophy [*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*], presents the transcendental field as *a life*, no longer dependent on a Being submitted to an Act—it is an absolute immediate consciousness whose very activity no longer refers to a being but is ceaselessly posed in a life" (27).

²⁰ See Stengers (2011), Massumi (2011), and Shaviro (2012).

read or discussed, in it Whitehead theorizes religion as a “transforming agency,” which comports with science’s “transformation of knowledge” and is vital to philosophical reflection, not because it produces static epistemological or cultural entities, but because it generates a set of modalities by which an individual participates in the universe’s creativity (*Religion* 5, vii). Whitehead’s religious constructivism might be seen as a radially interiorized version of the “function” of religion, one that locates religion in the problem of conversion. Whereas Luhmann (*via* Weber, Durkheim, et al.) imputes to religion a fundamentally social function, Whitehead, following William James’s lead, investigates religion as a radically personal phenomenon. Religion, in Whitehead’s sense, is “what the individual does with his own solitariness” (6). This phenomenalization of religion comes into conflict with accounts of religion’s social objectivity as one attempts to ground “religious life” (Durkheim’s *la vie religieuse*). Where such forms of life reside, and how they survive, is a matter of philosophical perspective. As Isabelle Stengers comments, Whitehead’s approach to science and religion alike takes from Kant the idea of “experience as constructive functioning,” yet Whitehead reverses Kant so that “the process he will describe produces subjectivity from objectivity, not vice versa” (*Thinking* 279). Experience (the key term for Emerson’s transitional self and James’s pluralistic mystic) thus emerges as the central term for connecting pragmatist conceptions of process to both art and religion, from James’s *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902) to Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934). And it bears reminding that one traditional word used to express the experience of the, or a, “religious life” is vocation.

Whitehead’s “philosophy of organism” is central to this study beyond its direct

influence on the organicism of Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Robert Duncan, Denise Levertov, and other Black Mountain artists (*Process* 7). Variations of process-oriented thought have critically informed a range of poetries and aesthetic philosophies in America since mid-century. Modern American poetic traditions deriving from poets as unique as Robert Frost and Gertrude Stein thus may be united under what Richard Poirier labels, via James, the “transfiguration of work” (*Poetry & Pragmatism* 79). Transfiguration, of course, in Poirier’s lexicon is a wholly secular operation. But in the postwar era, this pragmatist transfiguration of poetic work as a process shows how formally and ideologically problematic the notion of secularity is. On the one hand, process formally manifests itself not only in ongoing serial-forms such as Duncan’s *Passages* (and the many poetic projects indebted to projective verse), but in various kinds of free-verse formalism. The latter either get short shrift in the competitive industry of conceptual poetry, or written off as formally irrelevant and anemic, too liberal and too bourgeois (just “lineated prose” as Marjorie Perloff writes) to merit critical attention let alone praise (“Oulipo” Web). Likewise, the critical desire to abrogate any ties to poetic organicism after Pound and Olson has factored into the attenuation of critical interest in, if not sheer dismissal of, religiosity in postmodern poetry. In such readings, organicist thought, or process-oriented poetics, are unwittingly symptomatic of pre-existing rhetorical and formal architectures that govern the non-human aspects of language itself.²¹

In a late lecture entitled “Process” (1938), Whitehead writes: “Time and space express the universe as including the essence of transition and the success of achievement. The transition is real, and the achievement is real. The difficulty is for language to express one of them without explaining away the other” (*Modes* 102).

²¹ For a provocative critique of organicism in postwar American poetry, see Blasing (1995) 13-17.

Whitehead thus distills his project to the claim that an “essential relevance between deity and historic process” is in the making (103). Whitehead’s conclusion presents a mysteriously preemptive riposte to secularist agendas for postmodern culture: “It is the religious impulse in the world which transforms the dead facts of science into the living drama of history” (104). The links between poetry and pragmatism, or poetry and religion, in late modernity are chiasmic in structure, but elliptical in their particular effects. The transfiguration of poetic vocation is a two-way street in which form finds its freedom and freedom finds a form. Poetic vocation’s process weaves together the necessities *and* contingencies of linguistic use, spiritual belief, political commitment, and social action into forms of aspiration that resist the overwhelmingly powerful postmodern urge to “explain away,” rhetorically ironize, or simply ignore such aspirations. Throughout this study, then, I address how each poet highlights some facets of the convergences of, and battles between, poetic realism and idealism, and how each poet offers a compelling account of how these two poles of vocational attraction can be combined or counterbalanced.

The result of my approach is a reconfiguration of religious and poetic practice in terms of historical changes in postwar American culture, changes taking place more often and more intensively in metropolitan areas. The poetic tendencies toward cultural pluralism are especially rife with significance in the 1960s, but they endure in conflicted forms in the poetry produced during the last two decades of the twentieth century—the heyday of multiculturalism and identity politics. My dissertation thus reanimates pragmatist thought—and related critical methodologies such as pluralism and constructivism—from a perspective of multiplicity that, as religious studies scholar Tracy

Fessenden notes, “work[s] through” the multifaceted juncture of Protestantism (or pragmatism) and religious pluralism in American culture, rather than simply celebrating or denying the presence of such a juncture (“Objects” 381). Whatever the responses I provoke by my readings—either *more* secular, *more* religious, or *more* complicated understandings of poetic vocation (hint: I hope they will be the latter)—I anticipate that the ensuing conversation will enrich the worn-out binary of “sacred and secular” and our understanding of how poets continue to make a living poetry in the present.

A Brief Look Ahead

My first chapter, “The Sound of Ongoing Life: William Carlos Williams’s Lyric Descent,” juxtaposes the vocational ethos of William Carlos Williams’s late writings, especially *Paterson*, with understandings of a poetic career as something that can be achieved or completed. I focus on how Williams integrates his notion of poetry as a constructive practice of listening into representations of American life. *Paterson*’s polyvocal text highlights the centrally significant ways acoustic and temporal meanings of sound enable Williams to reinvent a spirituality of art in the languages of scientific empiricism and cultural pluralism. By recoding the rhythmic and rhetorical features of Evangelical preaching, and placing such utterances alongside other sounds of American life, Williams troubles the boundary between satire and medley—between exposing the corruption, staging an interruption, and celebrating a new eruption of ethically-minded life in America at mid-century. Looking at how Williams’s prosodic invention, the “variable foot,” coordinates with a lyric ethos of “descent” (in the sense of a genealogy and evolution), I argue that a pragmatic sense of worldmaking in Williams’s late lyrics

opens up a way of reading the end of a poetic career as radically ongoing. Whether the lyrics that emerged from *Paterson* such as “The Descent” stand alone, or must be read along a continuum, the “sound of ongoing life” provides an open-ended attitude toward poetic practice that became increasingly important for younger poets of the postwar period.

“There Are No Final Orders: Robert Duncan’s Conversion to Poetry” explores Duncan’s prolific allusions to, and creative work with, the idea of a vocation, from his early poems written during the late 1940s (part of the “Berkeley Renaissance”) to the ongoing sequences of work collected in *Before the War* (1984) and *In the Dark* (1987). In reading Duncan’s chief works of the 1960s in the context of Duncan’s lifelong vocation, and in the context of contemporaneous intellectual histories of the counterculture such as Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* (1959), I analyze how Duncan’s work takes seriously the concept of a poet’s *forma vivendi*. In particular, I stress that for Duncan the radically syncretic nature of poetry’s “Law” opposes those forms of social anomie to which banal countercultural ideals of negative freedom give rise. Duncan’s multifarious adaptations of religious and romantic idioms, I conclude, interweave the openness of living process with high modernist ideals of aesthetic rigor and formal exactitude. Revisiting key early, middle, and late poems by Duncan, as well as nearly forgotten pieces such as his 1961 essay, “The Poetic Vocation: A Study of St.-John Perse,” the metapoetic drama of recuperating vocation’s simultaneously liberal and radical elements shows Duncan’s idiosyncratic and heretical religious capaciousness to be far from anomalous or exceptional. In fact, the “metamodernist” strain of poetics that Duncan developed over his lifetime is key for understanding how religious modes of

affirming one's life and work "function" in varieties of experimental poetry or art that do not bespeak *prima facie* any particular religious doctrine.

Adrienne Rich, like Duncan, emerged from the Vietnam War with a transformed sense of poetic commitment. Yet her career veered toward the kind of political engagement that Duncan considered incompatible with a poet's true calling. In "The Will to Change... Is Always One Word Short: Adrienne Rich's Formalist Continuum," I remap the arc of Rich's career in terms of her disavowal of those patriarchal norms which underwrite poetic vocation. This disavowal paradoxically constitutes a radical lesbian-feminist and anti-neoliberal counter-vocation. Reading against the grain of critics who conclude that Rich's work progressively embraces weaker and weaker ontological commitments (thus becoming invested, by the end of her career, in a politicization of everything), I trace Rich's engagement with ethical discourse across her career in order to query the notion of vocation's "chosenness." Reflecting on the meaning of diasporic Jewishness, as well as the internal conflicts that second-wave feminism faced with regards to racial and class differences, Rich's poetic "will to change" embodies an alternative take on the idea of vocation that recuperates certain pragmatist-poetic notions of creative becoming despite the tragic inability to have the final word.

In my final chapter, I test the cultural parameters of the process of vocation in "This Root-Bound Unblooming: Yusef Komunyakaa at the Jazz Workshop." Here I examine how Komunyakaa's engagement with the social histories and aesthetic forms of jazz improvisation offers a compelling alternative to cultural nationalism for African-American poetics after the Black Arts era. Komunyakaa's lyric formalism, I claim, mobilizes the anti-commercial ethos of Charles Mingus's "Jazz Workshop," or the after-

hours jam session, and bridges what Eric Porter calls the “art/soul divide” of African-American musical (and I would add, poetic) culture. Focusing on Komunyakaa’s poetic biography of Charlie Parker, “Testimony,” as well as his Vietnam War-inspired poetry, my readings examine how pragmatist notions of embodied consciousness and truth’s emergence in action take shape in poems that are historically and culturally distant from nineteenth-century New England. Indeed, the process of vocation depends upon living improvisations and dislocations, upon knowing *how* to make poetic composition take shape even in the after-hours.

So as the high modernist dream of a poet’s career fulfillment dies down, its transpositions resound at different frequencies and across different thresholds of sacred-secular experience. I hope that such individual experiences, and social processes, of poetic vocation in our late modernity will become vivid to you, the living readers of the following study.

CHAPTER 1

The Sound of Ongoing Life: William Carlos Williams's Lyric Descent

At the end of the day, the poet rests from his labors. When the work of art is complete, he rises from his struggles and steps back with the firm conviction that he has done his best. Surely this is how T.S. Eliot understood his work as a poet when he ended his career after the completion and publication of *Four Quartets* (first as individual poems, then as a four-part sequence).¹ Although Eliot's speaker beckons the reader to ceaseless exploration in the final poem of this final work, "Little Gidding," that call proved to be an all-or-nothing finale for Eliot's poetry. Many readers consider his quartets to be a necessary and sufficient end to a career that remains central in the history of Anglo-American poetic modernism. The "voice of this Calling," as Eliot writes, intimates "A condition of complete simplicity / (Costing not less than everything)" (*Four Quartets* 59). Though Eliot remained active as a critic, playwright, director, and public intellectual after World War II, his work *as a poet* was effectively over. At this moment, Eliot looked back not only to "The Waste Land" but also to the modernist project as a whole, choosing the perfection of his poetic corpus rather than continually practicing poetry as a form of survival. In other words, he fashioned his vocation in terms of a career's "fulfillment." However formative *Four Quartets* has proven to be for younger poets of the postwar generation and beyond (from Dylan Thomas, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath to Seamus Heaney, Geoffrey Hill, Louise Glück, or neo-metaphysical poets of today, such as Christian Wiman), the *form* of Eliot's choice—of poetic culmination,

¹ "Burnt Norton" was first published in Eliot's *Collected Poems: 1905-1935* (1936), "East Coker" in 1940, "The Dry Salvages" in 1941, and "Little Gidding" in 1942. *Four Quartets* was first published in America in 1943 and in England in 1944 (see Gardner 1978).

ascent, and rest—became increasingly unavailable to many poets actively seeking out new idioms for the poetic practice in postwar America. That is, the absolutist metaphysical position inscribed into Eliot's final work failed to address the aesthetic and social urgency of redefining poetry's vocation both in response to one's present historical condition (the postwar reconstruction of society) *and* regardless of personal or historical achievements and catastrophes. In order to reconstruct a poetic lifeworld out of the remains of the immediate past, postwar poets struggled to reconcile the indeterminate nature of a poet's calling with the irrevocability and incomprehensible magnitude of destruction inflicted upon humans by humans during World War II. Amid resounding sentiments of the precariousness of lyric poetry "after Auschwitz," and Hiroshima, poets had to continue their work amid newly emerging social formations of professional life in America at mid-century. For many modernists and their successors, there was no final creative release and certainly no poetic retirement plan.

This situation involves a radical reconstruction of poetic vocation in postwar America, a historical development that, I contend, emerged and continued along lines other than those of Eliot's swan song. Famously antagonistic toward Eliot's poetics and politics, William Carlos Williams dramatized the impracticability of the quite potent idea of the career's form (i.e. the coherent progression and culmination of a unified body of poetic works) for postwar American poets, whose relationship to the norms and ethos of poetic craft had been radically recontextualized by modernist experimentation itself, and by the new institutional parameters of the postwar university, in which poetic practice became ensconced. In late writings such as *Paterson*, a personal epic that Williams continued to work on until his death in 1962, Williams did not attempt to rise above his

accomplishments, but fell more deeply into the time and materials of his practice.² Furthermore, while Eliot appears from our present vantage to be a definitively “religious” poet and Williams a definitively “secular” poet, these seemingly unassailable designations of religious or secular affiliation misapprehend the dynamic transmutations of vocation. This trope of religious conversion also mediates poetic practices of self- and worldmaking in postwar America other than those driven by theistic faith or recognizable religious affirmation. In this chapter, I reconsider characterizations of *Paterson* and Williams’s later works of the 1950s as culminating achievements of a fully secular poetic. I maintain that Williams’s effort to “get back to work”—i.e. to re-define and re-legitimate the practice of poetry in an America that was in the process of reabsorbing five million GIs, all bringing back new expectations of what their share of the American dream could be—amplifies the contingent and anti-closural valences of poetic vocation at mid-century. As Williams understands it, engaging in the practice of poetry is *how* one discovers a living perfection “in the special sense of the poem”: particularly universal, locally dispersed, presently persistent, and resonant across time. In an era of extensive educational reform and vocational training programs, Williams considers the poet’s work against the grain of emerging institutional and professional paradigms of the poetic career. This resistance to the compromising pursuit of social capital within careerist paradigms—among which Eliot’s canonical presence and Ezra Pound’s massively

² In “The Practice,” a late chapter in *The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams* (1951), Williams asserts the mutual reinforcement of his duties as doctor and poet, both of which elude being *called* a name as they operate under “the constant feeling for a meaning, from the unselected nature of the material, just as it comes in over the phone or at the office door” (360). I argue that the satisfactions of being called upon in the process of “everyday work” do not reflect a reductive secularist ideology or ethos in which the satisfaction of identifying with one’s occupation is sufficient. My contention does not imply, however, that Williams aspires to a transcendent, or other-worldly poetic end (that would be a perverse reading). Rather I aim to underscore the fact that Williams understands the “ways of worldmaking” performed in his practices as doctor and poet to be constitutively uncertain, indefinite, and malleable over time—from one patient or poem to the next over the course of a lifelong practice.

influential *The Pisan Cantos* (1948), which won the Library of Congress's Bollingen Prize in 1949, figure prominently—permeates Williams's late work. His deepening attention to poetry's ethical and epistemological resonance evoked a *positive* sense of uncertainty. Such uncertainty developed into a formal practice of lyric "despair." Contrary to what it sounds like, despair operates as the differentiation of various social and cultural modes of hope or aspiration. Despair's poetic ethos is one of radical pluralization, advancing a sense of poetic freedom as a process of becoming more and more of a poet even at the volatile, perhaps even desperate, historical juncture in which Williams wrote his final works.

Key to Williams's resistance is process. The term blooms and buzzes in the collective poetic consciousness of postwar America. In the lexicon of American pragmatist William James, this term mitigates between competing philosophical camps of the nineteenth century: realist and idealist understandings of knowledge and the world.³ If pragmatists consider knowledge something other than the apprehension of immutable entities that comprise the world, then our conceptions of the world must cohere as habits of belief.⁴ Furthermore, the direct influence of pragmatist thought on modernist poetry is no mystery. Many high modernists such as Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and Wallace Stevens studied with the likes of William James, George Santayana, and Josiah Royce at Harvard. But critical assessments of the relationship between such heterogeneous philosophical approaches and such a mixed bag of poetic writings tend to be reflectionist, going something like this: philosophers create new idioms and poets parrot them. In such accounts, pragmatist conceptions of process come to be expressed in modernist poetry by

³ See James, *Pragmatism*, in *Writings: 1902-1910* (1988) 487-504.

⁴ See Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," in *The Essential Peirce, Volume I* (1992) 124-141.

virtue of poetry's "reinstatement" of philosophical precepts, however provisional such precepts may be or claim to be.⁵ Williams's specific engagement with Emerson, James, Dewey, Whitehead, and others undoubtedly inflects many pragmatist values: the processual, localist, organicist, self-reliant, liberal democratic, and typically middle-class dispositions that John Beck excavates in his study of Williams and Dewey's shared progressive cultural politics, *Writing the Radical Center* (2001). As Beck notes, Dewey and Williams share parallel "belief[s] that in transforming the role and structure of philosophy and poetry, by making them responsive to social reality, they will achieve a substantive transformation of that social reality itself" (6). For Williams, the transformation of reality (including the most local reality, i.e. one's own) does not require that singular forms of achievement (e.g. an artifact, a poem) be ultimate. In the following, I address the contradiction this poses to many of Williams's famously pithy claims about poetic form. *Paterson's* version of poetic process, its "on-going activity of self-assertion characterized by contention," develops a radically elastic understanding of lyric subjectivity and temporality that many studies of the correspondence between modernist poetics and pragmatist philosophy foreclose or symptomatize as liberal

⁵ See Richard Poirier's *Robert Frost: The Work of Knowing* (1990) and *Poetry and Pragmatism* (1992). In the latter, Poirier discusses modernism's "reinstatement of the vague," a phrase coined by James which Poirier traces, in his earlier work on Frost, to Frost's pragmatist-derived poetic—"the work of knowing" whose "provocations to poetic 'extravagance'" press some of the most patently formalist verse beyond its linguistic limitations (Poirier 1992, 129-170; 1990, xxiii-xxiv). Along with Jonathan Levin's *The Poetics of Transition* (1999), these influential accounts of poetry and pragmatism claim that poetic language is *pragmatically* expressive by virtue of its semantic pliability, rhetorical vagaries, and epistemic uncertainties. Consequently, in terms of the present argument, a poet's vocation is not simply bound by professional criteria of technique or craft, but comprises a form of life that opens up the interpretive possibilities of meaning beyond any poem's, poet's, or poetry's limited existence. Vocation is gerundial ("the work of 'knowing'"), pro-vocative, and off the beaten track of the professional career. While such accounts as Poirier's and Levin's are rich and illuminating, both veer toward reflectionist, or line-of-influence arguments in which poetic works and philosophical concepts line up neatly (their emphasis on linguistic vagrancy notwithstanding). For them, poetic process indicates an array of indeterminate effects that nonetheless inhere in a poem's achieved form. I wish to reframe these discussions by considering the dynamic and irresolvable conflicts of the voice that a poem works among and relation to without formally reflecting or containing them.

bourgeois ideology (i.e. one can simply choose, or consume, one's "self" through an endless process of exchanging marketable goods) (*Embodiment of Knowledge* x). Poetic or social transformation thus need not require formalism proper to activate or articulate the historical disruption or recombination in which it participates.

Williams's poetry produces its own forms of pragmatism. It does not simply reflect philosophical notions of process, but processes them poetically. This process takes shape in *Paterson* through the insistence on a lyric temporality whose formal *resonance*—its manifold of voices, ambient cultural sounds, rhetorical reverberations, and compositional duration—places the poem in an uncertain relationship to wholeness even if it temporarily reaches, or reaches *for*, moments of formal insight and closure.⁶ This resonance elicits a reading practice distinct from the aforementioned late-modernist opuses such as *Four Quartets* or the *Cantos*. While Eliot and Pound respectively articulated uncertainty as a mystical form of union intimated by poetic statement and re-statement, or amid the trans-historical continuity of great civilizations, *Paterson*'s organizing tropes of listening and musicality make uncertainty a constituent formal element of Williams's American idiom. In this light, modernist works that more evocatively anticipate *Paterson*'s structure and aspirations are those such as Hart Crane's *The Bridge* or James Joyce's *Ulysses*. Like *Paterson*, uncertainty in these works does not simply augur a condition beyond time, but limns the thick musicality of the world inhabited by its figures. By prying apart the resonance of process and the process of resonance in *Paterson*, I seek to illuminate an intellectual framework for better

⁶ In "A Theory of Resonance" (1997), Wai Chee Dimock considers time as a "destabilizing force" (1060). While Dimock's larger claim strikes me as dubious—that "resonance" convincingly offers a paradigm for "diachronic historicism," and that the "hermeneutical horizon of the text" extends indefinitely beyond its own moment—I still claim that a micro-dynamic of resonance, among the densely layered materials of a writer's body of writing, is palpably active in a work like *Paterson* (1061).

understanding certain responses of second-wave modernist poets to the political and aesthetic confrontations between secular democratic ideals and the persistence of spirituality in experimental American poetry. This is not to stake a claim for an underestimated “Williams era” of postwar poetry, for the poets I address in subsequent chapters diverge significantly from Williams’s poetics of American life. But I shall identify certain features of Williams’s abiding engagement with the idea of vocation that enter, even if negatively, into many different contexts and practices in the work of poets to come. The postwar “era” of American poetry—wherever its center of gravity may have been—is full of many different overlapping and intermingling eras, including the specific errands and errors of poetic practice into which poets fall as they pursue whatever they conceive their calling to be.

I first discuss background conceptions of poetic work and poetic works circulating in the modernist milieu with which Williams affiliates, drawing out a contrast between Williams and some of his peers (a contrast also internal to Williams’s poetics), which stems from the contested values of poetic professionalism that modernism leaves unresolved. The ethos of poetic formalism, like the ethos of the career, motivates Williams’s reconfiguration of the boundaries of poetic practice even as the act of creating those boundaries is integral all along to maintaining a workable self-understanding of his practice. One of Williams’s early poems, “The Wanderer,” enacts some of the epistemological concerns of Williams’s later work. My reading of this early forerunner of *Paterson* will also forecast how the discourse of a poet’s “late style” is an inadequate framework for reading Williams’s late works. That is, certain critical versions of late style discourse prevent one from reading a poet’s corpus of writings outside of the

framework of the career. It implies that style, or voice, is something to be achieved rather than something that mediates an ongoing engagement in one's work. The implicit notion of artistic belatedness in discussions of *Paterson* as a culminating work fails to reckon with Williams's epistemology of the present, a disposition that cannot disengage from the present day by entering a visionary realm but maintains its calling even as that calling enters into despair.

Secondly, I consider how *Paterson* and other late works by Williams complicate critical presuppositions of the intellectual affinity of modernist American poets with pragmatist philosophy insofar as these reflectionist arguments entail a tacit secularist ideology. In turn, I posit that the concern with process animating Williams's late poetry resounds in curious ways in a historical context that ushered in new modes of religiosity in postwar America. Williams's sense of poetic work bears upon how we register the visceral, rhetorical, and conceptual dynamics of religious belief in mid-twentieth century America rather than simply marking religion as *fixed* theological or dogmatic content. Williams's critique of religion—his opposition to the prudish and degrading Puritanical residues of the Protestant work ethic in American culture, and to the cultural politics of such theologically oriented poetic masterpieces as Eliot's *Four Quartets*—does not obscure the fact that his poetry traffics in tropes, temporal structures, and registers of musicality that modern American religious sensibilities concurrently re-appraise (to more liberal and more conservative extremes). The relative uses of a term like “faith”—or “work” or “process”—in conjunction with Williams's poetry must thus imagine a more complex sense of how some avowedly secular strains of literary modernism disclose strange correspondences of habit between the reshaping of religious sensibilities and

American poetic innovation after World War II.

Williams's late writings reconstruct the expressive notion of vocation within an ecological paradigm, what Benjamin Sankey describes as the "sound of ongoing life" (*Companion* 76). Giorgio Agamben calls this dimension one of "musico-acoustical" emergence ("Vocation and Voice" 90).⁷ I might add that this sense of emergence is in *Paterson* also epistemological and ontogenetic. Thus a continuum of resonance links the notion of falling into one's work with the provisional sites of embodied knowledge that such a process enables. Rather than recapitulating the Unitarian faith of his childhood (i.e. an abiding fidelity in the authority of one's personal experience of spiritual realities) or revealing a proto-poststructuralist sense of linguistic immanence (poetic form's coextension with its present reality), Williams develops a poetics of descent, diffusion, and resonance. Poetic form functions pragmatically in Williams's later writings, but however important formal integrity is to Williams, it does not reflect what might be understood as a pragmatist "ideal" of the provisional. Williams's attempts to re-vitalize poetic vocation emerge in different ways and for different ends—as a site of local adaptation, an instrument of amplification, a sounding board from which the voices of American lives might resonate. These various poetic means and ends do often come to an end. But I put this end aside for now, as I turn again to the contextual openings of

⁷ Agamben's discussion in of the term *Stimmung* in Heidegger and Hölderlin contemplates the etymological complexity of this term, which originally denotes the voice (*Stimme*) but has since conveyed something like a "mood" or "state of mind." Although translator Jeff Fort comments that *Stimmung* does not translate directly into "vocation" (*Bestimmung*), Agamben's appraisal of "the place of *Stimmung*" as "neither within interiority nor *in* the world, but *at* their limit" is useful in describing the dynamics of poetic locality and vocality at work in *Paterson* ("Vocation and Voice" 91). While I do not engage in the kind of deeply metaphysical reading of "vocation" that Agamben undertakes, his reading of Hölderlin's "phenomenology of the poetizing spirit" gestures toward a necessary distanciation between what we traditionally consider "the poetics of an author" (a program, a project, a career) and a dimension of poetic practice "which does not belong properly to the lived experience and is not simply language" (96-97). But the "purity" that Hölderlin (and also Agamben) attributes to this dimension—the intermediary or liminal *locus* of poetic process—is not my main concern throughout this study, but rather vocation's specific historical declension in Williams's work and American poetry after World War II.

Williams's career.

Modernist Works, Modernist Careers

The semiotic form of the career is a trajectory, a stable track moving from a point of departure to a destination. In its stability or inflexibility this trajectory designates certain conceptual and practical limitations of a poet's practice. A career "in its English origins meant a road for carriages, and as eventually applied to labor meant a lifelong channel for one's economic pursuits" (Sennett 9). Where, when, and how a poet's work begins and ends delimit the ethos of poetic formalism. According to this logic, poetic works form a whole as a contained set or autonomous body of work—a poetic corpus—that a community of writers and readers legitimizes and incorporates into a literary tradition.⁸ The formal integrity of individual works implicated in the conception of the poetic career legitimizes itself in the modernist discourse of professionalism. Louis Menand notes that Pound and Eliot's version of literary modernism's work ethic valorizes the figure of the professional, one who can "keep his personal feelings out of it [his work]; and his identification with his institution is what gives him his absolute superiority over the most gifted amateur" (*Discovering* 104). In other words, Eliot thinks it is necessary to reconcile the ethos of professionalism with the ideal of poetry's "ancient

⁸ In "Practicing Poetry: A Career Without a Job" (2007), Aisla Craig postulates four "facets" of a poetic career's social legitimation (facets that are "not temporally exclusive"): "career entry, establishment, maintenance, and projection" (43). While these facets of the poetic career are always indefinite, "since posthumous success is always a hope and possibility, even if remote," they are nonetheless sufficient for Craig as a theoretical model of poetic career-construction (43). My focus on vocation's opposition to the career takes into account the social dynamics of these facets, but I reconsider the self-making and aspirational processes of vocation that, as I claim, are decidedly *not* "too subjective" but integral to understanding the complex functions highlighted in Craig's sociology of the poetic career—i.e. poetry's "struggle for legitimacy," "creation of collective cultural capital," and the "appreciative communion" of its intersubjective success (52).

vocation” in the claim of formalism (99).⁹ The worldly ideals of a professional model of poetic formalism depend on the idea of poetry’s trans-historical stability—that poetic work manifests certain pre-capitalist and pre-industrial values of craftsmanship that “appear to have derived from the culture of some other, more venerable social formation” (132). Eliot’s formalist appeal to tradition’s continuity, as well as the specialized niche it created for literary innovation within an emergent professional class, thus entails a necessary isolation of the poet’s work (within “the autonomous sphere of its activity”) and a limited conception of the ontology of poetic works (unique and autonomous products of said activity). At the same time, this isolated sense of integrity ironically constitutes the socialization of the professional artist, for the supposedly pre-capitalist form of work that the professional artist undertakes is valued as a high-status activity in late capitalism. Or so the story goes: poetry’s calling functions as an institutionally sanctioned profession performed within the modern system of professions.

With the rise of literary professionalism over the nineteenth century, a modern poet’s career comes to be seen as highly specialized, self-regulated, self-sufficient, and complete. Yet this professional ethos of the poetic career is only one (undoubtedly successful) way in which the poet’s work came to be understood by the mid-twentieth century. Another conception of poetic practice traces its roots to Romanticism’s various appeals to an organic process by which a poet’s life and works develop in an ongoing dialectical process. Accordingly, individual poems and books of poems constitute parts

⁹ Menand explicates how the modernist literary professional’s strategy results in high formalism: “to isolate one feature of an activity that is most likely to require full-time attention, to make that feature the chief criterion of whether the activity is done well or not, and then to argue that every previous worker has historically taken the isolated characteristic to be the most important one as well. For the artist, this is the argument of formalism, and it is why formalism can be understood as a reflection of worldly values precisely by virtue of its effort to establish art as an autonomous sphere of activity” (*Discovering* 129).

of an organic whole that emerges over the course of one's life. Wordsworth's *The Prelude* is the prototype for this conception of a poet's career as an ongoing composition. This process is audible at the opening of *Paterson*, Book II, in a conversation recalled by the eponymous poet-protagonist:

I asked him, What do you do?

*He smiled patiently, The typical American question.
In Europe they would ask, What are you doing? Or,
What are you doing now?*

*What do I do? I listen to the water falling. (No
sound of it here but with the wind!) This is my entire
occupation. (P 46)*

The dialogue implies than a homegrown American conception of an occupation conflates one's work with one's identity. By abbreviating the full form of this typical American question—"What do you do *for a living*?"—Williams opens up an ambiguity in the typical question's implicit careerist logic: job title and job description. Curiously, however, *Paterson* gives a different answer than what Williams actually did for a living: medicine. "*What do I do?*" thus causes the sudden shock and discomfort of self-relation and self-definition built into the structure of the career. Yet the poet's response to this question is unexpected and radically inappropriate to the vocational logic of the middle stanza in which the process of vocation sounds distinctly foreign to the poet's self-understanding: "In Europe they would ask, What are you *doing*? Or / What are you doing *now*?" The poet's question to himself becomes a query of self-definition. It is also a self-invocation—a calling of oneself to action. What do I do *now*? So what *does* *Paterson* do? He listens. But the poet's listening is transitive, mediated by the preposition "to." The poet listens *to* the water, *to* the waterfall, and *to* the waterfall's

sound *with* the wind. Paterson does not immediately register the water on his senses but its resonance. The Passaic Falls, *Paterson*'s central geographical and figurative location of ongoing flux, pervades the poet's ongoing life and the life going on all around him. The falling water's sound emerges into poetic consciousness vis-à-vis the rather formless and unpredictable force of the wind. The image calls to mind how Williams's project of poetic self-definition unfolds like the act of listening, or any embodied experience that demands constant attention to modulation over time. How does such an image of poetic practice revise, or re-voice, the poetic form of the career?

We can begin to discern the particular re-voicings of poetic vocation in *Paterson* by first returning to some quintessential modernist formulations of the opposition between contained and open poetic forms. William Butler Yeats memorialized the formal "choice" that befell modernist poets in his famous lines:

The intellect of man is forced to choose
perfection of the life, or of the work [...] (Yeats 246)

Likewise, in the final couplet of Archibald MacLeish's poem, "Ars Poetica," the putatively resolvable formal conflict crystallized in two short lines serves as a touchstone for modernist poetic dicta:

A poem should not mean
But be. (Ramazani, et al. 515-516)¹⁰

As in Williams's maxim, "no ideas but in things," MacLeish's seemingly effortless brevity exemplifies and promotes the kind of close reading that New Critical approaches effectively institutionalized in the American academy from the 1930s on. It also

¹⁰ MacLeish later "charged the great modernist writers of his generation, centrally Eliot and Pound, with weakening the moral fiber of their readers and leaving them prey to fascism," indicating a turn in the arc of MacLeish's career to the public role of poetry so often forgotten when invoking this famous modernist sound bite (quoted in Ramazani, et al. 515).

espouses a kind of close writing. That is, MacLeish's lines embody, in their being—i.e. one rhythmically jagged, prosaic, didactic, and moralizing line corrected by a gem of percussive insight—the resolution to its own creative conflict. Both the rhythm and the logic of the words on the page *do* what the words say and *are* what they mean. Writing in the idiom of an Imagist verbal economy, Pound fashions this as a simple equation: “Dichten = condensare” (*ABC* 36). To make a poem or poetize (“dichten”) is to condense multiple domains of experience, to charge language with its highest possible meaning. With his eye always on Pound, much of Williams's early poetry reflects the influence of this lyricized conception of poetic form (and thus the poet's work). This is a conventional, oversimplified, reading of Williams's poetics: of autonomous poetic construction upon which so much—even life itself—depends. As a redefinition of Romantic organicism, Albert Gelpi writes, modernist poetic form is “autotelic” (an end in itself), and at one point Williams himself condenses this idea of poetic form to its barest logic: “the end of poetry is a poem” (*Coherent Splendor* 334).

But by the end of his career, particularly in *Paterson*, Williams moved past this definition of poetry even as he subsumed the “radiant gist” of lyric compression into the current of his late writings. *Paterson* moves poetry past the goal of self-reflexive definition, for the end of *Paterson* is a poetic practice that moves past the formal and imaginative boundaries it constructs. The response to Romantic poetics in modernism was anything but definite, as attested by the poetic loose ends abounding in the postwar period. The Imagist assumption of lyric's airtight linguistic space, and its concomitant demands of rigorous close reading, implies that the spatiotemporal dimensions of poetic form necessarily ground poetry's value in its difficulty (“figuring out” the poem).

Where, when, how, and to what degree a poem, or poetry, goes on disappears into the modernist ideal of form, and as such is contained within the arc of the career. An article in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 1918 by Arthur Clutton-Brock, “Professionalism in Art,” attacks such a professionalist emphasis. Clutton-Brock claims that “[t]he value of the Romantic movement lay, not in its escape to the wonders of the past, but in its escape from professionalism and all its self-imposed and easy difficulties” (quoted in Menand 2007, 123). *Paterson* stages this kind of return, or escape, to the irresolvable issues of poetic continuation in order that poetry might not mean, but breathe. Articulated by the forms of living processes, Williams not only naturalizes the poet’s vocation, but inter-articulates his way of worldmaking with the incessant conflicts brought about by transformations in American cultural attitudes toward knowledge and belief. Indeed, the mutability of what is going on in the poet’s world makes it difficult to figure out what is going on in the poem at any one moment, or in the poem as a whole. The roar of *Paterson*’s multiple voices produces difficulty at the level aesthetic or cultural dissonance even as it strains to mitigate that dissonance by channeling such conflicting voices into forms of consonance or resonance. Whatever the poem is or means, *Paterson*’s logical, affective, and musical dynamics disturb the pre-formed habits of reading or writing poetry that the abovementioned modernist conceptions of poetic professionalism uphold.

A Pragmatic Vocation

“...[T]he purpose of art IS to be useful” asserts Williams in “The Basis of Faith in Art” (1937), an essay that stages an imagined debate between Williams and his brother Edgar, an architect, about the problems of construction and utility that their respective

occupations face and about how both practices can be united in attempting to advance the modern conditions of human life (*SE* 179). This claim imposes itself throughout Williams's literary practice: imaginative, innovative writing is a fundamental and irrevocable component of human thought and action, of the human history, culture, and knowledge it produces. The poet Williams, moreover, claims to his architect brother that "[w]ithout faith in humanity...there's no faith in art" (*SE* 184). The logic of this claim echoes a common assumption concerning modern secularity. With the discrediting or demystification of all transcendent sources of authority, human action and self-knowledge are sufficient for reconstructing the values upon which human life flourishes. Nonetheless, a common rejoinder to the secularist remains embedded within Williams's language. In tracking down "the origins of the poet's aspirations," Williams invokes the language of "what might be called his [the poet's] soul" (*SE* 186). While his relatively unprincipled language neither demonstratively nor suggestively affirms a spirituality of art, Williams conjoins practical and spiritual idioms as a way to confound the deleterious functionalism that would render poetry useless. Along the way, the language of the poet's individual aspirations intermingles with other kinds of cultural reform, including religious reform. Rather than as a confession of belief, faith figures as a response to the modern specialization of labor that prevents the innovative desires of artists from flourishing.

While the assertion of Williams cited above is fairly clear and self-assured, many of his statements on poetics are multifarious, complex, contradictory, unsystematic, and decidedly non-utilitarian. Before asserting art's utility, Williams guardedly quips that the "uselessness of it [art] might constitute its principle use, sometimes" (*SE* 179, my

emphasis). Critics have stressed the merging of art and utility that Williams promoted, but in doing so have presented a relatively unified Williams (often by exaggerating one aspect of Williams's work). Such unifying impulses often oversimplify the pluralist and constructivist experiments (decidedly uncertain) involved in his work.¹¹ For Williams, what the life of a poet means, requires, and enables certainly incorporates trends of thought and feeling associated with pragmatist thought. Yet the more or less pragmatist values of Williams's verse alter significantly depending on where in Williams's œuvre one reads, and also how one reads. The problem of pluralism evoked by Paterson is not the "point" of the poem—its final cumulative blast, or its inevitable aporia. Pluralism's ethos, put simply, is its *modus vivendi*. In other words, Paterson answers the question of what a poet does by continually amplifying, rather than resolving, its resonant capacities.

Whatever characterizes his faith in art, it is not a closet spirituality or religion of art. For Williams's commitment to poetic language's redemptive capacities fluidly and desultorily arrays the sound—or in-formation—of things, words, environments, moods, and even *ideas* into a textual practice that refrains from positing a still point of union.

"No ideas but in things" does *not* mean, as many have noted, no ideas at all. Ideas—even

¹¹ Many engagements with pluralism and constructivism in Williams's work inform my readings. Mikkelsen's *Pastoral, Pragmatism, and Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2011) discusses Paterson's recuperation of the pastoral as a pragmatic mode of social progressivism. Wendell Berry's *The Poetry of William Carlos Williams of Rutherford* (2011) characterizes Williams's poetry as providing rich examples of the work and value of culture's local adaptations. Copestake's *The Ethics of William Carlos Williams's Poetry* (2010) argues that Williams persistently articulates throughout his life an ethics of poetry grounded upon Unitarian understandings of individualism and faith. In *Listening on All Sides* (2007), Deming characterizes Williams, along with Wallace Stevens, as a poet who expresses the mythological valences of the everyday, and is thus proponent of a literary ethos of pluralistic listening. Michael Magee's *Emancipating Pragmatism* (2004) cites Williams as a key figure uniting the improvisational threads of Emersonian-derived poetics with the experimentalism of twentieth-century American jazz. John Beck's *Writing the Radical Center* (2001) presents a rigorous analysis of Williams and Dewey in terms of their shared liberal ideals of political and social progressivism, and how Williams's art exemplifies the aspirations and limitations of a democratic poetics. Stephen Fredman's *The Grounding of American Poetry* (1993) places Williams among various idiosyncratic reinventions of tradition by modern American poets, all of which seek a grounded rootlessness to unite the ostensibly antagonistic aims of Eliot and Williams.

those of spirit or transcendence—can and must be radically associated with, not dissociated from, things. “In” in this phrase does not denote a thing’s self-containment, but its vibrant power as a locus of association and invention. It is crucial to reiterate here that while Williams consistently vociferates against the pieties of America’s Puritan ancestors (their “tight tied littleness,” parsimonious morality, and blindness to contingency), poetic or cultural religiosity is a much more complex and vexed affair (*LAG* 110). *Paterson* makes this evident by continuing the rhetorical destabilization of religion as a cultural institution. At the same time, this destabilization sounds out alternative possibilities for mobilizing religious symbols, figures, motifs, postures, idioms, and ideas against the grain of their inherited institutional logics. Poetic gestures of spiritual devotion and despair intersect or collide with protests against institutionalized forms of religion in *Paterson*, thus implicating the reader in a convoluted engagement with forms of “lived religion” that are often simultaneously digressive or differentially progressive (i.e. a multidirectional sense of progress). Thus *Paterson*’s treatment of religious belief goes with and against the grain of secular religious pluralism (i.e. neutrality toward any one given faith over another). As the poem oscillates among the myriad orders of voices and levels of history of a particular city—Paterson, New Jersey—the problem of an individual life’s spatiotemporal containment comes to produce greater significance and more intensified confusion as these ideas continuously resurface in the poem.

Paterson addresses the problem of predication writ large. To be “secular,” or to be “religious,” or even to avow a “secular spirituality,” makes very little sense in the worlds that Williams represents. If a poet’s vocation is to remain viable, one must reconsider the various ways of life (including those predicated on the religious life) that

may be of use and put them to use somehow, no matter how perverse or tenuous the process of adjustment, alteration, and negotiation remains. The opening inscription of the preface to *Paterson*, Book I sounds out the rhythm and logic of a pluralism that will not be subsumed into a unity by simply subtracting certain elements of the whole. Reading the sequence aloud, one hears how the variety of frameworks cannot be arranged into any hierarchy of sequence, as the rhythmic modulation of the poem's initial hyperactively indeterminate blueprint intensifies:

*: a local pride; spring, summer, fall and the sea; a confession; a
basket; a column; a reply to Greek and Latin with the bare hands;
a gathering up; a celebration;
in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction
to one; daring; a fall; the clouds resolved into a sandy sluice; an
enforced pause;
hard put to it; an identification and a plan for action
to supplant a plan for action; a taking up of slack; a dispersal and
a metamorphosis. (P 2)*

The colon propels this list of poetic projects and perspectives past that illegible point or origin. This opening mark also implies that the following passage is a definition of “Paterson,” a definition unfurling itself with metamorphosis as its projective end. At its earliest stage, *Paterson* is a poem in the making. The onrush of tangential and possibly conflicting frameworks coheres as a heterogeneous mixture of rhythmic shapes and conceptual paradigms connected (and partially separated) by semicolons. These phrases reflect poetic “ways of worldmaking,” a phrase Nelson Goodman uses to propose a constructivist epistemology of art. From an analytic perspective, Goodman modifies early pragmatist notions like Charles Sanders Peirce’s “fixation of belief” and other interpretations of epistemological process that stress the relative fixity of achieved truths. As Goodman argues, “knowing is as much remaking as reporting” and the various

processes of worldmaking that we use are sometimes incommensurable or in conflict with one another, while at other times these different processes complement each other and fortify the “advancement of understanding” (*Ways* 22). Goodman describes his approach as a “radical relativism under rigorous restraints,” or something “akin to irrealism” (x).¹² In terms of *Paterson*’s initial plan of construction, the material, intellectual, and spiritual forms of vocation pronounced in the preamble to the poem, at the mouth of the Passaic Falls, present intensely fluid versions of worlds that do not refer to a singular unified reality or world. Worlds, like cities or the lives that inhabit those cities, come into being in the poem “by multiplication,” so that even the “one” to which these versions are reduced appears to be only one version among a multitude of versions. “Ironically,” Goodman writes, “our passion for *one* world is satisfied, at different times and for different purposes, in *many* different ways” (20). Rather than “struggling with the noise of language around him,” as Ian D. Copestake argues, *Paterson*’s opening invocation, like the Passaic Falls, amplifies this noise, forcing language to flow through, roiling, converging, dispersing, and continuing to shape the poet’s listening practice (*Ethics* 103). Williams’s vocation, like *Paterson*’s, thus is not an “attempt to reconstruct a perception of ‘wholeness’ or holiness, through terms that echo the religious,” but, even before Book One’s initial lines, present a movement involving more and more intense interactions and transactions between ostensibly conflicting religious, artistic, economic, and scientific idioms (*Ethics* 107). *Paterson*’s faith in art thus generates itself

¹² Goodman’s coinage is not to be confused with the Irrealist artistic movement, which scrutinizes the difficulty or impossibility of concretely representing reality. Goodman’s term captures how our versions of the real comprise what we believe to be reality and not vice versa (reality is the basis for all our versions of it). “No ideas but in things”: things like poems convey the mutual dependence of things and ideas, the ways in which words and things resonate rather than refer, come into being together rather than simply reflect an abstract foundation.

differentially.

As both a “gathering” and a “dispersal,” a “celebration” and a “metamorphosis,” *Paterson* does not produce a poetics of pure manifestation—of realizing a plurality of forms in some unified synthesis of movements (however open-ended)—but one of sonorous “evocation” akin to what Jean-Luc Nancy describes in *Listening* (2006) as what is confronted both “as time and as meaning” (20).¹³ Disappointed with the “partial victory” of previous poetic success (upon which the poet’s “whole life” hangs, or depends, like the famous career of those images: the red wheelbarrow, the white chickens), Williams commands himself and the reader to “Music it for yourself” (*P* 29). “Music,” like “faith,” has been converted into, and functions as, a verb in Williams’s pluralistic universe. *Paterson* recovers the etymological sources of “music” in the Latin *musicare*, “to set to music” (*OED* “music, v.”). The acoustic and the spiritual emerge over the course of *Paterson* to repeatedly “lead the mind away” from the fixation of belief, even a provisional belief in the world’s lack of fixity (*P* 96). As the new measure of *Paterson* relativizes its own predicates, its practice of remaking the particular world it imagines calls attention to how Williams’s sense of *living* poetry—an indeterminate range of actions, behaviors, and relations, not a capaciously synchronic thing—elaborates a peculiar epistemology of the present through which contemporary modes of writing and reading of poetry may thrive.

¹³ Nancy ascribes to listening the “logic of evocation” over and against the “logic of manifestation”—a logic by which Williams rewrites the secular logic of the modernist career (20). However, the success of this evocational logic is difficult to gauge. Unlike the recognizable success of a career, vocation’s success depends on *contributing to* ends rather than *instantiating* such a final end.

“I Know Now”: Williams’s Epistemology of the Present

Like the career, the temporal arc of a vocation (whether a religious, poetic, or professional calling) begins at some point: a moment of conversion, inspiration, or realization of purpose. The voice of God addresses Saul on the road to Damascus, a beginning that, as the Christianized Paul lives out his evangelical mission, organizes the work of conversion he performs and the determinate ends that he seeks. Poetic vocation entails a similar narrative, in which the creative source of one’s mission—whether by divine *fiat*, mystic experience, the voice of the Muse, or the natural and cultural condition of one’s particular locale and history—orients one’s practice toward a certain end. Yet such a narrative, strong as it is in legitimating the practice of a vocation, tends to avoid the problems that persist between conceiving vocation as a poetic theory and activating vocation as a poetic practice. This conflation of vocation as theory and as practice is at the root of the work of poet and theorist Allen Grossman, whose magisterial, yet deliberately gendered, prognosis of the fate of poetic vocation in the wake of twentieth-century modernism is unavoidable. Grossman writes:

...the term or figuration [of poetic vocation] available at any historical moment by which the ‘above’ and the ‘outside’ is named (e.g., ‘god,’ ‘nature,’ ‘monarchy,’ ‘rights,’ ‘wealth,’ ‘immortality’) will be already written by the civilization of the moment within the language of the constitution of the person in the vernacular of one or (more likely) several institutions. (“The Calling” 222)

No matter how numerous or conflicting, first callings are “already written by the civilization of the moment” in which a poet’s practice comes to be. And the singular end of any poetic calling, according to Grossman, is always the manifestation of presence, “the constitution of the person” by which poetry memorializes the fugacious image of human life. In the authoritatively titled essay, “The Calling of Poetry: The Constitution

of Poetic Vocation, the Recognition of the Maker in the Twentieth Century, and the Work of the Poet in Our Time,” as elsewhere in his many writings on this literary *topos*, Grossman’s overarching thesis is that poets write poems to preserve the human image “against our vanishing” (*Sighted Singer* 1). On many counts, Williams aligns his work with a like-minded project. His poetry—early, middle, and late—addresses human subjects whose presence the poem brings to life. But the difference between Grossman’s conception of a poetic work, post-Romantic in a strong sense of the term, and Williams’s evolving sense of vocation lies in the temporality of their respective conceptions of poetic practice. For Grossman, vocation is always “residual,” always available and “already written” by the cultural milieu(x) in which a poet lives. Thus institutions are the ground in which the vernacular is constituted. Williams, on the other hand, conceives of vocation in a more dispersed, circumambient, and “ecological” sense.¹⁴ The poet’s life and work, like other forms of life and work, involve a mutual reorganization of self and society, organism and environment, or personal identity and cultural practices. George Herbert Mead, Dewey’s student and colleague, emphasizes this mutuality in his lectures on the “philosophy of the present” (i.e. the simultaneously irrevocable and revocable nature of the past in the historical emergence of the present). Mead identifies a philosophical problem that Williams formally engages: “We speak of life and consciousness as emergents but our rationalistic natures will never be satisfied until we have conceived a universe within which they arise inevitably out of that which preceded

¹⁴ I use “ecological” here not in the conventional sense of “nature poetry” per se, i.e. a poetry concerned with preserving the purity of the “natural” in aesthetics and social advocacy. Rather, the sense of “ecological” I use throughout emphasizes the term’s epistemological dynamics and is informed by theorists of perception such as James J. Gibson’s work on ecological psychology (e.g. his theory of “affordances”) or, much more recently, literary studies like Timothy Morton’s work on “ecology without nature” and the role of ambience in aesthetic theories of the environment. See Gibson (1977) and (1979), and Morton (2007) and (2010).

them” (*Present* 43). The problem in *Paterson* of rendering vocation’s determination congruent with the emergence of new vocational forms finds expression in an epistemological concern with how the poetic present resounds in time.

I will return to *Paterson* shortly, but first I visit Williams’s early poem, “The Wanderer,” in order to throw into relief the limitations of the discourse of “late style” in attempting to reconstruct Williams’s poetic career. In *Poets of Reality* (1965), J. Hillis Miller reads *Paterson* in a similar vein as Grossman’s version of vocation. It is a narrative reflecting the hold of modernist careerism on the field of literary studies: a narrative of originary pretexts, the growth and culmination of a poet’s works, and the canonization of said works for posterity. At first glance, this narrative seems unavoidable, as Williams himself at various points in his writing heeded such a framework. In accounting for the beginning of Williams’s poetic development, Miller cites one of Williams’s earliest poems written before 1909, a long personal epic influenced by Keats’s “Endymion.” As Miller writes, “the poem remained unfinished, a potentially endless series of episodes, never accomplishing the leap between homelessness and home” (*Poets* 287). Then, around the age of twenty, Williams recognized in his work as a poet an “inner security,” described in a letter to Marianne Moore in the language of religious experience. As Williams writes, it was “a sudden resignation to existence, a despair—if you wish to call it that, but a despair which made everything a unit and at the same time a part of myself. I suppose it might be called a sort of nameless religious experience. I resigned, I gave up” (quoted in Miller 287). Miller’s subsequent readings of Williams’s poetic works—loosely chronological and emphatically cumulative—asserts that this “resignation” propelled Williams “beyond

Romanticism” and that his turn away from Romanticism’s division of subject-object distinctions precipitates his poetic maturation. Miller claims that Williams fully realized his career in “a region of copresence in which anywhere is everywhere, and all times are one time,” and likewise fashions “a self beyond personality, a self coextensive with the universe” (288, 291). In effect, this account of *Paterson* and other late poems construes the culmination of Williams’s career in the same language that *Four Quartets* fulfilled, and thus ended, Eliot’s career. Furthermore, the “copresence” of self and universe sounds much more like Eliot’s Augustinian sense of time and eternity (cf. the opening lines of “Burnt Norton”) than *Paterson*’s contrapuntal vacillations between aperture and closure. This is not all there is to say about *Paterson*, nor is does this sense of union hold true for the work Williams produced at the earliest stages of his “resignation” to the world in which he led his poetic life. This boils down to what the perpetual present of Williams’s poetry means and how it functions in Williams’s work. Refining our understanding of this temporal aspect of Williams’s work forces us to rethink more broadly the presuppositions concerning an artist’s stylistic development, and to approach *Paterson*’s pragmatic vocation in terms of a rigorously relativist epistemology of the present.

Various critics read “The Wanderer,” written in 1913 and first published in 1914, as an early moment or pre-text of the life-long project that *Paterson* retrospectively became. The poem invokes two vocational frameworks—one rooted in Romantic tropes of inspiration such as the Muse, and another appealing to the structure of a religious conversion and initiation. While these two symbolic sources both entail a forward progression—a rebirth into a new artistic/spiritual life (within the same biological life)—

the poem orients its drama with a backwards glance at an elusive primal moment poetic vocation. Thus the poem's dramatic discoveries, and the source of its epistemological tension, emerge vis-à-vis retrospection. Williams articulates his incipient vocation by deploying Romantic conceptions of recollected experience, and yet he distantiates his emerging sense of poetic purpose from such Romantic figures. Unlike *Paterson's* vigilant open-endedness, "The Wanderer" distinguishes a present poetic self from past models of poetic selfhood by celebrating a sense of closure, and thus of poetic knowledge, that renders vocation a done deal. Tinctured as it is with Romantic conceptions of inspiration, "The Wanderer" both stresses the allure of formal containment and reveals some of the impediments that such conceptions of poetic resolution present to the process of making vital interactions with the world.

In the first section of the poem, "Advent," the speaker discovers that his new knowledge of a poetic calling forms a chiasmic relationship to the muse's revelation and the wanderer's conversion, which is as reminiscent of Jesus' theophanic manifestation to the Magi as it is of Joyce's secularized sense of an artistic "epiphany":

Even in the time when as yet
I had no certain knowledge of her
She sprang from the nest, a young crow,
Whose first flight circled the forest.
I know now how then she showed me
Her mind, reaching our to the horizon,
She close above the tree tops. (*SP* 3)

The second sentence pivots on "how"—on how knowledge of a poetic calling is discovered by juxtaposing the present immediacy of the speaker's "now" with the mediation of the muse's "then." Despite the logical and musical equipoise between present and past actions, as well as the even, step-by-step rhythm of each monosyllabic

word, the present takes priority. The subject's syntactical priority underwrites the poem's predominately retrospective account of the poet's coming into knowledge of his calling. The privilege of the present punctuates key moments of poetic insight, whether narrated in the present or past: "'I am given,' cried I, 'now I know it! / I know now all my time is foreshadowed!'" (SP 4); "It was then she struck...And instantly down the mists of my eyes / There came crowds walking" (SP 5); or "I am at peace again, old queen, I listen clearer now" (SP 7). This pattern culminates in the poem's final section, "Saint James Grove," wherein the ebb and flow of the poem's different temporal currents draw to a standstill: "And I knew all!—it became me." Certainly a moment like the latter strikes a deep Emersonian chord. But Williams's understanding of his own calling would become much more than the present epiphany that he knew *then*. These words resound in *Paterson*, Book Five, but re-present the reminiscence along with a satiric aside: "I knew all (or enough) / it became me" (P 229). *Enough* knowledge, not *all* knowledge, frames the work of the poet of *Paterson*.

The retrospective logic of the "The Wanderer" tacitly intimates the modification of the past by the present and future. In the opening clause, knowledge of the muse is not yet certain. In an early version of the poem, the first lines read, "Even in the time when still I / Had no certain version of her" (CP I 27). Williams's revision extracts the "I" from the first line, a reordering that creates a temporal situation in which both the poet's self and the muse's genesis remain suspended. For as the initial clause temporally *depends* upon the main actor and action of the first sentence—the female muse/bird (Williams's English grandmother, Emily Dickenson Wellcome) who "sprang from the nest"—it semantically *concedes* ("even" here being akin to "although," "even though,"

“even when,” etc.) that the main action took place long before the poem, or poet, came into being. At the level of ontology, the muse exists prior to the act of poetic creation. Epistemologically, however, the muse proceeds from the first line’s projection of “the time when as yet”—a situation in which the poet’s mission has not been realized. Notably, the first line complicates what would normally be a simple one- or two-word conjunction (i.e. “when...” or “even when...”) so that the entire first line functions as an extended, multi-layered conjunction. What follows “when” in the first line is not an actor or action but a further temporal deflection of knowledge and action (“as yet”) that compels the reader forward to the spring of action/knowledge—the encircling flight of the muse. This kind of wandering syntax promises objects of knowledge that are discovered to entail further promises and wanderings.

“The Wanderer” circuitously imagines non-present knowledge—revelations of past (retrospective) and future (deferred) realities—as tethered (circling around, converging upon, and radiating from) and thus subordinated to the present. The poet appears to be immersed in the present (literally so in the final baptismal scene of “St. James’ Grove”). James Breslin, along with many others, reads the “The Wanderer” as a poem whose awakening discloses the perdurable significance of the present. The muse, as Breslin writes, “humbles and awakens him [the poet] by forcing him to concentrate on the immediate rather than the remote” (*Artist* 21). It is the “‘filthy’ but generative reality of the here and now” upon which the poem, and the poet’s vocation, comes to be firmly rooted. Yet this conception of the present, indeed the material reality in which it is rooted, changes during Williams’s time. The poet’s vocational present—the clarity or stasis achieved by realization of what the muse mandates from the poet—carries its

message into the future upon the forces of historical and geographical contingency, as the poet acknowledges: “my voice was a seed in the wind” (*SP* 9). Present moments, moments of inspiration, although seeming to reveal knowledge of the entire arc of one’s life (e.g. “Behold / Yourself old!” the muse refrains in “Soothsay”), filter out into an unknowable world of ordinary obligations and uninspired labor (*SP* 9-10). As the visionary, quasi-religious, ecstatic imagination comes out of its reverie, the dynamics of a different form of vocation begin to emerge.

In the poem’s final section, “St. James’s Grove,” Williams enmeshes the image of a religious vocation with his quotidian poet of the here and now:

...For I knew the novitiate was ended
The ecstasy was over, the life begun.
In my woolen shirt and pale-blue neck tie
My grandmother gave me, there I went
With the old queen right past the houses
Of my friends down the hill to the river
As on any usual day, any errand. (*SP* 10)

To a certain degree, the poet has secularized the national and cosmic resonance of the Puritan “errand into the wilderness.” The “errand” no longer evokes the sublime wilderness of an uncharted, unnamed continent into which the poet is called to wander, but “The Passaic, that filthy river,” into which the poet enters and which enters his heart (*SP* 11). Rather than inhabiting the city on the hill, the poet descends that hill to enter into the muck of the river below. Despite this secular, or at least de-sacralizing *topos*, the form of the final scene adheres to narratives of a convert’s baptism and the ordination of a new clergy member. The poem’s vocational register thereby incorporates the performance of religious rituals in order to recognize its own moments of conversion as a kind of calling to a new life. The muse performs the ritual and the poet is overtaken by

an experience of transcendence:

Then she, leaping up with a fierce cry:
“Enter, youth, into this bulk!
Enter, river, into this young man!”
Then the river began to enter my heart,
Eddying back cool and limpid
Into the crystal beginning of its days. (*SP* 11)

A “baptism in filth,” yes, but at this moment of initiation the present moment of filth is washed away so wholly that the “crystal beginning of its [the river’s] days” is revealed, and time has been “washed finally under” (*SP* 11-12). The poet’s conversion, as the poem comes to recognize it in its final moment, seems to be complete—“And so the last of me was taken” (*SP* 12). Nothing remains of the former self of the poet, whose vocation here in this scene is irrevocable.

If “The Wanderer” begins in silence, at a time when the poet had no certain knowledge of his vocation (for he had no self-consciousness at all), the poem returns to, or at least pushes toward, silence at the end. The aperture from which the voice flows receives the demand of closure, as the muse exhorts the poet: “Be mostly silent!” (*SP* 12). Yet the poet’s vow of silence, unlike a monk’s vow of silence, is “mostly” complete—only insofar as it attends to the next poem, the next breaking out of silence. The awkward adverb “mostly” suggests that the poet’s vocation is a way of being, a habit of perfected silence. Always be the *most* silent. As the poet approaches this silence, a final moment of retrospective aspiration catapults the addressee toward a future horizon:

Live, river, live in luxuriance
Remembering this our son,
In remembrance of me and my sorrow
And of the new wandering! (*SP* 12)

Ending the poem is the poet’s errand, but this form of vocational closure is by necessity

consigned to further aperture. This new wandering resembles older forms of wandering—the poetic rites of initiation, conversion, resignation, and/or commitment that preoccupy Williams in different ways at different points of his writing life. Rather than deeming this poem the definitive beginning of *Paterson*, which according to the cumulative logic of poetic achievement comes into fruition in Williams's later works, I venture that "The Wanderer" generates a poetic purpose for Williams to the extent that it repurposes the religious form of a "novitiate" in order to usefully set aside the idea of a poetic career. The life of the river, like the poet's life, re-circulates itself in particular utterances, in the poetic present tense or tension that mediates any self-conception of poetic work. The command to "live" in remembrance translates the vocabulary of religious sacrament into a dramatization of poetic vocation's indeterminate capacity to resonate at different periods of one's lifetime and across inter-poetic silences.

In the coda of his study of Williams, Miller suggests that over time (and especially at the end of his life) Williams expresses increasing desire for a poetry of "continual flowering," a poetry to overcome the despair that follows the creation of new works and that outlasts individual experiences of beauty. At the moment of their efflorescence, these moments of beauty wither and die by form's closural imperatives. Thus the need for a poetry of imperishable blooming. "Just such a poetry," Miller writes, "is developed at the end of the poet's [Williams's] life" (355). At this point in the essay, Miller's language veers into encomiastic reverie. Williams's late poetry is a "triumphant reconciliation" in which "each line or phrase...gathers the elements [form, ground, beauty] into inextricable union. Rising and sinking are not sequential but simultaneous...In these [*Paterson*, Book Five, "The Desert Music," "Asphodel, That

Greeny Flower”] Williams reaches the summit of his art” (355). And later: “The poem [“Asphodel”] is speech in defiance of death...The poem flowers from it and yet contains it” (357). Miller formulations put Williams’s late style in direct contrast to the negative conception of artistic belatedness explored by Edward Said. For Said, artistic lateness involves “intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction,” producing works that “tamper irrevocably with the possibility of closure” (*Late Style* 7).¹⁵ Williams’s note on the process of writing Book Five intimates that he conceived his poetic works as wholly in time, in an emergent present:

After *Paterson*, *Four* ten years have elapsed. In that period I have come to understand not only that many changes have occurred in me and the world, but I have been forced to recognize that there can be no end to such a story I have envisioned with the terms which I had laid down for myself. I had to take the world of *Paterson* into a new dimension if I wanted to give it imaginative validity. Yet I wanted to keep it whole, as it is to me. As I mulled the thing over in my mind the composition began to assume a form which you see in the present poem, keeping, I fondly hope, a unity directly continuous with the *Paterson* of *Pat. 1 to 4*. Let’s hope I have succeeded in doing so. (*P xv*)

These comments expose the critical exaggerations of Miller’s (a poetry of “continual flowering”) and Said’s (a poetry of “unresolved contradiction”) conceptions of late style to the felt impracticality of stylistic wholeness. Wholeness, according to Williams, is the greatest possibility and limitation of vocation; it is never total in his self-understanding of poetic work (“as it is to me”). Still, brokenness is also not absolute in Williams’s poetry, early or late. Although “The Wanderer” manifests recognizably “lyric” features of

¹⁵ Writing on Adorno’s evaluation of Beethoven’s late compositions, Said claims, “Late style is *in*, but oddly *apart* from the present. Only certain artists and thinkers care enough about their *métier* to believe that it too ages and must face death with failing senses and memory...late style does not admit definitive cadences of death; instead, death appears in a refracted mode, as irony” (24). As I argue, however, Williams’s late works neither achieve the transcendent mastery that Miller’s reading proposes, nor ironically refract the present as Said suggests. Both accounts present exaggerated versions of a process that *Paterson*, like other late works by Williams, continues to work through without a definitively achieved style. That is, style is always at work in Williams’s late poetry, but considering it as stylistically “late” misapprehends the temporality of Williams epistemological practice.

lineation, prosody, diction, and figuration seized upon by Williams at the brink of his career, the poem's final command to "live" in the luxuriance of the present (i.e. in remembrance and anticipation) openly resounds from the initiation of the poem and throughout each newly wandering syntactical order. By stressing the relative values of wholeness and brokenness in Williams's epistemology of the present—a mutual reorganization between poet and poems in the context of an ongoing life of poetry—I do not want to simply register some of the poetic effects of Williams's rhetoric of the middle ground (the "imaginative validity" of his continuous pursuit of "new wandering," poised between remembrance and anticipation, wholeness and brokenness). For beyond this middle ground is a more radical sense of formal, psychological, or spiritual continuity, a continuum of aesthetic practices in Williams's late works that fosters resistance to rhetorical consolidation. One can read *Paterson* and other late poems as culminating works, but at this point, my hope is to have argued that this is not a necessary consequence of Williams's life work. As I turn to specific instances and general patterns of *Paterson*'s critique of the standard of lifetime achievement, I hope to illustrate how Williams construes an indeterminate relationship between individual art works and a lifetime of work. For example, Book Two of *Paterson* amplifies the voice of the preacher and his sermonistic rhetoric within the poem's prism of epistemic pluralism. The preacher Klaus Ehrens is one of many figures of polyphonic discovery that come into contact and interact with one another in the acoustic ecology of *Paterson*. Getting back to work, as I have earlier phrased it, does not require a suppression of a devotional affects, but reroutes and revitalizes those affects according to the shifting contexts that the poem incorporates.

Paterson's *Soundscape*

Williams's aim to integrate his life and work via the acoustic imagination manifests a composite (polyvocal), temporally constant (a musical drone), and locally/historically contingent framework for his late poetics. The voice of the Passaic emblemizes Williams's struggle to coordinate his poetic ambition within modernity's secular political and cultural institutions. The quasi-animistic "laral" quality (from *lares*, the local guardian deities of a given location in ancient Rome) of the Passaic's voice allows Williams to engage the difficult negotiations between poetic faith and the poetry of reality without succumbing to either one of two extremes: absolute idealism or dogmatic empiricism. In his "metablastic" account of poetic modernism and inspiration, Jed Rasula highlights what he considers a conceptual revolution in the lyric voice brought about by, and mediated through, voice-activated technologies.¹⁶ The modern lyric voice, Rasula writes, emerges as a "shadow mouth" or "voice-over" from the "mutter of matter" or the vocal "subtext" of the lyric text. Thus the voice is marked by a "tangle of striations, ideological stress marks, in which psychology and politics, sociology and aesthetics, are indiscriminately mingled in the leavening clutch of language" (7). In terms of *Paterson's* various voice-overs, the falls not only comprises the central figure of vocation's ecological dynamics, but is cumulatively organized and modified by the poem's various sub-textual and paratextual features: the figures, settings, images, voices, rhythms, and timbres that coalesce in *Paterson* and yet at the same time pull the poem

¹⁶ In *Modernism and Poetic Inspiration* (2009) Rasula's writes of poetry as a "voice-activated technology," or an "ecological survival technique" (98). While this account betrays a cultural politics that delimits a strict materialist and sociological understanding of poetic inspiration (and thus a secularist poetic ideology), his claims about the symbolic avenues through which poetic inspiration has been historically channeled in modernity—claims informed by a "perspective of metablastics or the science of change"—provocatively reframe the mutable applications of poetry's self-conceived visionary role (98).

apart. Before I look at some key instances of these vocal dynamics, just a few more words on what I mean by *Paterson*'s "soundscape."

The term soundscape comes from the work of music and sound theorist R. Murray Schafer, who describes the historical formation of "acoustic ecologies" and postulates an "interdiscipline" of acoustic design in which "musicians, acousticians, psychologists, sociologists, and others would study the world soundscape together in order to make intelligent recommendations for its improvement" (*Soundscape* 4).¹⁷ Schafer's analysis of different natural, rural, and urban soundscapes shows how, in both empirical and symbolic senses, the sound of ongoing life changes according to new sound technologies and the particular sound (or noise) of any technology. For Williams, the central sound technology of poetry is vocalized language. In pursuit of giving voice to and redeeming the American idiom, *Paterson* convokes personal, local, and national identities (the poet, the city and people of Paterson, and America all being irredeemably dialectical entities in *Paterson*) as they resound in time. The rhythms of day-to-day practices (the doctor's daily visits, the poet's continual listening, the sundry worldmaking habits and behaviors that form and reform themselves in time) do not end with the close of the day, but resonate across time to repeat, modulate, *and* disrupt those diurnal rhythms.¹⁸ In this

¹⁷ Schafer opens his book with lines from Whitman's "Song of Myself"—a telling reference to the logic of evocation rather than manifestation:

Now I will do nothing but listen. . .
I hear all sounds running together, combined,
fused or following,
Sounds of the city and sounds out of the city, sounds
of the day and night. . . (3)

¹⁸ Embodied listening permeates the rituals and techniques that constitute the affective life of various religious callings. The prologue of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, a foundational medieval vocational text, first calls the initiate to "incline the ear of the heart" (*inclina aurem cordis*) to heed the call of God's order (*Rule* 2). This trope extends far beyond the cloistered cells of medieval Christian monastic orders. Sound's powerfully dispersive means of reviving and reshaping religious subjectivities can be found in a spectrum

sense, the “acoustemological” subject of *Paterson* is nothing less than the lyric subject dispersed into its ecological context as part agent and part object of this particular world’s resonant life.

As the poet listens to the sound of the falls, two registers of sonority come together—the ecological and the spiritual. The ear internalizes the sounds of life going on in the world by echoing its vibrations. Even without any recognizable content or any discernable message, the experience of heeding an acoustic call precipitates an affective response within the whole sensorium. Listening is somatically inflected through the listener’s totality of pre-articulate response, hence the poet Paterson is

Caught (in mind)
beside the water he looks down, listens!
But discovers, still, no syllable in the confused
uproar: missing the sense (though he tries)
untaught but listening, shakes with the intensity
of his listening . (P 82)

Listening is an irresistibly intense, un-specialized, full-body experience. The call of the falls not only expresses the water’s sound upon the wind, but registers on the living flesh of the poet, the ear drum and the musical and spiritual apparatus of the entire body as it lives in time. The same kind of dynamic also abides in Dr. Williams’s other listening practice—the doctor’s auscultation, or measuring by listening to the heart rhythms, breath sounds, and the particular acoustic presence of a patient’s bodily systems.¹⁹ As the poet/doctor resonates with the sound of his listening ear, the call of an external body

of practices such as local tribal rites and song cycles, Buddhist recitation, Gregorian chant, the homophonic and heterophonic textures of devotional music, or in a more contemporary context the cassette sermon in contemporary Islamic piety movements. Most relevant to my current discussion, however, is the “sound” of the Evangelical preacher. See Smith, ed. (2004) and Schmidt (2002). Cataloguing the various global and trans-historical contexts of sound’s embodied imagination of the sacred is far too vast a project here. I simply wish to underscore how the dynamics of acoustic resonance and embodied listening are thematically and formally essential to understanding *Paterson*’s sense of poetic vocation.

¹⁹ Thanks to John Shoptaw for calling this aspect of Williams’s practice to mind.

becomes internalized and is circulated again by the doctor's prognoses.

Vocation in *Paterson* signifies anything but a singular noun (a singular possession, a given talent, a perfected craft), but evokes different habits of being that prove to be transformative. It sustains the resonant field of *Paterson's* soundscape, from which intra-poetic silences break open:

—and the imagination soars, as a voice
beckons, a thunderous voice, endless
—as sleep: the voice
that has ineluctably called them—
that unmoving roar! (*P* 55)

The “ineluctable modality of the visible” that mediates the daily experiences of Leopold Bloom modulates here into the ubiquitous modality of the audible (*Ulysses* 37).

Immersed in the soundscape of Garret Mountain Park, the poet's voice is a signal amidst the noise of voices in *Paterson*: “—his voice, one among many (unheard) / moving under all” (*P* 55). As the speaker's voice mingles with the voices of the parkgoers, the roar of the falls provides a poetic bass line—a shaping set of undertones that anchors the continuous flux of melodic lines. The falls sound like “the voice in his voice,” fueling the mind with articulate knowledge beyond the poet's own ken: “kindling his mind (more / than his mind will kindle)” (*P* 56). The poet depends upon the material medium of the falls, the vocational substance from which a particular voice, the voice of this particular version of the world, generates creative energy out of the kindling of recollected pasts and unrealized futures.

While the Passaic's roar continuously reverberates in *Paterson*, Book Two, *Paterson* the poet does not simply serve as a passive medium for the circumambient materials of the song. On the level of sheer phenomenal force, the multiple sounds

circulating in the poet's physical and cultural environments express nothing, neither individually nor as a whole. In the midst of this inarticulate soundscape, the poet's ear "strains to catch" an articulate voice:

Voices!
multiple and inarticulate . . . voices
clattering loudly to the sun, to
the clouds. Voices!
assaulting the air gaily from all sides.
—among which the ear strains to catch
the movement of one voice among the rest
—a reed-like voice
of peculiar accent. (*P* 54)

Paterson, the poet, actively listens. He “strains” toward, but never attains, the final “catch.” Perceiving and ordering the ensemble of vocal rhythms comprises the poet’s practice, but these acoustic perceptions and imaginative orderings meet abrupt and violent distortions, diffusions, and/or repetitions with significant difference. The “reed-like voice / of peculiar accent” lures the poet’s ear toward a sense of vocation by which that single voice’s call recedes into “the rest” of the voices, the incessant aural medium that often terminates (and articulates) these lines.

Echoing Whitman's locution, Richard Deming describes this as the ethical art of "listening on all sides."²⁰ The poet's ethical disposition, like his aural field, extends in three hundred and sixty degrees. Among a geographical and cultural field of voices,

²⁰ Invoking Stanley Cavell's idiom of "living one's skepticism," Deming theorizes modernism as "a stance, a worldview, that brings together skepticism and commitment to finding a way of going on, of continuing with a kind of attentiveness, a responsiveness, that might call one again and again to the world as it is" (*All Sides* 5). While I agree that *one* of American poetic modernism's legacies is that of dynamic attention and responsiveness, what "the world as it is" *is* (what the *modernist* sees, or hears, it *as*) is necessarily multiple, in flux, and thus resistant to, in addition to being partially resonant with, an Emersonian-pragmatic paradigm. Williams's resonant religiosity of sound throws into question the notion of "the world as it is" by destabilizing a presumed balance between skepticism and commitment. A temporality emerges that is not absolutely presentist (i.e. an idealization of the present) but *radically* provisional (in more vulnerable ways than a conventional pragmatist ideology will concede).

though, the emergence of particular poetic “idioms” (from the same root as “idiosyncrasies”) is not foreclosed. Pluralistic generosity cannot prevent a certain tonal weight from forming and inflecting itself with a particular force. The cross-pressures of multivocality pulsate between the openness of the poet’s “strain” and the “rest”—or closure—of the catch. The voice “among the rest,” among all other voices comprising a whole (or the voice inhabiting a musical silence), moves by way of multiple inflections impinging on it at once. Williams thus bends the voices of particular figures whose moral circles overlap, but do not coincide, with his own in order to modulate them into *Paterson*’s onward course. *Paterson*’s voice-work deviates from a unified trajectory, but the individual voices that interrupt and disarticulate the roar of the falls do not undo the work of the poet’s listening practice. *Paterson* charts the jarring rhythms of reciprocal alterity in postwar America, with particular attention given to economic and religious massification. The vocal assemblages of the poem in turn make evident how collective reciprocity, or the “social contact” of Williams’s poetry, is exceedingly difficult to represent as a discrete poetic or political entity. The constituencies charted in *Paterson* exceed the fixity of belief in any poetic project or disposition, as the poet, the city, and the nation do not voice themselves in a euphoniously secular key. *Paterson*’s resonance, like *Paterson*’s residents, is impossible to contain within the seemingly democratic capaciousness of the secular modern.

Protestant Voicing, Protesting Sound

Typically Williams’s readers are not surprised by his thoroughgoing hostility toward religious institutions, hostility leveled primarily against the historical

sedimentation and persisting presence of New England Puritanism. *In the American Grain* (1925) bristles with such hostility, yet Williams channels his animus toward critical insights rather than out-and-out polemic. Brian Bremen argues that Williams's attitude toward American history valorizes both mimetic and expressive violence—both “the violent energy of both slaughterer and slaughtered,” forces by which new worlds are wrested from the old (*Diagnostics* 6). Williams's understanding of America's cultural history thus castigates the dogmatic fixity and moral tightfistedness of Puritan culture for continually repressing (even as it perpetuates and thrives upon) its violent core. In this light, *In the American Grain* foreshadows some of the mimetic and expressive violence that *Paterson* not only inhabits as a compositional principle, but attempts to transfigure in the process. By rhetorically wresting the voice of Puritan-Protestant religiosity from its colonial past and doctrinal contexts, *Paterson* recuperates the performative forcefulness of the sermon's aesthetics. The emphatically personal style of the Evangelical sermon serves Williams's purposes, even though the sermon's belief content remains what Williams considers to be religion's incurable affliction—its blindness to contingency. Williams's satiric treatment of religious figures strangely invokes the musicality of the preacher's art both with and against the grain of liberal American culture. This voicing of Protestant sound is part of Williams's poetic struggle to maintain an affective openness in concert with his pluralizing ethos. If religion has come “to be the damning name of a deep normativity in liberal culture,” it is damning because it exposes the liberal to his or her *pieties*, to which the principles of reason and tolerance are central (“Liberalism” 611). Williams reactivates religiosity via the sound and sensuousness of the Protestant preacher and thus challenges us to rethink modernism's affiliation with popular religious cultures

and to re-evaluate the political determinacy or indeterminacy such associations in the postwar era.

As Williams writes, Book Two presents the “modern replicas” of Paterson’s “elemental character,” the latter being the subject of Book One (*P* xiv). Books Three and Four respectively endeavor to “make them [the modern replicas] vocal” and reminisce upon these figures of Paterson’s resonant history (*P* xiv). In one sense, the trajectory of the poem follows a linear narrative progression, from the first elements and principles of the city’s life to “all that one man may achieve in a lifetime” (*P* xiv). The plan of the poem outlines the arc of lifetime fulfillment that, as I have been contending, *Paterson*’s reconfiguration of poetic vocation renders unsatisfactory. Yet as the current work leaves behind previous works, elements of the poet’s subject ricochet in time and the poet is forced to listen to these resounding forms of the past. The same goes for *Paterson*’s treatment of the city of Paterson, which is alive in the social, political, and physical present. The dynamic of resonance thus poses difficulties to faithfully rendering all sides of the American conversation—between self and world, poet and city, or figure and ground. These voices do not synthesize into a democratic consensus of poetic meaning, for the panorama of contemporary American life in Book Two delineates the perspectivalism of its historical conditions rather than resolves such conditions.

One of the main voices of *Paterson* Book Two is Klaus Ehrens, an Evangelical preacher who is the pitiful object of the poet’s ridicule. Part II provides both a description of the scene of his preaching and a poetic transcription of his life story. Along with other beleaguered histories of becoming—e.g. Paterson’s provenance as an industrial mill town, and the creation of the Federal Reserve by Alexander Hamilton in

the early nineteenth century—Ehrens’s spiritual narrative provides an example of how Paterson decries the deleterious restrictions of knowledge and individual freedom by American religious and economic institutions alike. The section opens with reference to the emergence of a “massive church,” which as the poet reflects is the only thing that mediates between “those poor souls” (both economically and spiritually “poor”) and “the eternal stony, ungrateful and uncompromising dirt they lived by...” (*P* 62). The satirized Evangelical scene unfolds “near the urinals” of Lambert Tower. Worship and waste inhabit the same semantic space: to control or guide the moral lives of the congregation and to stop the flow of waste both representing forms of blockage that the poem seeks to undo. The makeshift benches prevent the children from “running off”—escape being aligned here with environmental contamination and defilement, a veritable seepage of free will (*P* 63). Religious devotion represents a dull, virtually anesthetized, pain and sordid confinement, as the children’s “buttocks ache on the slats of the sodden / benches” (*P* 64). Sauntering around Garrett Mountain Park, the poet chances upon Ehrens preaching to an assembly of the “poor souls” assembled before him:

Jumping up and down in his ecstasy he beams
into the empty blue, eastward, over the parapet
toward the city

[...] —calling with his back
to the paltry congregation, calling the winds;
a voice calling, calling (*P* 64)

Williams’s typographical elongations of silence evoke the deadening stillness produced by preacher’s voice falling upon the untuned ears of the congregation. The scene, as the poet or the congregation sees it, is one of vacuous religiosity: “One sees him first. Few listen” (*P* 65). All are present, and many can see, but few are actually—actively—

listening. This line's rhetorical creation of prestige and its attenuated rhythm emulate the gestures of such gospel passages as: "Many are called, but few are chosen," or "Having eyes do you not see, and having ears do you not hear?"²¹ The poet shares in the difficulty of listening *immediately*, for the apparition of Ehrens's visage always precedes, and often precludes, the sound and message of his voice. Description anticipates expression. But the described phenomena overwhelm one's attention. Williams echoes this logic, but also inverts it. The poet refines it. Seeing—or hearing, or understanding—is already filtered, and thus vexed, by an ideology of Protestant Christianity's pre-formed, thoughtless acceptance of personal testimony's revelation of truth. In an attempt to characterize the preacher, to "figure him out," the poet rhetorically muses, "What kind of priest / is this?" to which he later responds:

This is a Protestant! protesting—as
Though the world were his own . (P 65)

Here the perils of solipsism and pleonasm mark a shuttling between the epistemological dangers of considering the world "one's own"—a philosophical and moral correlative of Ehren's fairly conventional version of the prosperity gospel—and the poet's own risk of equating name and predicate ("Protestant" and "to protest") into a stable identity. With his back to the "paltry congregation," Ehrens's exhortations recede from his particular situation as his words become part of the environment's incessant, intransitive drone: "calling, calling." A more robust domain of calling, the Falls, submerges this figure's call, yet the two are not opposed to each other, nor is the preacher entirely displaced from his setting, even if he is divorced from his congregation's ability to hear, let alone respond.

²¹ Matthew 22:14; Mark 8:18.

Ehrens opens his sermon with a confession to his congregation, and the poem adopts a similar logic of testimony, framed in blank verse:

This is what the preacher said: Don't think
about me. Call me a stupid old man, that's
right. Yes, call me an old bore who talks until
he is hoarse when nobody wants to listen. That's
the truth. I'm an old fool and I know it. (*P* 66)

As soon as the preacher opens his mouth, knowledge is blocked or distorted by the first line's caesura. "Don't think" prevents one—for a moment—from listening further. But it also invites a violation of this acoustemic closure. The irony and pathos of this sequence mutate as turns of phrase render the blockage of knowledge into a worldly ignorance that somehow makes self-knowledge possible: "I'm an old fool and I know it." One can read this inversion—from not thinking to knowledge of one's ignorance—as a byproduct of Williams's false etymological pun, the dance of the "satyrically...tragic foot."²² *Paterson* attempts to expose the unconscious rhythms of thought, perception, and expression that stifle personal and social freedom in America by deepening the affinities between the tragicomic, or satirical, and the poetic, or lyrical. If one reads Ehrens as straightforwardly satirical figure, his homily exemplifies the absurd symptoms of inflexible ideology or backwards thinking that Dr. Williams, like the poet Paterson, diagnoses and treats. Yet by the same token, the unconscious music of ignorance (an

²² Satire, coming from the Latin *satura*, or "medley," is often etymologically confused with the mythological satyr, with which the satyr play, or tragicomedy, is associated. In terms of modern American writing, Ambrose Bierce defines the former with satiric sting: "An obsolete kind of literary composition in which the vices and follies of the author's enemies were expounded with imperfect tenderness. In this country satire never had more than a sickly and uncertain existence, for the soul of it is wit, wherein we are dolefully deficient, the humor that we mistake for it, like all humor, being tolerant and sympathetic. Moreover, although Americans are 'endowed by their Creator' with abundant vice and folly, it is not generally known that these are reprehensible qualities, wherefore the satirist is popularly regarded as a sour-spirited knave, and his every victim's outcry for codefendants evokes a national assent" (*Devil's* 176). *Paterson* reflects a tendency to confuse the two—the satiric and satyric—by attacking the vices of Protestant virtue with the "imperfect tenderness" of satire and, I contend, arraying the tragicomic rhythm of the satyr's dance with an equally imperfect rage for chaos (which emerges as a salubrious kind of despair).

“orchestral dullness”) sustains a living voice in the poem by contributing to *Paterson*’s unrestricted choral mode, a mode that permits, not without ample overtones of intolerance, Ehrens to continue with his sermon.

This permission allows, and implicitly advocates actively listening to, the sound of the preacher’s ongoing life to break forth:

BUT . . . !
You can’t ignore the words of Our Lord Jesus
Christ who died on the Cross for us that we
may have Eternal Life! Amen.

Amen! Amen! (*P* 66)

As Ehrens’s sermon unfolds, the recorded sound of his booming voice becomes louder and louder. Sound in this passage communicates something other than religious dogma; it communicates the visceral tones of a poetic conversion mediated and modulated by Williams’s ears. Ehrens, whose namesake encrypts into a softened vernacular the “errand” of American history (the mutually reinforcing stories of spiritual pilgrimage and economic venture, a wedding of Protestantism and capitalism) and the prophet “Aaron” of Biblical record, recalls his initial calling to come to America and pursue material wealth.²³ He then experiences a counter-calling of despair, the voice of conscience that leads Ehrens to ask himself “Did it [making money] make me GOOD?” (*P* 68). To which the preacher responds with unequivocal revulsion:

NO! he shouted, bending
at the knees and straightening himself up
violently with the force of his emphasis—like
Beethoven getting a crescendo out of an
orchestra—NO! (*P* 68)

The preacher’s emphatically repeated “NO!” anticipates the “the nul” that opens Book

²³ This idea of poetic encryption stems from John Shoptaw’s theorization of “crypt words” in “Lyric Cryptography” (2000).

Two, Part III:

Look for the nul
defeats it all

the N of all
equations .

the rock, the blank
that holds them up

which pulled away—
the rock's

their fall. Look
for that nul

that's past all
seeing

the death of all
that's past

all being . (*P* 77)

Williams fills the poetic interval between repeated “NO!”s with material—descriptive, narrative, and figurative content—that combines religious and musical gestures with the force of the poet’s emphasis. While Ehrens’s sermon logically entails what Williams derides as the “perverse confusions that come of a failure to untangle the language and make it our own” (i.e. Ehrens’s message to give away one’s money will presumably make him money, although his congregation’s indifference reinforces the fact that Ehrens merely “addresses / the leaves in the patient trees”), its resonant power as music, as a sense past seeing or understanding, is oddly uncompromised (*P* 279, 72). Ehrens aspires to produce as powerful a sermonic crescendo as one of Beethoven’s symphonies. Thus the unanticipated and unnameable resonance between the preacher and *Paterson’s* general soundscape:

—with monotonous insistence
the falls of his harangue hung featureless
upon the ear, yet with a certain strangeness
as if arrested in space. (*P* 70)

One can hear the sound of the preacher's sermon as featureless sound, but this sound is as vivid and as powerful as the force of a symphonic climax.²⁴ Ehrens's "NO!" sounds out the intervening exclamatory force between despair and hope, the brink between ignorance or mystification and knowledge, and of the aural illusion of motionlessness that is brought into being by listening to the sermon's resonant movements and counter-movements. To sum up these resonances, the force of the preacher's "No!" is precisely the moment of his conversion, manifested by "scattering [his] money to the winds" (*P* 73).

The force of the preacher's protesting sound does not consist in articulate semantic content, but something like the *longue durée* of poetic language's illocutionary force—a diachronic series of resonances occurring throughout a single lifetime or across lifetimes. Ehrens promotes the "prosperity of poverty"—spiritual riches over economic wealth—but his message "becomes reabsorbed into the very fabric of the structure of power that it paradoxically identifies both against and with" (*Diagnostics* 166). As Bremen argues, Ehrens's success as a preacher depends upon a "grammar of transference"—a textual process of rhetorical manipulation by which the preacher's demands "awaken the habitus" of the congregation so that they will identify with an order (salvation) that opposes capitalism's dominating and subordinating structures (capital)

²⁴ Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, for example, begins to culminate with a chorus of voices. The libretto beginning with a negating vocative invites a radical revolution of sound, "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne! / Sondern laßt uns angenehmere an stimmen / und freudenvollere" ("Oh Friends, not these tones! / Rather, let us raise our voices in more pleasing / And more joyful sounds"). Unlike the universal brotherhood imagined in Schiller's "Ode to Joy," Ehrens's sermon—as *Paterson* recaptures it—is divorced from any poetic, narrative, or musical harmony. See "Schiller's 'An die Freude' and Authoritative Translation" (*Beethoven Foundation* Web).

(*Diagnostics* 167). This Bourdieuan analysis of the scene reveals what is at stake, as elsewhere in the poem, in *Paterson*'s attitude toward history. If to hear Ehren's message is merely to reinscribe a dialectical opposition between good and bad forces of history, between one kind of calling and another, then to listen to the sound of the preacher indeed entails, as Bremen argues, holding in tension "notions of identity and difference" rather than choosing sides. But Paterson's listening is a more radically open act, and prone to greater risk and modification, than one of holding or capturing the perdurable tension of good and bad, light and dark, same and different. The preacher's sound, like the entire poetic soundscape, operates below the threshold of conscious self-justification. Sound comprises one of the "visceral modes of appraisal" that William Connolly calls the "infrasensible" level of religious, political, or cultural affiliation ("Refashioning" 165). As the preacher vocalizes himself, his performance resonates with Williams's poetic performance. The poem's language traces over the preacher's but with modulated tones and rhythms, coaxing out the visceral power and flexibility of his voice but grafting this power onto other forms of affective association.

Other voices of *Paterson*, including the poet's voice, mimic the preacher's isolated intonations—the exclamations, drones, appeals, and interior conversions or conversations reported to an audience that may or may not be listening. A musical parallel of *Paterson*'s soundscape more relevant than Beethoven is Charles Ives, whose polytonal musical experimentalism evokes various American idioms and tonal imagery—marching bands, church hymns, parlor ballads, patriotic songs, etc. (often in simultaneous, or contiguous, flux).²⁵ A composition like Ives's Symphony No. 3, "The

²⁵ Charles Ives (1874-1954) produced a body of compositions that, like Williams's efforts as a poet, was concerned with experimenting with and crafting a distinctly American voice with the materials of first-hand

Camp Meeting,” produces a soundscape similar to that of Ehrens’s sermon heard amidst *Paterson*’s other resounding voices. Ives superimposes the sonic textures of sermonic oratory on various sounds of American life, and the structural effects of this overlap render the art of embodied listening integral to the ongoing composition. While some of Ives’s compositions may be adjudged as sentimental or nostalgic, the voice of the preacher sounding with and against the grain of *Paterson*’s satirical impulses produces a “certain strangeness” shared by Ives’s nostalgia: a complex of feelings and sounds hovering betwixt and between clashing senses of American life.

This strange array of affect is at the heart of *Paterson*’s sense how preacher and poet both make a life, or at least a living, with one’s voice even if one’s audience remains inattentive. Yet to convert this process into an artifact or exchangeable good is antithetical to *Paterson*’s and Ehrens’s respective “errands” because the poet’s and the preacher’s respective cultural livelihoods depend upon that which is “past all being.” To wit, both can only affirm their own practice negatively—as a protest against the impossibility of fully representing the “soundness” of one’s life. The voice that sets the preacher apart also sets the modern poet apart from the world, and vocation’s collateral isolation resounds with possibilities not offered by the logic of synthesis, marriage, union, or resolution. Williams certainly saw the plight of an artist like Ives in a light not dissimilar to that of the preacher, but with an opposite assessment. Music critic Paul Rosenfeld quotes Williams’s comments on Ives that identify the lack of public

experiences of daily life. Biographical and aesthetic convergences reveal something about their lines of work at this time: Ives had a day job as a successful insurance agent in Connecticut (similar to Williams, and even more similar to Wallace Stevens), his final *Universe Symphony* is left unfinished (as is *Paterson*, but for different reasons), and public recognition of his work came very late. Much of Ives’s music requires one to listen on all sides—with polytonal harmonic arrangements, or with different sections of the band quoting “heard” material such as in “Central Park in the Dark” (1906).

recognition, for better or worse, as *the* constant dilemma of certain vocations that are outside of, or in conflict with, their time:

Nowhere better than in the case with Ives is shown the typical effect of this neglect [the solitude of American artists among the American public]: witness phenomenally intelligent and original conceptions, never fully oriented or worked out for lack of the necessary orchestra to work with;—effects on his character the product of a pitiless isolation, his designation as an eccentric—a typical American retort to the castigation genius ends by applying to its compatriots—and finally a retirement from the encounter with mountains of unfinished and half-finished projects in which the young find ‘marvelous bits,’ the work of a man ‘way ahead of Europe in his time.’ (“Advent” 53)

If the artist takes the pulse of the age, his or her vocation is a kind of cultural auscultation of the contemporary moment. Yet doing so cannot be achieved without producing a pulse of one’s own, a pulse that varies with the materials at hand. A “necessary orchestra” and its constituent instruments are required. In Williams’s late work, the “never fully oriented or worked out” character of Ives’s music becomes a compositional principle that, nevertheless, still works itself out through a lyric dispersal.

Williams’s satirical representation of the colloquial preacher, a lá Billy Sunday, utilizes the *poetic* resources of preaching. But Williams works these sounds into a soundscape that, like Ives’s layered symphonies, produces dissonance and irresolution as much as satisfaction and harmony. This is a much different imitation of the preacher’s voice than what James Weldon Johnson tried out twenty years prior to *Paterson* in *God’s Trombones* (1927). In order to reconstitute the vital “power of the old-time [African American] preacher,” Johnson transcribed sermons performed by African American preachers into free verse with dashes, caesuras, and other typographical markings to replicate the musicality of the preacher’s voice (*God’s* 2). Johnson’s aim to employ dialect not merely as comic relief but a source of provocative power augurs

some of Williams's attempts to develop an American idiom out of the poetic materials of satire's musical sense: as medleyed sound. Yet Williams's preacher is multiplied and transfigured by his contextual surroundings. Other voices impinge upon, alter, or augment what Ehrens's example provides. This is how one is called to listen to any single voice in *Paterson*: by constant relation that is neither union nor absolute otherness. The following section will address how despair becomes an operative term for the lyric and for the lyric subject in Williams's late writings. Despair leaves room for lyric's unfulfilled activity, calling particular voices out of the roiling sounds of American life despite the voice's continual descent into a pre-articulate silence, or the inarticulate wash of the falls.

Musical Descent, Lyric Despair

Williams dubbed his standard of poetic measure a “*relatively* stable foot,” which is often referred as the “variable” foot of Williams's late poetry (SE 340). This idea offered Williams a pliable metric for dividing lines into descending tercets, which he used in many poems of his later books, and a method for reshaping the affective duration of the lyric. The paradox of a standard based on variability in Williams's prosody is also apparent on a macro-level: in the rhythmic segmentation of poems, books, identities, and aspirations whose measure is relative to the voice that produces, performs, or expresses what a life is at the present or can be in the future. In his essay “On Measure,” Williams hearkens to “a new measure by which may be ordered our poems as well as our lives” (SE 340). *Paterson*'s order of ongoing life might go something like this: Flowing sound emerging into resonant music, resonant music localized into useable knowledge, useable

knowledge transforming into beautiful forms, beautiful forms eliciting spiritual pursuits, and spiritual pursuit vividly transposed again and again by the sounding flux of the Falls into further performances and evocations of poetic practice. The poetic self and world do not interpenetrate each other in a poetry of continuous flowering, but react to and act upon each other in “the roar of the present”—the amplification of their interaction as it proceeds, falls, into a cadence to be further developed (*P* 145). “No one mind / can do it all”—no one voice can make audible this flowering process of flowing sound (*P* 190). As the poet addresses the efflorescent world at the end of section II of Book Two, the section including Ehren’s sermon, he articulates a condition that I have phrased, using Paterson’s language, lyric “despair”:

[...] But you
 never wither—but blossom
 all about me. In that I forget
 myself perpetually—in your
 composition and decomposition
 I find my
despair!

. (*P* 75)

Lines break apart subject and predicate in an utterance that cloaks the natural order of poetic “decomposition” with an inversion of Christ’s rhetoric of renunciation and resurrection: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.”²⁶ Paterson’s despair (somewhat like Ehren’s evocative “No!”) imbues “life”—as an object of losing or saving—with the uncertainty of living. Thus the resonant trail of periods ensconced at the foot of this line represents both a condition of inarticulacy (these are empty sentences) and elliptical possibility (utterances that might possibly befall the poet with more time and listening). This logic is extended

²⁶ Matthew 16:25.

to the poem as a non-comprehensive series of relative wholes. It denies the status of master trope to the act of listening, even if the trope disperses itself into and anchors many parts the poem. The dynamic between the poet's listening practice and Paterson's ecological resonance pulls the sound of the preacher along with the flow of the poet's despair.

At times, this dynamic appears to reach a standstill—or, in the modality of the audible, be sensed amidst a “soundstill.” Thus something like the self-contained lyric emerges from the ongoing and multiplying resonances of *Paterson's* frenetic montage. A striking example of this is the originally un-demarcated passage in *Paterson*, Book Two, Part III, which Williams later presents as a lyric, “The Descent,” in the opening of *The Desert Music* (1954).²⁷ Like many of Williams's late poems, “The Descent” exemplifies the operations of Williams's variable foot, the rhythmic precipitation of speech falling into a musical pattern. Since the achieved wholeness and/or ongoing nature of this piece's accomplishment is at stake in what follows, I cite it in full (as printed in *The Desert Music*):

THE DESCENT

The descent beckons
as the ascent beckoned.
Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the spaces it opens are new places,
inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized,

²⁷ Introducing this poem in a reading at the 92nd Street YM-YWHA Poetry Center on January 27, 1954, Williams reflects on how this poem emerged into his consciousness as a poem—as a something that stands out from the rest of the circumambient voices, something that stands on its own as “something”—in the process of reviewing his previous work: “This poem appears in *Paterson*, Book III, and when I began to look it over...I thought to myself, Hmph! That's *something*!” (*Penn Sound Web*).

of new kinds—
 since their movements
 are toward new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned).

No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—since
the world it opens is always a place
 formerly
 unsuspected. A
world lost,
 a world unsuspected,
 beckons to new places
and no whiteness (lost) is so white as the memory
of whiteness .

With evening, love wakens
 though its shadows
 which are alive by reason
of the sun shining—
 grow sleepy now and drop away
 from desire .

Love without shadows stirs now
 beginning to awaken
 as night
advances.

The descent
 made up of despairs
 and without accomplishment
realizes a new awakening:
 which is a reversal
of despair.

For what we cannot accomplish, what
is denied to love,
 what we have lost in the anticipation—
 a descent follows,
endless and indestructible . (*CP II* 245-246)

A conception of codependent feelings of despair and indestructibility in poetic practice is rife after World War II. Delmore Schwartz invokes these terms in a 1951 essay, “The Vocation of the Poet in the Modern World,” citing the work of Eliot and Joyce as exemplary vocational figures. Schwartz reaches a conclusion that does not differ greatly

from Williams's lines:

In the unpredictable and fearful future that awaits civilization, the poet must be prepared to be alienated and indestructible. He must dedicate himself to poetry, although no one else seems likely to read what he writes; and must be indestructible as a poet until he is destroyed as a human being. (Schwartz 91)

For Schwartz, modern American poetry's "internationality" compels the poet to prepare for catastrophic change—in the world and in his language for that world. Yet for Williams, alienation and indestructibility *follow* the poet's work rather precede it. In this vocational time, Williams discloses the lyric, and its despair, to history rather than protecting or preparing it for the fury of historical violence and the wake of history's losses.

Unlike the silence of the remaining blank space on the page, what follows this sequence in *Paterson* is the sound of a provocative command and exclamatory deictic:

Listen! —

the pouring water! (*P* 79)

This cinematic scene shift reverses the endlessly deferred closure (perhaps itself a mode of indestructibility) of the previous image and the punctuated finality of the foregoing sequence. Such a shift articulates the rhythm of *Paterson*'s dialectical exchanges between sound and listening. From instance to instance, whether it be the cascading lines of Williams's lineated triplets, redacted excerpts from personal correspondence (from the passionate and often embittered missives of Williams's "frenemy," poet Marcia Nardi, from Ezra Pound, or from the up-and-coming poet Allen Ginsberg), encyclopedia entries, historical records, recent novels, other poems, and sundry fragments of real or imagined speech, actions, and experiences—the pulsation between closure and aperture forms *Paterson*'s "measured dance," the "[s]atyrically" arrayed "tragic foot" (*P* 235-236). This

play of forms and ideas among a field of contrasting images and narrative modes enables connectivity without the establishment of final connections. Although this hearkens to the serial-form compositions of younger poets of the postwar generation—Charles Olson, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, Nathaniel Mackey, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, and scores of contemporary writers—the key difference is that Williams’s late works do not take seriality as a foregoing premise or principle. Ongoingness happens as it happens, and sometimes realizing the poet’s constitutive despair necessitates “a reversal of / despair.” Such a process twists the logic of “The Descent” into a “despair” of despair, the rhythm of reciprocal exchange built up by the process of displacement in a place over an indeterminate period of time (the poet’s lifetime as it is lived). Hence the descent of somebody “over the hill” (and yet continually at the apex, or precipice, of his or her creative faculties). The stylistic corollary of this condition seems to fall under the umbra of what Barbara Herrnstein Smith has called the “senile sublime,” rather than the triumphant historical defiance of Adornian late style.²⁸ In various recordings Williams reads the line, “No defeat is made up entirely of defeat—[...]” without a rising emphasis on “entirely,” which would inflect a hopeful register of consolation or qualification. Williams’s descending tonal trajectory—leading to the final foot, “defeat”—produces an affective response contrary to the entire line’s paraphrasable content. The effect is strikingly dissonant.²⁹ Such an ambivalent consolation, then, is the sounding out of

²⁸ Discussed in conversation with Barbara Herrnstein Smith. Citing Smith’s term, Sedgwick (2003) describes the “senile sublime” as the “more or less intelligible performances by old brilliant people, whether artists, scientists, or intellectuals, where the bare outlines of a creative idiom seem finally to emerge from what had been the obscuring puppy fat of personableness, timeliness, or sometimes even of coherent sense” (*Touching* 24).

²⁹ Williams’s various recorded readings of the poem, despite the variations and irregularities of each performance, inflect this line in a descending tone. Listen to readings 17 (at 92nd Street YM-YWHA Poetry Center on January 27, 1954), 19 (for NBC radio series *Anthology*, March 26, 1954), 21 (at home in

despair. “The Descent” does not mark Williams’s stabilization of the work with which he engages, but it enables him to return to earlier work and propels (not without the pain and uncertainty of “what is denied to love”) him into work yet to be figured out (the descent which “follows”).

Yet like *Paterson*, or the memory to which it leads, “The Descent” is “a kind of accomplishment,” a *kind* of self-contained lyric. Or, one might object, at the least the poem lends itself to being *read as a lyric*. Whether in *Paterson* or its later placement in *The Desert Music*, the sequence pronounces an experience moving from a discrete beginning to a discrete end. Worlds “lost” and “unsuspected” alike are phenomenally absent or nonmanifest as the poem’s descent into the shadowless night (shadowless because at night the world becomes, in one respect, *all* shadow) beckons them into possibility, if not into being. This draws the speaker into sleep and into sleep’s release of unaccomplished work, denials of love, forgotten aspirations, and misplaced desiderata, beyond which lies a “new awakening.” As Thoreau famously puts it, “the awakening hour” calls upon “our own newly-acquired force and aspirations from within, accompanied by the undulations of celestial music, instead of factory bells, and a fragrance fills the air—to a higher life than we fell asleep from; and thus the darkness bears its fruit, and prove itself to be good, no less than the light” (*Walden* 393). Whereas Thoreau’s religious exercises require the purification of sound and sense—both personal and universal callings purged of “factory bells”—Williams’s descent anticipates what I have described as an insistently transformational process of listening, in which the city’s

Rutherford, NJ, June 6, 1954), 22 (interview with Francis Mason on Voice of America, NBC Radio, 1954), 25 (reading at the University of California, Berkeley, May 19, 1955) 26 (reading at the University of California, Santa Barbara, June 1, 1955) 27 (reading at UCLA, May, 1955), and 28 (recording by Eyvind Earle at his home in Hillview Park Ave., San Fernando Valley, Van Nuys, CA. May 1955) (*Penn Sound Web*).

stream of endless calls (including factory bells, evangelical preachers, and the like) further intensifies and differentiates various modes of despair that the poet's vocation encounters in postwar life. While Stevens's casual flocks of pigeons make their descent with "ambiguous undulations"—cryptically anticipating the agnostic perplexity surrounding Stevens's alleged deathbed conversion—Williams's speaker reaches an unanticipated point of "endless and indestructible" closure—"." The well-spaced period, like a held note, sustains the cumulative energies of the speaker's despair as the poem reaches toward a resonant end rather than remaining ambiguously situated between beginning and ending. Likewise, as a whole, *Paterson* reverses the constitutionally tragic mode of the Romantic lyric speaker, whose memory of the voice of vocation is predicated upon the loss of its original sound.³⁰ Williams's lyric descent, like Paterson's despair, is neither fatalistic nor purifying, but is a constant turning of attention, an abiding tuning of the ear with the "city limits" of the poet's lifetime. Modulating the borders of those limits comprises the *habitus* of Williams's late work.

Beyond the Remote Borders Of Poetry

"At every instant there is more than the eye can see, more than the ear can hear, a setting or view waiting to be explored. Nothing is experienced by itself, but always in relation to its surroundings, the sequence of events leading up to it, the memory of past experiences" (*Image 1*). Kevin Lynch's description of modern city life is an equally accurate description of *Paterson*'s spatiotemporal dynamics. "A man is indeed a city,"

³⁰ This tragic figuration of the voice, or the sonic object, belies "a Romantic paradigm, whereby sonic capture is understood implicitly as the capture of that which is lost. [...] [S]ound is always capture, and capture is always loss" ("In Pursuit" 4). Chow and Steintrager cite Wordsworth's "The Prelude" as an exemplary instance of this paradigm: "My own voice cheered me, and, far more, the mind's / Internal echo of the imperfect sound" (8).

Williams writes, but this is a form presenting itself only in relation to an imagined whole (A 390). But Paterson—the poem, the city, or the poet—does not separate, as Thoreau’s transcendentalist separation of sounds implies, the city’s elemental nature and its cultural iterations; it does not oppose the wilderness and the workshop. Again: no ideas but in things. That preposition does not indicate containment but a process of exchange. By extension, ideas of secular and religious callings come into being only by virtue of things such as poems and the resonant life they may enjoy. The products and problems of pursuing a poetic vocation are the products and problems of the reciprocal exchange between things and ideas—the ongoing results of transactions between what the poet produces in the form of work and what the poet’s life becomes in the process of that work. A major problem endemic to an indeterminate will to poetry is the kind of constraints enforced by the thingliness of poetic ideas. The affective and intellectual exchanges between indefinite poetic growth and a poetry of immanence call for order or discipline to manage one’s relationship to one’s own development.

Hank Lazer refers to “two Dr. Williamses—the Williams beloved of creative writing programmes, with his emphasis on quotidian detail and speech, and the Williams of the late teens and twenties hybrid texts, the self-consciously avant-gardist Williams who has proven a central figure for the most serious avant-garde of the past three decades, the Language writers” (quoted in Golding 265-266). Williams’s practice makes this underlying distinction between two poetic identities, and the two poetry camps that have fashioned themselves in relation to modernism’s legacy, altogether moot. Lyric containment and indeterminate resonance are interdependent in Williams’s poetry, although what ideological underpinnings these terms are said to reflect depend upon, or at

least deepen in, the soundscape of the reader who engages in her own listening practice. The same goes for the intensities evoked by labeling a poetic with a secular or religious ideology. In “Deep Religious Faith,” Williams makes hard and fast distinctions between poetic belief and unbelief seem chimerical. The poem opens:

Past death
 past rainy days
 or the distraction
of lady’s-smocks all silver-white;
 beyond the remote borders
 of poetry itself
if it does not drive us,
 it is vain. (*CP II* 262)

The riddling identity of “it” is uncertain, as is the possible reference of “it” to deep religious faith. Later Williams writes, “Invention is the heart of it”: invention and imagination, being Williams’s choice terms for poetry’s ways of worldmaking, or how “the poet’s line / come[s] true!” (*CP II* 262). Whatever “it” is in terms of formal and political allegiances—avant-garde poetry, workshop poetry, or something else—it is mostly a process of becoming something other than itself. The depths that Williams sounds out by no means present us with an either/or decision (or some enticing dialectical synthesis of the two): the metaphysical depths of spiritual belief or the deeply tangible and incontrovertible facts of America’s historical material.

Not in the least theologically inspired, Williams’s effort to render audible a new vitality for poetry as a cultural resource raises questions about the idealization of secularity in postwar American poetics. Modernism’s new freedoms must be counterpoised with new orderings. Yet Williams’s order of work decidedly breaks apart the borders of specialization so that the career track can be laid to rest. *Paterson*’s densely layered scenes of local figures generate a collective resonance that, like memory,

is a heuristic accomplishment. It is thus perennially destructible, but in persisting past the implosion of autotelic formalism *Paterson* advocates a temporally extensive ethos of the poetic career. This reconfiguration of the artistic careers redounds not only to the well-known family tree of Dr. Williams's poetic descendants, but to aesthetic experiments in American experimental music such as Steve Reich's minimalist works, such as his 1983 composition based on Williams's *The Desert Music* and titled the same. In his compositions, Reich's experimentation with phase-shifting sound, as Aden Evens writes, "repeat[s] an internally differentiated motif and alter[s] that motif over the course of a piece" (*Sound Ideas* 50). On the level of poetics, Williams's modes of differentiating repetition enables his late poetry to "grasp new durations" and "operate across temporal distances both vast and fleeting" by stretching and thickening the sounds and senses of one's time without ascribing to them a standard measure (50).

I have stressed that a sense of vocation as resonance provides Williams with a compelling trope and formal dynamic for continuing his creative life past the point of final achievement. Williams counters the variable foot's risk—the risk of a too capacious and arbitrary will-to-plurality—with his willingness to fall into a practice of poetry without the specialized niche reserved for the career's legitimation. Rather than aim to purify or sublimate liberal democratic culture's pluralistic values into a secular ideal of poetic form—something private, contained, and ultimately providing rest—Williams refuses, much like contemporary political theorist William Connolly, to be a secularist. *Paterson's* soundscape, in striking resonance with Connolly's recent work, aims to "rework[s] the secular problematic by exploring layered conceptions of thinking, ethos, and public life appropriate to a timely vision of multidimensional pluralism" (*Why I Am*

Not 4). Such a model of vocation is a far cry from the lyric condensation advocated by Pound and sundry other modernist poets of Imagist or Symbolist affiliations. What I have argued for here is an amplification of certain resonant practices in Williams's late work that provoke a secular poetic vocation's internal tension and irresolution. Resonance indeed can and does operate counter to an ethos of pluralism. Connolly's highlighting of the contemporary ubiquity of the "evangelical-capitalist resonance machine" is one instance that makes this undeniably evident (see *Capitalism and Christianity* 39-68). Williams's attempts to rework the subject of pluralism at the half-century mark and at the point of near-lifetime achievement comprise a process of lyric despair. In this despair, like the quasi-religious experience of resignation Williams recalls early in his life, one's achievement displaces itself over time as one is called to return to previous work in order to "figure out" what kind of work is coming into being. That kind of work, as Williams acknowledges, drives us past the elegiac mood of much postwar American poetry, and even beyond remote borders of the lyric as such. But what Williams discovers is that, with "no one to drive the car," there are perhaps too many hands on the wheel. There are many stop signs along the road, and many stations that the poet can occupy. In the process of listening to the ongoing sound of life, in the impossibility work's complete termination or fulfillment, lies Williams's reversal of despair.

CHAPTER 2

There Are No Final Orders: Robert Duncan's Conversion to Poetry

"I came not to be concerned with poems in themselves but with the life of poems as part of the evolving and continuing work of a poetry I could never complete—a poetry that had begun long before I was born and that extended beyond my own work in it."

-Robert Duncan, "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife"

"...freedom in art, as in life, is the result of a discipline imposed by ourselves."

-Marianne Moore, "Humility, Concentration, Gusto"

To speak of Robert Duncan's poetic "career" runs counter to his lifelong profession of a commitment to poetry as something far more profound, of poetic practice as an indeterminate process. Hostile to the encroachment of a careerist ethos in middlebrow sectors of American poetry at mid-century (an ethos perceived to be increasingly open to the institutional settings for, and the commercial status of, "making a living" as a poet), Duncan's writings affirm the radical and experimental impulses of various strands of the postwar American avant-garde. The familiar version of Duncan's entry into the counter-canon of this period begins with his inclusion in Donald Allen's formative, if now infamously exclusive, anthology *The New American Poetry* (1960). Allen's taxonomy of new poetic movements, as well as the criteria of anthologizing itself, has indeed expanded and evolved since 1960 and will continue to undergo extensive revisions and critiques. Yet more recent poetic projects, venues, media, and geographical-historical contexts continue to lay claim to (at least cryptically) the poetics of process, however much the ends of the poetic counterculture have changed. Yet in doing so, a poetics of the counterculture has remained ever so heterogeneous. Thus aesthetic and political frames of reference—liberal, radical, experimental, innovative,

conceptual (and so forth)—bespeak the staying power of what Michael Davidson calls postwar poetry’s “enabling fictions”: the power of “creative dissension and opposition” that Duncan, along with other key figures associated with the New American Poetry, generated through a renovated sense of poetic form’s duration and through a reconceptualization of poetic practice as something beyond vulgar professionalism (*San Francisco Renaissance* 1). In this chapter, I argue that Duncan’s redefinition of poetic vocation extensively engages the notion of a religious calling in order to substantively realize and reflect upon what a modernist poetic, in his lifetime or in lifetimes to come, might come to be.

As a practice of metapoetics, Duncan’s œuvre illuminates what has come to be recently discussed in terms of “metamodernism”—an artistic position mediating (or *stuck*) between the modern and the postmodern. Examining the points of contact and exchange between religious and poetic forms of symbolic engagement is crucial for understanding of Duncan’s contributions to a radicalized personalism and neo-Romantic strains of the postwar avant-garde.¹ To this end, I take a less thematic approach to religion as content that poets merely include or reject from their work. My hope is to reorient what we talk about when (or if) we talk about a “religious” poet of the postwar period. Duncan’s spiritualization of poetic work thus offers an exemplary, if overabundant, ground for rethinking religion’s, or more accurately, religiosity’s,

¹ In his back cover review of *The Opening of the Field* (1960), Kenneth Rexroth writes that Duncan’s poetry veers away from modernism’s treatment of the work of art “as purely self-sufficient, a construction rather than a communication,” adding that Duncan’s poetry “is about as personal as can be imagined.” Rexroth adds: “So it [Duncan’s poetry] resembles the work of poets like David Gascoyne and Pierre Emmanuel, who, raised in the tradition, have seceded from it to begin the exploration of a new, dedicated personalism. What is the self? What is the other? These are the questions of those who have transcended the ‘existentialist dilemma’—Buber or Mounier....” Here Rexroth’s sanction of Duncan’s poetry identifies the latter’s affinity with various contemporary religious poets and theologians working towards a reconstruction of the “mind and body of love,” as Rexroth puts it, or an artistic *and* religious reconstruction of the notion of the person.

prominence in postwar experimental poetry. Indeed, reconsidering vocation as a poetics of process will show how the counterculture's emphasis on religious or artistic freedom emerged along with idealized, sometimes ambiguous, notions of poetic law and order. But in the manner of the "spiritual chameleon" that Duncan imagined himself to be, our understanding of the "discipline" of poetic practice that Duncan upheld will transform before us, even as we read through those key texts of his in which something like an established order seems to appear.²

A sense of sheer capaciousness, of infinite possibility entwined with infinite incompleteness, calls to mind the deeply unsettling dynamics of Duncan's corpus *as a whole*. Two durational trajectories frame Duncan's capaciousness: the extensive formations of a "life-long" poem (or "lifework") and a poet's life (his or her "vocation").³ The ambiguous relationship between these trajectories raises questions that are formal and existential, aesthetic and ethical, material and spiritual. Furthermore, these two trajectories (work/vocation) do not merely overlap, but coincide. Duncan's conception of "work" is synonymous with his conception of a "vocation." Yet paradoxically work remains incommensurable with vocation, making the aforementioned ambiguity a constitutive feature of Duncan's writing. By such a paradoxical logic, Duncan's poems cannot fulfill the task he imagines for capital-p Poetry, even if the poems he writes are contributions to or apprehensions of fulfillment. Like many "anti-closural" poetries, Duncan's work often remains suspended in a state of fertile incompletion.⁴ But this

² Letter to Jack Spicer, February 29, 1947. Bancroft Library: University of California, Berkeley.

³ For thorough accounts of the life-long poem in modern and contemporary North American poetry, see Conte (1991), McHale (2004), DuPlessis (2009), Finkelstein (2010), Collis (2010), and Middleton (2010).

⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith's account of "anti-closure" in modernist poetics maps out many ways in which modern experimental poetic practices modify the operations of poetic closure for open effects—what Herrnstein Smith identifies as strategies of "weak closure" in modernist poetics (*Poetic Closure* 237). The

resistance to containment nonetheless revitalizes a mode of poetic discipline that is unrecognized by critical accounts of open-field poetics that assert the lack of rhetorical discipline in such experimental practices. In this sense, Duncan's deployment of the practical grammar and symbolic energies of religious vocations sustains a creative tension between open and closed forms. Attending to these tensions without thematizing religion will illuminate how, in significantly overlooked ways, the excessive and synthetic modes of religiosity inform (both positively and negatively) a variety of avant-garde cultural *topoi* in postwar America.

In "Man's Fulfillment in Order and Strife" (1969), Duncan recalls that his early "conversion to Poetry" revealed that "to become a *poet*, was to evidence a serious social disorder," or "to be at war with every hope the world before had had of me" (FC 112). Duncan's artistic identification with the religious rhetoric of "conversion" destabilizes a guiding assumption concerning modernism's identification with the secular, an assumption due to which Duncan is consistently read as a "religious" poet in the pejorative sense of the term.⁵ Yet Duncan's engagement with the dynamic meanings of vocation, including if not especially its religious dimensions, fashions experimental poetry as a practice that exceeds the holding of a professional office or the championing of a discrete social doctrine. For Duncan, a poet's "conversion" is quite similar to what I

suggestiveness of anti-closure's negative phrasing strikes me as a richer way of thinking about "open-form" poetics in this period. The term brings into awareness a range of closural effects in open-form poetics that a simplified understanding of open-form poems, as simply not having endings that "click like a box," does not (243). See Smith, *Poetic Closure* (1968) 234-271.

⁵ Duncan claims the religious affiliation of poetic practice quite directly at times: "We are not poets...other than by occupying the office of poet. And that office is a holy office. We are in a holy office when we sit in front of a piece of paper" (*Young Robert Duncan* 273). However, Duncan's biographer Ekbert Faas tempers this assertion with the reminder that "this priestly mission did not go unaccompanied by some inquisitorial tendencies, even though the Grand Inquisitor himself was a proclaimed heretic" (273). The spectrum of religiosity covered by Duncan's sense of vocation—from obedient reverence to ecstatic fanaticism to destructive heresy—needs to be engaged without overemphasizing one single mode, stage, or theme of the religious invoked in Duncan's practice.

discussed in the previous chapter in terms of Williams's "descent." This kind of conversion offers no tenure-track position and no retirement plan. In this sense, the work of poetry involves elective affinities as well as ineluctable burdens. Both the order *and* strife—or the "benemaledictions"—of tradition constitute a blessing and a curse, a source of freedom and of discipline in the poet's ongoing activity of representation (*OF* 10). Put otherwise, poetic vocation is a "life sentence." And in order to intellectually and affectively provoke the cultural contradictions of late modernity (including the status of "religion" or the "religious"), Duncan reanimates a mode of lived religiosity that changes the very grammar of poetic means and ends.

As I have stressed earlier, critical histories of avant-garde poetics and oppositional politics after World War II depend upon a foundational (if unacknowledged) story of modern secularization. Duncan's vocational process is inassimilable to stable categories of either the sacred or the secular. In its virtually inexhaustible eclecticism, sustained by a will to orchestrate a mythopoeic whole, Duncan's writings embody many of the formal inconsistencies and new cultural contradictions that discussions of American modernism's afterlife have tried to resolve by placing a socially-committed art on one side and traditional ideologies of the "sacred" (or the subject, human, or person) on the other. The multiple vocational valences and categorical blurriness that such a practice creates for readers necessitate a richer conception of the relationship between poetics as a lifelong process and a disciplined practice. I will discuss these valences as Duncan's vocational "effects"—patterns of response elicited by his work that reroute the ideological presuppositions of both religious and secular discourses through what Duncan

calls “the testimony of experience.”⁶ Such a testimony refashions a conception of poetry’s access to mythic, religious, historical, and political callings as necessary to a vocation’s extensive emergence. As a result of rethinking poetic vocation in terms of its multiple sources and potential/hypothetical effects rather than a originating from a visionary source and culminating in an achieved form, Duncan’s sense of vocation as radical process challenges us to rethink the standard hermeneutic oppositions and affinities drawn between religious and literary practice after modernism.

“A New Self-Appraisal”

The November 1961 issue of *Jubilee: A Magazine for the Church and Her People* (a Catholic magazine edited by Edward Rice, Robert Lax, and Thomas Merton) featured an essay by Robert Duncan entitled “The Poetic Vocation: A Study of St.-John Perse.” At first glance, the inclusion of Duncan’s name in this publication (considered a “vehicle for communicating Christian culture” in postwar America) appears incongruent (“Jubilee” 77). Duncan’s deep rooted affiliation with occult, syncretistic, and radically heterodox religious thought should raise questions about why and how his musings made sense in a journal devoted to redefining modern Catholic ecclesiology. It is also significant that, in the early 1960s, the Catholic Church in America and Europe had begun to open some of its windows to air out the fustiness of centuries-old dogma, and to open some of its doors to conversations with modern secular thought. Having ulterior countercultural bearings themselves, figures like Merton and Lax were key participants in

⁶ For example: “I study the sciences of Man and His superstitions...His testimony of experience...The deep and true testimony recognized of men who have known passionately that there are no gods, is no God, comes into the whole then as a coexistent figure with the deep and true testimony of men who have known passionately that there are gods, is a God...Here, Gods and God have to do with intent, with the absence of intent, in what is happening [...]” (FC 137).

the dialogue between the sacred and profane, between the Church and the world, and between mitigating contemporary social alienation at the level of spiritual consciousness. With Vatican II less than a year away, and less than a year into the term of America's first Catholic president, what was to be considered "Christian culture" in postwar America was becoming increasingly unstable, controversial, and internally complex.⁷ Yet at the same time, the moment was also rich with possibilities for reform, expansion, inclusion, and engagement with the historical realities of its day.

During this same period, experimental American poets responded to the totalizing curatorial credos of high modernists like Eliot or Pound with a will to formally capaciousness that sometimes risked recapitulating such totalizing theories of poetic form. Charles Olson's watershed essay, "Projective Verse" (1950), transposed the imagist-objectivist nexus of Pound, Williams, and Zukofsky into an idiom of "open field" poetics. Yet Olson's theory of "composition by field" could and did go far afield of its organicist roots in the 1950s and 1960s. As compromising as they were liberating, "open field"-derived poetics often realized Williams's poetic credo—"no ideas but in things"—in the breach rather than in the observance thereof. Claiming the poet's breath as a standard of measure for composition could easily devolve unwittingly into hypertrophied forms of self-expression, into poetically blowing off steam. In this regard, caricatures of open-form poetics can be found in its politicized extremes—the free verse confessional booths of predominately elite, academic, and bourgeois poets, or the counterculture's

⁷ Duncan's friend and fellow Californian William Everson (Brother Antoninus) is a case in point. Nicknamed the "Beat friar," Everson was both an ordained Dominican priest and an active poet in San Francisco at mid-century. His sexual, or "Dionysian-Christian," awakening in the late 1960s culminated in his now famous, and quite literal, performance of vocational "dismantling." At the end of Everson's 1969 UC Davis reading of *Tendril in the Mesh*—his last poetic work as a monk—Everson "stripped off his religious habit and announced to his shocked audience that he was leaving the Dominican Order" (see "Introduction: Everson/Antoninus" xxxi).

performance of marginalized social identity and political subversiveness for the sake of “Left cultural capital” (Kaufman 141). Still, the predominating ethos of experimental poetry at mid-century, like that of counterculturally sympathetic figures like Merton and Lax, was one of open engagement with the politics and kinetics of poetic forms. This is a poetic ethos of *pluralization* that, however unruly the aesthetic effects of that ethos would prove to be, informs Duncan’s sense of radical poetics as a lawful discipline.

The shared aspirations towards greater freedom in progressive poetic practices and religious reform of the period reflect the fact that Duncan’s essay in *Jubilee* is anything but anomalous. The dilemma of self-definition that the essay charts proposes a radically refined understanding of the quasi-religious nature of poetic practice. Duncan’s liberal reading of Perse intimates what has now been gradually, if also perplexingly, articulated as “post-secular” dispositions toward religious affiliation in late-twentieth-century America.⁸ Confusing the categorical definitions by which forms of work can be defined as such (e.g. economic, cultural, intellectual, spiritual), Duncan’s affirmation of poetic vocation oscillates between the idiosyncratic particularity of a single life undergoing constant influence and the syncretistic openness that aims toward an imagined whole (however incomplete such a whole proves to be). Duncan’s blend of perpetually contending forces sustains a pragmatic idealism with respect to poetry and belief. His process thus maintains both a literary and religious kind of “idiosyncraticism”: a constructive activity in which radically contingent and intensively mutable uses of religious traditions and counter-traditions formally coalesce into a capacious affirmation

⁸ Current assessments of the meaning and usefulness of the “post-secular” in the critical study of religion and the public sphere have taken a variety of courses. These discussions offer a wider cultural framework in which to situate my contention that Duncan’s radical poetic practice is unclassifiable as either “religious” or “secular.” See Casanova (1994), Connolly (1999), Pecora (2006), Taylor (2007), Abeysekara (2008), Braidotti (2008), and Gorski, et al. (2012).

of both spiritual coherence and decoherence. What results from this practiced coalescence, as we shall see, is anything but neatly bounded by one poetic or religious framework.

The essay's publication was also less than a year after the publication of Duncan's breakthrough volume of poetry, *The Opening of the Field* (1960). While the essay's title suggests that it is a "study" of the recent Nobel Prize winner Saint-John Perse, the essay itself tellingly elaborates Duncan's own sense of poetic vocation. Echoing the poetic ambitions of his recent book, Duncan claims that "for Perse there are no discrete poems, but one very long theme of Poetry to which his poems refer as phrases or phases of the human phrase...There can be no completion, for the process itself is eternal; we experience form, love, and being in the movement itself" ("Poetic Vocation" 38). It is significant how much this sounds like what has come to be understood as the key contribution of Duncan's work to postwar American poetics—his "opening of the field" of American poetry to a conception of poetic vocation as a lifelong practice or process exceeding the imagined bounds of accomplished work. According to Perse's Nobel speech and Duncan's essay, vocation must be re-imagined on a universal scale: a poetic system or cosmos that motivates and organizes a poet's work. On the other hand, vocation functions through the individual, idiosyncratic, and indeterminate dimensions of a particular poet's evolving practice. In order to make a living *from* poetry, according to Duncan's logic, one is better off dropping any irksome preposition that would confine and reify the ongoing and historically contingent work of making "a living poetry."⁹

⁹ In "Pages from a Notebook," Duncan's use of this phrase, "a living poetry," appears amidst a categorical distinction between the work of the poetic imagination and the historical violence of religious institutions: "Do I believe in God? heaven? hell? salvation? damnation? What a trickery this is, to ask a poet. In centaurs? in lovers? in suffering? in metamorphosis? How obscene are these creations of the treacherous

Vocation's grand theme, however, disorients one's attempts to produce and sustain particular formal categories for poetry and its spiritual justifications. Thus the vocational process aims "[t]o interrupt all sure course of my inspiration," as Duncan writes in the preface to *Letters: Poems 1953-1956* (1958) (L xii). But this is not a purely negative ground of creativity (a form of practice so open that it becomes formless, an organic compositional philosophy so spontaneous that it decomposes before it lives). The interruptive and disorderly valences of Duncan's vocation endorse a constant struggle with the taken-for-granted modes of verbal behavior that affectively and intellectually arouse meaning through the habitual practices of poetry. Such practices "conform" to different cultural needs of the moment without sacrificing a working idea of freedom's discipline. In this sense, Duncan's work complicates a double cultural bifurcation of postwar American poetry: of secular professionalism being strictly anathema to authentic forms of poetic practice, and of the general dualistic paranoia in the field of poetics that sees tradition and talent, universality and innovation, idealism and materialism, or constraint and freedom as rigidly opposed. This complication, actively confusing different modes of postmodern religious and secular cultures, is a defining feature of Duncan's process-oriented understanding of poetic vocation.

"Perse is ultimately *catholic* in the proper meaning of the word," writes Duncan, "for he gives his allegiance to and takes his vocation from the imagination of the whole, the universe" (39). This is no misrepresentation of the optimistic tenor and cosmic scope

imagination. Xtians have been murdering Jews, Moslems, and heathen Chinese for centuries to establish the kingdom of their imagination on earth. As Joyce sez, their poor little magic nation. To make a living poetry. A living universal poem, an inspiration realized, is a scourge for all" (SP 20). However Manichean such oppositional rhetoric appears, Duncan's conversion of "treacherous" Christian imaginaries into the weft of his "self-declared" poetic vocation embodies the recuperation of the idea of a living poetry as a central motive in Duncan's lifelong work.

of Perse's Nobel acceptance speech, in which Perse proclaims:

Thus by his total adherence to that which is, the poet maintains for us a relationship with the permanence and unity of Being. And his lesson is one of optimism. For him the entire world of things is governed by a single law of harmony...The worst upheavals of history are nothing but seasonal rhythms in a much vaster cycle of repetitions and renewals...Ripening civilizations do not die in the throes of one autumn: they merely change. Inertia is the only menace. The poet is one who breaks through our habits. And in this way the poet finds himself tied to history despite himself. No aspect of the drama of his times is foreign to him. May he give all of us a clear taste of life in this great age. For this is a great and new time calling for a new self-appraisal. ("Banquet Speech" Web).

Duncan takes Perse's call for a new "calling" to be "*catholic* in the proper meaning of the word," rather than doctrinally or institutionally "Catholic" as Dante's poetry, "where the division is all, where Hell and Heaven are discrete and irreconcilable opposites" (39).

Perse's notion of universality as a pluralistic catholicity upholds a problematic notion of "*la pensée désintéressée*," or "the disinterested mind" (37). As Duncan puts it, Poetry's disinterested vocation is related neither to the "revealed or dogmatic universe of the Church, nor the rationalized universe of eighteenth century convention," but resembles what Duncan believes to be the "disinterested" minds of modern experimental scientists, who expand our vision of the physical universe's boundaries (37). Similarly, poetic practice expands our vision of the human universe, which is an "open universe" according to one of Duncan's essays, "a form that maintains a disequilibrium or lifetime" (FC 78). Still, the "total adherence" demanded by Perse's sense of vocation renders "no aspect of the drama of his times...foreign to him." Poetic vocational disinterest has become ineluctably *interested* in the historical moment: "the poet finds himself tied to history despite himself." Thus while the *catholic* poet may be more capable of addressing the expanding and transforming universe of human experience in the mid-twentieth century than a Catholic one, vocational disinterest emerges paradoxically as a

form of hyper-interest. Poetry, *La Poésie*, is bound to everything. Poetic vocation, in other words, must attend not only to the established human universe—to the historical realities of past and present—but tend “toward an open universe” of inclusive possibility vis-à-vis the constant process of creation that renews, even as it rigorously upsets and destabilizes established divisions within, the process of human self-appraisal.

Romantic Synthesis, Vocational Syncretism

There is another story behind the one told in Duncan’s essay. In addition to the story of unfolding process, a sense of disciplined “return” also buttresses Duncan’s concept of vocation. In a letter to Denise Levertov at the time of writing the *Perse* essay, Duncan confides that, “I will be so glad, relieved! when at last these duties to ‘Poetry’ are done, and I might collapse into or relax into an empty or yearning mind waiting for the invasion of words and lines” (Bertholf and Gelpi, ed. 298). This collapse, or relaxation, of one’s dutiful self into the passive pleasures of poetic inspiration is, for Duncan, the *res* itself. The passive return to the habit of poetic practice, of writing and reading words and lines, is underscored in Devin Johnston’s account in *Precipitations* (2002) of Duncan’s occult- and Romanticism-derived practices of poetic dictation. Under the rubric of dictation, Johnston argues, Duncan “presented a totalizing and sweeping coherence” in the face of postwar notions of fragmented and displaced consciousness (50). Such a form of practice is neither that of professor, expositor, nor public advocate of poetry, but of the Romantic bard or religious initiate whose “sublime undoing” relies upon a creative agency greater than the poet’s. Nonetheless even this sublime experience of negative freedom, of emptying the mind of all worldly duties, entails a form of obligation. At the

imagined moment of relief, a form of necessary “waiting” (creative/aesthetic service) takes precedence over another form of “duty” (critical/discursive obligation). Certainly Duncan’s channeling of the passive mediumistic trope of the inspired bard derives in part from, and sustains affinity with, Romanticism’s conceptions of inspiration such as William Blake’s. Yet the passivity of poetic inspiration does not completely account for the productive and critical forces involved in making, for Duncan and his ilk, the practice of poetics worthwhile. Indeed, the figure of poetic inspiration in post-Romantic verse culture continues to disturb itself from within. It undoes its own expressive acts, even as its self-consciously passive or negative forms of inspiration appear to enjoy a form of composure.

Michael Palmer describes Duncan’s achievement as a “Romantic synthesis.” To a certain extent, this dialectical end-term rings true to Duncan’s professed indebtedness to Romantic poetic and philosophical traditions. However, Duncan’s cultivation of formal and spiritual multiplicities, dynamic resemblances and contrasts, and productive mystifications tears apart the seams of a complete or fully realized synthesis. Duncan’s poetics more often than not complicate rather than match the synthetic logic implied by Palmer’s account of “making place” for Romantic lore in modernist poetics:

Duncan’s project can be seen in part as an effort to make place once again for the artifice, affect, and lore modernism had repressed. However, this was achieved not in reaction against modernism (and certainly not for the sake of decor), but as an extension of its exploratory impulse and a reading or revealing of its progressive, Romantic philosophical and aesthetic origins. (“Romantic Synthesis” Web)

The initial equivocation in this passage—the “in part” part—betrays the fact that Romantic “synthesis” occludes other crucial parts of Duncan’s project. What are those hidden parts? As one enters into the overlapping levels of *scientia* and *mysteria* in

Duncan's writings, one finds that his sense of poetry's field is always at work, always multiple, and always mobile.¹⁰ In this regard, Palmer's account of Romantic "origins" and modernist extensions aims at a comprehensive and continuous sense of poetic history despite the rhetorical gestures of critical partiality. The story of a recovery or revival of repressed Romantic lore in postwar American poetics not only inadequately apprehends how Duncan imagines vocation through multiple perspectives, but the incomplete synthesis derived therefrom reveals the paradoxical logic underlying Duncan's project.

In a recent study of the varieties of dialectical thought in modern and contemporary philosophy, Frederic Jameson argues that the "vocation of the dialectic," the true work of the dialectic, is to keep philosophical oppositions alive in a "dynamic rather than static fashion" (*Valences* 4, 33). That is, the reification (even by Hegel himself) of Hegel's "rich practice of dialectical thinking" into a thesis-antithesis-synthesis model stultifies the historically, geographically, and ideologically contingent operations of various dialectical forms. In Jameson's view, we must "shift our perspective from sender to the receiver, and approach 'the dialectical' from the shock of its effects on reader and listener, in order to appreciate the force of its originality," rather than by simply labeling a (or *the*) dialectic as the enduring form of a timeless metaphysical dualism (*Valences* 51, 56). This dualism is one major "dialectical effect" of

¹⁰ Duncan's allusions to a "field" of poetry demonstrate his resistance to synthesis. In his Guggenheim application letter of 1958, Duncan proposes that *The Opening of the Field* will be constituted by "about fifty poems radiating from the image and idea of a field, and, where inspired, from the Field Itself—known intimately as the given field of my own life, intellectually as the field of the language (or spirit), and imaginatively as the field given to Man (of many languages)" (Duncan Letters, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley). These simultaneously intimate, intellectual, and imaginative levels overburden the synthetic logic of Duncan's extensive erudition and creative intensity. Rather, the poems "radiate" from a hypothetical nexus, which itself is understood as manifold. While the idea of a coherent whole governs this proliferation of field, I understand Duncan's sense of vocational process to leave unresolved the dynamic between radiating parts, individual poems, discrete or continuing sequences, and the imagined "field."

the processes of mediation in which the dialectical forms take part. Similarly, redefining Duncan's synthesis of romantic and modernist poetics as a dialectical process enables a wider range of awareness of Duncan's discursive play with vocation's rhetorical effects. Rather than simply recovering or deepening the idiosyncratic and complex archive of vocational thematics in Duncan's writings, vocation signals a multifarious range of practices through which Duncan realizes a kind of creative religiosity in late modernity.¹¹ This sense of vocation as practice stands back from conventional ways of reading a poet's corpus along a trajectory, one leading to conceptual synthesis or the aesthetic equivalent of Aristotle's "entelechy"—the completion of living potential in *actuality* (see Aristotle 101-111, 155-163). Indeed, the logic of Duncan's vocational practice includes, like the late works of H.D., Williams, and Pound, what cannot be read or written as a whole.

The Call and Response of Romantic Opposition

The unprecedented increase of economic affluence and cultural conformity in America during the late 1940s and 1950s lies behind (i.e. generates the force of, by being the source of opposition to) Duncan's ongoing appeals to vocation. Intensified social and economic pressures encountered by artists in this context made the practice of poetry increasingly vulnerable to political critiques from both the right and left. The caricatured forms of these critiques can be rather absurd, albeit all too familiar. From a conservative point of view, one will hear accusations leveled against the unrestrained practices of free verse, practices that are susceptible to ethical indifference (or intellectual solipsism, or ideological zealotry) and produce a subjective expressivity that parades its narcissism as a

¹¹ Influential readings of Duncan's work in terms of its Romantic and occult sources include Altieri (1979), Nelson (1981), Davidson (1989), Fredman (1993), Johnston (2002), O'Leary (2002), Kaufman (2010), Finkelstein (2010), and Nichols (2010).

form of political critique. On the other hand, the use of traditional verse forms and prosodies might signify, to an activist poetics on the left, capitulation to a bourgeois notion of subjectivity, political quietude, social restraint, and elitist notions of cultural authority. This “two camps” model has been a virtually unavoidable framework for American poetic history since World War II. Oren Izenberg’s *Being Numerous* (2011) aims to puncture some air holes in this monolithic (and often stifling) debate. By displacing the familiar nodes of antagonism to a level of categorical analysis at which cognitive and affective constructions of personhood delimit, under the banner of a “new humanism,” a coherent ground for contemporary poetic theory and practice, for Izenberg the “lyric” as such no longer embodies the privileged expressive site of literary subjectivity. Instead, what the lyric, or the “poetic” writ large, indexes, or desires there to be outside of itself, can be understood as the personalizing effects of poetic practice—what Izenberg claims to be the “ground of social life” itself.¹²

A common critical narrative has it that many experimental American poets writing after World War II equipped their respective countercultural ambitions with recuperated versions of Romantic poetics. In his trenchant contextualization of Duncan’s work within the American afterlife of Theodor Adorno’s controversial statements on “poetry after Auschwitz,” Robert Kaufman endeavors to open our critical doors of perception to Romanticism’s resurgent and reapplied presence in “later modernist” poetics. As Kaufman writes:

A more general effort to freshly see and hear the Romantic poetics and the Romanticism-conceived notion of reflective critical agency (itself perhaps just another way of saying life, organic form, or expressivist-constructivist form) inside what was formally revolutionary in Poundian modernism (despite Pound’s,

¹² See Izenberg’s discussion of twentieth-century poetry’s grounding of a “minimal” sense of personhood in the introductory chapter of *Being Numerous* (2011) 1-39.

Eliot's, and others' denials of the Romantic sources) is central to those tendencies within the postwar poetry and criticism seeking to retain yet reorient attractive legacies of modernist experimentalism. ("Poetry After" 120)

For Kaufman, the "reflective critical agency" of many post-Kantian poetic practices is that which centers the attention of Duncan and his ilk on poetics as a writing and reading "agency." Neither the ideals of classical prosodies, forms, or rhetoric per se, nor the "pure products of America," the *things* that modernists claimed to directly treat, satisfy Duncan, who "seems not [to] have heard the very old news that *modernist* means *anti-Romantic*" ("Poetry After" 138). Duncan's work, in Kaufman's account, engages both models of Romantic expressivity and modernist abstraction, but does not simply "retain" these energies as something real and dependable. Keeping the convergences, alliances, tensions, boundaries, gaps, and failures of his vocational project alive requires a sense of creativity's discipline that avoids both the elitist cultural politics of the New Criticism's academic verse culture and the "banality of freedom" to which the idealism of the postwar counterculture in America could be susceptible.¹³ Indeed, it is difficult and problematic to firmly locate Duncan's work within the rubrics of political and cultural affiliations of a postwar neo-Romantic revival in American poetry because his practice renders these affiliations always provisional and often contradictory.

Libbie Rifkin's study of the poetic career's social lives, *Career Moves* (2000), orients my discussion of postwar poetic positions and oppositions toward a direction I wish to pursue even further. For Rifkin, a focus on "career over canon enables an

¹³ The "banality of freedom" is David Kyuman Kim's turn of phrase in *Melancholic Freedom* (2007), which follows upon Hannah Arendt's famous argument concerning the "banality of evil" (20). Kim coins this term to address how in late modernity notions of political agency and freedom have thinned out in many domains of public discourse. I find the phrase helpful in a limited sense—to approach certain unacknowledged inadequacies or risks of countercultural conceptions freedom that do not critically engage notions like discipline, process, and forms of idealism vexed by practice.

examination of institutions from the interested perspective of particularity, historically situated individuals, and allows for an understanding of the poet's 'duty' that includes Eliot's bid to 'extend and improve' the language, but it is also responsive to local material, ideological, and psychosocial demands" (*Career Moves* 6). Duncan's responses to the psychosocial and psychogeographical demands of being a religiously heterodox, anarcho-pacifist, gay, West Coast poet certainly shape the lineaments of his career. But even Duncan's various identities, as well as his position with respect to modernist precursors or to contemporary "program-era" poets like Roethke, Lowell, Jarrell, Bogan, and company, do not fully comprise Duncan's vocation. Rifkin argues that "[p]ostwar poets watched modernism's breach become an institution," and this process involves, citing Pierre Bourdieu, "position-taking"—forms of literary behavior (poetic production, theoretical programs, institutional affiliation, etc.) governed by a homology between forms of cultural capital and the "generalized field of power" (*Career Moves* 9-10). But Bourdieu's economic model does not afford enough detail for Rifkin in mapping out the postwar avant garde's "psychosocial terrain." To focus on "individual actors, attempting to articulate career as the intersection of individual ambition and collective production," moves from the level of the literary field to the individual's ambitions, which are and are not affected by institutional (op-)positions and collective affiliations (countercultural or otherwise).

At times, Duncan's target of opposition is quite clear: the Protestant work ethic of genteel, middle class culture. Call this "weak" vocation. Duncan identifies this ethos with the evacuation of work's meaningfulness by capitalist norms of production and consumption, the standardization of social and family life, and the career's fixed narrative

arc. In this regard, Duncan gives credence to Weber's famous treatment of the secularization of religious callings and its reformation in modern industrial capitalist forms of labor and social existence—what Weber defines as “worldly asceticism” (*Protestant Ethic* 72-73). The threats to poetic practice that Duncan identifies in this model of life are perceived to be real on a greater scope than just artistic vocation. Paul Goodman, whose intimate life intersected with Duncan's (Duncan's “Venice Poem” laments the excruciating loss of his boyfriend of the time to Goodman), addresses the problems of “vocation” for the younger generation of disaffected youth in his famous study *Growing Up Absurd* (1961). Goodman's corrective to regnant ideas of vocation in America (according to Puritan-derived notions of God's chosen people, or its corporate transmutation into the organization man) claims that individual vocations must emerge from a community “that tries to provide every youth with his right calling, understanding, however, that its providence is not Providence” (142). This non-theological, non-capitalistic form of vocation, or life purpose, proceeds without an end established before it is put into practice within a communal context:

Vocation, therefore, is a solid means of finding one's opportunities, things worth while, useful, and honorable to do and be justified by. As such, vocations are neither traditional nor rationalistic in some system, but whatever happens to be the ongoing work of the particular community of human interests. (142-143)

For Duncan, the religious patterning of work in an ongoing spiritual practice becomes integral to his avowedly anti-capitalist, syncretistic experimentalism. Central to the confusion concerning Weber's study of this trope is how one's “works” (poems, objects of production) subsume the “work” (calling, process of production) of constructing, or more accurately, *practicing* an identity. In one version of the postwar avant garde's vocational story, radical artistic identity becomes a product rather than a praxis or

process—e.g. Andy Warhol. This embraces, by radically flaunting, the complete success of the Protestant work ethic as a marketable form. Vocation can thus manipulate the organization man as much as the disaffiliated dropout. Both extremes depend upon an understanding of vocation as a ready-made form of identity that one may select (thus earning a living wage, security, and a consumable lifestyle) or reject (assuming there are other lifestyle “options”). Rejection, however, does not lead automatically to a process-oriented mode of vocation.

The broader issue here is to what extent does the counterculture embody banal vocational freedom. The more radical response to this scenario may not involve a durable form of identity, but rather whatever happens to press upon the poet as one practices his or her vocation. In this sense, Duncan cleaves to vocation as a way to identify with and critique these patterns of response. By articulating a practice that is neither devoutly secular (a poetics that claims to be untainted by authoritative forms of religious belief, practice, affiliation, identity, and so forth) nor as transcendently *a priori* (the poet as a quasi-sacred figure whose role in the human story is pre-ordained), poetic calling is neither a “choice” nor a “fate” in the strictest sense. The calling, rather, is the continually imaginative play of both stories as they reform one another in time. It is both the call of, and response to, an impersonal history of the collective imagination’s idioms and the intensive experiences of the poet’s physical, intellectual, and emotional participation in that history. Duncan’s vocation is ongoing in a radically non-teleological sense. It goes on outside the purview of particular coterie, traditions, constellations of source texts, and so on. This kind of vocation calls for practices of reading and writing poetry in perpetually dialectical responsiveness, a “permanent revolution” that, as

Roberto Mangabeira Unger recently writes, constitutes a radicalized pragmatism.¹⁴

Postwar Solitude and the Ability to Respond

For some poets, the career's impingements on social and cultural life at mid-century meant a stronger need to reclaim a jeopardized Romantic sensibility. Dylan Thomas, an early influence on Duncan, epitomized such a Romantic image of the solitary and singular artist. Not only did Thomas's virtuosic cultivation of a bardic persona find positive expression in his poetry, but it tragically manifested itself in the personal dissolution and social coercion that led to Thomas's death during his 1953 tour of America. A vocational encomium by Thomas opens:

In my craft or sullen art
Exercised in the still night
When only the moon rages
And the lovers lie abed
With all their griefs in their arms,
I labour by singing light. (Thomas 142)

Here Thomas's syntax confuses the source of poetic agency. The poet's craft may be bestowed upon the poet "by singing light," or it may be produced in the process of the poet's labor, which manifests itself *by* "singing light." The trochaic echo of "labour" heard in "singing" metrically unites the work of these two actions. Indeed, Thomas's music stresses the poet's laborious measurements. Metrical balance and euphonious end rhymes reflect Thomas's formalist sense of a poet's role as a maker of beautifully measured forms. On the other hand, Thomas disowns the "towering dead / With their nightingales and their psalms"—the mythological and religious lore typically

¹⁴ The "transformative vocation" of what Unger recently calls a "radicalized pragmatism," posits itself as the "shortening of the distance between context-preserving and context-transforming activities" (*Self Awakened* 57). See also Unger, *Social Theory* (2004) 26-35.

presupposed in lyric traditions (142). Instead Thomas offers up a putatively secular homage to his timeless lovers. Nowhere but here in the illuminated space of the poet's study can the fruits of Thomas's labors be enjoyed. Moreover, an imbalanced economy of sympathy maintains the relationship between the solitary singer and the solitary lovers. The singer sings "for the common wages / Of their [the lovers'] most secret heart," but the lovers "pay no praise or wages / Nor heed my craft or art" (142). In this tragic circuit of incommunicable value (the song is intended only for the lovers' "most secret heart"), the unwritten question of Thomas's poem remains: Why don't the lovers "heed" the poet's craft? The lovers do not heed his sullen art because they do not need poetry at all. It is impracticable.

Duncan's poetic labor, on the other hand, places itself in the context of a community, imagined or real. The poetic community living and working in Berkeley and the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1940s and 1950s (a.k.a. the Berkeley Renaissance) shaped some of Duncan's earliest conceptions of vocation's social responsibilities. Duncan, along with poets Jack Spicer, Robin Blaser, and Landis Everson conversed and communed with an imagined community, a "queer genealogy" of poets identified in figures such as Whitman, Rimbaud, Crane, and Lorca (Fredman 2005, 110-111). In this context, one of Duncan's early poems, first published in the same year as Thomas's *Deaths and Entrances* (1946), proposes a considerably different dynamic for the poet's affective and spiritual economy—that is, how the poet, outside of commercial success, "makes a living." Duncan begins the poem with an assertion of the historical fact of the contemporary moment's perverse ethical condition: "Among my friends love is a great sorrow" (*Years* 73). The rest of the first stanza elaborates the implications for

the opening assertion of what “love” has become. Acts of communication lack content: “We visit another one another asking, telling one another.” Asking becomes a form of telling, and vice versa, although neither verbal act refers to any content. Asking and telling merely reciprocally denote a common addressee—“one another.” What perhaps for Duncan framed these reciprocal acts of asking and telling is the social orientation of modern secular social imaginaries that Charles Taylor calls the “buffered self” (*Secular Age* 37-41).¹⁵ In this condition, Duncan writes, “We have become our own realities. / We seek to exhaust our lovelessness.” Yet these realities, and the burden/question of love, are poetically inexhaustible. The poem presents this inexhaustibility by repeatedly modifying its assertions based on the phrase “Among my friends love is [...].” Duncan’s poem works its way toward an understanding of poetic vocation defined by its subjection to his present-day micro- and macro-social contexts.¹⁶ The poet has been called in the process of its formulations to ask the question about poetic practice that Thomas’s lovers and the solitary poet ignore. Suspended in the amber of their own grief, Thomas’s lovers do not “question the fire” as do Duncan and company (even if such skepticism is problematic among the circle of friends). The solitary lovers do not offer the “common wages” for which the poet aspires, and their embrace isolates their world from the poet’s.

¹⁵ In *A Secular Age*, Taylor writes: “For the modern, buffered self, the possibility exists of taking a distance from, disengaging from everything outside the mind. My ultimate purposes are those which arise within me, the crucial meanings of things are those defined in my responses to them” (38). Duncan’s speaker assumes this “possibility” of disengagement is a prevalent condition—not a given fact of, but rather a prevalent story about, modernity—that poets must engage.

¹⁶ These micro- and macro-contexts might, in Duncan’s case, be inferred to be his immediate poetic community (“among my friends”) and the social, political, economic, and cultural worlds of the United States immediately after the end of World War II. Duncan’s “we,” while oscillating between or superimposing local, national, or even international domains, is emphatically embedded in the processes and facts of the historical present: “Among my friends love is,” “It *has become*,” “We *do not*,” “We *have become*...”. Gradually, though, the parameters of the poem’s historical present stretch further into the past and future as the poem reaches its resolution: “We *seek out*...,” “It is an *old debt* for a borrowing *foolishly spent*,” “And we *go on*,” “love is a wage / that one *might have*.”

Given the fact that the poet's song never reaches its intended audience, the poet listens to, or consumes, his own voice.

Working toward a propositional resolution, Duncan's lines accrue conflicting realities and responsibilities that impinge upon the poet's living:

We do not burn hotly, we question the fire.
We do not fall forward with our alive
eager faces looking thru into the fire.
We stare back into our own faces.
We have become our own realities.
We seek to exhaust our lovelessness. (*Years* 73)

The poem's "resolution" is double in that it reminds one of the etymological wedding between a "wage" (what the poets accomplishes, earns, or "has," by his labor) and a "wager" (the risky, uncertain stakes of the labor in its resolve) (*OED*, "wage *n.*," "wager *n.*," "wed. *n.*"). The poem's destination is a proposition of what remains to be fulfilled (or, in Duncan's convoluted logic, evacuating the vacuity of contemporary "love"). For Duncan, poetry, like love, is not always "exercised in the still night" as Thomas's solitary work, but goes out among "the passing faces" of the social world beyond the poet's circle of intimacy. In this light, Duncan's spirituality, like his poetics, champions (with no set premium on coherence) a mode of "seeking" rather than of "dwelling." In *After Heaven* (1998), Robert Wuthnow uses these terms to describe prevailing modes of spirituality in postwar America. A spirituality of "dwelling"—rooted in religious institutions, domestic life, traditional doctrine, ritual practice, and discipline—lacks the nomadic freedom and self-reliant possibilities of a "seeking" spirituality, which lends itself to more syncretistic, pluralistic, and personally-tailored forms of belief and practice (*After Heaven* 1-18). Yet what looks like an affective and spiritual problem at one moment in Duncan's poem—"We do not burn hotly, we question the fire"—turns at another moment into a necessary

extension of the poetic process that foliates from the seed of a repeated prepositional phrase—"Among my friends." This is the "pre-position" of Duncan's community. The second stanza continues: "Among my friends love is an answer to a question / that has not been askt. / Then ask it." The answer in the subsequent stanza emerges without the previous stanza's implicit question. The only choice is to go on "borrowing and borrowing / from each other," a process in which "love is a wage / that one might have for an honest living." Duncan's poem works out the *telling* of a question in the processes of "earning" the poem's final proposition, an articulation of poetic vocation that can dislodge itself from the secrecy and isolation of Thomas's lovers. The poet's ideal audience is not an audience at all. It is a community. In the process of its various conflicting activities, the community wagers for an "honest living" by realizing its responsibilities in a world of multiple, contingent, and conflicting immediacies. If social, political, economic, sexual, or spiritual freedoms are to be produced by poetic means, they will be "borrowed" means. The practice sketched out here by Duncan is provisional (denoting temporary possession and promising an eventual, but indefinite, return) and derivative (that temporary possession is borrowed *from* someone or something). Both an ongoing process and a lawful discipline reconstitute the law of poetics, and of love, in the habitual forms of a practice.

Freedom's Law

As Duncan's recurrent "we" unfolds along his major collections of the 1960s—*The Opening of the Field* (1960), *Roots and Branches* (1964), and *Bending the Bow* (1968)—a corresponding sense of lawful discipline buttresses this affective community.

In an essay relating Duncan's poetics to the idea of law in medieval jurisprudence, Graça Capinha queries the ostensible antinomy between freedom and lawfulness in Duncan's poetry. This tension challenges readers to imagine what it means for an "open system" of poetry to cohere:

How does one deal with a poetics that is looking for absolute freedom and possibility, an asystematic/nonclosed vision of reality, a discontinuous, fragmented, incomplete, and decentered model of language—a poetic that is trying to give voice(s) to a discontinuous, fragmented, incomplete, and decentered model of subject—and still argue for a wholeness of organic form, 'a gift of spirit and of tongues,' 'coherence in our moving'?" ("Question of Law" 19)

The relationship between lawfulness and freedom underscores the irresolvable and perhaps hypertrophied combinations of religious signifiers (theological rhetoric, mythological tropes, ritual performance, and a lexicon of mystical experience) with Duncan's poetic projects. Yet it is admittedly incoherent to describe Duncan's poetic lawfulness as a reinstatement of the sacred as a transcendental term of belief. Olson critiqued Duncan for just this reason in "Against Wisdom as Such" (1954). Duncan's heterogeneous borrowings from religious sources, including the theological rhetoric of divine and natural law, suggest an ambition beyond the things that poems are, for a mode of poetic transcendence routed through the affective potential of illusion. But this form of transcendence *via* aesthetic illusion does not as a rule equate to a complete profession of metaphysical faith in something beyond poetry.

In his introduction to *The Years as Catches: First Poems, 1939-1946* (1966), Duncan claims that these poems "are of an irregularity," recalling that "from the beginning I had not sought the poem as a discipline or paradigm of my thought and feeling but as a source of feeling and thought...having to do with mounting waves of feeling and yet incorporating an inner opposition or reproof of such feeling" (*Years* i).

Discipline in Duncan's sense is not an *a priori* given to which the poem conforms or strives as its ultimate good. It is not the institutional discipline of a church, an army, or the academy. Rather, poets engage a discipline through a textual and affective drama of call and response, the "inner opposition or reproof" of what comes to the fore to face the Law of its own revelation. This affective notion of discipline emerges out of many of Duncan's borrowings, including those of Alfred North Whitehead's speculative conception of a "proposition" as a "lure for feeling" (Whitehead 1978, 25). According to Whitehead's process philosophy, an "actual occasion"—a poem in this case—"is not an enduring substance, but a process of becoming" (Stanford Encyclopedia, Web). For Olson, the poetic process arises from a naturalized tropism, from the organic processes incited by the speaker's breath as it passes through the poet's body. Comparing Olson's naturalism to Duncan's allegorization of nature, Charles Altieri writes:

Olson's tropism becomes in Duncan a universal principle of desire rooted in a set of genetic codes that establish a modern *Pre-Text* or grounding structure without which the play of analogical relationships soon becomes sheer fiction...Modern science makes it possible for Duncan to propose that as nature is allegorical, allegory is natural. (*Enlarging* 155)

This grounding structure—the Law or poetic "Pre-Text"—mutates as Duncan rearranges the relationship between sets of natural or allegorical schemata. Duncan's expresses his faith in the Law, then, as a devoted outlaw: one whose duty is realized by undermining the very "grounding structure" in which his playful work appears to be rooted.¹⁷

Later in his introduction Duncan recalls that "[b]y my eighteenth year, I

¹⁷ James Maynard's extensive analysis of Duncan's engagement with Whitehead's *Process and Reality* after Olson's well-known introduction of Whitehead's work to Duncan in 1957 alludes momentarily to an intriguing sense in which Duncan's earlier works seem to "do" Whiteheadian process naturally. That is, Duncan's early works like "Heavenly City, Earthly City" (1947) manifest, as Maynard writes, a "blending of neo-Platonism and Heraclitean flux" that predate his exposure to Whitehead ("Extending the Field" 69). These early writings are certainly not self-conscious "derivations" from Whitehead, but they reveal how Duncan's discovery of Whitehead triggered an emergent recognition of a latent intellectual affinity.

recognized my sole and ruling vocation...[o]nly in this art—at once a dramatic projection and at the same time a magic ritual in which a poet was to come into being—only in this art, it seemed to me, could my inner nature unfold” (*Years* i). Only in this poetry, only by this “sole” and “ruling” vocation was a poet to *come into being*. Here Duncan retrojects Whitehead’s process philosophy upon his early self-understanding, portraying vocation as ontogenetic unfolding rather than as ontological source. To have a poetic vocation means *becoming* rather than *being* a poet. Other references to primal vocational scenes from Duncan’s early life comment on how the rhetoric of disciplined disobedience displaces conventional forms of obedience such as the genteel middle class “way of reading” that “was not only tedious but wronged what we read” (*H.D.* 37). Miss Keough, Duncan’s high school English teacher, presented a “new way of being” to Duncan that rejected the “status of appreciation and knowing about things, of reading skillfully and remembering points that were important for tests in what you read” (*H.D.* 37, 40). This “way of being” initiated a new way of reading through which a poem itself must be understood as a transformative illustration of poetry’s process rather than an inert artifact invested with the cultural capital of middle-class morality. Thus the reading process of vocation is also always provisional, not prudent. Duncan looks back to his first reading and writing of poetry as a matter of incremental oscillation between anticipation and recollection:

We make good our earliest readings, make real what even we failed to see present at the time, transforming the events of our earlier life in a process of realizing what our work and life comes to mean. Creating meaning we create work and life, and, in turn, for meaning is the matter of the increment of human experience which we come to recognize in the language, we unite our individuality with a vision of its communal identity. (*H.D.* 53)

This mention of a “communal identity” underscores that vocation is fundamentally more

than an individual's calling. The ethical impulse of a vocation to "make good" on its earliest promises is thus not an achievable end, but an assemblage of provocations by which "work and life" are creatively interarticulated. Obedience gradually "comes to mean" something other than poetic asceticism, something that cannot be known through the possession of knowledge through renunciation and following a predetermined history. The alternative model of poetic obedience as process realizes itself by unforeseen passages and perspectives within vocational time.

Duncan writes of poetic discipline as a "dramatic projection" or "magic ritual" in the theater of the Law. The curtains of this theater open upon a profession of love in the third poem of *The Opening of the Field*: "*THE LAW I LOVE IS MAJOR MOVER.*" Duncan's mover is not only primary but "major"—i.e. it provides the key to democratic (of a political majority), military (of a chain of command), and musical (scales of measured intervals) systems of harmony. The Law to which the poet devotes his work is not temporally *prior to* but *ubiquitous in* all bodies—whether one's physical "constitution," a political association ("No nation stands unstirrd"), or the universe (*Opening* 10). What is entailed by this redistribution of motivation— from a primary point of origin to a congregation of movement pervading, and destroying, all bodies? To begin, lawful poetic sentences both create and destroy the Constitutional order in service of the Law. As lines flow backwards and forwards, two syntaxes twist together in readerly time. The first line's prepositional fulcrum—"from which flow"—illustrates how the Law moves as an effluence and alteration, derivation and metamorphosis: "*THE LAW I LOVE IS MAJOR MOVER / from which flow destructions of the Constitution*" (*OF* 10). This superimposes a flowing *from* the Law as derivation upon movement away

from it, or flowing “out of” the Law into “destructions” that the secular laws of the Constitution bring into being. The poet’s and the Law’s sentences are thus knotted together in an orderly porosity.

The Law’s speaker shapeshifts multiple times over the course of the poem: as lover, witness, judge, master, servant, shaman, witness (again), composer, audience, reader, hortatory prophet, and finally a dreaming Jacob whose wrestling partner, the angel “Syntax,” turns the dreamer back into a lover. Moments of contact between ordering and disordering roles reciprocally animate the process of the Law’s drama: “There is no touch that is not each / to each reciprocal” (*OF* 10). This animation emerges in the grammatical play between the common subordinating conjunction “but” as coordinating point of the universe’s “outflowings” and “the self up before the Law.” One must re-read the poem’s sentences as mediating between the subject and the Law. “Self,” in this process, becomes the medium:

The shaman sends himself
The universe is filld with eyes then, intensities,
 with intent
 outflowings of good or evil,
 benemaledictions of the dead,

 but
 the witness brings self up before the Law.
 It is the Law before the witness that
 makes Justice. (*OF* 10)

The pivotal “but” coordinates the two figures of shaman and witness. The shaman sends himself out into the realm of spirits, whereas the witness “brings self” face to face with the Law. Both render the poet’s self a medium by which the Law makes Justice. The self is an effect of and a response to the poem’s experiment: to put the Law “before” the witness. The question is whether the Law is *prior* to the witness, or if the Law stands

before the witness as a witness would stand before the judge (an encounter that will generate the next pre-condition of poetic knowledge and the next transition into a re-constitution of “poetic justice”).

The work of the Law before the witness and the work of the witness before the Law proceed in tandem, in the “embrace” of Syntax. This type of process-oriented reciprocity follows the “common pattern” that John Dewey drew upon to describe, in *Art as Experience* (1934), how aesthetic experience is always transitive and interactive. In Duncan’s poem, as in Dewey’s account, no matter the subject, “There is no touch that is not each / to each reciprocal” (*OF* 10). Dewey writes:

A man does something; he lifts, let us say, a stone. In consequence he undergoes, suffers, something: the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing. The stone is too heavy or too angular, not solid enough; or else the properties undergone show it is fit for the use which it is intended. The process continues until a mutual adaptation of the self and the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close. (*Art as Experience* 45)

This rings true for Duncan’s witness, who brings self up before the Law as the Law before the witness makes (poetic) Justice. Yet this making of justice, like Duncan’s vocational process, doesn’t come to a close.

In *Roots and Branches*, Duncan begins “The Law” with a decree:

There are no
final orders. But the Law
constantly destroys the law [...] (*RB* 26)

Like vocation, Law revokes its own laws. In this sense, Duncan’s Law constitutes itself as becoming, whereas laws are occasions of that process. Later in the same poem, Duncan castigates “the deceitful coils of institutions,” an echo of the snake-like figure of Syntax in “The Structure of Rime” (*RB* 30). In the holographic rhetoric of “The Structure

of Rime,” the “snake-like beauty in the living changes of syntax” takes such a shape:

I ask the unyielding Sentence that shows Itself forth in the
language as I make it,

Speak! For I name myself your master, who come to
serve.

Writing is first a search in obedience. (*OF* 12)

The master’s ambivalent command of language derives its power from the process of the Law. “Speak!” entails a silence previous to the sentence, to the poem, or to the poet’s coming to serve: a “first search in obedience.” The poem closes upon a refrain with a difference: the Law becomes “Him” whom the speaker loves. The Law’s personification involves a movement from and a return to love. This is a poet’s self-possession and dispossession before the Law.

The microdynamics of closure and disclosure preoccupy *The Opening of the Field*’s organization as a whole. Duncan’s radical derivation and deviation from a formalized sense of vocation bequeathed by modernism is the pre-text for this lawful unraveling of the Law. In this sense, culminating modernist works like Pound’s *Cantos*, Williams’s *Paterson*, or Zukofsky’s “A” (all cited by Duncan in *The H.D. Book* as key sources for his work in the late 1950s and 1960s) exemplify significant anti-careerist strands of modernist poetics whose central formal feature is the unending sequence. *The Opening of the Field* not only marks Duncan’s transition into a new mode of processual composition influenced by his reading of Whitehead, but an emergence into a perhaps overabundant premonition of how the entirety of one’s poetic resources comprises a process without a discrete end. Duncan’s titles are not conventional titles, but first lines indicating things other than self-contained poems. Duncan breaks up and intersperses his poetic sequence, “The Structure of Rime,” with other emerging, receding, and resonating

movements of the book's ebb and flow. This hypertransitive formalism creates a new continuum by rhythmically re-ordering a book's formal laws. The poetic work of seeking is thus a mode of dwelling, a discipline of freedom in which a voice reconstructs its vows to a community across time.

In the Way of Poetry

It is easy to lose sight of the trees when one enters Duncan's vocational ecosystem. This difficulty often goes unnoticed, and stems in part from how a sense of Duncan's syncretistic practice blends into and enlarges the context of any given poem. "Come, Let Me Free Myself," from *Roots and Branches*, illustrates some of the wide-ranging vocational effects of Duncan's writing within the (now extensively scrutinized) self-contained space of a short lyric. To "illustrate" something conjures a handful of related verbs—to manifest, show, represent, exemplify, reveal, embody, visualize, and so on—all of which coalesce around a very powerful idea about *how* a poem means. This term might lead us somewhere—to the end of the poem, its governing conceit, its radiant gist, what it means—but it does so often by ignoring the tensions and interconnections by which a poem's dynamics render these affective elements more intense and more interconnected. G. Matthew Jenkins reads the rhetorical dynamics of Duncan's poetry in terms of its excess rather than its discipline. Excess, as Jenkins writes, generates the ethical force that "keeps us in the present moment, a moment that is not static but dynamic, always changing and open to the Other" (*Poetic Obligation* 121). Yet in Duncan's work excess and discipline do not contradict each other, but are profoundly complementary as an aesthetic and ethical project. To "keep" something or someone in

the present moment does open one up to possible changes, but only inasmuch as what is kept open can be left behind. One's disposition towards alterity must change radically by engaging that which resists being kept open, what constantly reduces one's options, or that which seems to block a certain number of passages. This engagement involves clearing away some of the most common cultural conceptions of freedom in ethical life and aesthetic practice. Of all these conceptions of freedom swarming in the cultural debates of postwar America life, identity rises to the surface.

What Duncan's speaker cannot resolve, but must continue, is the poem's "subject," which is both the poem's paraphrasable content and the poet/speaker's identity. The poem engages the frustrating, practically exhausting, work of intellectual and spiritual aspiration. In the spirit of a neophyte entering the religious life, the poem begins with an act of renunciation, a form of negative engagement with the world. One might read the rest of the poem as a spiritual exercise, a meditation upon the quandaries evoked by the first line: How does one become free from passionate attachments? By whose, or what kind of, agency? Where does this renunciation lead? Why would one want to do such a thing? Is this even possible? But unlike the stasis and stillness of a lyric meditation, the poem wanders through sets of alternatives and complications that make the point of origin vanish even as its implications are brought to life.

The logic of address disorients the reader from a conventional trajectory of self-knowledge as the immovable goal of one's poems or one's life. The poem's first footfall—"Come"—invokes a somewhere (the speaker's deictic "here") and someone (the implied "you" of the imperative address). But this quickly changes, as the opening line unfolds and enfolds the addressee into the speaker: "Come, let me free myself [...]."

This is the domain of the dramatic monologue, the Romantic lyric that is “overheard,” according to John Stuart Mill’s distinction.¹⁸ The monologue soon splits into a dialogue between two interwoven sides of an argument. “Myself” splits apart from “all that I love,” but the two reattach over the course of a dialogue between the speaker’s desires for freedom and for obedience. This movement resonates in logical turns and sonic ricochets and repetitions:

Come, let me free myself from all that I love.
Let me free what I love from me, let it go free.
For I would obey without bound,
serve as only I serve. (*RB* 55)

Permission, like poetic license, abounds. What abounds are not possessions but expressions of a felt need. Both the freer and the freed need permission, need to be permitted to perform the act of freeing or in order to become free. The speaker strives toward the awareness that he cannot free what he loves if it is *he* who frees it. But this awareness is not enough. The openness expressed in the first two lines does not overcome the speaker’s counter-desire to “obey without bound.” Obedience here constitutes the very substance of freedom.

Looked at from one level, the paradoxical nature of this freedom-in-obedience involves two contradictory terms that suggest synthesis. Freeing oneself from the idea of

¹⁸ The full paragraph in which Mill’s famous formulation occurs gives us a greater sense of the internal ambivalence (not entirely genteel politesse) of an argument upon which so much of post-Romantic lyric culture depends:

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or utterance of feeling: but, if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is *heard*; poetry is *overheard*. Eloquence supposes an audience. The peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself in moments of solitude, and bodying itself forth in symbols which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet’s mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavoring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action. (*Essays on Poetry* 12)

freedom enables an alternative form of freedom, but this is not the synthesis of two opposing poles, a more stable form of “freer” freedom. Rather, freedom is a form of engagement that augments the structures of response that the poem’s lines induce. Stanley Fish describes this dynamic in terms “kinetic art,” wherein poetry “does not lend itself to a static interpretation because it refuses to stay still and does not let you stay still either” (*Is There* 43). Fish’s account of a reader’s experience of poetic meaning as non-static and ongoing usefully illuminates the rhetorical oscillations at play in Duncan’s poem. As the speaker confronts an ambivalent figure of an internalized master—what Judith Butler calls a figure of psychic “subjection”—the effects of this encounter inaugurate the speaker’s foundational agency:

Come, let me be free of this master I set over me
so that I must exact rectitude
upon rectitude
right over right. (*RB* 55)¹⁹

The speaker’s freedom opens up the possibility for keener forms of discipline without immovable foundations (“rectitude / upon rectitude”) or discrete dimensions (“right over right”). “So that” conjoins freedom *from* discipline (“the master I set over me”) and discipline *as* integral to freedom (“so that I must...”) within the syntax of speaker’s evolving purpose. Rather than solving this logical inconsistency—between two possible readings of the causal reference of “so that,” which either stress (a) the master’s demand to “exact rectitude / upon rectitude, / right over right” or (b) the speaker’s freedom from the master restructuring a discipline *ad infinitum*—the poem sustains an engagement between both syntactical orders in order to break through the logic of spatial and temporal equilibrium.

¹⁹ See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power* (1997) 1-30.

One of the textual examples in Fish's discussion of what he calls "affective stylistics" helpfully glosses Duncan's trope of the spiritual path. The pun on being "in the way" of one's way echoes a moment in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*:

Chr. Is this the way to the Celestial City?
Shep. You are just in your way. (*Is There* 41)

Bunyan's pun on the word "just" presents an alternative worldview, as Fish notes, in which "spatial configurations have moral inner meanings, and being in the way is independent of the way you happen to be in" (*Is There* 41). In Duncan's poem, the speaker disorients the logic of Kerouac's countercultural *topos* of life "on the road" by also claiming to be "by the road"—somewhere off the road, on the margins of his own way. But the speaker's impatience to be back on the road is part of the way. In one sense, the spiritual path's "inner meaning," the speaker's internalization of "the way," flourishes on the sunny side of the street: "For I am at a station. I am at home / in the sun. Not waiting, but standing here" (*RB* 55). Waiting is a form of being on the way. Along with the presence of Bunyan's pilgrim, we hear modifications of Milton's famous vocational musing upon "that one Talent which is death to hide." Heeding the voice of patience, Milton's sonnet articulates a theological understanding of "standing" and "waiting":

...Thousands at his bidding speed
And post o're Land and Ocean without rest:
They also serve who only stand and waite. (Milton 35-36)

One side of Duncan's "road" is the roadside, the "station" wherein one is at home, serving only as one serves. Yet this original form of service depends upon its counterpart. On the other side of the road, the station's security gives way to the tension built up between waiting to be on one's way and waiting to be free of one's way. The

pressure of this self-making dilemma requires a bearing which is practically unbearable: “And on the other, I am waiting, / to be on the way, that it be *my* way. / I am impatient.” The final stanza’s climactic vocative—“O let me free now of *my* way”—expresses the tension in freedom’s constraints, as the closure of a poetic “destination” forecloses poetic mobility: “For I stand in the way, my destination stands in the way!” The force of the closing exclamation lays claim upon that which is outside of the poem, outside of poems, outside of the way of a poetry leading toward a destination. But in the same process of un-closing a poetics, the subject desires neither something prior to nor beyond the poem’s process of articulation. The exclamation issues forth what I have highlighted in terms of non-synthetic dialectical effects—the forceful shock of concurrently remembering and revoking one’s sense of poetic purpose.

The Vow of the Voice

Duncan’s poetics present a network of traditional resources, the play of inspired voices in harmony and also in dissonant contrast. This dramatic framework includes various contradictions, puzzles, and overabundant conditions of possibility brought into being by the field. Duncan’s avoidance of absolute (or premature) synthesis simply includes the single voice of Romantic self-expression among a polyphonic complex of vocational idioms and religious traditions. As in Williams’s *Paterson*, Duncan’s lyric voice must pass through endless processes of mediation, imitation, amplification, resonance, and association in order to be audible. Vocation thus is not merely a term for spiritual and creative identity, but for the very processes of a voicing and vocalizing poetic form. The trope branches out into different modes of calling and singing, none of

which prevails over the other. In Duncan's works, a spectrum of vocational modalities becomes vivid: processes of invocation, provocation, evocation, revocation, convocation, and polyvocation. Vocation speaks at low and high frequencies, with various musical, visual, and symbolic effects. In Duncan's practice, everything speaks to the poet, including his own voice. His work is to engage this hyper-valence by listening, by keeping the ability to respond to what is happening in the process of vocation.

Take, for example, the opening poem of *Letters: Poems 1953-1956*, "For A Muse Meant." The title evokes the playful indeterminacy of inspiration by provoking, rather than invoking, the muse. The muse is "meant" in a projective sense—meant, even if not realized. But the poem's intention—what was "meant"—is nonetheless real, even if yet to be unrealized. As the poem opens, the poet does not give voice to his inspiration, but breaks it down into its constituent linguistic matter—its syllables and etymons. This mobilizes a current of association without anything preceding the colon's aperture, and the first term has vanished:

: in
 s p i r e d / the aspirate
 the aspirant almost

 without breath

 it is a breath out
 breathed—an aspiration
 pictured as the familiar spirit [...] (L 1)

The opening cluster of puns relating "spirit" with "breath" conspires with the figure of the "aspirant," one who breathes spiritual influence. The effects of this verbal "deconstruction" (the word appears later in Duncan's poem, over a decade before Derrida's coinage) draws forth a picture of "the familiar spirit," a hovering presence that

forms “from the vowels (the bowels) / of meaning” (L 1-2). The visual effect of Duncan’s deconstructive spacing of words airs out “inspiration” so that each letter of the past participle’s root—“s p i r e d”—is aurally and orally distinct, uprooted from its ground. Meaning passes from the opening poem’s opening “colon” like excrement (from the “bowels” of meaning), but is not laid to waste as an objectified and inert literary artifact. Contrary to Olson’s notion of a poetic process that terminates when “form is accomplished,” Duncan’s playful and sequential oscillations between order and disorder shape and reshape the sound and sight of words so that the “spirit” of these verbal forms is doubly suspended (Olson 240). This vertiginous suspension of stable meanings through acts of verbal decomposition and the suspense of vocation’s mystery, the poem’s devotion to uncertain, but suggestive, resonances initiated by the poem’s play and thereby extended to the reader, do not nullify or neutralize each other. Such tensions conspire to transpose single poems from the crystalline internal bonds of the poem-as-verbal-icon into a process of poetic aspiration.

The poems of *Letters* speak directly to Olson’s directive to “step back” to the “place of the elements and minims of language,” to “engage speech where it is least careless—and least logical” (241). The collection’s response to the poetic vocational paradigm of “Projective Verse” does not conform to Olson’s unalterable purposes of line and breath. Olson’s aggressive immanentism, his assertion of a process poetics that achieves poetic ends beyond the confines of traditional verse forms, but which also avoids the formlessness to which pure self-expression can devolve, clashes with the neo-surrealist and exploratory poetic religiosity of Duncan’s work in the 1950s. One poem in *Letters* includes an array of religious gestures and allusions to poetic wisdom, elements

for which Olson critiqued Duncan's early work.²⁰ Duncan represents the gestures of Christian worship as symbolic acts of inclination or desire that unmoor the poem from lyric's spatiotemporal containment. For instance, in "Upon Taking Hold" (inscribed to Olson), Duncan writes:

The poetry—now—a gesture,
a lifting of sentence as the wind lifts,
palm outward in address,
 fingers,
 exactly
 curld

—it is a fact—

the words not to be alterd.

Is there another altar than the fact we make,
the form, fate, future dared
 desired in the act? (*L* 7)

Prayer and worship ("fingers curld," "words not to be alterd") recombine in a written/spoken gesture of poetic desire—pronounced by the poem's rhetorical question—whose verbal resemblances are seen, heard, and thought through the poetic process of meaningful change (alteration) and of "lifting up" into potential significance ("another altar" being brought to mind in the act of questioning its possibility). In a set of Duncan's illustrations and textual insets from a later poem in the same collection, "An Owl Is An Only Bird of Poetry," Duncan transposes the generative poetic principles of Pound's Imagist triad (*melopoeia*, *phanopoeia*, and *logopoiea*) into an associative

²⁰ Olson specifically critiques how Duncan "chastises himself as either more or less than he is, because of some outside concept and measure of 'wisdom'" (260). But this self-chastisement, recognized as a mode of creative engagement, is precisely the generative force of vocation for Duncan. While this sense of constraint is taken from religious settings, Duncan's discipline does not hinge upon discernably religious nor purely secular sources of authority (as Olson's urge for complete autonomy portrays such religiosity). For a useful discussion on this essay and some differences between Duncan and Olson around this period, see Don Byrd, "The Question of Wisdom As Such" in *Robert Duncan: Scales of the Marvelous* (1979) 38-55.

textbook-like diagram (*ABC* 37-38). These images combine a phonetic and phonological partition of speech sounds with the vocabulary of religious ritual and discipleship. The sonic and visual confluence of “owl” and “vowels” (as well as the “bowels” and “vows” of the poet) evokes “a possible music” latent in these figures:

FIGURE 1

The vowels are physical corridors of the imagination emitting passionately breaths of flame. In a poem the vowels appear like the flutterings of an owl caught in a web and give awful intimations of eternal life.

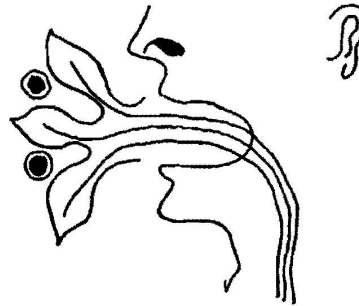
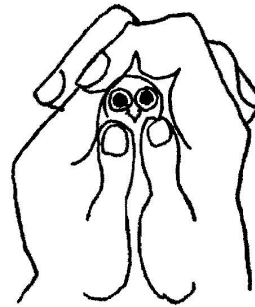


FIGURE 2

The consonants are a church of hands interlocking, stops and measures of fingerings that confine the spirit to articulations of space and time.



(L 42)

On the one hand, Figure 1 portrays vowels as a form of freedom, with the open mouth “emitting passionately” the flame-like fluttering of their notes/tones. Vowels are the corridors of the voice, the literal channels of a poet’s “vocation.” Yet while wisdom, the owl of Minerva, has its wings “caught in a web,” it still conveys “awful intimations of eternal life.” Like Duncan’s “everlasting omen of what is,” the owl/vowel/vow is the constant reminder in linguistic form of the spirit. The divided flames of Duncan’s vowels resemble the Pentecostal fire, but in Duncan’s hand-drawn illustrations this fire transforms into the organic images of foliating leaves and budding fruit. The buds manifest the first poem’s opening colon: the “lure for feeling” that Duncan derives from Whitehead. The fruition of inspired speech pictured here indicates further forking of the

poet's tongues as well as more intense correspondences between the processes of the perceived world and the perceiving processes of the mind.

Corresponding to Figure 1's buds are the owl's eyes in Figure 2. In the second image, the consonants form "a church of hands" or "stops / and measures of fingerings"—the necessary delimitation of freely flowing vowels. Like their rhyming relative, "consonance," consonants articulate connections between like sounds (between the tones of vowels) and between like gestures and meanings ("hands interlocking" in prayer resembling the rafted ceilings of a church, the institution in which the spirit is "confined"). The visual gestalt of these two figures—vocalized text and ritual gesture—forms a figure in prayer, which is what the poem's first section ("INCLUDE A PRAYER") does in its excessively anaphoric imperative to "include" the multifarious "orders descending through words" (L 42). Among the list of included orders is the "tree upon which our life hangs/ ...the metaphor in which from that tree Christ is crucified" as well as "chairs and tables and comfortable things" (L 42). No distinctions between high and low, empty and full, despair and hope, can be made in this figure of inclusion because it has no ultimate goal except for the multifarious arrangements and "disarrangements" of the spirit that poetic practice intends. The corollary religious figure is both incidental and essential to Duncan's poetic practice. As *illustrations*—a term whose meaning Duncan derives from Whitehead—the figures "move chunks of inertia about expression...to evoke otherness, and to view the personal only as incident."²¹ And yet the images interlock the forces of spiritual pretense and conviction, or of phonemic freedom and constraint, together in the crucial dynamic through which Duncan's work engages the persistence of those expressive forms that religious practices share with a poetics balanced, and

²¹ Letter to Robin Blaser, November 5, 1958. Bancroft Library: University of California, Berkeley.

unbalanced, by its everlasting omens.

“Metamodernist” Pre-Formances

Duncan’s writings invite ways of reading modern and postmodern senses of poetic vocation as a complex of ongoing effects precipitated by the symbolic resources afforded by borrowed (and wagered) forms of religiosity. In the recently published edition of *The H.D. Book*, editors Michael Boughn and Victor Coleman describe Duncan’s intellectual-historical prescience as such:

Long before the wave of postwar European philosophies entered the awareness of North American academics, Duncan was already exploring the significant moves they were to make to reopen the world to the multiple realities foreclosed by modernity’s singular Real. The indeterminacy of meaning, readerly texts, the diversity and multiplicity of the truths of the world, the fluid boundaries of “time” and “space,” the fictionality of the subject, all these openings into those dimensions of the world rendered occult by the disciplinary institutions of modernity, were the playgrounds of his thinking. (*H.D.* 12)

Discipline grounds Duncan’s radically playful poetry by preserving the necessary means for making a committed poetic response to banalized forms of freedom. Duncan’s principled syncretism, governed by the evolutionary trope of process, helps us see how radically different Duncan may be from some of his contemporaries and also how his work tests the boundaries, sounds the lifespan, of the countercultural moment itself. My central claim has been that Duncan’s poetry articulates a rigorous open-endedness that engages certain cultural-political contradictions of postwar poetics on both the left and the right. What is required by this sense of vocation is both the diffusion of the poet’s identity into communal orderings, as well the dissolution of neo-humanist grounds for identity itself. Such a demand might sound lofty or be impossible to accept for those invested in maintaining a secular humanist framework as the condition of possibility for

poetry's vocation. Nevertheless, Duncan's cultivated loss of identity and dissolution of humanist norms of personhood are realized in and through his appeals to the "human"—not as eternal form, but as a process perpetually entangled in a hypervalent ecology of forms. The human, then, is recomposed in Duncan's writing as the interconnectedness of organic and symbolic processes through which the sacred and the secular mirror one another, and by which poetry transforms of the fictive into the real and vice versa.

Norman Finkelstein interprets the "strange, postmodern *scripture*" of Duncan's late ongoing writings, particularly his ongoing sequence *Passages*, as a deconstructive making and unmaking of poetry as a sustained body of works (*Mount Vision* 31). Finkelstein intriguingly reads the *Ground Work* volumes, *Before the War* (1984) and *In the Dark* (1988), as "becoming an increasingly attenuated, self-diminishing, even self-sacrificing body of writing" (30). This self-diminution can be glimpsed not only in the poetry itself, but also in Duncan's famous self-imposed fifteen-year vow of non-publication (quite an ascetic "career move") after 1968's *Bending the Bow*. But the characterization of Duncan as simply a postmodern visionary of self-dissipation sustains a hagiographic impulse that does not fully account for what is both more radically forward-looking and more radically conservative in Duncan's œuvre. The more unsettling and paradoxical dimensions of Duncan's practice not only undo the standard early-middle-late trajectory of a poet's career, but such multidimensionality refocuses our habits of reading so that Duncan's writings seem radically foreign to any single poetic or intellectual order. The syncretic process always includes more than it can synthesize. Its own self-sacrificing, or deconstructive, impulses do not achieve a *complete* undoing, for it is poetic vocation's worldmaking calling to keep this undoing incomplete.

Recent work on what comes after the postmodern in contemporary art has come up with scores of new prefixes and terms. In “Notes on Metamodernism,” Timotheus Vermuelen and Robin van den Akker add “metamodernism” to a list of neologisms such as hypermodernism, digimodernism, pseudomodernism, or automodernism. Such terms contend for theoretical currency as a way to appraise a recent Romantic turn in visual art, film, architecture, and literature after postmodernism. “Metamodernism” characterizes the elements I have highlighted in my discussion of Duncan’s late modern reworking of vocation. As Vermuelen and van den Akker suggest, the metamodern “should be situated epistemologically *with* (post) modernism, ontologically *between* (post) modernism, and historically *beyond* (post) modernism” (“Notes” 2). The “both-neither” dynamic of *metaxis* (literally situating “between”) characterizes metamodernist aesthetics as a pragmatic idealism that not only derives *from* an invocation of ideals, but branches *out* and *into* various provocations and evocations of those ideals. Duncan’s sustained play upon the ideal of vocation thus provides an exemplary instance of mediating the risks of modernism’s fanatic will to totality and the “bad infinity” of postmodernism’s endlessly pluralizing ironies.²² As a “deliberate being out of time, an intentional being out of place, and the pretense that desired atemporality and displacement are actually possible even though they are not,” Duncan’s metamodernist “pre-formances” reveal the disenchantment narrative of modern secular culture to be a pretense, having only the semblance of a reality that poetic expression takes license to reveal as impure, always

²² Justus Hartnack’s analysis of why and how “*die schlechte Unendlichkeit*” is “bad” according to Hegel underscores a point that I have stressed throughout—namely, that the logic of vocation is distinct from a logic of completion: “[Bad infinity] is an endless series of finite terms, that is, of terms that, by necessity, are finite and also, by necessity, must continue to the next item. From the very fact that its continuation is logically built into it, it follows that there is a conflict between what the series requires, namely, its continuation to completion, and the logical impossibility of such a completion” (*Hegel’s Logic* 21).

incomplete, and undergoing further modification (“Notes” 12).

Duncan’s re-signification of religious and Romantic idioms of vocation interfuses a process-oriented pragmatism based on ongoing world-construction with a high modernist’s fidelity to formal experimentation. Yet Duncan also exposes the ongoing limitations of pragmatism’s inclination toward reflexive, provisional wholeness. Here the final form a career might take serves as a check to vocation’s own “bad infinity.” While Duncan accuses a poet like Dante in his 1961 essay on Perse as not a truly “catholic” poet, that exclusion is not by any means absolute. Dante’s theological vision returns in Duncan’s “Dante Études,” a work informed by Duncan’s engagement with the “immediate, everlastingly immediate” lore of the “idea of Poetry” (GW 98). The epigraph to the sequence reads:

*It is in the social definition of freedom
that we most sense
the presence of the Law:
pluralistic, multiphasic,
liberal, radical. (GW 98)*

Terms like “liberal” and “radical” are evocations of intensities (what we “most sense”) provoking further orders and disorders of the Law. Its sacred and secular constitutions are, throughout “Dante Études” (and elsewhere and elsewhere), phases of a drama that poetry engages without canceling out the religious resonances and dissonances of the metamodern. What is most radical in Duncan’s conversion is how the practice of poetry is neither absolutely ordered nor disordered, but maintains order and disorder as constitutive processes within the life of a poetic community. These processes involve being “at strife with our own conviction on behalf of the multiplicity of convictions at work in poetry” without settling into a secular or religious framework of poetic affiliation

(*FC* 111). Such a disciplined sense of radical freedom might free readers from reading the poet's career as a closed system. In this sense, Duncan's poetic vocation is made up along the way, as it has always been, and remains active. As Eric Keenaghan has argued in "Robert Duncan's Radical Humanism; or, On the Crises of Reading and Falling in Love," Duncan's "radical humanism" offers a new sense of political agency and a reconstructive ethos whereby one "gives oneself over to listening for a call that may or may not come" ("Radical Humanism" 124). Vocation thus proceeds by way of practices of the self through which one finds oneself "in the way" of poetry: obstructing the course of poetry *and* following its orders (*RB* 55). Our answers to the biggest questions that Duncan poses, as in the Dante Étude entitled "The Whole Potentiality," ought to compel us to continue to investigate how contemporary poetic experimentation continues to modify what a vocation means in a secular and/or a post-secular age. This calls us to feel one's way with, between, and beyond the career of the secular modern:

the end of which is *doing* and

making, enactment

and poetry,

intending the very
movement of his hand so

the Creative, Man

enters into the Process of *Man*. (*GW* 112)

CHAPTER 3

The Will to Change...Is Always One Word Short: Adrienne Rich and the Formalist Continuum

A life I didn't choose
chose me: even
my tools are the wrong ones
for what I have to do.

-Adrienne Rich, "The Roofwalker"

the moment of change is the only poem

-Adrienne Rich, "Images for Godard"

Poetry has the capacity to remind us of something we are forbidden to see. A forgotten future: a still uncreated site whose moral architecture is founded not on ownership and dispossession, the subjection of women, outcast and tribe, but on the continuous redefining of freedom—that word now held under house arrest by the rhetoric of the “free” market. This on-going future, written-off over and over, is still within view. All over the world its paths are being rediscovered and reinvented: through collective action, through many kinds of art. Its elementary condition is the recovery and redistribution of the world’s resources that have been extracted from the many by the few.

-Adrienne Rich, Poetry and Commitment

Adrienne Rich’s various poetic commitments—to a “tradition of radical modernism,” to a lesbian-feminist critique of patriarchy, and to the discourse of universal human rights—articulate the conception of vocation with explicit political responsibilities (*PC* 37). Accounts of how Rich’s poetry came to be, and how her poetry works, or has stopped working, for readers typically emphasize an abrupt and irrevocable personal transformation at a discrete historical moment. To some degree, such a story of transformation can be found in Rich’s biography and her writings. This tale of poetic awakening resembles in many ways a kind of spiritual conversion to a new life and a new consciousness. As new social, cultural, and political pressures multiplied the resonances of an individual’s or community’s vocation for social and political activism in the 1960s, the value Rich placed on a poet’s and poetry’s determined endurance increasingly became a key part of her political rhetoric. Countercultural poets in the 1960s variously

framed their poetics in opposition to the formal and ideological habits of an academic ethos of literary professionalism whose politics were (and are) allegedly quietist in the political realm. However, such resistance to poetic professionalism did not necessarily guarantee less constricting modes of artistic self-construction. As I have argued in my readings of Duncan's devoutly professional poetics, the critical distinction between the modernist "career" and a romantic-revolutionary "vocation" does not hold true over the course of twentieth-century. Postwar poets grounded in institutional culture as well as those in pursuit of heretical upheaval have blended together and/or purloining elements of each other's rhetorical armature at mid-century (as they have in other historical periods). And thus the opposition between normative liberal culture and its radical opponents cannot remain as strictly bifurcated as its various practitioners and critics in the postwar poetic field have tried to keep it.

To be sure, the poetry written by Rich during and after the late 1960s undoubtedly pronounces an unabating desire for radical change—a desire that her early writings only anticipate. Yet as Rich contested the gendered limits of vocational discourse, she registered how open-form poetry's ideals of social engagement have struggled to confront the rhetorical limitations and ethical ambivalence that are endemic in radical poetic practices.¹ I shall argue in what follows that Rich's collections embody a situational practice of ethics that unfolds along a formal continuum. By "situational

¹ By the "gendered limits of vocational discourse," I have in mind critiques of poetic vocation's traditional gender dynamics (its "Orphic" mode) such as that articulated in Rachel Blau DuPlessis's "Manifests" (*Blue Studios* 2006). DuPlessis analyzes the "electrifying gender binary" of works like Allen Grossman's *Summa Lyrica* and Charles Olson's "Projective Verse" and argues that the stories these poets have inherited and perpetuate (e.g. the female Muse as a master trope that communicates the gendered ideology of poetic vocation) are ones that have consolidated "access to language, the formation of the poet, the possibilities and reception of poetic practices, [and] the motives and causes of cultural action [that] have made use of gender and sexual (and—certainly—ethnic and class) narratives that depend on, or are indebted to, rigid categories of behavior and limit for females" (*Blue Studios* 94). Both Rich and DuPlessis's works are thus central to a counter-genealogy of postwar poetics that conjures the figuration of an "anti-Orpheus."

practice of ethics” I mean an ethos that jostles between anticipatory anxiety toward, intuitive acceptance of, and resistant seizure of power from the other without reference to a formal absolute (literary or political). Together these impulses form a nexus of ethical questioning through which many of Rich’s poems generate a positive dissatisfaction with open-endedness as such. Whereas various critics of Rich’s poetry assume that her major poetic transition marks a revolutionary standard for all of her work—early, middle, or late—I ask: What other ends does her work serve if the ideal of open-endedness proves to be insufficient? What if the “will to change” of poetic modernism, and its late-twentieth century iterations, proves to always be one word short?

These questions issue into more specific ones. How does a woman poet of postwar America re-imagine the ramifications, complexities, solutions, and uses of a term like poetic vocation? How does she make a living poetry when, as Rich puts it, a life she did not choose chose her? In what ways do the rhetorical associations of “choosing” or “being chosen” characterize Rich’s extensive poetic career? I shall address these questions and their implications for Rich’s redeployment of religious categories of identification—most openly expressed in her writings on the culturally “split” condition of Jewish-American identity—despite her explicitly secular articulation of sociopolitical commitment? As poetic vocation’s sense of temporal deferral appears to be at odds with the lived crises and conflicts of “women’s work” in the United States, Rich negotiates the complicated dynamics of a continually gendered and engendered trope such as poetic vocation. But, one may ask, is negotiation enough?

My first epigraph, taken from *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), configures the impulses of Rich’s creative practice and the impasses of her intellectual efforts

against the operations of patriarchal forms of power as one and the same. Produced over six decades, Rich's expansive output of poetry brings to light the fact that modernism's cultural imprint in postwar iterations of radical feminism, identity politics, and ethical critique have remained knotted together in personal and political projects of becoming. Rich's vocation thus occupies a formal and temporal continuum in which expansive modes of compositional duration persist in time and "in spite of" the times—in spite of contemporaneous narratives of cultural and historical change (quoted in Braidotti 16). Yet such durational persistence remains intensely troubled in the process of reframing its own convictions. While this understanding of poetry's temporality may idealize duration in a way similar to Duncan's never-ending story of poetic "re-vision," Rich's artistic means of resistance to stasis have impacted the viability of radical modernism for contemporary poets in different and divisive ways.² Critical idealizations of Rich's commitments—whether through positive valuations such as Rich's legacy as a "pioneer" of postwar women's writing in United States, or pejorative images that decry her work as romanticizing identity and political activism at the cost of aesthetic integrity or socio-historical effectiveness—tend to forego a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between radical politics and poetic form.³ One-dimensional readings of the political

² In *Our Last First Poets* (1981), Nelson cites Rich's prefatory comment in her 1975 collection, *Poems Selected and New*, that re-vision "is not a summing-up or even a retrospective, but as the graph of a process still going on," and speculates on whether Duncan may have been an influence on Rich's use of that hyphenated term Duncan used earlier (146). Nelson concludes that, because of her supposed lack of stylistic preference (i.e. re-vision's endlessness is a literal *lack* of political ends), Rich's aesthetic "requires us to reject evaluative criteria external to a poem and its historical context" (147). This reading ascribes to Rich's experimental poems of the 1960s and 1970s an "exaggerated formalism," but in doing so misconstrues how a poetic *continuum* structures Rich's career: as a conceptual and practical means for testing normative and extra-normative conceptions of poetic form *over time*, and as a way to license the unspeakable character of *living* without resorting to the ethical violence that ideals of adequacy or transparency so often demand (147).

³ The impulse to idealize Rich as "pioneer" can be found in volumes such as Claire Keyes's *The Aesthetics of Power* (1986), Alice Templeton's *The Dream and the Dialogue* (1994), and Cheri Colby Langdell's

aesthetics of Rich's career delineate discrete stages of Rich's career, thereby reinforcing a critical vocabulary that separates art and politics into crudely progressive or conservative categories. Whether from the vantage of high formalism or postwar identity politics, such frameworks obscure Rich's incipient articulation of poetic duration, whether as self-empowering mission or vexed obstinacy. Rich's vocation, in this sense, is progressive insofar as it is transversal and relational rather than straightforward and teleological. And such a relational poetics of process is often *confounded* by its rhetoric of expansiveness rather than satisfied with it (especially so because Rich understood the process of poetry not as a personal remedy or compensation for inconsolable suffering, but as the possible ground for a situated freedom and collective resistance to ethical violence). As intimated in the title of her last collection, *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve* (2010), Rich grew weary of how poetry, even the activist lyric, "serves" the intellectual and affective powers that be, and her last poems express such self-examination. For Rich, poetry thus does not always remain adequate to the subjects of her poetic address: the marginalized and oppressed others to which the poet has no affective or effective access, and vice versa. By the same token, this inadequacy comprises the ethical constraints and imperatives that spur both writers and readers to pick poetry up again and again with revised expectations of what is found there, and also what must be created anew.

Adrienne Rich: The Moment of Change (2004). Citing Rich's individual struggles in support of a pluralist narrative of greater historical inclusion and complexity in postwar U.S. poetry, these accounts are blurred by the narrative form that they take, and often cast this literary historical tendency in idealized and oversimplified images of Rich's poetic exceptionalism. For example, Langdell sees Rich as one who "[l]ike the prophet Abraham...bargains and negotiates new visions of the social order as she extends her search to embrace the possibility of a just community in her native country as well" (8). The notion of a formalist continuum is not antithetical to these readings, and I am indeed indebted to many of the readings and perspectives to be found in the aforementioned works. But to read Rich's poetic achievements and aspirations outside of the will to idealize requires greater scrutiny of Rich's celebrity status, in addition to scrutiny bearing upon conservative and academic rebuttals of her politics. This de-idealized version of the story of Rich's career may indeed be a more vital way to engage her poetry and the social worlds it addresses.

The Will to Change

Rich's career, I contend, lays bare the stubborn fact that between a poet's will and poetic change a term always remains missing. And the "fact" of this gap constantly shifts and swerves throughout a lifetime's work. With a title borrowed from Charles Olson's "The Kingfishers," Rich's *The Will to Change* (1971) reverberates in peculiar ways with various modern philosophical master theories of the will's prime modality (and said theories' evocative elision of a material object): Schopenhauer's "will to life," Nietzsche's "will to power," James's "will to believe," or something akin to a "will to pleasure," and corresponding "will to death," in Freud's pleasure/reality principles. But what about these philosophical formulations of modernity does Rich's poetic "will to change" change? In her conversion to free verse experimentation and social and political activism, Rich highlights the paucity of ultimate answers to this question, and thus the limitations of a conception of poetic vocation as intransitive change. While there may be in Rich's poetry a complementary will to remain—to preserve a modernist poetic *in order to change* our attitudes toward the historically silenced voices that remain unheard, unspeakable, unrecognized, and thus unchanged in their suffering—Rich's overriding commitment is to a poetic will-to-newness, even though it assumes other modalities than a full assimilation or flat-out rejection of high modernism.

It has proven easy for critics to lose sight of the uneven ebbs and flows of aesthetic change in Rich's poetry—including co-option, extension, partial foreclosure, distortion, re-vision, and compulsive struggle. By evaluating her poetry in terms of aesthetic and emotional intelligibility (Helen Vendler's reading of Rich's provocative 1972 poem "Rape" reduces the poem to its so-called lack of common decency) or by her

rhetoric's sociopolitical (in)adequacy to constant historical change (as Cary Nelson argues in reading Rich's Vietnam War-era poems), influential critics have read Rich's early work as falling short of certain aesthetic or political standards. But the reasons for these strong reactions are as multifarious as the multiple poetic aspirations and dilemmas that they fail to register. For example, the historical proximity and sometimes melodramatic infelicities of Rich's poetic pronouncements quite plausibly distort Vendler's assessment of Rich as having an all-too-political agenda. Or as Nelson discusses, Rich's willful subversion of lyric's formal compression yields, like much of the poetry of the late 1960s, poems that "cling tenaciously to their own dissolution" (*Our Last* 30). And this does not jibe with Nelson's specifications for successful, or compelling, revolutionary rhetoric. Whatever the grounds, the judgments that critics have made regarding Rich's work from the late 1960s have often bollixed the epistemic and aesthetic combinations of change and stasis through which much of Rich's poetry articulates a positive form of "vocation" in the non-professional sense of an ongoing persistence regardless of the payoff. Rich's sense of ethics expressed in her late work responds to and reenacts problems staged by her earlier poems rather than transcends the aesthetic and political convictions of an earlier moment. Rich's apprehension about the inability of poetry to realize certain utopian goals goes hand in hand with the ethical imperative to continue writing poetry. But there is no sense in attributing the shortcomings or contradictions of Rich's poetry to the putative political conservatism of the lyric as a genre or to the rhetorical inadequacy of Rich's more expansive process-oriented poems to its historical moment. Rich confronts poetry's shortcomings along the formalist continuum her work inhabits. What is found there is never exactly what one is

looking for. The moments of Rich's artistic changes must therefore be resituated and relativized within the constitutive incompleteness of the poetic career that such changes expose.

Charles Altieri classifies Rich's work as a response to the "enervated romanticism" that a predominant portion of male American poets seemed to cling to in the 1960s and 1970s (*Self and Sensibility* 166). Considering the atrophied rhetoric of cultural exhaustion and political resignation in postwar American poetry, Altieri deems Rich's radicalized formalism too dependent upon "vague ideals of a feminine source" and thus unable to "restore writers' or readers' confidence in the speculative poetic imagination" (166). This critique ultimately obfuscates the still important and troubling inquiries into gender that Rich's "poetics of process" initiates by presenting an overly generalized aesthetic and ethical criteria of "the speculative poetic imagination." Yet Altieri's interpretation of Rich's development from the 1970s to the early 1980s does trenchantly highlight how her effort to reconstruct a situated sense of freedom in time (through the dramatic forms of poetic utterance) has produced a style that "could capture the fluid, fragmentary aspects of experience while multiple threads of coherence might disclose the unconscious realities and forces relatively free of the oppressive patriarchal orders that determine discursive intelligibility" (174). Rich's stylistic change, Altieri suggestively claims, is a "probably a mistake," for by his account it precludes Rich from writing a poetry of "discursive intelligibility": a poetry, in other words, whose style is flexible enough to transform personal suffering into stronger interpersonal relationships, from the intimate to the political. But what about other modes of poetic agency operating beyond strict discursive intelligibility? What if agent and agency are, more often than

not, non-identical but related elements in any literary expression? And what if the transformation of suffering and the reconstruction of lyric's ethics occur on different timelines than a predetermined pathway from subject to object, origin to destination, or figure to ground? If these alternative temporalities are in actuality valid, or "live," options, then Rich's "multiple threads of coherence" comprise what *cannot* be a mistake. In their tangled operations, such threads enable Rich's fragmentary poetics to hone one's ethical attention without imposing the discursive violence of narrative totalities.

What these evaluations miss is that Rich's will to change, like many of her contemporaries, emerged sporadically and diffusively. Although Nelson and others have critiqued the rhetoric of open-form poetry's "ambiguous complicity" in the Vietnam War-era's national and historical guilt, the creative perdurability elaborated by Rich, whether in "fluid, fragmentary" poetic sequences or individual poems, does not simply eschew personal responsibility in the void of historical flux (*Our Last* 30). Moments of change dramatized by Rich's poems have an incremental life, consisting of a process whose outcome appears to be "nothing" on its own, as in "Incipience" (1971):

Nothing can be done
but by inches. I write out my life
hour by hour, word by word
gazing into the anger of old women on the bus
numbering the striations
of air inside the ice cube
imagining the existence
of something uncreated
this poem
our lives (*DW* 11)

Rich's practice of dating each of her poems, and her inclusion of the duration of composition in each title of her books, places every work in a historical context that both historically contextualizes the components of the book in the process of its formation and,

in a certain way, dislodges each poem from the book's own kind of finished temporality by situating each poem as a composition within the duration of Rich's lifetime. Rich figures this as the interplay between the natural and cultural "striations" of change, between the passive experience of change and an active will that changes, or evokes, the "uncreated" both as an incipient connection (between "this poem" and "our lives") and the fissures embedded in what appears to be solid form (or "frozen" in time). The uncreated as yet-to-be created, or as that which suffuses the substance of the created with the capacity for de-creation and re-creation, allows Rich to posit in "Images for Godard" that the "moment of change is the only poem" (*CEP* 399). The "I" that "write[s] out my life" gathers itself in "our lives"—a collectivity summoned by "this poem" that also tacitly collapses the two entities in the process of "imagining the existence / of something uncreated." Rather than extracting expedient cognitive ends from a poetic or extra-poetic exchange, the relationship between "this poem" and "our lives" involves an incipient ethics emerging among the speaker's and addressee's shared activities—address, response, challenge, negotiation, and a weathered endurance of the uncreated.

The Avoidance of Ethical Violence

Before going further, I here consider how and why Rich's poetics and politics require a reconsideration of ethics. In *Poetry and Commitment* (2007), Rich describes herself as "both a poet and one of the 'everybodies' of my country" (15). In this speech, subsequently printed as a small chapbook-like manifesto, Rich characterizes poetry's ethics as neither special nor ideal, but indubitably ordinary (*PC* 21).⁴ Yet this mundane

⁴ In *Ordinary Ethics* (2010), Michael Lambek elaborates anthropology of ethics akin to ordinary language philosophy, stressing that ethics consists of the actual circumstances of human practices rather than solely

character of poetic practice is not transparent. For Rich, poetry's ordinary ethics—the “poetic lore” that Whitman describes as “a conversation overheard in the dusk, from speakers far or hid, of which we get only a few broken murmurs”—corresponds to “the obscurity...of democracy itself,” a conversation extending late into the evening, perhaps without a definitive conclusion but with evolving repetitions (*PC* 22). Rich claims that poetry's ordinary ethics is fraught with the ineradicable opacity of its subjects and a constitutive susceptibility to violence that its practitioners risk. Enduring such risks of obscurity, neglect, or negation is how Rich sees poetry as a way of remaining critical of the culture settings in which it is produced. Poets must engage in “a dialogue with others in which it never will be possible to have the last word” (Hedley 70). But this leads us to ask with and of Rich: what *is* possible?

Rich imagines ethical agency as ineluctably opaque, despite her vows to poetic lucidity. Poetry's ethical imperative registers the opacity of having to act with the wrong tools, the fact of being subjected to choices to which one cannot but choose to act with responsiveness. Such an ethical impasse—the emergent encounters with others within persistent socio-linguistic constraints—concerns Judith Butler's *Giving and Account of Oneself* (2005). Butler's discussion of ethical discourse sheds light on how ethical agency may be realized in non-prescriptive modes. Citing Theodor Adorno, Butler highlights the “tension between ethos and morality” that exists such that “a waning of the former is the condition for the waxing of the latter” (4). By extension, an “ethos that

the hypothetical and abstract rules, or codes, of behavior. This perspective is useful for rethinking how poetic discourse is a “modality of social action or of being in the world [rather] than as a modular component of society or mind” (10). In this sense, the relationship between Rich's radical politics and poetic forms emerge as contingent upon contending notions of time—whether history realizes itself in monuments, movement, or moments—and formal practices. While Rich upholds an ethics throughout her work, the formal realization of ethical commitment in her poetry does not uphold a teleology of aesthetic or political self-mastery in such a way that the will to change would ever obsolesce.

refuses to be past” often perpetuates itself by imposing violence on the present, whereas morality is any “set of maxims or rules [that] must be appropriable by individuals in a ‘living way’” (5). While the preference for “ethics” over “morality” as a philosophical frame of reference can lead philosophers into a thorny terminological bramble, Butler stresses that a subject cannot exist prior to her situation in a narrative mode of address and social ontology that “constitutes a precondition for giving an account of oneself and assuming responsibility for one’s actions through that means” (12). Thus any formation of ethical responsibility takes shape within a situation of opacity which is the very ground of ethical freedom.

Butler draws upon Michel Foucault’s studies of the practice of self-making as an inventive process. While Butler notes how this notion of self-making is informed by Friedrich Nietzsche’s account of the emergence of the sovereign subject (the “animal which is entitled to make promises” and internalizes the law as “bad conscience”), she differentiates the two thinkers too starkly: “Foucault differs explicitly from Nietzsche by refusing to generalize the scene of punishment to account for how a reflexive subject comes about” (*Genealogy* 39; *Giving an Account* 15). Yet Butler’s argument vis-à-vis Foucault—that the constitution of a livable practice of ethics is not *ex nihilo*, nor is it reducible to the internalized mechanisms of managing personal and social guilt—stems from, rather than repudiates, Nietzsche’s elaboration of the complex and murky processes of acculturation to moral behavior. The internalization of the law as individual responsibility is, as Nietzsche writes, “an extremely recent and refined form” (*Genealogy* 44). Indeed, the self-creative *poiesis* examined by Foucault emerges out of the ongoing entanglement of both prescriptive and proscriptive forms of reflexivity. This process of

ethical self-formation, as Butler fittingly notes, is indeterminate and opaque. An ethical agent engages in forms of behavior that expose herself to “suffering and injury that cannot be fully accounted for” because any subject “invariably struggles with conditions of one’s own life that one could not have chosen” (13, 19). The echoes of Rich’s writings should not be hard to miss. But the vexed conditions of ethical agency do not equate to the breakdown of ethical discourse. Exposed in one’s singularity, containing irrecoverable primary relations to one’s past, partially opaque to oneself, and substitutable within normative modes of narration (i.e. the structure of address that dispossesses any subject of her historical singularity), one is forced, as Butler puts it, to confront the possibility for “acknowledging a relationality that binds me more deeply to language and to you than I previously knew”—even if and especially because that relationality remains a challenge and an open question (40). What is possible, then, is to make challenges to and pursue questions of ethical relationality without a narrative *telos* of full intelligibility ready at hand.

Rich gives an account of her work as a poet from various ethical positions—sometimes aggressively asserting difference, sometimes equality, and sometimes both at once. In her essay, “Split At the Root (An Essay on Jewish Identity)” (1982) Rich reflects on the conflicted sources of her own ethical formation as a child of a Jewish father and Protestant mother in Baltimore of the 1930s and 1940s: “Sometimes I feel I have seen too long from too many disconnected angles: white, Jewish, anti-Semite, racist, anti-racist, once-married, lesbian, middle-class, feminist, exmatriate southerner, *split at the root*—that I will never bring them whole” (*BBP* 122). These conflicts led Rich to conclude that while “there is no purity” and “no end to this process” of giving an account

of herself, avoiding the ethical violence of any aspect of her identity requires “as part of her resistance, to clean up her act” (123). While Williams and Duncan also acknowledge the indeterminacy and impurity of poetry’s ethics in their respective investments in democratic pluralism and spiritual syncretism, Rich seeks to mitigate poetry’s slippage into rhetorical endlessness through emphatic, albeit provisional, statements of poetic ends. I use “provisional” to stress the compositional act of *providing* substantial forms and livable models of ethical action rather than passively accepting action’s absolute indeterminacy. Those persistent calls to respond within discrete discursive limitations demand more of an ethical agent than he or she can provide in the course of a life. These calls constitute the bonds that Rich sees between ethics as a process of becoming and lyric practice as a formal continuum, and her poetry exposes those bonds to be relentlessly interrupted by social and political responsibilities that impinge upon a poet’s career.

A Career in Three Stages

Although my coordination of Rich’s works along a formal and historical continuum challenges the model of the poetic career as a series of discrete stages of development, a review of how such a critical model has been applied to Rich’s work is useful to bear in mind.⁵ In 1951, her first book of poems, *A Change of World*, won the prestigious Yale Series of Younger Poet’s Award, which was presided over by W.H.

⁵ See Lawrence I. Lipking, *The Life of the Poet* (1981). The tripartite division of Rich’s career mirrors Lipking’s model for a poet’s life—i.e. “breakthrough,” “summing-up,” and “passage” (ix). This model, however, elucidates the particular dynamics of emergence, change, recurrence, and stasis operative in Rich’s work far less than, for example, it does the sheer staying power of one particular narrative of the poetic career (from Virgil to Lowell), no matter how inaccurate or limited the aforementioned model proves to be for assessing any particular poet’s gradual emergence and ongoing creative aspirations.

Auden. In his introduction to this initial volume, Auden devotes most of his attention to diagnosing the contemporary crisis of poetic innovation rather than discussing Rich's work. Auden thus ponders what it will take for a "radical change in human sensibility" to materialize in poetry written after World War II (Cooper 210). This is a time at which, writes Auden, "we are living not at the beginning but in the middle of a historical epoch; they [changes in artistic movements] are not novel but repetitions on a vastly enlarged scale and at a violently accelerated tempo of events which took place long since" (210). Auden's judgment reflects the position of an expatriated English poet who had detached himself from his earlier commitments to left politics and turned to a theological framework, after his return to Anglicanism in the early 1940s, to articulate a sense of the mid-twentieth century's post-revolutionary belatedness. He considers a "typical danger" hazarded by younger poets to be the "desire to be 'original'" (209). Yet in his estimation, the "younger poet" Rich avoids the bumptious impulse to undisciplined innovation for innovation's sake. Auden's implicit claim—*Do not simply make it new, but hew, in new ways, to the old*—envisioned an ideal of poetic change and a kind of world that Rich's poetic career would recognize as undesirable in the late-twentieth century. For Rich, poetic practice can only survive the "vastly enlarged scale and violently accelerated tempo" of the postwar years through a continuously rehabilitated resistance to the continuity of tradition. Rich's antipathy to ideologies of poetic tradition and individual talent (Eliot's call renewed in 1951 by Auden's campaign for postwar poetic propriety) does not render originality as simply a "danger" to be consciously avoided, but as an vulnerable, but essential, term to be channeled into the ongoing work of lyric as a form of political activism.

This breakthrough moment has proven to be anything but definitive of Rich's career. The same can be said for books such as *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963), *Diving Into the Wreck* (1973), or *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978), all three of which mark pivotal moments in Rich's personal history and aesthetic development. What Auden's endorsement throws into relief is how one conception of modernist career entry—i.e. paying one's poetic dues—obscures the potential for radical change with which Rich's early poems are charged, and instead insulates them in terms of the "liberal hope of peaceful change" and the "neatly and modestly dressed" scenes of male-dominated institutions of literary culture (210-211). Rich's early development thus runs counter to the androcentric and formalist presuppositions that are by now quite familiar to her readers.

The continuation of Rich's conventional career story goes something like this: her work in the late 1960s marks the beginning of a second stage, a kind of "conversion" to free verse. The transition coincides with a series of historical, political, and personal upheavals of the same time: the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the founding of the National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966, the emergence of second-wave feminism in the late 1960s, America's escalating military violence in Vietnam, Rich's divorce in 1969 from her husband Alfred Haskell Conrad (who committed suicide the following year), and Rich's increasing prominence as a radical lesbian feminist icon during the 1970s. Amid this web of transitions and upheavals, Rich constructs a new conception of poetic livelihood that necessitated a radical renunciation of her former identity—the attachments, obligations, and understandings in which her early poetry emerged. By articulating poetry as an "act of survival," Rich persistently invokes the sense of a living,

trans-historical community of women writers and activists, as well as of her Jewish ethnicity in postwar America (*LSS* 35). At the same time, however, Rich struggles to negotiate her subversive ambitions and renovated discourses of diasporic Jewishness with conflicting perspectives, both from outside and within these movements. This tension marks the continually questionable transparency of collective identification. At the critical turns of her life and career, Rich has been portrayed as a groundbreaking figure of American poetry, feminist activism, and political resistance in the 1970s. But this public recognition was rooted in a totalizing rhetoric of feminist solidarity. As Betsy Erkkila argues, the rhetoric of solidarity tends to essentialize and totalize difference among women across national, racial, and class boundaries.⁶ In its exaggerated versions, this stage “sums up” an oppositional poetics by subsuming all difference among feminists under the banner of a “common language” and assumes a harmony of resistance within its imagined community.

Such expansive gestures and aspirations occasion the third stage of Rich’s career. Miriam Matty Clark describes this period of Rich’s work as a sustained “account of human anxieties and limitations” through “vivid evocations of a moral and spiritual experience” that explore the “frontierlessness of moral obligation” (“Human Rights” 46-47). In conjunction with Charles Taylor’s account of modern secularity’s social imaginary—where “many forms of belief and unbelief jostle, and hence fragilize each other”—Clark charts a widening of concern in Rich’s poetry from the 1980s onward. Amid the backdrop of global neoliberal economic and military developments, Rich turns more and more to a discourse of universal human rights, a turn that entails engagement with every aspect of the poet’s identity (47). Rich thus begins responding to the

⁶ See Erkkila, *The Wicked Sisters* (1992) 152-184.

pressures felt by “moving into accountability, enlarging the range of accountability” that poetry can provide (50). Among the strategies Rich employs in her late works, Clark highlights the “global ‘you’” of Rich’s many poems of ethical address (56). This expanded range of concern seeks a vocabulary of “*indivisible* pain” shared across time and distance (65). Many of Rich’s writings of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s grapple with the possibility of a poetic vocation’s ethical fulfillment (or “fulfill-ability”) by interrogating the various sources of identification among which Rich finds herself temporally, spatially, and affectively split. In the last decades of her life and career, Rich appeared to reach a stage of poetic “passage”—of passing on a poetic legacy, surpassing one’s own culminating efforts, and presenting clues to readers for the furtherance of their work. As artificial and retroactive as these three stages are, they nonetheless reflect how Rich’s career lends itself to a narrative of progressive aspiration that her poems concurrently corrupt, dismantle, and expropriate. With a career saturated both by the highest poetic awards and deep socio-political antagonism, Rich’s work struggled not only to redefine women’s experience, but to figure out how to map the experience of a vocation onto something other than the trajectories of the past.

The Formalist Continuum

Two days after her obituary in *The New York Times* on March 28, 2012, David Orr’s short retrospective piece on Adrienne Rich’s life and work, “Adrienne Rich, Beyond the Anger,” appeared in the same newspaper. Orr reaffirms the high formalist standards of poetic value from which Rich emerged, grew away from, and actively critiqued for decades to come. Yet Orr does so by claiming to move, as his title suggests,

“beyond” the past. Acknowledging Rich’s cultural stature as a poet *and* a public intellectual (one should question whether these roles must be separate or not), Orr claims that Rich’s legacy suffers from a readership that overemphasizes the “social history” of which her work has remained critically reflective. This appraisal exhorts Rich’s current or future readers to treat Rich’s work *simply* “as poetry” (“Beyond the Anger” Web). In doing so he calls for a re-examination of the “conventional view of her [Rich’s] career,” which:

[...] goes something like this: After following in the footsteps of her (mostly male) poetic models and writing a prim, formal, cautious sort of poem, Ms. Rich arrived at her true style with “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law” in 1963. In that collection and the books that came afterward, her forms relaxed, her voice gained a new, often furious register, and her societal concerns became specific, rather than blurred by the indirections of the period style. (“Beyond the Anger” Web)

The solutions Orr proffers for this problematic narrative appear to be twofold. First, Orr aims to recover Rich’s early and late poems from critical neglect brought about by the popular success of Rich’s “furious” voice, i.e. her middle stage (presumably her groundbreaking collections of the 1970s and 80s). Secondly, and by implication of the first, Orr wants to expose and correct a greater public misapprehension of a poet’s and poetry’s role in the United States that persists today. As Orr puts it, “[t]he more the public looks at a poet, the harder she becomes to see” (“Beyond the Anger” Web). Despite the explicit intentions of Orr’s mission of cultural recovery, this piece covers up the tensions between the impassioned politicization of poetic form in postwar America and what may be found by recuperating of an inhabitable “uncertainty” (“Beyond the Anger” Web). The latter is, by Orr’s account, lyric’s characteristic kind of ethical thinking. One is “open to the questioning of others, as well as herself,” a.k.a. the liberal pluralistic subject (“Beyond the Anger” Web). Although Rich critiques the ironic and politically quiescent

ethos of a caricatured bourgeois liberal subject, her use of the lyric voice as a mode of political address relies upon the rhetorical dramatization and embodiment of such a subject. Thus the tensions between poetic form and pluralistic self-critique in Rich's work can be, and often are, precarious and, in the end, *uninhabitable*. The psychic satisfactions or political interventions Rich's poetry provides are quite incipient and limited in their scope. To take Rich at her word, we must read each and every poem not as a dwelling in uncertainty, but as a moment of change.

Rather than balk at Orr's challenge by simply reasserting the central aesthetic significance of her "anger," a more substantive engagement with the issues behind such reactionary critiques of Rich's legacy must venture into those poems that appear exhausted or neglected by a readership supposedly enthralled by her radical, activist, and "public" poems. Rather than angrily protest Orr's dubious insinuations (i.e. that poetry is somehow "beyond" social history; that *lyric* uncertainty is distinctively different from and better than other kinds of self-questioning; and that "an Adrienne Rich poem" can be gauged as more or less Rich-like according to this comfortable ideal of lyric uncertainty), I turn to "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers," a well-known poem from *A Change of World*, in order to test assumptions like Orr's and how they distort the current critical consciousness (collective or not) of Rich's work. In turn, considering Rich's poetry *as social history* and *as poetry* should, I propose, be complementary to each other in the dramatic experience of pathos and irony, of being moved and unsettled, in Rich's poems. Furthermore, I read "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" as inviting critical dialogue with poems such as Louise Bogan's "Women." The latter was written amid an earlier generation of American feminism, and offers a different use of a lyric persona. While Bogan's literary

politics seem more restrained to many critics than even Rich's most well-wrought lyrics, "Women" also provides clues to the potential subversiveness of formalism in Rich's early poetry. Bogan's animation of wit and irony through her persona's produces an example of what Stanley Fish coined a "self-consuming artifact" (see Fish 1972). Bogan thus presents complex ethical and epistemological dilemmas through which speech comes to life in irresolvable tension. Rich's poem, however, underutilizes the intensity of wit in favor of a surplus of pathos, an affective sublimation displacing the personal agency of Aunt Jennifer into a rhetorical memorialization of her unspecified "ordeals." Rich's poem imagines the subjective life of Aunt Jennifer in terms of life's projected passing, and full subsumption, into an art object (Aunt Jennifer's tapestry of unspoken grief). Here are Rich's and Bogan's poems, respectively:

Aunt Jennifer's tigers prance across a screen,
Bright topaz denizens of a world of green.
They do not fear the men beneath the tree;
They pace in sleek chivalric certainty.

Aunt Jennifer's fingers fluttering through her wool
Find even the ivory needle hard to pull.
The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band
Sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.

When Aunt is dead, her terrified hands will lie
Still ringed with ordeals she was mastered by.
The tigers in the panel that she made
Will go on prancing, proud and unafraid. (*CEP* 4)

Women have no wilderness in them,
They are provident instead,
Content in the tight hot cell of their hearts
To eat dusty bread.
They do not see cattle cropping red winter grass,
They do not hear
Snow water going down under culverts
Shallow and clear.

They wait, when they should turn to journeys,
They stiffen, when they should bend.
They use against themselves that benevolence
To which no man is friend.

They cannot think of so many crops to a field
Or of clean wood cleft by an axe.
Their love is an eager meaninglessness
Too tense, or too lax.

They hear in every whisper that speaks to them
A shout and a cry.
As like as not, when they take life over their door-sills
They should let it go by. (Bogan 19)

The difference between Bogan's understated intensity of wit and Rich's surplus of pathos does not simply indicate the extent to which lyric poems are able or unable to order experience in pleasant forms. The distinction I draw here boils down to how the psychic verisimilitude of a lyric's mimetic utterance brings to life the particular *disorders* of mind, self, and world in any given milieu. As a literary performance of psychic and intellectual disturbance rather than political evasion, Bogan's poem generates the energy for personal and political change within its rhetorical ambivalence. In another critical context, Florence Verducci's discussion of Ovid's irony and wit in the *Heroides* considers an analogous performance of lyricized disorder. According to Verducci, the "interplay of volition and confusion, deliberate persuasion and involuntary self-expression" in Ovid's epistolary lyrics clears the ground of standard preconceptions concerning literary experience (*Ovid's Toyshop* 28). Thus a reader's understanding of the beliefs, motives, and intentions of Ovid's abandoned heroines can only be reconstituted by cooperating, nay *colluding*, with Ovid's adroitly erratic interplay of linguistic self-mastery and powerlessness. This affectively and cognitively taxing

process echoes Fish's notion of a self-consuming artifact:

The result is a poetics of tension, reflecting a continuing dialectic between an egocentric vision which believes in, and is sustained by, the distinctions it creates, and the relentless pressure of a *resolving* and *dissolving* insight. That dialectic takes many forms, but its basic contours remain recognizable: the surface argument or plot of a poem proceeds in the context of the everyday world of time and space, where objects and persons are discrete and independent; but at the same time and within the same linguistic space, there felt the pressure of a larger context which lays claim to that world and everything in it, including the speaker, reader, and the poem itself [...]" (*Self-Consuming* 157)

As modes of lyric expression, the pressures of wit and pathos direct a poet's rhetorical conceit into resolutions that trigger either the reader's self-scrutiny or complacency. But the possible inducement of complacency by Rich's early poetry does not equate to the complacency of their form. For lyric compression and rhetorical artifice serve as the technical points of reference and departure in Rich's subsequent expansive work, and the imaginative changes that such poetic forms make possible cannot be limited to a singular conception of linear progress or poetic maturation.

Bogan's poem reveals that a return to formalism at mid-century (Rich's early work included), need not equate to the kinds of affective closure and reactionary politics for which Orr's lyric uncertainty principle calls. At first glance, the tension in "Women" almost go unnoticed. The poem's surface argument presents a naturalized misogynist attitude toward gender difference, with the speaker disparaging women as fundamentally deprived of certain mental, emotional, and physical faculties. If the speaker is male, his insistent "they" differentiates a species—"Women"—from his own "we." Men, as his logic implies, *can* do all the listed activities, *have* all the recorded experiences and thoughts, and *never* fall prey to the weaknesses, demurrals, vacillations, and excesses that women reportedly *cannot* avoid. If the speaker is a woman, she has internalized such a

notion of inherently gendered capacities. But there is much more to the poem beyond this admittedly simplistic distinction. The opening proposition—“Women have no wilderness in them”—modulates in the poem’s subsequent lines and stanzas. And over the course of a few readings, what this assertion illustrates is neither simple nor coherent.

Even if the speaker’s gender may be ambiguous, the poet, Louise Bogan, is a woman. This fact twists the rhetorical framing of the poem, as the opening assertion’s logic—that men contain or internalize wilderness—proves to be confused at its roots and tangled in all of its branches. What kind of wilderness is truly, successfully contained? And where does the poem take us, but into the wilderness of the imagination? If the poem’s first claim contains anything, its content spills out in the tortuous oscillations between negative and positive assertions about “women” in the following stanzas. But these assertions consistently prove to be either “too tense” or “too lax,” mirroring the speaker’s complaints. The closing couplet brings to a head the speaker’s rhetorical ambivalence, as the gnarled, object-less syntax of the colloquial expression “as like as not” (as like what? as not like what?) foregrounds the speaker’s inability to grant *positive* being to the objects of his or her own representation—to welcome life over speech’s rhetorical door-sill. “Containing” life, or wilderness, proves to be an impossible pretense for moral proscription (“they should let it go by”). Ending on a note of normative knowledge (knowing *that*), what has happened to practical know *how*—the wood cleanly cleft by the poet’s axe? Without shedding the unruly habits of the heart, who can still participate in the trans-historical “pact” among American poets that Pound invoked in his salvo to Whitman?

It was you who broke the new wood,
Now is a time for carving.

We have one sap and one root—
Let there be commerce between us. (*Personæ* 39)

Bogan's ironic answer to this poem is another poem: "Women." The poem's subversive wit exposes the speaker's lack of transparency, and the dialectical transactions between poem and speaker invite the one to imagine the poem's assertions otherwise. In its self-consuming rhetoric, the poem makes the counterargument a positive exemplum of wilderness, shaped and chiseled as it is within the doorsill of Bogan's workshop. While "Women" compromises the speaker's credibility as the voice of normative morality, the rhetorical play of the poem (the counterargument to what the poem says) elicits the reader's awareness of the poem's *uninhabitable* uncertainty. The reader, in effect, must rethink, rather than let by, the presuppositions from which any of the poem's images may emerge to be true: whether of the seemingly unmediated clear water of the mountain culvert, or rhetorical gestalt of "Women" that is conjured by the poem's rhetorical performance as a whole.

Fish contrasts this kind of dialectical poem of tension, resolution, and dissolution with a merely "rhetorical" mode of writing that "mirror[s] and present[s] for approval the opinions its readers already hold" (*Self-Consuming* 1). Whereas Bogan opens from a universal generalization, Rich's poem begins and ends within the intimate circle of familial bonds. The speaker's relationship to Aunt Jennifer precedes the poem and conditions the speaker in ways that Bogan's speaker can afford to ignore. The challenge of "Women" is to *not* let life go by, but to reorient oneself in a wilderness that suffuses the life of a language-using species. The poem urges its readers to remain keenly skeptical toward the intensities, volatility, and limitations of reason's dramatic forms.

As life goes by, it keeps *going on*, but this a truth that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers"

struggles to record. Rich's proleptic ekphrasis is a tapestry in which an imagined wilderness will come to represent, because it has already become, Aunt Jennifer's entire life. In the poem, Aunt Jennifer sublimates her living struggles, the "ordeals she was mastered by," into the static images of a living artwork. The finished product of her labors, however, is a "panel"—a single image or section of a greater narrative sequence. What goes on in the finished panel paradoxically comes to a standstill as the poised tigers, continuing to pace and prance in the "chivalric certainty" of the tapestry's ongoing life, move *across* the "screen" only to re-enter and remain in the wilderness of Aunt Jennifer's creation *ad infinitum*. The perpetual motion of Aunt Jennifer's tigers seems both to express and contain Aunt Jennifer's inner life. The only imaginative conduit, it seems, for Aunt Jennifer's "ordeals" is this tapestry that she weaves, seemingly complete within the sphere of the sonnet form, but also suggestive of other panels, or stories, outside of the framing conceit of "married life" as "life" in its totality. But the poem cannot imagine another life for Aunt Jennifer, or a sequence of life in different modes, but only the one she memorializes with her woven image of defiant suffering held in perpetual motion.

The image's singular fate produces the poem's pathos. There is no end to this pathos, only the repetition of or re-entering into it as the tiger's do—"proud and unafraid." Like the speaker's report in the title poem, "A Change of World" (also an image of historical change contained within the "sphere" of a poetic world), "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" foregoes the dialectical workings of irony. Rich channels this dialectical capacity for modulation into the idealization of a future stabilized by the lyric's preservation of tension (i.e. the tension between the weight of Aunt Jennifer's ring

and the proud, light movements of her tapestry's imagined creatures). In "A Change of World," the "busy little tailors" conclude: "the season of doubt has passed: / The changes coming are due to last" (*CEP* 39). Unlike Bogan's speaker, Aunt Jennifer is unable "to produce a development which uses all the terms," as Kenneth Burke describes the work of irony as dialectic (*Grammar* 512). The kind of resistance that "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" imagines takes the form of an aesthetic that harmoniously balances itself upon its own pathos. The poem thus does not undertake the ethical challenges and risks that arise in the textual act of dialectical provocation. Rich's later development of such a dialectical poetry—especially her characteristic splicing together of lyric voicings in her longer sequences, a kind of lyric cinematography—subsumes her early lyrics such as "Aunt Jennifer's Tigers" insofar the latter illustrate the incipient poetic impasses that she will rigorously confront and make her own in decades to come. These impasses constitute the political and ethical margins of a radical lyric poetics whose expansive humanism has hoped (and still hopes, I think) to redress to the waning of lyric's potential for political engagement amid the social divisions, exclusions, and asymmetries within contemporary iterations of humanist discourse. Navigating these margins as a poet forced Rich, in her astoundingly long and influential career, to produce and account for a seasoned, indeed weathered, mode of lyric address that lives on more than pathos alone.

Licensing the Unspeakable, or Turning the Great Conversation

Earlier I mentioned the juxtaposition of "epistemic activity" and "cognitive ends" with regard to poetry, a juxtaposition that arises in Barbara Herrnstein Smith's discussion in *In the Margins of Discourse* (1978) of how literary discourse engages in acts of

“licensing the unspeakable.” This phrase encompasses a wide range of what poetic language *does*—most notably, for the purposes of my argument, the verbal staging of those thoughts, experiences, feelings, realities, and possible worlds that, for whatever reason, circumstances do not afford time or means to communicate. Smith thus describes lyric poems as “fictive utterances,” meaning that, by virtue of their virtuality, such utterances enable the speaking or writing of what “would be otherwise unspeakable” in everyday discourse (109). In other words, literature allows one to verbalize not only that which “would make us vulnerable...would expose us to contempt, hostility, or danger,” but also any form of hypothetical, abstract, or pragmatically impossible (but nonetheless desirable) communication (110). “Fictive discourse,” as Smith writes, “allows us to speak the unspeakable—but only if we agree not to *say* it” (110). Smith’s elucidation of fictive discourse draws attention to the ways that poems can and do exceed the “linguistic marketplace” of naturalized discourse (including the discourse of career choice and advancement) and provides a conceptual vocabulary for reading how, across the formal continuum of oppositional poetics, Rich endeavors to license the unspeakable experiences of marginalized subjects, whether these are gendered, racial, ethnic, national, socioeconomic, or spiritual others. Concerns central to her work— woman-to-woman relationality (or the “lesbian continuum”), self-reflexive critiques of ethnic, religious, and cultural identity (as a Jewish-American who is “split at the root”), the reinvigoration of an ethic of global citizenship, and a fuller awareness of the United States’ historical privileges and guilt—all factor into how Rich brings into poetic language that which the linguistic marketplace curtails, co-opts, distorts, or prevents from changing.

Of course, “discourse” is itself many things. For example, it may refer to “an

onward course, a process or succession of time, events, or actions”; “reasoning, thought, ratiocination” or the process and/or faculty of thereof; “communication of thought by speech, talk, conversation”; “report, rumor”; a “narrative, tale, or account”; or a “dissertation, treatise, homily, or sermon” (*OED* “discourse” n., Web). Amid these definitions, we can come see how Rich’s opposition to the discursive power of patriarchy also relies on the tools of discourse, or relations to discourse, as a way to resist some of its most pernicious norms. At the end of *The Will to Change*, Rich begins the first poem of “Shooting Script” with a suggestive recollection: “We were bound on the wheel of an endless conversation” (*CEP* 401). Here are suggested two figurations of discourse seemingly at odds with another: the “great conversation,” or canon of traditional humanistic learning in the West, and the “wheel” of revolutionary change. The great conversation is indeed ubiquitous—representing the canonical poets and writers Rich read as a girl in Baltimore, as well as poetic models such as Yeats and Auden, whom she read as a student at Radcliffe College in the late 1940s. This “conversation” indeed is the title of the first volume of, and promotional pitch for, the fifty-four volume series *Great Books of the Western World* (1952), published in the U.S. by Encyclopedia Britannica. Editor Robert M. Hutchins opens the first chapter by proclaiming: “The tradition of the West is embodied in the Great Conversation that began in the dawn of history and that continues to the present day” (Hutchins 1). Hutchins extols the “Civilization of the Dialogue” despite the dialogue’s conflicted valences within the context of international politics in the postwar era. For if the West symbolizes itself to itself as “the source of that technology for which the whole world yearns,” then in the eyes of its enemies it represents “the fountainhead of selfishness and greed” (2). The conversation’s various

iterations, Hutchins claims, are co-present in, and thus epiphenomenal to, the conversational ideal. The ideal, Hutchins writes, *is* “the Conversation itself” (2). In other words, the conversation honored by the liberal humanist tradition betrays *ipso facto* an order that includes all orders of resistance or disorder. Or at least this story is that which Rich hopes to interrupt, although the interruption of such a grand story—the extirpation of aesthetic ideologies supporting white male privilege, political quietism, and various forms of social injustice—requires an alternative story, another iteration of the conversation that, along with the social transformation Rich calls forth, revives ethical discourses that her work co-occupies, to a certain extent, with what it resists.

As “Shooting Script” opens, the speaker has been suspended for an indefinite amount of time on the fiery wheel of this conversation. This image recalls Ixion, the first to murder his own kin in Greek mythology and whose punishment was to be bound upon a burning solar wheel that only briefly stopped turning when Orpheus would play his lyre to Eurydice in the underworld. The conversation’s turning unfolds in single-line iterations, and in this sense it turns out to be “A monologue waiting for you to interrupt it” (*CEP* 401). In its turning over of image after image of the “dialogue that lasts all night or a whole lifetime,” Rich exposes the surface tension of rhetorical address, the interruptive character of apostrophe. How, the poem tacitly asks, are these lines to be read together? In dialogue? In contrapuntal simultaneity? As perpetual interruption—each successive image interrupting the preceding one and being followed by the next interruption?:

A conversation of sounds melting constantly into rhythms.

A shell waiting for you to listen.

A tide that ebbs and flows against a deserted continent.

A cycle whose rhythm begins to change the meaning of words.

A wheel of blinding waves of light, the spokes pulsing out from
where we hang together in the turning of an endless
conversation. (*CEP* 401)

These appreciably psychedelic imagery of this opening—the “ebbs and flows” of “melting sounds” and “waves of light”—trace out a type of conversational plenitude akin to Duncan’s affinity for holographic evocations of a radically mutable poetic spirituality. But Rich’s juxtaposed images do not aspire to the kind of rhetorical expansion *ad infinitum* the way many passages in Duncan’s work do. Instead, “Shooting Script” contracts as it distills its motions to “A monologue that waits for one listener” (*CEP* 401). In the subsequent tuning and detuning of each line with the others, the fact that “we hang together” suggests the interdependence of listeners and speakers in the poem’s interlocutory scene. The source of this interruption cannot be clearly made out, as the speaker addresses “you” in the final section of the poem, whose ultimate uncertainty is what image the poem’s images figuratively project: “Whatever it was, the image that stopped you, the one on which you / came to grief, projecting it over & over on empty walls” (*CEP* 414). In addition to “stopping you,” the poem’s shifts of phrasing in the first section also “begin[s] to change the meaning of words,” forming a projected collection of phrases like “hang together,” which renders casual countercultural sociality (i.e. “hanging out”) and the spectacularized deaths of those who have been hung “hang together” with other threads of meaning in the “one sound only”—the tonic upon which the conversation converges (*CEP* 401). The “shell penetrated by meaning” in the first poem’s final line modulates the violently erotic and interruptive force of civilization’s

discourse into “meaning” as ethical substance. This substance is as deeply personal and as melancholically elusive an experience as “To pull yourself up by your own roots; to eat the last meal in / your old neighborhood” (*CEP* 414).

That Rich’s meaning “searches for its word like a hermit crab” insinuates that the speaker’s inclination toward solitude, opacity, and reclusion is a desirable effect of poetry’s engagement with the ethical. At the same time, poems such as “Shooting Script” enable a kind of virtual reality comprising the “unspeakable” elements of solitary and social experience, even as the “meaning” projected by the poem’s discourse goes into hiding. Lines from “Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)” recognize this unspeakability:

When you read these lines, think of me
and of what I have not written here. (*CEP* 339)

or:

These words are vapor trails of a plane that has vanished;
by the time I write them out, they are whispering something else.
(*CEP* 340)

Poets in the West ranging from Goethe to Lorca have experimented with appropriating the ghazal. The ghazal is an ancient Arabic verse form with rigid structural and thematic requirements (mono-rhymed couplets—*aa ba ca, etc.*—with a refrain, all in a uniform meter, a thematic of love and separation, and often with an inscription of the poet’s name in the last line) and has been a widespread fixed form for centuries in Turkish, Persian, and Indian poetic traditions. At mid-century, American poets such as Rich, W.S. Merwin, William Stafford, Mark Strand, and others translated the Urdu poet Mizra Ghalib into English, all of which are collected in Aijaz Ahmad’s *Ghazals of Ghalib: Versions of the Urdu* (1971). In addition to sources like the French New Wave cinema of Jean-Luc Godard, or the various open-forms of the New American Poetry, Rich’s poetry

of the late 1960s manifests the ghazal's influence both explicitly (in her translations of Ghalib and poetic sequences like "Ghazals (Homage to Ghalib)" or "The Blue Ghazals") and tacitly (in poems and poetic sequences such as "Shooting Script"). In addition to including a ghazal adapted from Ghalib, "Shooting Script" also repurposes the self-contained couplets of the ghazal into single-sentence segments of varying length.⁷ These expansive lines resemble Whitman's sprawling prosody, but they do so while maintaining a relationship between Rich's speaker and her addressee that is less of a contractual form of agreement based on consent, and more of an explicit appeal to possible collective identifications that occur over an indefinite timespan ("a shell waiting for you to listen," a "tide" flowing against a "deserted continent").⁸ In the lines above, the transfigured formal constraints of the ghazal help evoke the unspeakable subjects of new social conditions of impoverishment and isolation. Rich's speakers come to be "bound" to the Great Conversation, and any mode of resistance to civilization's disempowerment of its

⁷ John Shoptaw's reading of Rich's poem "Diving Into Wreck" in terms of the presence of "crypt words" provides an even more imperceptible example of Rich's use of the ghazal's conventions, such as the inscription of the poet's name in the final line. Shoptaw writes: "In the conclusion to Adrienne Rich's 'Diving into the Wreck' (1993: 55) an otherwise unremarkable phrase is given a line to itself:

a book of myths
in which
our names do not appear.

While the poem ends by declaring the absence of 'our names,' the isolated phrase 'in which' affords the name Adrienne Rich a garbled and fragmentary appearance" ("Lyric Cryptography" 229).

⁸ See Kerry Larson, *Whitman's Drama of Consensus* (1988) 1-74. Larson's robust analysis of Whitman's poetics of convocation and consensus reads Whitman's self-conceived vocation as "the connective link for the public discourse" in which, like Rich's poetry, "the language of voluntarism...edges irresistibly toward a language of compulsion" (xvi, xxi). However finical or limited it might be, the difference between Whitman's expansive mode of identification and Rich's collective (and highly fragmented) poetic you might lie in how deeply rooted, or consciously questioned, the desire for *unanimity* is in their respective practices of address. The reasons for this are not only historical—whereby it might seem facile to conclude that Rich values difference in a way Whitman cannot. The difference also stems, I contend, from the gendered rhetoric and ethical frameworks with which each poet structures his or her verse. We might say the realms of obscurity and silence that Whitman seeks to dissipate by reconstructing a unified, "contractual" form of poetic address are those which Rich mines as a poetic resource and an ethical disposition—realms in which the unexpressed is as essential as the expressed.

subjects does so by reclaiming the conversation as an ideal. Thus Rich's poems recapitulate one of its central motifs—the will to change—despite the fact that the radical reorientation of this will does not offer a complete narrative arc to replace the older ones. Rich's ability to press pause on the endless conversation for a moment, and license a “you” temporarily unmoored from various kinds of socio-historical overdetermination, dispossesses the subject of ethical address of its self-mastery. This, in turn, encourages readers to participate in the poem's unpredictable implications and continuing lines of activity as the conversation changes course.

Where, and how, does this reconfigured conversation continue in Rich's poetry from this point on? The three-stage model of the poetic career depicts Rich's turn to political and personal rage as an irrevocable change that she will subsequently develop, modify, and temper with greater inclusiveness and keener self-doubt in the last decades of her life. Vendler trenchantly describes the change of Rich's poetry in the late 1960s as one “from formalism to...a new version of truth” (*Part of Nature* 259). But the poetic “conversion” of truth happening at this time in Rich's life (Vendler suggests that Rich appears to be “compelled as by a vow”) does not equate to a departure *from* formalism *to* this new version of truth (258). For Rich's own conversion still retains all of the chief characteristics of formalist verse (a “revolutionary” rather than “reactionary” formalism) and the new truths she explores are those live formal and ethical options for working impersonality or dispossession into a genre typically obsessed with persons, personhood, and personal modes of address (Conte 2). In this regard, Smith's argument about fictive utterances—that the “impersonality” upheld between the poet and reader reflects “neither evasion nor abdication of social responsibility” but “a most punctilious respect for it”—

sheds light on how Rich finds herself compelled to abandon the conversation's authorizing trope of the rational and autonomous subject in order to reclaim responsibility for the ethical demands of daily life (115). As Rich writes in her 1977 poem "Natural Resources," humanism cannot sustain a viable literary ethics on its own. The word itself, like androgyny, is no longer capable of registering the inextricable "shame" or "diffidence" of daily life:

There are words I cannot choose again:
humanism androgyny

Such words have no shame in them, no diffidence
before the raging stoic grandmothers:

their glint is too shallow, like a dye
that does not permeate

the fibers of actual life
as we live it, now: (*DCL* 66).

Unlike Aunt Jennifer's tapestry of uninterrupted pathos, the poetic weaving is "ragged because incomplete / we turn our hands to, interrupted" (*DCL* 67). Yet like Aunt Jennifer's panel of sublimated pain, Rich's turn to "the fibers of actual life" of the open-ended present presents the *gravitas* of this conversation as an unavoidably privative attempt "to close the gap" of difference (*DCL* 67). How does Rich respond to that gap by endorsing a sense of poetic responsibility predicated upon the dialectical loss of personhood? This loss, which I turn to now, makes possible the reclamation of a living relationship to liberal humanist discourse—a discourse which, at various stages of her career, Rich renounced.

Habits of Privation

At first glance, "choice" and "renunciation" seem, as actions, to be at odds with

one another (i.e. “avowal” and “disavowal”). But the chiasmic relation of these two terms, as examples of what Susan Sontag dubbed “styles of radical will,” reveals privation’s power as it informs Rich’s modes of ethical address. Her collections in the 1970s onward engage more and more intensively in what I have discussed as the poetic activity of “licensing the unspeakable.” Attending to the structures of renunciation and chosenness in Rich’s revolutionary lyrics will allow us to see more concretely how her “re-vision” of a literary ethics is not created *ex nihilo*. In early poems like “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” intimations of an activist poetic render dispossession as a kind of liberating compulsion—a story one *has* to tell, work one *has* to perform. This empowering mode of self-dispossession is the condition for the will to change’s poetic survival. In this spirit, Rich opens *The Will to Change* with “November 1968”:

Stripped
 you’re beginning to float free
 up through the smoke of brushfires
 and incinerators
 the unleaved branches won’t hold you
 nor the radar aerials (*CEP* 359)

Here privation is the condition of possibility for changes that can only be fictively spoken, but never actually said. How are such imaginative changes *willed* by the poet? Vendler considers this a moot question, as she reminds us that “change is our lot whether we will it or not” (*Part of Nature* 255). This truism notwithstanding, Rich enunciates the world’s change *as if* it were a product of the poet’s will. Or at least the image is the poem’s willful response to the world’s unwilled changes. Some kind of change, on this level, comes into being by virtue of the poet’s willful staging of a moment of change: “Stripped.” With the eye and ear arrested by this monosyllabic opening—ripping the unmeasured flow of durational time with percussive singularity—Rich concentrates the

reader's senses upon the subject of change's abjection. The reader too is "stripped" of narrative context: Who or what has been stripped? Who or what has done the stripping? "November 1968" dramatizes a historical moment of change and cultural collapse in which the presidential election of Richard Nixon came upon the heels of a tumultuous year in U.S. history: assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy, race riots across the country, violent protests against the escalating Vietnam War at the Democratic National Convention, and other signals that the countercultural Left, like the Democratic party, was becoming increasingly beleaguered by cultural and political antagonisms deeper than any revolutionary ethos could successfully resist. But what can one make of this situation other than resignation? How does one avoid this bad logic of the late 1960s: that without radical left cultural capital, the only available option is to acquiesce to, or disengage from, those historical changes enforced upon the will?

"November, 1968" inverts the rites of spring that modernist poets like Eliot or Williams took as the literary *topos* of career entry. The ambiguous moment before the addressee's appearance in the second line enacts a kind of poetic change predicated upon the paradoxically self-empowering loss of self-mastery. This gesture comes to a head as "November, 1968" closes in rapt observation of its dissolving addressee:

How you broke open, what sheathed you
until this moment
I know nothing about it

my ignorance of you amazes me
now that I watch you
starting to give yourself away
to the wind (*CEP* 359)

The addressee's evocation of a "floating world" mirrors the speaker's vulnerable attention span, which "until this moment" has been buoyed by some pretense of

knowledge. But the speaker's positing of an animate will weighs down this image of natural and spiritual dispersion. The observation of "you / starting to give yourself away" suggests that the scene of breaking open, and consequent privation, is an effect of the addressee's will. The will emerges differently, however, if one attends the strange nuances in the speaker's amazement—that state in which the speaker's consciousness of change is confined on all sides by limitation and constraint. The speaker's amazement suggests that what motivates this moment of change, and what is actually changing, will change again in time; it suggests that this moment of change is, and can only ever be, just beginning. Rich articulates a privative sense of amazement—of observation as both the complex participation by, and stripping down of, an agent in indeterminate moments of change. This sense is drawn, in part, from the French philosopher and activist Simone Weil. Later in *The Will to Change* Rich begins a section of the poem "Pieces" with an explicit reference to such amazement-in-deprivation:

This morning: read Simone Weil
on the loss of grace

drank a glass of water

remembered the dream that woke me: (CEP 383)

The speaker's subsequently recollected nightmare, in which "some one, some more than one / battering into my room / intent to kill me," reveals itself to the awakened speaker, her husband sleeps "unhearing" as she cries his name "like signs executed / by the superstitious" (CEP 384). In the speaker's "revelation," Weil's writings portray history and personhood not as a nightmare from which one tries to, and cannot, awake, but that into which one is paradoxically roused by a loss of self, a concentrated form of unmotivated attention. The "loss of grace" in this negative epiphany symbolizes a

spirituality of concentration, of enduring the cost of choosing to live otherwise and to renounce the grace of a narrative that offers protection, reprieve, and closure.

In *Impersonality* (2007), Sharon Cameron ruminates upon how a “vocation for de-creation” in Weil’s writings embodies “a discipline for forfeiting personality and consequently came to be associated with the affliction and violence requisite for such a renunciation” (109). This radical cultivation of “naturalistic” attention (over and against something like the cultivation of supernatural virtues) imagines subjectivity to be “positional” rather than “substantive”; thus the “I” is necessarily de-created by the privations of a discipline of attending to affliction without a subject’s intervening will (110-111). As Cameron argues, “the value of attention,” or unmotivated regard, for Weil “is its capacity to free us from limitation” while at the same moment attention necessarily establishes bondage to affliction (119). This “double agency of attention” is crucial to understanding how Rich’s confrontations over the 1980s with the troubling identifications of gender, ethnicity, nationality, and spirituality dovetails with her use of formal and rhetorical modes of fracture, separation, and loss. Rich’s determined antipathy toward theistic and patriarchal forms of spirituality requires her to invent a new ethical discourse in her poetry beyond Weil’s mysticism of affliction. While Rich shares Weil’s aversion to the ideological and material comforts provided by the logic of “fulfilling” spiritual desires or aspirations, Rich’s poetics of renunciation reroutes the terms of poetic necessity away from Weil’s kind of impersonal asceticism. But how does Rich articulate a poetics based on renunciation without the self-inflicted violence of the ascetic? Furthermore, how does Rich creatively manage this dilemma in poetic forms of address without simply embracing an endless renunciation of certainty—a state of

permanent subjective uncertainty that is easily dissolved into the pervasive neoliberal paradigms such as history's end or the irresistible rationality of the global marketplace in the contemporary moment?

In "Necessities of Life," the opening poem of Rich's 1966 volume of the same title, the picture of an integral self emerges from an immersion in something like William James's "great blooming, buzzing confusion"—a description, to wit, of an infant's impression of the world (*Principles* 462). Rich writes:

Piece by piece I seem
to re-enter the world: I first began

a small, fixed dot, still see
that old myself, a dark-blue thumbtack

pushed into the scene,
a hard little head protruding
from the pointillist's buzz and bloom. (*CEP* 205)

Stopping at this point, the speaker's consciousness seems to ooze and melt from its fixed particularity into "ranges" of color and figuration. The speaker's dark-blue dot blurs into "burnt red" and "burning green," and eventually she is swallowed up "like Jonah" into various philosophical-political-artistic personalities: "Wittgenstein, / Mary Wollstonecraft, the soul // of Louis Jouvet" (*CEP* 205). The speaker's occupation of a point in time and space transforms until a decisive moment of de-creation in which the speaker renews herself in a hardened, unpalatable form of life reduced to its "bare necessities":

Till, wolfed almost to shreds,
I learned to make myself

unappetizing. Scaly as a dry bulb
thrown into a cellar

I used myself, letting nothing use me.
Like being on a private dole,

sometimes more like kneading bricks in Egypt.
What life was there, was mine,

now and again to lay
one hand on a warm brick

and touch the sun's ghost
with economical joy,

now and again to name
over the bare necessities. (*CEP* 205-206)

Here the speaker's laying of hands makes no pretension of the miraculous, but configures touch and naming as part of a "minimalist economy," one that, like Rich's more fragmentary poems or Weil's conversational fragments, has "[...] integrity, but without extraneous conception" (*Impersonality* 111). What is considered "extraneous" is rather different than for Rich than for Weil. The necessities of Rich's poetics of living flow with aspirations and desires that sometimes comes from within, as from "a private dole," but at other times her work is motivated by a lived bondage to her cultural and social situation—"like kneading bricks in Egypt." These alternative sources of motivation call for incessant naming, a process that Rich's speaker must give up at some point. "So much for those days," writes Rich at the poem's turn (*CEP* 206). Yet as the speaker gives up her days of being bound to the bare necessity of living, the world awaiting expression ("houses along the road stand waiting" like "breathless" old women "waiting to tell their tales") expresses itself in repeatedly externalized forms, as "visible as my breath" (*CEP* 206). As waiting and exhaustion take concrete form, the poem marks those convergent and divergent spiritual commitments of Rich's and Weil's writings: the enactment and questioning of a damaged life's living endurance, and the representation

of such endurance through impersonal or personal modes of address. And Rich's poetic engagement with Weil draws readers into a conversation of the unspeakable.

Rich provides a speculative example of such a conversation in "A Vision" (1981), whose parenthetical inscription—"(*thinking of Simone Weil*)"—suggests the imposed and unbridgeable distance, or limitation, of ethical attention. The encounter begins with minimalist apostrophic gestures. Naming and placing the other before the speaker, the poem tentatively recognizes the other's own perceptive presence:

You. There, with your gazing eyes
Your blazing eyes (*AWP* 50).

Rich's fixed attention on Weil's figure, a "you" the poem can neither fix nor assimilate, mirrors the figure's fixed attention upon the blinding sun. Weil's concentration upon affliction bewilders and overwhelms the speaker's sense of ethical attention:

[...] Then it comes back: this
test of the capacity to keep in focus
this
unfair struggle with the forces of perception
this enforced

(but that word your attention changes)
this enforced loss of self
in a greater thing of course, who has ever
lost herself in something smaller? (*AWP* 50)

The struggle between voluntary and enforced privation is "unfair" because privation ultimately enforces upon a subject the limitations of perception. But the figure's "attention" strangely places the word "enforced" into a fungible relationship with the notion of empowerment. Empowered, that is, "in a greater thing," for a de-creative sense of perception calls for a change of scale, a widening of syntax. "This" grows to "this enforced," and then upon the third time, the silence of an impersonal void interposes

itself—“this enforced loss of self”—a progression which indexes a complete annihilation of personhood through attention’s exhaustion of the will. The speaker realizes that Weil’s “fear of blinding” almost resembles the difficulties of poetic composition: “Here it is. I am writing this almost / involuntarily on a bad, junky typewriter that skips / and slides the text” (*AWP* 50). Nonetheless, the interpersonal nature of this de-creative address allows for a new language game to emerge from the problem of attention: “writing to you / is another kind of problem / and even so the words create themselves” (*AWP* 50).

Those words with which Rich addresses her interlocutor are the same by which she addresses herself to her own work:

What is your own will that it
can so transfix you
why are you forced to take this test
over and over and call it God
why not call it you and get it over
your hatred of enforcement
and your fear of blinding? (*AWP* 50-51)

Both what Weil and Rich have in common and where they differ dissolves into this final rhetorical question. Why not “get over” the continual struggle between the painful and pleasurable attachments to the “self” and the supposed detachment of supernatural belief? This poses a test for the speaker, whose fragile trust in a secular humanist grounding of ethical address—“Why not call it you?”—exposes the potential for ethical violence embedded in any notion of lyric address as a successful mediating form of social life. Rather than opting for Weil’s ascetic forfeiture of personhood, Rich directs her question toward a “you” who mirrors the speaker’s own calling, the lyric’s own vocational anxieties about the violence of ethical obligation and its silent perpetuation. The

questions ending “A Vision” bear directly on Rich’s ethical quandaries, among which is that of recognizing the changing conditions of one’s subjective and subjected life in a social context. Before concluding this chapter by turning to Rich’s late work, I consider how Rich’s negotiation of ethical recognition amid continuous change permeates her poems that scrutinize the Jewish sources of her identity. The link between Rich’s experiments with a dialogic poetics and the ethical/epistemic splintering that occurs in any living poetic practice can be located, in part, with how and why Rich seeks to recuperate the sources of Jewish spiritual identity in a radicalized pragmatist fashion.

Suffering Chosenness, or “Zion by itself is not enough”

The links between Rich’s poetic, political, and spiritual projects form around a number of key words: change, wreckage, patience, endurance, solidarity, difference, collectivity, service, justice, power. Yet all of these words will someday, if not already, fail to serve the ends for which they are used. The historical invalidation of particular ethical and linguistic regimes reminds us that poetic license not only consists in choosing certain words and being chosen by them, but of facing the consequences of those choices and creating the possibility of new uses for old terms. As Rich idiomatically (and somewhat puritanically) puts it, this reckoning with poetry’s continuous need for social validation requires her to “clean up” her act. Another way of describing this need is to realize, as Butler argues, that being called by an “other” or to suffer chosenness occupies an ethical and epistemological position so densely layered with psychological, social, and historical contexts that to assume the tenability of a *full* account of oneself inflicts forms of ethical violence that restrict one’s social being. To put this in a paradoxical form: the limitations that precondition an ethical subject’s choices for iteration enable that subject

to make certain inventive and creative choices and be held responsible for them. It is no coincidence, then, that Rich's reflections on her partial Jewish heritage—in the essay "Split At the Root: An Essay on Jewish Identity," or poems so deeply invested in confronting her own Jewishness such as "Sources" (1981-1982)—examine how the threads of religious and ethnic identity "chosenness" interlineate the broader fabric of Rich's poetics of survival, endurance, and social responsibility. The title of her 1982 essay derives from an early poem, "Readings of History" (1960):

Split at the root, neither Gentile nor Jew,
Yankee nor Rebel, born
In the face of two ancient cults,
I'm a good reader of histories. (*CEP* 164)

What makes a "good" reader of history? Rich's confidence, it should be noted, does not purport to be capable of a full or complete reading of history. The historical reading announced here remains in question, even as the poem's ethical claim of a "good" reading of history (for Rich this must be one "split at the root," or multi-perspectival) is attempted in good faith. Rich's readings of contemporary Jewish history, like her readings of her own personal identity, refract within poems that expose how personal histories intersect with broader genealogies—tangled root systems that make up the multiple origins and destinations pursued by Rich's vexed ethical subject.

In her recent study, Maera Y. Shreiber theorizes a "Jewish American poetics" along the hermeneutic horizon of "anamnesis," which as she writes is "an imaginative retrieval of the past conducted in the interest of transforming the future" (*Singing* 4). Shreiber argues that Jewish American poetry, like other diasporic poetic traditions, "makes vivid and apparent an irresolvable and ongoing, even sustaining, tension between individual and collective models of voice and identity" (6). Nowhere more explicitly

does Rich engage in the tensions within American Jewish identification and dis-identification after the Holocaust than in “Sources,” a poem originally published on its own in 1983 and then included in *Your Native Land, Your Life* (1986). The poem’s twenty three untitled parts stage various forms of return: to places and times after a considerably long duration, to Rich’s childhood experiences in Maryland, to America during World War II, to particular relationships such as that between Rich and her father, to flows of migration throughout North America’s colonial and natural history (“Yankee Puritans, Québec Catholics / mingled within sight of the Northern Lights”), and through scriptural and natural historical texts that remind Rich of her displacement in her native land (“I never knew it so well because...”) and her desire “to become / a citizen of the world” (YNL 13, 18, 26). These returns compel the speaker at various movements toward a diasporic consciousness for which, as the speaker concludes in one section, “Zion by itself is not enough” (YNL 22). Throughout the poem, an anonymous voice poses questions concerning the speaker’s relation to her spiritual and ethnic sources. The fourth section opens with: “*With whom do you believe your lot is cast? / From where does your strength come?*” The speaker responds:

I think somehow, somewhere
every poem of mine must repeat those questions

which are not the same. There is a *whom*, a *where*
that is not chosen that is given and sometimes falsely given

in the beginning we grasp whatever we can
to survive (YNL 6)

These questions choose the speaker—that is, they are “given” and the recipients of this gift must “grasp” whatever is at hand if they are to endure. But these questions have been dissociated, in part, from a distinctly religious community. The process of survival

intimated by this decisive moment of entry into ethical life is certainly pragmatic, if not marked with desperation (“we grasp whatever we can”). Additionally, the pronoun shift from “I” to “we” resembles the same shift in “Incipience,” in which the speaker’s focused attention compulsively collectivizes the first-person. But rather than merely reinscribe the individual within a collective identity and destiny, “Sources” comes back to these questions repeatedly, and transfigures incommunicable suffering into a series of poems in which “there is something more” than identity (YNL 19).

Rich’s experiments with poetic form makes this sense of “something more” unavoidable. What each section dramatizes in its recuperated organicism—each part’s relation to each other assembling into a functional relation to the whole, and to the imagined “paratexts” of greater connections to be had within its cultural ecology—is the constitutive boundary of Rich’s ethics. Lines and poems break their promises, letters are written to those who cannot read them, knowledge of one’s location and one’s community disintegrates into separate poems and different voicings. The recuperative speaker constantly undergoes a diminishment of her idealized power. At one point, the speaker considers the poem to be a missive addressed to Rich’s long deceased ex-husband, a “strange, angry packet for you, threaded with love” (YNL 25). Yet in the enunciation of love, the speaker feels strangely reluctant, even guilty, to identify as a survivor: “The living, writers especially, are terrible projectionists. I hate the way they use the dead” (YNL 25). The formal fractures and temporal discontinuities stretch the poet’s diasporic consciousness, and the speaker realizes that this kind of calling is one of abiding in a state of living disjuncture:

*Because you have chosen
something else: to know other things*

*even the cities which
create of this a myth*

*Because you grew up in a castle of air
disjunctured*

*Because without a faith
you are faithful (YNL 26)*

According to this calling, being “faithful” articulates how Butler, among many other scholars, describes secularization as “a fugitive way for religion to survive” (“Is Judaism” 72). At the core of Rich’s “sources” is the will to create a “public polyvalence” of Jewishness reanimates the ethics of cohabitation (“Is Judaism” 76). In trying to formalize such a polyvalent understanding of Jewish experience, Rich’s insistent colloquy ultimately appeals for its power to a single “womanly” perspective (YNL 27). In “The Desert as a Garden of Paradise” (1987-1988), a poem from her next volume, *Time’s Power* (1989), Rich sacralizes the splitness of her perspective:

What’s sacred is singular:
out of this dry fork, this
wreck of perspective
what’s sacred tries itself
one more time (TP 31)

Shreiber’s description of Rich’s spiritual project is similar to, but not identical with, Butler’s description of secularization as religion’s fugitive endurance. In her reading of “An Atlas of the Difficult World” (1990-1991), Shreiber writes: “Seeking to transform pathos into ethos, Rich works to envision a community based on an ethical system of relation other than those previously asserted in the name of God or the state” (155). While this hearkens to a “something more,” it also suggests a “something less,” as it returns us to the choice of renunciation that Rich anxiously, skeptically countenances in Weil’s transcendental loss of self. Notwithstanding Rich’s denouncement both of

idealism's and commercialism's dilution of activist poetics, the loss of self that is necessary for the will to change requires something even smaller, more pared down in its immediacy, than short lyric poems. Given the time lag between the supposed event of secularization and poetry's protraction that event into of "something more," one is left perpetually giving an account of oneself with whatever sources or resources are at hand.

"Women's Time," Rich's Times, and a Final Word

Rachel Blau DuPlessis depicts the newly emerging temporality of women in the twentieth century as a "test" that contemporary American poetry continues to conduct. DuPlessis writes that, "[I]t is vital to declare that the secular entrance of women in society, with coequal political, cultural, and legal stakes and coeval temporalities, is a test for modernization and modernity. Possibly also for modernism as a cultural movement" (*Blue Studios* 7). As vital as they are, the questions raised by DuPlessis in allusion to the "secular entrance of women in society" sideline the question of how, or if, the framework of modern secularity coheres with the wide range of personal and social transformations experienced by American women poets after World War II. My underlying argument throughout this chapter has been that, over time, Rich's poetry responds to certain structural limitations and concrete demands of ethical life through an insistent articulation of lyric address regardless (a "regardless" that is not always heroic) of the lyric's potential success in enforcing social change. This also involves positing a modified understanding of what "secularization" means and what its many historical and aesthetic iterations entail for postwar feminist recuperations of the idea of a poetic vocation. Not only do contemporary feminist poetries continue to test the historical and political

aspirations of modernist movements, as DuPlessis's comments squarely acknowledge, but the socio-aesthetic interventions of figures like Rich also inscribe the process of testing modernism's legacy within modernist metaphors of historical rupture. A secular entrance into society implies that society itself has established considerable imperviousness to the symbolic structures and practices of religious belief. This "entrance" rhetorically buffers the more fraught and continuously contestable poetic engagements with history—what DuPlessis calls a "perpetual investigative feminism" (*Blue Studios* 7). As dramatized by Rich's modes of lyric address, this perpetual conversation manifests the irresolvable impasses or unsatisfying compromises of poetic discourse. The contemporary condition of these impasses has recently been critiqued by anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli under the term "late liberalism."⁹ We find ourselves here at the intersection or overlapping of two cultural narratives, two senses of time (linear progress and cyclical recurrence) among which Rich's critique of Western androcentrism came into being and might never fully resolve. The "endless" conversation becomes something smaller and actual in its endurance of forms of violence that occasion its attempts to respond. As Rich writes, the conversation is brutally "long":

⁹ In *Economies of Abandonment* (2011), Povinelli understands late liberalism as "the governance of social difference in the wake of anticolonial movements and the emergence of new social movements" (ix). Povinelli postulates how one might continue inhabit "spaces of abandonment, exhaustion, and excess [that] radically reduce being," but in such a way that "the possibility of being otherwise" is still maintained (129). Povinelli's confronts the problems of materialization or embodiment that are endemic to these spaces, and thereby grapples with problems to which Rich's lyric commitments seek to make palpable and active rather than to transcend. Thus what Povinelli asks of contemporary critical theory's ability to practice an "ethically informed politics" is what Rich's poetry asks of itself: "To what are we committing ourselves if we commit to a freedom that is the undefined and undefinable trajectory of a radical otherwise in our world's scenes of abandonment?" (129-130). This critical alternative resonates with how I have read the *longue durée* of Rich's career: "This otherwise may lie in shattering the life-world in which a person finds herself situated, but it also might mean maintaining a life-world under constant threat of being saturated by the rhythms and meanings of another. The conditions of excess always sit side by side with the conditions of exhaustion and endurance that put into question the neat capture of substance by capital and other biopolitical projects and complicates the simple ethical investment in the thresholds and transitions of becoming within biopolitics. In these situations, to be the same, to be durative, may be as emancipatory as to be transitive" (130).

pierced, jammed, stretched out:
bans, preventive detention, broken mouths
and on the scarred bench sequestered
a human creature with bloody wings
its private parts
reamed
still trying to speak (*MS 58*)

What understanding of temporality might afford a keener sense of lyric's engagement with the forceful pull of multiplicity? As Rich challenges stable and definitive historical reference points, she tends to reproduce at the same time her own historical coordinates as a source of critical energy. While one can map out Rich's poetic changes of mind as a road traveled from one sense of time to another, from a poetic career to a feminist vocation, the elements of this story of transformation do not add up to a complete conversion that eradicates the past by a radically new aesthetic and political purpose. As I have argued, the various strands of discursive activity and reactivity in Rich's poems coalesce at various moments into rhetorical stasis. But her writings nonetheless also inhabit a "paradoxical temporal structure" that Julia Kristeva elaborates in "Women's Time" (1977), a watershed essay appraising second-wave feminist critique in terms of modernity's historically fragile "symbolic denominator" (*Blue Studios*, 5; "Women's Time" 351-352). While Kristeva acknowledges secular modernity's gains for women's "coequal" status (e.g. the relatively enhanced compatibility of maternity in the domain of "reproduction" and the modern system of careers aligned with "production"), she also notes how contemporary feminist movements have undergone a crisis coextensive with the "religious crisis of contemporary civilization" (367). By this account, second-wave feminism's idealist responses to contemporary technocratic society's curtailment of subjectivity reflect a resurgence of symbolic action not unlike

religious belief:

Some contemporary thinkers maintain that modernity is the first era in human history in which human beings have attempted to live without religion. As it stands today, is feminism not about to become a sort of religion? Or will it manage to rid itself of its belief in Woman, Her power, and Her writing and support instead the singularity of each woman, her complexities, her many languages, at the cost of a single horizon, of a single perspective, of faith? (368)

Responding to her own questions, Kristeva imagines a third generation of feminism that

“suggests less a chronology than a *signifying* space, a mental space that is at once corporeal and desirous” (368). In this signifying space, aesthetic discourse serves to

“highlight the diversity of our identifications and the relativity of our symbolic and biological existence” (369). But the relativity of contemporary feminism’s

understandings of time does not equate to a fully realized secular age (or any discrete

epoch, modern, postmodern, or otherwise). In *Doing Time* (2000), an analysis of feminist theoretical *practice* in postmodernity, Rita Felski cites Ernst Bloch’s concept of

“synchronous nonsynchronicity” (*ungleichzeitige Gleichzeitigkeit*) to describe how “we [feminist theorists] inhabit both the same time and different times: individuals coexist at the same moment, yet often make sense of this moment in strikingly disparate ways” (3).

Felski extends this temporal cohabitation to social and cultural movements as well:

“Women can neither be subsumed within conventional periods nor segregated within a separate ‘women’s time’” (3). As conceptually thorny as it may be, Felski’s application of Bloch’s paradoxical term in her critique of women’s time usefully supplements the Kristevan argument concerning the shortcomings of difference feminism. This sense of temporal paradox, or the conversation’s perpetual lag, is central to Rich’s late poetry.

That is, Rich’s attempts to poetically initiate historical change do not obviate the persistent (and often unwanted) necessity of patience—a *wild* patience even—amid

cultural situations of crisis, collapse, separation, and survival as forms of enforced change.

The vacillations between and among different values of time displace Rich's poetry from the enjoyment of self-possession, full recognition, or fully achievable ends. In the temporal betwixt-and-betweenness of her work, Rich often licenses the speaking of unspeakable suffering by suggesting a literary ethics founded upon what "The Lag" (1962) portrays as a technologically distorted and ethically unstable echo:

My words
reach you as through a telephone
where some submarine echo of my voice
blurts knowledge you can't use. (*CEP* 190)

Here the telephone conversation's disjunctive temporality and epistemology prefigures what Avital Ronell describes in *The Telephone Book* (1991) as telephony's "new modalities of being called," modalities of being that are "pluralized, multiplied, engaged by another line, high strung and heading for you" (3). Being chosen to respond means one is *always* on call. Like Butler's recuperation of an ethics grounded in the necessary opacity of subjectivity, Ronell asserts that in order to "trace these calls" it is "necessary to start with the absolute priority of the Other to the self, and to acknowledge the constitutive impurity that obliges a self to respond to its calling" (10). Lyric's contemporary mediation of the Great Conversation likewise suffers the time lag and the crossing of lines that we hear echoing throughout Rich's work. In "Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth" (2006), lyric's communication technology echoes across labyrinthine space as situational repetition:

Image erupts from image
atlas from vagrancy
articulation from mammal howl

strangeness from repetition
even this default location
surveyed again one more poem (*TRL* 101)

Rich's return to poetry is an act of "working / this passage of the labyrinth / as laboratory" (*TRL* 101). Upon finding a way out of the labyrinth, the speaker realizes that the threads of meaning that cohere in her life work warp its aspirations with a cruel irony: "that clew / offering an exit choice was no gift at all" (*TRL* 101).

The image of mixed, broken signals resonates in much of Rich's last poems. In a related vein, Lauren Berlant has recently theorized present-day fantasies of the good life in terms of "cruel optimism"—the dream of an extended historical present held in place by the constitutive impasse of "being bound to life" and inhabiting the "scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (*Cruel* 12). Berlant's analysis of structures of attachment in the neoliberal present returns us again to the question of poetry's endurance as it is confined to a social space of "avocation": something done *merely* in one's free time. In "How Does a Poet Put Bread on the Table?" Rich betrays this sense of beleaguered freedom, hailing poetic work as a sacred form of labor that realizes a chronic human need for a form of work that makes one's time free. With this appeal comes a fraught sense of poetry's freedom as class privilege:

Most, if not all, of the names we know in North American poetry are the names of people who have had some access to freedom in time—that privilege of some which is actually a necessity for all. The struggle to limit the working day is a sacred struggle for the worker's freedom in time. To feel herself or himself, for a few hours or a weekend, as a free being with choices—to plant vegetables, and later sit on a porch with a cold beer, to write poetry or build a fence or fish or play cards, to walk without a purpose, to make love in the daytime. To sleep late. Ordinary human pleasures, the self's re-creation. Yet every working generation has to reclaim that freedom in time, and many are brutally thwarted in that effort.

Capitalism is based on the abridgment of that freedom. (*What Is Found* 43)

Rich calls the kind of living a poet makes in the contemporary moment “interstitial living.” A poet moves among part-time jobs, temporary positions, and various forms subsistence living that have become “more difficult, risky, and wearing” in a time of shrinking arts funding, lack of public support, and “censorship-by-clique,” “censorship by the Right,” and “censorship by distribution” (43). Economic and cultural pressures thus force poets into negotiating time as chronology and time as duration. Rich calls for the making of freedom *in* time—a project of furtherance whose objects recede in the process of pursuing them. The subject of Rich’s poetry moves on, but moves “without a purpose.” The normative compulsion implicit in such movement is unavoidable, however persistently open-ended Rich’s rhetoric may be. Whether it is personality or impersonality that goes on is a question advanced by Rich without reaching a resolution, without declaring the unspeakable once and for all:

I would have wanted to say it
without falling back
on words Desired not

you so much as your life,
your prevailing Not for me
but for furtherance how

you would move
on the horizon You, the person, you
the particle fierce and furthering (*TRL* 103)

In her closing words, Kristeva alludes to Spinoza’s question, “Are women capable of Ethics?,” as a limit or challenge to difference feminism. The question’s implications direct us to a last consideration of Rich’s “ethics of sexual difference.”¹⁰ Spinoza’s

¹⁰ In “Another Look at Genre: *Diving Into the Wreck* of Ethics with Rich and Irigaray” (1994), Elizabeth Hirsh uses this term to describe the poetic achievement of Rich’s most pivotal volume, *Diving Into Wreck*.

question incites us to confront the impasse of foundational assumptions of sexual difference. By indicating an end to ethics that Spinoza's ontology can neither conceive nor honor, one of Cameron's epigraphs from Weil's writings casts doubt upon Spinoza's term *conatus*—"The striving by which each thing strives to persevere in its being involves no finite time, but an indefinite time" (*Ethics* 75)—as a universally distributed will, or the striving for the furtherance of one's being:

The principal claim we think we have on the universe is that our personality should continue. This claim implies all the others. The instinct of self-preservation makes us feel this continuation to be a necessity, and we believe that a necessity is a right. We are like the beggar who said to Talleyrand, 'Sir, I must live,' and to whom Talleyrand replied, 'I do not see the necessity for that.' (*Impersonality* 108)

Rich's feminist interventions resist the discourse of professionalism, but they do so with a kind of pragmatic attention to the necessities of living in uncertainty. Rich's invocation of Weil in her 1976 essay, "Conditions for Work: The Common World of Women," articulates an ethics of feminist collectivity in terms of clear possibilities: "Instead of the concept of 'professionalism,' we [women] need, perhaps, a vision of work akin to that described by Simone Weil in her "Theoretical Picture of a Free Society" (*LSS* 213). This is:

A clear view of what is possible and what impossible, what is easy and what difficult, of the labors that separate the project from its accomplishment—this alone does away with insatiable desires and vain fears; from this and not from anything else proceed moderation and courage, virtues without which life is nothing but a disgraceful frenzy. Besides, the source of any kind of virtue lies in the shock produced by the human intelligence being brought up against a matter devoid of lenience and falsity. (*LSS* 213)

In her argument, Hirsh balances ethical dilemmas of linguistically inscribed difference through a perceived affinity between Luce Irigaray's theoretical writings on genre's gendered dynamics and the figure of the woman poet's will in Rich's poetry. Her conclusion presents the efficacy of female desire as a way to redirect the preconditions of established genres, but this argument reinstalls a bifurcation of desire and form in part to avoid how Rich's various aesthetic and political entanglements persist even when she claims to have denounced certain ones.

However grounded on distinct sets of terms, Rich and Weil both locate the “source” of this shock in the force of truth as it comes into being between creation and de-creation. This process of becoming is the “parrhesiastic game,” as Foucault puts it, of a poet’s “interstitial living”; it may not be a choice per se, but it is Rich’s way of writing the will to change into a calling that may bring self and other together, but also may rend them apart.¹¹ Rich inscribes this dynamic in one of her last poems, “Powers of Recuperation,” a sequence the ends with a meditation on “imaginative melancholy” (based on Albrecht Dürer’s famous 1514 engraving “Melencolia I”), a last gesture of the living tensions at work in Rich’s will to change. Of the two callings, parting literally has the last word in Rich’s last book. This final poem calls “apart” what has held together for a long time, suspended in an image of separation and falling short. Its final image nonetheless attends to, and embodies, the will to change:

built things hold her suspended
between desolation

and the massive figure on unrest’s verge
pondering the unbuilt city

cheek on hand and glowing eyes and
skirted knees apart (TNP 81)

which is itself an ekphrastic commentary on Dürer’s engraving:

¹¹ As Foucault writes, the practice, or “game,” of *parrhēsia* (alternatively defined as “truth telling,” “saying/speaking all,” or “free speech”) provides “the criticism of traditional premises of democracy, of democratic institutions and the practice of democracy” (*Courage* 35). This game consists of pact “between the person who takes the risk of telling the truth and the person who agrees to listen to it,” the latter being required to take “courage in agreeing to accept the hurtful truth that he hears” (13). The parrhesiast, unlike the prophet or professional, “must put his name to his words; this is the price of his frankness” (16). In this regard, the “parrhesiastic game” looks a lot like Rich’s risky business of “licensing the unspeakable”—yet with at least one key difference. The parrhesiast, as Foucault writes, “leaves nothing to interpretation,” but leaves something to be done (16). Rich’s sense of poetic vocation, as elaborated here, renders these two modes (interpretation and action, a critique of democratic life and living democratically) inseparable.



With no clear end in sight, why do poets with a radically democratic “will to change” go on working? Beyond the available options of late liberalism—the shattering or shuttering of the self, the broken or buffered life, or the “insatiable desires and vain fears”—what kinds of returns do later modernist lyrics enable in terms of a connective or collective living? Like the ekphrastic time of Rich’s early lyric, “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers,” Rich’s rendition of Dürer’s image presents poetic “passage” as a process of going on unafraid, albeit with one’s pride perpetually chastened. Or, in an even *later* “last” poem called “Endpapers” (the final entry in the “New and Unpublished Poems” section of Rich’s posthumous *Later Poems*), we encounter an anachronistic reminder or remainder of the poet’s will to change. This last poem calls to mind what the poet’s vocation does not serve, what it cannot contain, and perhaps most importantly, how this demand for poetry, in its suspended transitivity and cruel intransitivity, *passes on*:

The signature to a life requires
the search for a method
rejection of posturing

trust in the witnesses
a vial of invisible ink
a sheet of paper held steady
after the end-stroke
above a deciphering flame. (*LP* 512)¹²

Rich's final poems release, or prolong, a shudder related to the models of psychic shuttering and shattering to the extent that this shudder affectively registers *as well as* articulately utters its recuperative desires. Such an utterance is also an "otherance" of neoliberalism's sclerotic desensitization of the subject within its economic and social forms of life (i.e. the logic of the career, the linguistic marketplace, etc.). For Rich, the power of poetic recuperation—her own ongoing vocation—manifests itself in unavoidably ambivalent, and yet fully committed, utterances of a radical hope. This is a hope for lyric's formalist continuum to continue working, even as poets attend to the difficult knowledge of their own personal and political experiences of rupture and revocation.

¹² cf. Rich's earlier poem, "Living Memory" (1988):

Written-across like nineteenth-century letters
or secrets penned in vinegar, invisible
till the page is held over flame. (*LP* 208)

CHAPTER 4

This Root-Bound Unblooming: Yusef Komunyakaa at the Jazz Workshop

In a 1990 interview Yusef Komunyakaa decries a “neo-fugitive” trend of contemporary American poetry, a trend reminiscent of the aesthetic ideology crystallized by the Fugitive Poets of the 1920s. This trend shuns or sublimates the political dilemmas of the present with “empty endurance and superficial reverence in the literary world” (Gotera 225). For Komunyakaa, a Louisiana-born Vietnam War veteran, the vitality of American poetry consists in how spiritual and aesthetic rigor together confront the psychosocial pressures that “empty” and “superficial” poetries evade. Komunyakaa’s wager—that any contemporary poetry worth its salt *must* be politically engaged—bespeaks persistent difficulties involved in negotiating aesthetic and political frames of reference for a genre increasingly polarized as either “political” or “apolitical,” culturally invaluable or utterly useless. This chapter focuses upon such difficulties vis-à-vis Komunyakaa’s understanding of the mutual implication of postwar jazz and African American lyric poetry in redefining the social, political, and spiritual contours of contemporary artistic professionalism. The positive forms of poetic endurance and reverence that Komunyakaa’s chastisement of “neo-fugitive” poetry throws into relief the sense of ongoing achievement and potentiality, as well as persistent limitation, that a jazz-inflected poetics entails. Both “tempered” through introspective consciousness and “stepped” by socio-political commitment, Komunayakaa animates an image of the poet’s workshop as a secular mode of artistic piety that reaches after unforeseen bonds of community and innovative forms of self-understanding.

As the only African American poet, baby boomer, and recipient of an MFA

degree focused on in my study, Komunyakaa's career spans a pivotal period of African American literature and is more firmly situated within academic institutions than the work of poets discussed in my first three chapters. His work thus occupies an enduring present that, since the late 1960s, scholars have described as the "postsegregation" and "post-soul" era of African American politics.¹ Elaborating on the former, Adolph Reed argues in *Stirrings in the Jug* (1999) that the heterogeneity of class interests and institutional frameworks for black politics after desegregation have amplified the "exposed limitations of the pro forma styles of political radicalism that had grown out of black power ideology" (6). Reed calls for a more substantive critique of the "structural or institutional processes *within* black politics," and of the "presumption of cohesiveness" across class lines of black political interests. This is grounded by the

[...] need to reconceptualize black political activity as a dynamic set of social relations and interests that converge on some issues as consequential for broad sectors of the black population and that diverge from others, based on other identities and interest aggregations [...] It is a notion of black politics in which black people, as individuals and as groups, organize, form alliances, and enter coalitions freely on the basis of mutually constituted interests, crisscrossing racial boundaries as they find it pragmatically appropriate. (39)

Reed's pragmatic re-contextualization of contemporary African American politics informs more specific and no less heated debates about the status of African American literature. Kenneth W. Warren's more recent argument in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) extends Reed's concerns to literary studies by reading against the grain of widespread critical assumptions about what African American literature is (or, as Warren argues, *was*) and is (was) for. Warren's critique is leveled against "a sense that African American writers and critics of the postsegregation era have often remained

¹ See Adolph Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug* (1999) 1-54, and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *In a Shade of Blue* (2007) 1-16.

oriented by the project of Negro literature as it was defined by responses to Jim Crow” (*What Was* 5). Warren attributes this prevalent orientation in part to nostalgia for the Civil Rights Movement’s cultural ethos, but he also imputes to such critical retrospection a set of facile political and social analyses of the *de facto* forms of racial inequality that exist today and define the current state of U.S. racial politics. Few literary scholars have responded directly to Reed’s or Warren’s call to disambiguate the “antagonism between cultural and normative politics,” as Vaughn Rasberry notes, an antagonism that, as I argue in what follows, Komunyakaa’s engagement with jazz’s socio-aesthetic practices and concepts seeks to substantially reconfigure (“Black Cultural Politics” 797).

Komunyakaa’s bicameral relationship to African American cultural politics vis-à-vis the lyric may inflame similar antagonisms with which poetic efforts to reclaim or redefine the status of poetic practice in America have been preoccupied since World War II. The seemingly exhausted debates—about reconciling or re-opposing the camps of the traditional first-person lyric and the oppositional/experimental avant-garde—have often been met with reactions that hyperbolically dichotomize and/or self-marginalize poetry from other literary and cultural practices. In my preceding investigations of how Williams, Duncan, and Rich confront and confound such aesthetico-political appraisals of American poetry—from the culminating works of high modernism, to the “cruel optimism” of lyric poetry after the Cold War—the newly emerging bonds and redrawn boundaries between the professional discourse of a poet’s “career” and understandings of poetic practice as a form of broadly social and ethical commitment (infused with modes of repurposed religiosity) have come into sharper focus. I have argued throughout this study that reductionist versions of a secularist narrative underwrite critical accounts that

simply thematize, and thus overlook, poets' living attachments to aesthetically coded forms of religiosity. According to such accounts, poets may continue to write *about* religion, either negatively or positively, but poets can no longer *be religious in, or about*, their work. In tracing out the convergent objectives of formal discipline and spiritual freedom in Komunyakaa's practice, this chapter will reassess both overtly and indirectly the role that spirituality plays in contemporary African American poetry. Komunyakaa's mobilization of jazz aesthetics thus modifies how we understand the tensions and/or hopeful rapport between religious and secular discourses in contemporary African American literature and devises a new idiom of the improvisational lyric.

While Duncan and Rich reached career-defining moments amid the 1960s counterculture and were activists against the Vietnam War, Komunyakaa was serving a tour of duty in South Vietnam as an information specialist, and witnessing traumatic scenes of conflict and massacre at first-hand. In such a context, the particular convergence of craft and calling staged by Komunyakaa's poetry coordinates itself within the collective conscience(s) of African American poets, Vietnam veterans, and poets who were raised, or "paid their dues," in MFA programs. At the level of a communal calling, the Black Arts Movement's (BAM) poets of the 1960s offered a "first real synthesis of jazz and poetry" for writers of Komunyakaa's generation, although BAM's aesthetic and political objectives proved to be fraught with the totalizing rhetoric of a nationalist and masculinist didacticism (BN 5). Yet on the level of professionalized craft, the political quietism often attributed to mainstream lyric poetry has spurred some poets and scholars to invoke a reconstituted universalism as the means by which to mitigate the perceived misfit of lyric's engagement with political institutions and subjectivity. By substituting

secular criteria of lyric “personhood” for older religious idioms of the soul or self, such arguments fail to recognize how religiously-inflected imaginaries and practices continue to shape contemporary lyric practices. Komunyakaa works at both sides of this critical discrepancy by merging and appropriating elements of jazz’s pragmatic and spiritual vernaculars to reanimate the interplay of disciplined construction and expressive freedom in lyric. As Vincent Colapietro writes, jazz’s socio-aesthetic undertakings on the whole have involved a similar project of “communal celebration of the individual voice both as an integral part of an ensemble and an independent (or solitary) force of articulation” (“Jazz as Metaphor” 23). This peculiar dialogic interaction between ensemble and soloist is crucial for understanding of how poets like Komunyakaa have emulated jazz’s ethos of improvisation not simply by thematic renderings of jazz performance and its cultural history, but by enacting and transforming the imaginative experiences to which jazz, as a social and aesthetic medium of communication, gives shape.

Komunyakaa’s broad investment in black musical expression recalls Eugene Redmond’s 1976 poetry anthology and series of essays, *Drumvoices: The Mission of Afro-American Poetry*, wherein Redmond describes black musical culture “not just as an aesthetic or inspirational sense, but in terms of an architectonics” (15). But the poetic principles derived from such an architectonics of musical improvisation prove to be unstable, even if individual poems, sequences, lines, phrases, or words reach—or reach after—cognitive and affective states of equilibrium. By extension, the co-implication of freedom and discipline in a jazz poetics resonates with Rich’s description of contemporary poets’ livelihood as “interstitial living” (*What Is Found* 43). That is, the ways that poets working today pay dues, make ends meet, or realize unpredictable forms

cultural survival occur in spaces where there seems to be no time or space left for the practice of poetry. This resonance notwithstanding, Komunyakaa's approach to making a living poetry differs from Rich's kind of politics, as well as from his Black Arts forebears such as Amiri Baraka, Larry Neal, Sonia Sanchez, Nikki Giovanni, and Haki Madhubuti (to name just a few poets whose work in the 1960s has informed Komunyakaa's work). The significant difference of Komunyakaa's work lies in his avoidance of dramatizing the frustrations of the postwar avant-garde, frustrations manifested in poetry whose revolutionary aspirations are becoming outstripped by the rhetorical ambivalence of "open form" poetics. If radical poetic polemicizing can become as politically risible as the scenic quietude of the postwar lyric of bourgeois solitude, newer dispensations of modernist innovation must take stock of not only what "free" verse opens up or liberates, but also what new forms of constraint are needed. Komunyakaa thus recasts jazz poetry's particular vocation(s) as that which "demands trust in others and in its mode of freedom," while continuing to question the reduction of black poetic expression in terms of racial custodianship (*BN* 7). By tying musical and poetic innovation to the lived experiences and pragmatic choices of particular individuals working, living, and creating art at various levels—personal survival, social belonging, cultural resonance, spiritual longing, and cosmological speculation—Komunyakaa's work tests how the political bifurcation of formalism and experimentalism has limited contemporary African American poetics. By imagining the workshop as a space in between experimental and traditional absolutes, Komunyakaa's poetry offers a compelling response to his own call for a politically engaged and reverent practice.

The Jazz Workshop

The Jazz Workshop serves as a key figure for grasping how Komunyakaa incorporates jazz's improvisational techniques and collective language into a compositional *habitus*. The workshop is certainly not foreign to the lexicon of postwar American poetry, as the creative writing workshop has been perhaps the institutional space in which poets are made and from which most poetic careers are launched (notwithstanding extra-academic channels of poetic production such as spoken word, hip-hop, SLAM, performance art, electronic writing, or the post-avant terrain of sundry practices that Kenneth Goldsmith has recently dubbed “uncreative writing”; see Goldsmith 2011). The workshop ethos I posit here, however, reverberates at different frequencies than the stylistic and political associations of the “workshop lyric” in the age of the MFA program—i.e. plainspoken reveries, often based on quotidian detail, in which the speaker/spectator enjoys a moment of insight that is sanctioned by the safe space of reflection provided by the lyric first-person. While much of Komunyakaa's practice is rooted in a conventional sense of first-person lyric subjectivity, his articulation of a workshop ethos enriches those Manichean conceptions of contemporary poetics that have disaggregated two senses of poetic “license.” As Marjorie Perloff notes, these two senses are always entangled and difficult to mitigate: “*license* as permit, as permission from an outside authority” and “*license* as defiance of authority, as failure to obtain a permit” (*Poetic License* 1). These competing orientations—poetry as the product of artisanal craft or the expression of artistic genius—mirror similarly compartmentalized roles that jazz musicians at mid-century faced and to which their work offered assorted responses. The social and aesthetic negotiations that postwar jazz artists made between the roles of

entertainer or disciplined innovator (what Eric Porter calls the “art/soul dichotomy of jazz valuation”) produced a peculiarly interfused sense of craft and calling (“Born Out of Jazz” 219).² Critics of Komunyakaa’s poetry have perceived a similar convergence of artistic discipline and freedom as well, although fuller attention to how this convergence came to be, what structural and symbolic strategies it deploys, and what sense of a jazz ethos it prefigures will yield a more accurately nuanced understanding of why and how in poetry such as Komunyakaa’s the discursive values placed on careers and vocations no longer strictly oppose one another. In addition, the undoing of this seemingly fundamental tension need not be grounds for concluding that the one paradigm has subsumed the other, or vice versa.

Komunyakaa expresses the basic sense of the Jazz Workshop in “Copacetic Mingus,” a snapshot-of-the-jazz-artist-as-a-living-figure included in an early volume, *Copacetic* (1984). The poem opens with an epigraph from Charles Mingus’s autobiography, *Beneath the Underdog* (1971): “*Mingus One, Two, and Three. / Which do you want the world to see?*” (PD 112).³ The poem implicitly answers Mingus’s elliptical

² Porter’s discussion of composer and pianist George Russell’s influential 1953 Ur-treatise of post-bop harmonic theory, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, usefully analyzes how figures in the emergence of modal jazz, and Russell in particular, presented dual conceptions of artistic subjectivity—as both “theorist and romantic artist”—and this presentation was “a complex kind of gendered, racial, and technoscientific maneuver” (217). Referred to as “the Concept”—basically a “theory that allows an improviser or composer to identify a series of scales that can be used to express a chord or other harmonic framework...[and thus] allows an improvising musician to play any note in the tempered scale, although one is to do so while maintaining an awareness of the ‘tonal gravity’ (i.e. the relative relationship to the parent scale) of the notes one is playing” (214-215)—Russell’s combination of theoretical and scientific idioms with an ethos of pan-denominational spirituality was “geared toward improving the position of jazz players (whether African American or not) laboring in a field coded and often devalued as black” (226). Russell’s “alternative universalism” urges us, as Porter claims, “to think about the limitations of ‘blackness’ as a framework explaining the generation of art, and to consider carefully a matrix of meaning revolving around black music and how such meanings relate to the place of black people in the music industry and the world beyond” (231).

³ In *Beneath the Underdog* (1991 [1971]), Mingus formulates this cryptic provocation in the opening dialogue with his therapist by way of a Freudian triad. This elaboration is itself an iteration of a previous

question with “all of the above,” stating that:

Art & life bleed
into each other
as he works the bow. (*PD* 112)

“Copacetic Mingus” condenses Mingus’s various self-fashioned and socially ascribed selves—as well as the multifaceted political aspirations and aesthetic sensibilities of civil-rights-era hard bop—into a short lyric that promises little more than acknowledging, or doggedly celebrating, the beautiful and tragic actuality of all of these facets. The poem’s task is to acknowledge Mingus’s volatile sense of a creative self as somehow unified, as copacetic. Through the poem’s “tonal insinuations,” Mingus’s musical self manifests an unmistakably gendered and eroticized social reality of jazz instrumental performance (*BN* 6). Komunyakaa intimates this in the poem’s refrain: “Hard love, it’s hard love” (*PD* 112). Leading up to the bleeding together of art and life, Komunyakaa apposes the materials of Mingus’s craft:

Heartstring. Blessed wood,
& every moment the thing’s made of:
ball of fatback
licked by fingers of fire.
Hard love, it’s hard love.
Running big hands down
the upright’s wide hips,
rocking his moon-eyed mistress

unheard conversation and results in the ambiguously real presence of all three aspects of the artist’s personality:

‘In other words I am three. One man stands forever in the middle, unconcerned, unmoved, watching, waiting to be allowed to express what he sees to the other two. The second man is like a frightened animal that attacks for fear of being attacked. Then there’s an over-loving gentle person who lets people into the uttermost sacred temple of his being and he’ll take insults and be trusting and sign contracts without reading them and get talked down to working cheap or for nothing, and when he realizes what’s been done to him he feels like killing and destroying everything around him including himself for being so stupid. But he can’t—he goes back inside himself.’

‘Which one is real?’
‘They’re *all* real.’ (3)

with gold in her teeth. (PD 112-113)

In her recent discussion of the “jazz body,” Meta DuEwa Jones connects this poem to normative figurations of jazz’s highly eroticized muse and unfaithful mistress, and to the invisibility of women instrumentalists in the legacy of jazz performance. The insinuations of art and life bleeding together not only echo this gendered sense of jazz artists as masculine cultural warriors, but also alludes to Mingus’s technical work (“dogging the raw strings / unwaxed with rosin”); to jazz’s role in the Civil Rights Movement’s struggle against the violence of Jim Crow; to the aesthetic blending together of different vernacular, classical, and sacred musical traditions; and, at the broadest level, to any “technique of existence [that has] absorbed itself into its surroundings” (voices and instruments into resonant sounds, ink forming into signifying shapes on absorbent paper, and these sounds and shapes reforming one’s preformed ideas, feelings, experiences, and motives) (*Semblance* 166). This “bleed” embodies an instance of what Brian Massumi has elaborated in *Semblance and Event* (2011) as a “speculative-pragmatic” dynamic of artistic innovation (12). Massumi’s hyphenated coinages (the former, as well as the “aesthetic-political”) stress the “co-occurring dimensions” of aesthetic and political creation that “do not parse out in a way that maps onto the existing disciplinary landscape and associated ways of conventionally bifurcating practices [...] Pragmatic doesn’t mean practical *as opposed to* speculative or theoretical. It is a synonym for composition: ‘how’ processual differentials eventually play out as co-composing formative forces” (166). In relation to Komunyakaa’s Mingus, the bleeding together of life and art renders the musician’s (or poet’s) “mission” as that of always “trying out” (attempt and trial, experiment and struggle) more affectively and technically responsive relationships to

one's instrument(s) and to one's inherited forms. In addition to being a coarse, "unwaxed" celebration of the Mingus mythos of male heterosexual mastery and artistic genius, Komunyakaa's poem realizes an oblique and quizzically tender critique of the "hard love" of jazz improvisation. It is a double-edged practice in which mastery and vulnerability co-compose. The expressive qualities of instruments themselves render personal or aesthetic autonomy an illusion at best, and a delusion at worst. As Jones argues, the widespread notion of jazz as a language connects the bodily mediated aspects of jazz performance to formal properties of the lyric, for both compositional processes are "dialogic and heteroglossic, sensual and sonic, masculine and feminine, androgynous and unknown" (*Muse* 166). In light of this, Komunyakaa's lyric repurposing of central tropological registers of jazz history and practice posits a working relationship between aesthetic form and improvisational expression—a relationship that has, at many times in the late-twentieth century, ossified into an essentialist notion of what jazz is, and what its cultural politics may, or should, be.

Seeking a way to establish legal and pragmatic control over his artistic and economic pursuits, Mingus christened his band, music-publishing imprint, and independent record label (Debut Records) "The Jazz Workshop." The term signaled, as Scott Saul notes, "Mingus's multifaceted rebellion against the pressure of racial stereotype and the forces of musical stasis. Mingus copyrighted the phrase, and the tag became a kind of marketable trademark, attesting to jazz authenticity and Mingus's desire to control his own fortunes" (*Freedom Is* 149). This move was driven by the hope to forge an economically profitable and aesthetically rewarding practice in an era that saw jazz being subsumed into the mass culture of middle-class white America (the "Jazz

Workshop” was also ironically the name for an album series released in the 1950s by mainstream label RCA Victor). In addition to representing his legal and economic rights, Mingus’s phrase also initiated a new mode of jazz aesthetics. In opposition to the politics of liberal consensus, Mingus’s Workshop “implied that jazz composition was an ongoing process, fraught with the high drama of virtuosos contesting one another” (149). As Saul writes, Mingus earned the moniker of the “Lee Strasburg of Jazz” through his “method”—the heterodox and dramatic means by which intense emotion was elicited from musicians in his bands through harsh discipline. This was a “sphere of musical action governed by the push and pull of the Workshop dynamic [...] where compositional restraint served paradoxically as a kind of emotional provocation” (158-159). Saul’s analogies between Strasberg’s Actor’s Studio, the modernist atelier, and Mingus’s Jazz Workshop (which “strove to inculcate the compositions within the musicians themselves”) extend to the terrain of the jazz lyric (159). As musicians developed ways, in Nat Hentoff’s words, “to make their instruments extensions of themselves,” so might a poet’s linguistic medium be deployed as a spiritual prosthesis, or phantom limb, in order to re-member, through hard love, what has been lost in the context of what remains and what is coming into being (161).

This historical and generic transposition of the Jazz Workshop in Komunyakaa’s writing indicates a juncture at which various aspects of a “calling” converge in contemporary jazz poetics (i.e. a “calling” as a literary profession, a political role, an authentic mode of spirituality, a communal pattern of call and response, an improvisational mode of knowing, a cry of the heart, or various combination of more than one of these roles). At the crux of Komunyakaa’s *habitus* (a catacoustic interplay of life

and art that poetry works upon and with), the Jazz Workshop underscores the interface between roles ascribed to contemporary African American literary artists. Komunyakaa insists that to seamlessly conflate these roles or to aggressively prioritize and monitor them are unviable options for poets seeking to actively engage both with the history of jazz and the paths that improvisational music is taking today. To “keep jazz alive” is an insufficient motto, as it dubiously evokes nostalgic attitudes toward a cultural poetics that necessarily honors transformation in tandem with preservation. Such a sentiment is the wrong starting point for engaging jazz history and for enabling a living interaction between contemporary poetry and improvisational music.

Calling All Professionals

The aspiration of keeping jazz alive raises questions about how and to what extent the various creative musical practices, understood in one way or another as jazz, can or ought to be unified as a single tradition. Journalist Michael Spies writes: “[Y]ou can’t talk about jazz in America without describing something dying. But jazz did not die; musicians died. Miles Davis died. But Jazz remained a language. And languages only die when they are no longer spoken” (“Speaking the Language” Web). The logic underwriting this image of capital-J Jazz reflects an organicist logic of continuous and progressive growth—an unbroken lineage or language passed on from generation to generation. According to this logic, the language of Jazz is greater than the sum of its individual voices. In *The Birth of Bebop* (1999), Scott DeVeaux juxtaposes this critical narrative of jazz’s “evolution” (aligned with works such as Martin Williams’s *The Jazz Tradition* (1970)) with the trope of “revolution.” DeVeaux argues that bebop’s “rejection

of the status quo” is a rejection not only of jazz’s aesthetic forms of the early decades of the twentieth century (Ragtime, Dixieland, Swing, etc.) but also of the cultural, social, and economic roles attributed to African American musicians (i.e. minstrel performers, popular entertainers) as they pursued a livelihood amid the institutionalized discrimination of Jim Crow (4). This contradicts the logic of continuous evolution inscribed into images of *the* jazz tradition. To this extent, the sum of jazz’s various parts appears to be a more complex set of motives and purposes than that for which the image of unified tradition can account. This also compels us to rethink how jazz professionals make a living, and how one listens for these aspirations in the musical record.

DeVeaux also claims that the irresolvable tensions between the terms “evolution” and “revolution” epitomize the historical dynamics of modernist aesthetics writ large: “[...] any disjunction [between pre-bop and post-bop jazz] may be accounted for by the rhetoric of modernism, which by its insistence on the necessity of ongoing, radical innovation suggests that the *process* of growth in artistic tradition is likely to be punctuated by many such ‘revolutions’” (4, my emphasis). DeVeaux diverges not only from Williams’s approach to jazz as an organic tradition (which calls for critical appreciation in isolation from its social and historical contexts), but also from accounts such as Amiri Baraka’s depiction of the “clarion call of bebop” as an originary moment that led to the awakening of radical black consciousness in the late 1960s (22). Both of these terms reveal that bebop was imperiled by dilemmas facing the historical avant-garde as a disjunctive whole. That is, the conflicting values of social engagement and disengagement written into the anti- or non-commercial rhetoric of modernist aesthetics fundamentally condition the emergence of bebop. Bebop is thus not only a continuation

of evolving African American musical traditions or the revolutionary hailing of a new black consciousness, but a professional art form responsive to the impasse of jazz's commercial promise and the segregation of society in which that market operates. Thus bebop's historical provenance and aspirations, DeVaux writes, are rooted in "the day-to-day, year-by-year decisions made by the musicians of the bebop generation in the pursuit of their careers" (28). At the seemingly impossible meeting point of the social and the musical, bebop's call for a living music is linked, quite understandably and irrevocably, to maintaining a livelihood—to the stakes of professional musicianship as a discipline creating new channels for social advancement and cultural critique.

DeVaux's understanding of bebop "as a result of the decisions" musicians made—an array of cumulative, but heterogeneous, outcomes of individual agents reworking the aesthetic materials and socioeconomic conditions inherited from earlier generations—informs my reading of Komunyakaa's sense of poetry as a profession with a difference (28). The difference—both in DeVaux's account of jazz's history and in Komunyakaa's poetry—lies in understanding artistic vocations in the various contexts of African American modernism neither in terms of a mythic call of a single racial tradition or essence, nor as divine genius or innate talent. Rather, vocation comprises a set of ongoing responses to current of the historical, social, political, and ethical contingencies of black musicians' and writers' lived experiences. DeVaux's analysis of how bebop's professional ethos emerged as the particular outcomes of musicians' living choices informs Komunayaa's poetic sense of jazz improvisation's pragmatic aesthetics.

Recent criticism on the connections between American pragmatism and jazz clarifies the philosophical purview of this mode of professional self-making. Walton M.

Muyumba describes jazz improvisation not only as a set of particular techniques or routines but also, tapping into Kenneth Burke's lexicon, as "equipment for living" or a "way of life" (*Shadow* 15, 17).⁴ As Muyumba writes, a pragmatist understanding of jazz improvisation and its professional ethos underscore the "secular piety" of such cultural expressions that are predicated upon "the experimental development of selves through experience" (19). Komunyakaa combines associative play with formal constraint into a pragmatist-inflected poetry that critiques the use of "blackness" as an arch-category for contemporary African American poetry. A critical aesthetic and professional calling thus sustain attention to one's historical roots and abiding the loss of older conceptions of selfhood while incorporating their living vestiges into an archive of the "future anterior," or a conversation-coming-into-being, as Thom Donovan writes, which serves "less as a time-capsule than a provisional index of loss or misplaced futures; where the future has not yet become past and multiple futures remain compossible within a single present" ("For an Archive" Web). In the following sections, the "the continual reappearance of the future anterior" that Aldon Lynn Nielsen highlights in black experimental writing shows up in poems for which jazz works as a kind of soundtrack for various psychopolitical states of mind (*Integral Music* xvi). Routing my readings through

Komunyakaa's poetic meditations on jazz careers, his Vietnam War poetry, his evocation

⁴ In addition to "equipment for living," Muyumba further connects the lexicon of Kenneth Burke, a key intellectual figure linking classical American pragmatism with postwar African American literary artists such as Ellison and Baldwin. As Muyumba notes, Burke's notion of "secular piety" serves as a crucial concept for how James Baldwin articulates a jazz ethos into stories such as "Sonny's Blues," a short story that certainly informs Komunyakaa's poetic reworking of Parker's life and music: "Piety, as Burke suggests we understand it, is not about religious ideals as such, though they can be referenced, or about ethics—what is good or bad for us. Piety is not another name for theistic beliefs and practices. As well, piety does not speak of ethics as such...Rather, Burke writes, piety is about being loyal to the roots of our being, '[a] deep connection [to] the 'remembrance of things past'. Piety...is an attitude toward personal history and displays a desire to flesh things out, connecting experiences together into a succinct whole" (37). For further discussion of experimental American poetics, pragmatism, and jazz, see Magee (2004).

of a jazz soundtrack, as well his collaboration with jazz musicians, the Jazz Workshop not only proves to be a space for an improvisational sense of subjectivity and thus offers a set of aesthetic dispositions that both confront present forms of psychic and physical violence and delineate the limitations of artistic confrontation—what a poet can neither transcend nor stave off because of her personal embedment in social structures that perpetuate such violence.

“Testimony” and Jazz’s Phantom Limbs

Originally commissioned by Australia’s ABC radio as a libretto, published in *Thieves of Paradise* (1998), and performed as a multimedia orchestral piece at the Sydney Opera House in 2002, “Testimony” does not present a biographical sketch of Charlie Parker’s life in a conventional narrative arc. Rather, the poem evokes aspects of Parker’s vocation (a roughly chronological montage opening with Parker wandering from Kansas City to New York via Chicago in order to pursue a living as a musician, and closing with Parker’s death in New York’s Stanhope Hotel in 1955) and the living afterimages of his art. Avoiding both a matter-of-fact narrative style of realist portraiture or documentary and the mythologizing tendencies of many poems inspired by Parker’s life, Komunyakaa reconstructs the changes that made and make up the process of becoming “Bird.” As its title suggests, the poem bears witness to Parker’s life and work—to the assortment of persons, places, events, forms, textures, and moods that entered into Parker’s music and what the music evokes by attentive ear witness. The poem’s testimony also translates the religious vernacular of testifyin’ into a secular idiom of artistic piety. This form of witness bridges poetic and musical worlds and reworks

Black Arts paradigms for how African American poets formally and conceptually participate in, and comment upon, the ongoing emergence of black musical traditions.⁵ Komunyakaa understands the relationship between poetic and musical forms as reciprocal practices of inquiry in which performers and audience members sustain the time-bound work of artistic exchange:

For me a poem shouldn't have a resolution. I try to cultivate an open-endedness that invited the reader to enter, not merely read the poem as an outsider but to experience it from within. I'm not talking about the physics of chance but about an enjoyment culled from hard work—a connection fused by interactive minds. (BN 30)

Nonetheless, this fusion of interactive minds never fully relieves itself of the *confusion* (the complicated nature of an active unity) that this process of “enjoyment” necessitates. The “hard work” of writing a poetic homage to one of the most influential musicians of the twentieth century neither “embrace[s] the strange mythos of Bird” nor succeeds entirely in making Parker, as Sascha Feinstein writes, “absolutely present in our world”

⁵ In the watershed anthology, *Understanding the New Black Poetry* (1973), Stephen Henderson lists elements that illustrate the structural dynamics of black poetry in an introductory section entitled “Black Music as Poetic Reference”:

1. The casual, generalized reference
2. The careful allusion to song titles
3. The quotations from a song
4. The adaptation of song forms
5. The use of tonal memory as poetic structure
6. The use of precise musical notation in the text
7. The use of an assumed emotional response incorporated into the poem: the “subjective correlative”
8. The musician as subject/poem/history/myth
9. The use of language from jazz life
10. The poem as “score” or “chart” (47)

“Testimony” incorporates many of these structural elements (and the thematic content of African American life Henderson discusses in the initial introductory section), although the provocations generated by the poem neither aim for nor produce what Henderson calls in his third section poetic “saturation”—the “communication of Blackness” and a “sense of fidelity to the observed and intuited truth of Black Experience” (62). Komunyakaa mobilizes some of the structural elements (especially numbers 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, and 10) and thus complicates the ideological conflation of cultural forms and racial essence or, more particularly, the jazz improviser’s vocation with a mythic role as a spiritual voice or advocate for individuals and communities unified by a racial essence.

(“Humanity” 761).⁶ For the poem leaves itself open to unexpected revisions, reversals, imbalances, and insinuations that attentive, embodied listening involves. Thus Komunyakaa does not assimilate the legacy of Parker’s artistic genius into a pre-formed ideal of what jazz or jazz poetry is. Indeed, many of the creative dimensions that “Testimony” explores do not resolve on the “tonic” of formal or conceptual closure. In effect, the poem transposes jazz improvisation’s embodied musicality: the micro-dynamics of spontaneous composition and the macro-dynamics of jazz’s cross-generational evolution. This transposition is signaled, however spectrally, by a trope that permeates “Testimony”—jazz’s “phantom limbs.” This figure of intuited perception—a real, but weirdly displaced and dispersed form of attention—prefigures a mode of critically reappraising the historical afterimages of bebop. Not only does this mode of attention reconstitute a montage of dreams deferred within the history of jazz, but it also augurs the shape of a jazz prosody as it still emerges today.⁷

Komunyakaa’s exploration of Parker’s music and the personal experiences from

⁶ Feinstein’s analysis of this poem describes how Komunyakaa weds the “diaspora of myth” (slogans such as “Bird Lives!”) with a humanized portrait of Parker’s life and music (762). While I agree with these observations on a general level, the insights Feinstein’s reading yields—that the poem “replaces cliché with real poetry”—does not go far enough into the figurative and musical features of the poem that make it not only a jazz *poem*, but a *jazz* poem (762). In other words, an investigation of *how* Komunyakaa experiments with standard conceptions of lyric form in the process of evoking, abstracting, commenting upon, and engaging Parker’s historical experiences and musical legacy will provide a more compelling sense of how a jazz poem like this can work as historical inquiry or active listening.

⁷ In *In the Break* (2003), Fred Moten writes: “Montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself. That space is, is the site of, *ensemble*: the improvisation *of* singularity and totality *through* their opposition” (89). In many ways, “Testimony” deploys montage-like and/or cinematic techniques that frame, splice, and juxtapose scenes of Parker’s life in the short space-time of the poem in order to make readers “linger in the cut between them.” While Moten situates his work at “the intersection in philosophy of semiotics and phenomenology”—a critical starting point that I share—his characterization of the improvisational aesthetics of the black avant-garde as an intense process of “active forgetting” hazards a hypertrophic version of deconstruction that downplays or distorts thinking about jazz improvisation’s contributions to a poetics of critical memory, or what Nietzsche calls “critical history” (90). Radical pragmatist senses of jazz’s improvisational aesthetics do not offer an essential, trans-historical, or absolutely singular jazz “aesthetic” and such composite perspectives are necessary to avoid the methodological impasses that still haunt discussions of jazz’s aesthetic and/or sociological history as a singular and continuous tradition.

which it was produced takes shape in fourteen sections, each section containing two fourteen-line, end-stopped, non-rhyming sonnets. At the level of the line, the accentual three-beat pattern (three stressed syllables per line with variable combinations of feet) with fairly stable line breaks (governed for the most part by syntactical units ending on nouns, pronouns, and verbs) formally maps out, or “scores,” what is fundamentally an improvisational art. This prosodic design provides, in Komunyakaa’s words, “shape and tonal equilibrium” to the open-ended routes that poetic inquiry takes. If, by virtue of its improvisational freedom, Parker’s music cannot be mapped with referential stability, “Testimony” establishes a differential relationship between the poetic “map”—which is not only organized by Komunyakaa’s prosody, but by the profusion of place names, nicknames, song titles, and sundry concrete details of Parker’s life—and bebop’s musical “territory.” Although the poetic map does not correspond to the territory of jazz’s improvised performances, it does ground the poem’s inquiry into and speculation upon a figure of jazz history and jazz myth in the process of Parker’s becoming a kind of ritualized object.

The poem opens with an image of Parker heading north, a sequence that not only indicates geographic and economic mobility, but also initiates the poem’s prosodic design in conjunction with the beginning of Bird’s artistic pursuits:

He hopped boxcars to Chitown
late fall, just a few steps
ahead of the hawk. After
sleepwalking to the 65 Club,
he begged Goon for a chance
to sit in with a borrowed sax.
He’d paid his dues for years
blowing ravenous after-hours
till secrets filled with blues
rooted in Mississippi mud; [...] (*PD* 407)

Komunyakaa's irregular rhythms, suggestively truncated logic, and elliptical line breaks—all at play within the abovementioned levels of formal constraint—induce something of the spontaneously generated rhythms both of Parker's phrasings as well as the desultory cadences of making a living as a musician (i.e. *providing* for oneself through pragmatic extemporization). Generally speaking, such rhythmic modulations function in "Testimony" as a contrapuntal linking of syntactical phrases or metrical feet in relation to one another within and across lines. Within a single line, this rhythmic modulation flips an iambic foot (Hě hópped) into a trochee (bóxcărs) then twists the two feet together as an amphibrach (tő Chítówn). The first line progresses in a conventional syntactical order (subject-verb-object) with a logical narrative of movement, from origin to destination. Yet the speaker's linear syntax does not remain so, as "lâte fáll" retrojects the temporal context of Parker's early peregrinations as the afterthought of, or riposte to, the first line's back-to-front movement. A more prosaic and linear narrative might begin with the setting and move towards the punctuated result of the action—e.g. "In late fall, Parker hopped boxcars in order to get to Chicago." Here in the first few lines of "Testimony," the jazz improviser's paradigm to always "tell a story" emerges as an inverted call and response: response (hopping cars) and then call (late fall's timeliness). The event's timing comes as a response to and commentary upon the initial rhythmic pulses of action, which in the first line are without historical reference. The emphatic spondee opening the second line completes a rhythmic "sentence." On a micro-level, this rhythmic punctuation approximates the phrasing of the classic "mop-mop" figure of bebop's musical lexicon.⁸ As the first sentence lands "a few steps / ahead of the hawk,"

⁸ In "The Dozens: Steve Coleman on Charlie Parker," saxophonist Steve Coleman discusses with great

Komunyakaa weaves into his anticipatory rhythms the trace of sophisticated harmonic practices (reconstituted “steps”) advanced by bebop innovators like Coleman Hawkins (the Hawk) and Parker, while beyond off the map of cultural reference lingers a totemic or mythic sense of Parker outrunning his artistic fate (“the hawk”) yet, always being guided by it. All of these are insinuations within the geographical vernacular to which the line refers: the “hawk” winds of a Chicago winter.

Another line of this opening sequence—“He’d paid his dues for years”—stands out with such iambic evenness that it strikes the ear as a rhythmic quotation of a more traditional prosody. This line’s even feet contrast with the jilted line breaks and protean rhythms of the other opening lines. Such rhythmic textures communicate micro-information that syncs up with macro-level issues that the poem incorporates: historical events in Parker’s lifetime, proper names of persons and places, recurrent images, and the artistic/spiritual lore associated to Parker’s music. The even/uneven courses of “paying one’s dues” crisscrossing through Parker’s life and work trace out a career that, as pragmatist philosophers like James or Dewey stress, depends upon and emerge from the available routes of a present “funded” by experience. This process becomes both theme and a method for the poem to work out anew. Jazz “provides spiritual connection to the land,” writes Komunyakaa (*BN* 4). In addition to weirdly encrypting into Bird’s artistic

depth how the “mop-mop” figure and other “structural rhythmic tendencies” work within Parker’s music and the “micro-information” they communicate (“Dozens” Web). In a discussion of Parker’s “internal sense of rhythmic structure” in the context of African-diasporic musical traditions, Coleman notes: “Recognition of a sense of *clave* in Parker’s playing is a *key* (pardon my pun) to beginning to investigate his complex rhythmic concepts in greater detail. It would be instructive to listen to Bird’s spontaneous compositions only for their rhythmic content without regard for the pitches” (“Dozens” Web). The conversational interplay between Parker and drummer Max Roach, for example, highlights a musical kinship with sub-Saharan master drummers, whose spontaneous compositions lengthen and compress phrases and establish rhythmic emphasis as relational rather than definitive. Coleman’s commentary is crucial to consider here insofar as Komunyakaa’s evocation of Parker’s music relates how in lyric poetry as well as jazz improvisation “tonal, suprasegmental communication is possible through purely prosodic means” (“Dozens” Web).

hunger a harbinger of ill omen, Parker's "blowing *ravenous*" is rooted in the telluric currents of jazz's cultural sediment—the blues, "Mississippi Mud." The growing sense of jazz as a cultural ecology—in which the radical permutation of one's "roots" superimpose musical and manual labor—comes further into focus in section II. Here Bird generates an opportunity to play music after paying his dues upon arriving in New York—"Washing dishes at Jimmy's / Chicken Shack from midnight / to eight for nine bucks a week" (*PD* 408). These opportunities accentuate the after effects of Bird's somnambulant yet auspicious "fall" into such circumstances:

[...] After
a tango palace in Times Square
& jam sessions at Clark Monroe's,
in the back room of a chili house
on "Cherokee," he could finally play
everything inside his head,
the melodic line modulating
through his bones to align itself
with Venus & the Dog Star. (*PD* 408)

The macro-rhythm of Venus and Sirius's cosmic alignment converges with Parker's entry into musical opportunities that enable him to unify mind ("everything inside head") and body ("through his bones") through "modulating" lines. This demands that we understand the revelatory moment ("he *finally* could play") as provisional. This finality ironically enough precipitates Parker's vocation: a process that is dependent upon such eventful chances and odd jobs as it is upon the totality of one's embodied experiences, thoughts, aspirations, and dreams. The first time Parker solos on "Cherokee"—an originary moment in bebop lore—accumulates significance by virtue of the moment's duration unfolding over Parker's lifetime and successive generations. This moment in the poem registers the interplay between the musical structures, historical happenstance,

and symbolic interpretations that coalesce into Parker's life work. Episodes in Parker's life ricochet off each other, evoking their integral role in multiple phases of improvisation, across in ambient, locally specific, or acoustic levels of memory:

A train whistle
In the distance, gun shot
through the ceiling, a wood warbler
back in the Ozarks at Lake
Taneycomo, he'd harmonize
them all. (*PD* 409)

or the transformation of linguistic play into legend:

He followed a spectral cologne
till he was back with Hootie,
till that joke about chickens
hit by a car swells into legend. (*PD* 408-409)

or the confluence of Parker's own body with musical expression's immaterial traces:

Now, he was ready to squeeze
elevenths, thirteenths,
every silent grace note
of blood into each dream
he dared to play. (*PD* 408-409)

or converting the experience of racial injustice into an extension of the improvising imagination:

[...] Bird landed in jail
in Jackson for lallygagging
on the front porch of a boardinghouse
with the lights on. For two days
he fingered a phantom alto
till "What Price Love" spoke
through metal and fluted bone. (*PD* 410)

These various images evoke how the process of living shows up in Parker's music.

Furthermore, as the last two passages imply, what does not manifest—"every silent grace note"—also resounds at another level of the poem.

Parker's "phantom alto" resurfaces in the poem as the physical and spiritual phenomenon in which living experience reveals itself as improvised:

If you favor your left
hand over the right, one
turns into Abel & the other
into Cain. (*PD* 411)

Here Komunyakaa's line break skews our sense of physical and moral balance, as the disequilibrium of each turn ratchets up a sense of cross-eyed, or cross-eared, duplicity. The split decision between sacrificing the weaker hand and compensating the imbalance by "righting" these lines (making physical ambidexterity akin to moral rectitude) requires readers to incorporate the two positions into a chord of meaning, however consonant or dissonant it may be. According to the poem's logic of the improvising body-mind, "Charlie could be two places at once, / always arm-wrestling himself in the dark" (*PD* 412). The call-and-response, or response-and-call, structures an incessant struggle with oneself across multiple but simultaneously occupied positions. Furthermore, this elicits a form of embodied attention that David Sudnow describes in his famous study of improvisation, *Ways of the Hand* (1978) as "a kind of imaginary conceiving of various aspects of the territory in which I was moving" (xi). Sudnow details how a pianist's "jazz hands" develop an intimate knowledge of the keyboard, enabling it to find "ways of exploratory engagement with routings through its [the keyboard's] spaces, modalities of reaching and articulating" in order to "choose places to go in the course of moving from place to place as a handful choosing" (xiii). This phenomenological account of improvisational dexterity recalibrates the mental processes associated with improvisation (as a kind of spontaneous choosing informed by the creative will) with respect to the kinds of embodied memory that improvisation involves. Sudnow offers a description of

improvisational activity “not through an introspective consciousness, but by a fine examination of concrete problems posed by the task of sustaining an orderly activity, which ‘improvisation’ certainly is” (xiii). Improvisation’s “body language” takes on a new significance within this framework of “incorporated sense of places and distances” so as to temper an overly intellectualized view of improvisation with the embodied shapes of practical know-how (20). When Sudnow writes of struggling to learn a notoriously difficult passage in a solo by Parker, he recognizes that “I had been glossing the particularities of the notes in many of my hummings, grasping their essential shape perhaps but not singing them with refined pitch sensitivity” (17). As one of Komunyakaa’s multiple speakers queries Parker’s art—speculating whether his art is simply “guesswork / contorted into breath”—a keen sensitivity concerning the “body’s own appreciative structures” forms in tandem with the poem’s rhythmic modulations in order to re-member Bird’s life and music rather than purify one or the other (*PD* 411; *Ways* 13). It is in this sense that “Testimony” demonstrates how jazz’s practical and spiritual modes of knowing, or divining, involve the sensory work of appendages that perhaps are not ontologically *there*, but are nonetheless percipient and real.

As the poem approaches Parker’s death, the sense of a virtual self articulated by jazz’s phantom’s limbs dovetails with the poem’s shift in perspective. In section X, Parker, then institutionalized at Camarillo State Mental Hospital in California, receives news of his daughter Pree’s death. Writing to his wife Chan, the poem shifts into the italicized voice of Parker’s letter, “crying within these words [...] trying to ease Chan’s pain, / trying to save himself”:

*My darling. My daughter’s death
surprised me more than it did you.*

*Don't fulfill funeral proceeding until
I get there. I shall be the first
one to walk into our chapel.
Forgive me for not being there
with you while you were at
the hospital. Yours most sincerely,
your husband, Charlie Parker. (PD 414-415)*

Here Komunyakaa's short lines split up phrases such as "My daughter's death / surprised me," "until / I get there," or "at / the hospital," thus superimposing upon these interrupted lines' breathless and nearly wordless grief the necessary risk of improvising an expression of empathy and solace. As the second sonnet opens, Komunyakaa presents another version of the letter, an alternate take that reads at moments more like an interior monologue with desperate, almost delusional, digressions interposed within the message:

*My daughter is dead.
I will be there as quick
as I can. My name is Bird.
It is very nice to be out here,
I am coming in right away.
Take it easy. Let me be the first
one to approach you. I am
your husband. Sincerely,
Charlie Parker. (PD 415)*

After this second version, the speaker enjoins the reader:

[...] Now, don't
say we can't already hear
those telegraph keys playing Bartok
till the mockingbird loses its tongue,
already playing Pree's funeral song
from the City of Angels. (PD 415)

These expressions of unimaginable grief invoke musical figures and otherworldly innuendoes in place names until the mockingbird falls silent—until one's vocation reaches the end of the line. Parker's recorded utterances interline Bartok with a threnody for his daughter in the form of a practical message—a telegraph stating that he's on his

way. Art and life are “already” virtually conjoined even as the act of articulation only points toward what will become of both as they eventually separate from one another.

The interplay of body language’s formal and conceptual modulations in “Testimony” foregrounds the differential semiotic registers of lyric as an artifact (a composition, score, or chart) and an event (reading, performance, interpretation). Musical theorist Jean-Jacques Nattiez names the sum of these differential relationships in a musical composition a “Total Musical Fact”: an “irreducibly timebound phenomenon [...] brought into experience by innumerable acts of particular individuals [...] informed by all their idiosyncrasies and by the accidents of historical context” (quoted in K. Parker 30).⁹ It is in this process that the micro-information of bodily rhythms, tones of voice, and the cultural-geographical contexts of Parker’s music as a living process, rather than static object, takes shape in the poem’s language and imagery. Williams’s evocative vernacular soundscape in *Paterson* as well as Duncan’s syncretic representations of religious gestures, and his characterization of poetic composition as an ongoing rite, resonate with the kinds of living processes worked into “Testimony.” The spontaneously blossoming flower (a sunset, a composition, a lingering trace of Parker’s art) at the closing of the first section and in the last moment of the poem is a symbol of a Total Musical Fact. The flower’s transformative emergence illustrates how Bird’s vocation proceeds from, rather than produces, an assemblage of forces—as much by forms of embodied knowledge, chance encounters, and economic necessities as by intellectual

⁹ Kelly A. Parker employs this term and its tripartite structure—described by Nattiez as the *poietic* (“procedures that have engendered it (acts of composition),” the *neutral* or *immanent* (“organizations, structures, ‘configurations,’ sounds, and/or score that define the experientiable work”), and the *esthetic* (“procedures to which it [the musical composition] gives rise: acts of interpretation and perception”)—in a Peircean semiotic model for jazz aesthetics that aims to rethink the relationship between a musical object (composition, score, etc.) and its production and reception (e.g. the reduction and reification of musical practices—composing, playing, listening, evaluating, etc.) (30).

ingenuity and aesthetic virtuosity:

[...] Weeks
later, with the horn hocked,
he was on a slow Greyhound
headed for the Big Apple,
& “Honeysuckle Rose”
blossomed into body language
driven by a sunset on the Hudson. (PD 408)

The accidents that bloom into the musical language and cultural iconography of Parker’s art of living simply do not have predictable and verifiable precedents, however grounded in metaphors of continuous evolution and a unified tradition jazz appears to be.

Metaphors such as the blooming rose in “Testimony” are not established by prior forms of symbolic significance, but prefigure possible forms of significance that, like an artistic vocation in the process of unfolding, are still unrealized. Metaphors, as Walker Percy describes them, take on a life of their own as the fortuitous and unpredictable results of creative “mistakes” (*Message* 64). Section XIV’s closes the poem with reverberating instances of how the process of metaphorizing Parker’s spiritual and social significance emerges from the haze of historical rumor while extending the temporal and political indeterminacy of Parker’s legacy:

They wanted to hold his Selmer
to put lips to the mouthpiece,
to have their pictures snapped
beneath *Bird Lives! Bird Lives!*
scrawled across Village walls
& subway trains. Three women
sang over his body, but no one read
The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam
aloud. Two swore he never said
“Please don’t let them bury me
in Kansas City.” Everyone
has a Bird story. Someone
said he wished for the words
Bird recited for midnight fixes.

Someone spoke about a letter
in *Down Beat* from a G.I.
in Korea who stole back
a recording of “Bird in Paradise”
from a dead Chinese soldier’s hand.
Someone counted the letters in his name
& broke the bagman’s bank. Maybe
there’s something to all this
talk about seeing a graven image
of Bird in Buddha & the Sphinx.
Although half of the root’s gone,
heavy with phantom limbs, French
flowers engraved into his horn
bloom into the after-hours. (*PD* 418)

In its closing section, “Testimony” resists the kind of hero worship it portrays, in which one of the most central figures of jazz in postwar America underwent a countercultural apotheosis. Parker’s own testimony, as the ending obliquely insinuates, is still being tested out years, decades, and generations after bebop’s heyday. To frame Parker’s musical corpus as something supernatural risks the possibility of deactivating the music’s potential energy. To what extent does Bird live, and how does Bird’s music live, or can live, or be living in the present? The verdict on these investigations seems to be always out, moving past any single iteration of the mythic motifs that bleed into other scenes—whether in the anecdotes of Bird as an expropriated token of Cold War American nationalism, the gambler’s use of Parker’s name as an auspicious cipher, or the “graven images” of Bird appearing in the guise of Buddha or the Sphinx. Rather than perpetuate this mythologizing of Parker through the practice jazz iconography, Komunyakaa voices a “testimony” in the sense of a trial that is always virtually present yet with profoundly real consequences. The poem thus destabilizes race while historicizing the lived experience of it in conjunction with an emerging artistic practice. As “Testimony”

illustrates, an improvising artist like Parker's vocation emerges from, and in some sense is created by, the forceful layers of sound—rhythm, harmony, melody, timbre, pitch, group dynamics, and so on—rather than simply precedes these elements and manipulates them to masterful or mythic effects. The image of creative efflorescence with which the poem ends visualizes an understanding of jazz's practical and spiritual vocation not only in terms of an emerging form of cultural life. The rose on Parker's horn operates within the poem as a "spandrel" (referring here to the engraved decoration on the blank space formed by the saxophone's practical design, but figuring broadly as a incidental byproduct retroactively invested with ritual significance, a living form that refracts essentializing interpretations of jazz as a continuous heritage grounded in absolute notions of race, gender, or spirituality). "Testimony" represents such images not in order to enshrine jazz's heroes, but rather to trace out the shapes of a jazz poetics to come, a poetics blooming into the after-hours after *ours* have had their moment.

The Jazz Soundtrack

In other poems jazz provides Komunyakaa with a kind of "soundtrack" for creatively recounting specific historical experiences:

In the early 1970s when I was listening to Miles, Monk, and Coltrane along with other progressive players, I didn't notice at first how they were influencing my poetry. I just loved the sound; jazz was part of my life as a continuous score to the fleeting images my mind envisioned. The music signaled a kind of freedom and that's what I internalized. Jazz allowed me to make vivid excursions into my creative universe. (*BN* 5-6, my emphasis)

Jones emphasizes that the jazz soundtrack operates on a conceptual level in Komunyakaa's work, as she writes: "the *idea* of jazz improvisation shapes his style of composition and critical interpretation" (*Muse* 214). Furthermore, in her readings of

Komunyakaa and Nathaniel Mackey's collaborative performance with saxophonist Hamiet Bluiett, Jones locates jazz's improvisational dynamics in the poets' embodied practices, which "[...] evoke the tactility and physical effort musical performance entails. They [Komunyakaa and Mackey] underscore the 'fundamental quality of work' as the bases for creating blues and jazz, work that 'extends to the emotional reach of sound, the politics of race, and gender [...]' (218). In this section, I turn to those of Komunyakaa's poems in which the jazz soundtrack does not involve specific reference to jazz music or musicians, and in which jazz does not appear as an explicit reference of the poem's textual style or performance. Rather, I consider the jazz soundtrack as a "continuous score" of historical experience, amid which Komunyakaa's experiences in the Vietnam War and the poetry that emerged from those experiences have presented some of the most bracing self-examinations of what the jazz soundtrack enables or restricts in fashioning new black political subjectivities after the 1960s. This form of subjectivity at once avows the eclecticism of jazz improvisation as a means of witnessing and responding to historical violence, while it also further tests the boundaries between self and community that jazz-inspired modes of lyric introspection reconstruct.

The jazz soundtrack can thus be understood as interiorized layers of resonance that mediate different kinds of traumatic experience. In Komunyakaa's war poetry, the experiences of soldiers, war victims, and distant spectators collectively represent the ethical impasses that poetic representation faces in communicating, or attempting to reconcile, a coherent sense of communal life within the bounds of war trauma. "The real interrogator is a voice within," writes Komunyakaa in "Jungle Surrender" (*PD* 216). This voice is identical with its listener, a voice of lyric consciousness and lyric

conscience. One of the central problems that the jazz soundtrack exposes is the inability of such a personalized aesthetic to establish a universal and democratic language, to bridge “Some place between // central Georgia & Tay Ninh Province” (PD 217). An internalized archive of jazz aesthetics struggles to render whole its own implication in, and limited power to mitigate, the political violence it witnesses at first hand or from afar. Captured soldiers or returned veterans (with real phantom limbs) preoccupy many of Komunyakaa’s poems in *Dien Cai Dau* (1988). The possibility of psychic or physical wholeness for these figures is always partial or oblique. For example, the prisoner’s dilemma in “Jungle Surrender” elicits an improvised response wherein the risk of incoherence, rupture, and loss accompanies the demand of self-reformation and creative advance. As Komunyakaa writes, the soldier:

[...] will always touch
fraying edges of things, to feel hope break

like the worm rejoins itself
under the soil . . . head to tail. (PD 217)

The figure that “rejoins itself [...] head to tail” recalls the mythic “Uroboroslike circuit of justification” expounded by Nathaniel Mackey in his discussion of Duncan’s process poetics, and in light of the latter, the same self-justifying figure in Williams’s *Paterson* (*Discrepant* 89).¹⁰ In *Balance*, the closing section of Komunyakaa’s “Palimpsest,” the speaker affirms this circuit through an image of conjunction’s opposite:

¹⁰ Mackey’s discussion of this figure in the context of Duncan’s and Williams’s poetics makes a vivid connection between Duncan and Williams: “The figure of Uroboros, the tail-eating serpent suggesting unity and wholeness in ancient tradition, is compounded of ominous as well as ‘unitive’ connotations in the poetic tradition from which Duncan’s work more immediately derives. William Carlos Williams makes use of the figure in *Paterson* to convey a sense of having come full-circle, a sense that is darkly inflected by suggestions of exhaustion” (91). Although Mackey’s essay begins by citing Duncan’s critique of Rich’s early views on lyric’s “instinctual wisdom” (expressed in Rich’s review of Louis Zukofsky’s *Found Objects*), my chapter on the duration of Rich’s career has shown how she confronted the ethical and imaginative limits and exhaustion of her poetics in a mode that does not invoke a mythic idea of poetry’s calling the way Duncan persistently did.

I kill a part
so the other lives;
unlike the snake
chopped in half,

rejoining itself among
nightshade. (*PD* 363)

Later in the section, creative separation unexpectedly evokes the jazz soundtrack:

[...] I think of Count Basie,
what he knew

to leave out. Leverage
determines the arc,
& everything else is
naked grace. (*PD* 364)

Cut off from or buried in the historical record, the voice of introspective consciousness and personal testimony in Komunyakaa's scenes of war articulate jazz as a self-creative practice insofar as it leaves out many things that once seemed integral to it. What these poems evoke is the arc of the possibility that remains available to survivors, witnesses, and bystanders. Informed by the jazz soundtrack, the poems leverage themselves into this arc of self-transformation at moments of disjunction. These disjunctive moments, in turn, confer their leverage upon mundane experiences of social order in which political crises are beyond detection. In this way, the jazz soundtrack can and does train one, however subliminally or disjunctively, to listen for what is left out.

How does this practice effectively insinuate political engagement in poems that are not "overtly political," but rather "deal in nuanced images rather than directives" (*Renegade* 160)? This is the line of inquiry that Evie Shockley scrutinizes in *Renegade Poetics* (2011) while articulating alternative modes of political engagement in contemporary black poetic writing, such as Ed Roberson's poetry of ecological attention.

Like Roberson, Komunyakaa reworks those politicizing imperatives of Black Arts poetics that mandate political engagement to be written within specific idioms of nationalist opposition. Komunyakaa's relatively elliptical and malleable relations to politics create a space for jazz poetry outside of, or in a differential relation to, the generic, thematic, or stylistic protocols of "Black Art." This alternative strain of jazz poetics thus manifests itself through experimental transactions with history and politics rather than as a utopian art aiming for nothing less than complete social revolution. A poem like Roberson's "What the Tree Took, On the Table" magnifies this process by detailing the psychic and historical suspension evoked by a tree-embedded Civil-War bullet. The poem traces out the improvisational arc of an active imagination making something else of history whilst remaining "in the American grain":

Wood that has grown around
a fence post
over the years enclosing

it the metal in a swirl of grain
a tree that has taken
a bullet from the civil war

shot suddenly exposed in a tabletop
being made
grown into the open by hand

seats us
at the bench of our own
consequence shown all around us

we don't get away
we don't get off race
though we know genetically does not exist

does not erase but is
enacted as our history in us is enacted as
American the tree

does not ungrow the shot unfire
the whip unlash from the hand having
to build here nor its scars unscar but to remain
in grain (Roberson 72)

Similar to Roberson, Komunyakaa's recollections of his experiences in Vietnam also "remain in grain" by mediating the movement of the speaker's reflections, reflections that cannot "get away" from the spectacle of America's racial violence and its military intervention in Vietnam. In "Tu Do Street," the stratified layers of American white supremacy and Cold War foreign policy bleed together. The poem opens with a rebirth of national and personal identity sanctioned by the racial divisions that American music brings into awareness. Country artists like Hank Snow, and later Hank Williams (who "calls from the psychedelic jukebox"), mediate this encounter with the poet's past:

Music divides the evening.
I close my eyes & see
men drawing lines in the dust.
American pushes through the membrane
of mist & smoke, & I'm a small boy
again in Bogalusa. *White Only*
signs & Hank Snow. (PD 210)

As black and white soldiers "touch the same lovers / minutes apart," the historical imprint of segregation thickens the opacity of this politico-ethical scenario. "We have played Judas where / only machine-gun fire brings us / together" the speaker concludes (PD 210). As the sexual, racial, and international politics of the scene converge, American GIs blindly tunnel deeper into the entangled, incestuous, and fatal consequences of this encounter:

Back in the bush at Dak To
& Khe Sanh, we fought
the brothers of these women
we now run to hold in our arms.
There's more than a nation

inside us, black & white
soldiers touch the same lovers
minutes apart, tasting
each other's breath,
without knowing these rooms
run into each other like tunnels
leading to the underworld. (*PD* 210)

What is “more than a nation” here? A shared humanity, yes, but the poem figures such a shared humanity as the shared breath that American soldiers taste on the breath of the Vietnamese women they kiss. This shared breath—a literal *conspiracy*—embodies not only the sexual and political predations of this scene, but leads to a radical disorientation in space and time, a breathing “without knowing these rooms / run into each other [...].” What is left out in the poem—the inaudible voices involved in this collective descent, the voices of the powerless and the dead—remain as the voices to be listened for by the speaker’s proxy. The speaker attends to the collective action of this ensemble of actors by shutting his eyes, by listening to how experiences are deeply ingrained within other experiences. This form of attention enables the speaker to deviate for a moment from the common motives and desires of the black and white soldiers, to obliquely perceive the obscured conduits between these rooms, this poem, and the political scenarios that underlies them—both in Vietnam and in the United States.

The poems in *Dien Cai Dau* are all overtly political poems by virtue of their subject matter, but the form of attention they elicit toward politics shares a common denominator with those of Komunyakaa’s poems that bear witness to war from a drastically mediated distance. The embodied listening of jazz lyricism undergoes such a displacement in “Dolphy’s Aviary.” Here the soundtrack of the innovative saxophonist, flautist, and reedman Eric Dolphy sonically intercedes between the spectator and

spectacle in the age of hyper-televised war:

We watched Baghdad's skyline
ignite, arms & legs entwined
as white phosphorus washed over
our bedroom, the sounds of war
turned down to a sigh. (*PD* 424)

Here attention to the political appears as a strangely purifying and transfiguring medium—the “white phosphorous” of the silent televised broadcast of the Persian Gulf War, as somewhere in the actual bedroom of the two lovers, or in the acoustic space of the speaker's thoughts, Eric Dolphy's music plays along with these images. The poem carries with a compartmentalized vision of politics—the “sigh” of an aestheticized and eroticized sense of politics wherein the two lovers inhabit “muted chords [...] an orgasm / of secrets” (*PD* 425). Yet at the moment when the jazz soundtrack seems to be mere background music for a sublimated form of political sympathizing, the speaker turns back to listen to Dolphy and reenter the world that has been silenced:

[...] Dolphy said
“Birds have notes between our notes . . .”
I could see them among oak rafters
& beams, beyond the burning cold,
melodious in cobweb & soot.
Like false angels up there
in a war of electrical wires
& bat skeletons caked with excrement,
we in winding sheets of desire
as their unbreakable songs
startled us down. (*PD* 425)

In his performance of “Dolphy's Aviary” on *Love Notes from the Madhouse* (1998), a live recording with saxophonist John Tchichai's ensemble, Komunyakaa replaces key words with alternate words, pauses between phrases to create unexpected rhythmic effects, and stresses vowels and syllables that are not scored by the printed poem.

Jones's reads these performative dynamics as spontaneous compositional choices that Komunyakaa makes when reading an alternate and modified version of the text. But reading this analogy between live poetry readings and jazz performance at the level of the reader/musician's mastery of the medium relies on an understanding of improvisation as entirely intentional. Indeed, the misreadings of any given performance may very well be attributed to slips of the tongue or unpremeditated choices as easily as to conscious revision. Furthermore, improvisation often involves both conscious alteration and unconscious misstep. Here accidents, or mis-takes, can be taken in the moment as a new pattern upon which to build. One can hear this as Komunyakaa reads "white light" instead of "white phosphorous," an early moment when Komunyakaa seems to be reading with his ears rather than eyes (for rhyme rather than, or before, reason or textual fidelity). At the end of his performance, Komunyakaa reads the phrase "a war of electrical wires" as a "war of electrical wars"—a similar phonic substitution that not only reshapes the poem aural patterns, but reconfigures the relationship between wars and wires as a metonymic matrix in which wires extend the war in Baghdad to the self-reflexive "war of electrical wars" and fill in the silence of snowy Midwestern streets, turned down to a sigh, with entangled, nearly inaudible, messages.

This interfusion of politics and place mediated by the jazz soundtrack makes the cinematic imaginary an explicit reference in the poem, "Oil":

Now, when I hear Horace
Silver's "Baghdad's Blues"
the sandy sky blooms

smart bombs. Live
footage of an old man
on a yellow bicycle

trying to outpedal
the apocalypse—
the film runs till

he's my uncle Buddy
who turned to mist
after his father hocked

two hundred acres to go
his bail. He'd killed a man
who cornered him in Biloxi. (*T* 102)

These apocalyptic scenes—mediated by television footage, personal memory, and Silver's piano playing—are linked by a concreative dynamic that, with a strong resemblance to the Deep Image poets of the 1960s, establishes a radical conjunction between inner and outer worlds, between present circumstance and the enduring presence of the past. As the speaker listens in on this moment, such a linkage extends back into deep historical time:

[...] Silver's piano
pulses beneath the burning
oil fields, the volume

turned down on the tv
till the ghost of At
Thinnin (The Dragon)

Caliph of Baghdad,
floats through smoke. (*T* 103)

Interposed directly between the evocation of Ibrahim ibn al-Mahdi—an Abbasid prince who, after resigning as caliph, spent the remainder of his life as a popular poet and singer—is the voice of the speaker's grandmother:

[...] "Son, you don't
know how it hurt to see
those oil wells bowing

& rising like big birds

eating my father's farm." (T 103)

In its final descending tercet (a version of Williams's "variable foot" that structures all of the poems in *Taboo*, itself a collection that poetically rewrites Williams's *In the American Grain* from the perspective of the Black Atlantic), the poem's voices converge in an image of destructive obscurity:

[...] Like a film
of sleep, oil covers camera
lenses & the old man's face
as he rides into the flames. (T 104)

Oil washes out the image and its medium of representation, as the poem "Oil" brings both the image and its mode mediation into relief. Like the startling moment at the end of "Dolphy's Aviary," the jazz soundtrack provides no relief from world history in its destructive processes. What the soundtrack provides is poetry's internal freedom to take the pulse of political events that transpire at different times and along different scales of time. While, as "Testimony" concludes, "half the root is gone" in jazz-inflected poetic improvisations upon historical experience, the missing half of historical truth remains ingrained into arc of these poems to be worked upon and worked out over the lifetimes that lie ahead.

Ritual Form's Janus Face: Exilic Longing and Rooted Desire

How do poets account for what goes missing over the course of time? How, in concluding this last chapter of my study of postwar poetics of vocation that are rooted in radical ongoingness, might I write towards a provisional end? One important point to

consider is how a poetic vocation entails forms of revocation.¹¹ My sense is that a more compelling account of vocational closure will, as the works of these poets indicate, invite us to rethink how modern and contemporary lyric poetry can and does experiment with versions of the religious/secular binary that has been assumed to definitively structure social life in modernity. The various expressions of this binary in the categorization of worlds, regions, communities, institutions, and subjectivities that the present historical moment allows, whether post- or late-modern, must be reconfigured in terms of radical modes of process in order to better understand how affective disciplines primarily associated in the Euro-American West with “religious” vocations continue to be active and transformative in the creative arts.

In reconsidering vocation as a centrally active term in American poetry from the postwar era to the present, many utopian promises (and dystopian rebuttals) come to mind. Theodor Adorno’s description of “Art’s Utopia” renders this promise, as Maria Damon writes, a “counterfactual yet-to-come, draped in black...a kind of imaginary restitution of the catastrophe which is world history” (“Vocation for Longing” Web). Maria Damon cites this evocative description as an epigraph for her engagement with Mackey, a poet born in the same year as Komunyakaa and whose cross-generic writings present a jazz-derived spirituality to which Damon attributes an “ethics of aesthetic practice as a response to trauma” (“Vocation for Longing” Web). Mackey’s response to the constitutive world-historical condition of traumatic separation experienced by

¹¹ As Leland de la Durantaye writes about the aspirations of Giorgio Agamben’s philosophical project, “The idea that a ‘true vocation’ is actually the revocation of an earlier one does not mean simply seeing through the vanity of vocations, nor does it necessitate seeing vocations as vicious circles destined to be superseded by other vocations that in turn will prove equally unsatisfying. For Agamben, a ‘true’ or ‘philosophical’ vocation is not a revocation of one vocation for another vocation of the same nature, but instead a vocation without set tasks or fixed content” (*Agamben* 3).

members of diasporic communities gravitates toward an aesthetic of exilic consciousness—a “vocation for longing” for “those whose humanity is in rough draft form” (“Vocation for Longing” Web). In another of Damon’s vivid phrasings, Mackey’s writerly embodiment of a jazz sensibility “surf[s] the crest of that asymptote that brings them the farthest out, toward the so-obviously-there-but-ever-receding horizon of fulfillment” (“Vocation for Longing” Web). This form of literary spirituality might strike a chord with a so-obviously-there-but-ever-*transformed* sense of Emersonian subjectivity, particularly his eponymous trope of experience in “Circles.” Such a linkage has been drawn together by previous work on pragmatism and jazz, such as Michael Magee’s *Emancipating Pragmatism* (2004), wherein Magee describes how a utopian sense of pragmatist-derived poetics continues to fund an image of humanity as a perpetual rough draft, and he locates the piety necessary for practicing poetry as a vocation in a continual deferral of the present in light of an always uncertain future and displaced past.

The staying power of this historical sentiment of inextinguishable longing is strong, as is the aesthetic force of Mackey’s writing, which constructs a poetic “resonance machine”—to use William Connolly’s locution—across different thresholds between sounds, images, lines, poems, sequences, and histories (*World of Becoming* 16). In “Sound and Semblance,” Mackey continues his ongoing sequence “Mu” with an representative evocation of exilic survival as musico-poetic metamorphosis:

—“*mu*” *twenty-sixth part*—

A sand-anointed wind spoke of
 survival, wood scratched raw,
 scoured bough. And of low sky
 poked at by branches, blown

digressions, creative breakthroughs and breakdowns, and non-teleological emphases—throughout the work of the poets I have focused on in this study. Indeed, a paradoxical “rooting” of the rhizomatic, as expressed in Komunyakaa’s jazz sensibility, reactivates poetry’s potential for embodying forms of political engagement and spiritual striving that find themselves perpetually eclipsed by the “more than could be said of it said,” as well as the generative silences of both Mackey’s and Komunyakaa’s elliptical line breaks.

In a recent assessment of what pragmatism might be useful for today, Roberto Mangabeira Unger urges his readers to reclaim pragmatism, which “though diminished and domesticated, represents the philosophy most alive today” (*Self Awakened* 28). Unger’s “radicalized pragmatism” is operative in the jazz workshop’s aesthetic and social struggles to redefine artistic and economic agency for black Americans as a reciprocal relationship freedom and finitude. The improvising agent’s/radical pragmatist’s work faces contingency, in Unger’s words, as “no mere idle speculation” but as a “weight that bears heavily down upon us” (39). Thus “a radicalized pragmatism [...] must [...] reveal how we can redirect thought and reorganize society so that the vision of the agent able to use contingency against constraint becomes more real, and the picture of the toolmaker made into a tool of natural processes indifferent to his concerns becomes less real” (35). Poetry might be conceived along these lines not as a spiritual panacea for the systemic inequalities of political life in the twenty-first century, but as an open-ended agency-inducing process. Likewise, the possible relationships between contemporary lyric poetry’s modes of discipline and freedom, or the stark distinctions made between traditional religion (i.e. its beliefs, practices, and affects) and modernized/secularized forms of spirituality (what at mid-century sociologist Thomas Luckmann dubbed “the

invisible religion”), need to be recognized as unpredictably cooperative, as chaotically informing each other (see Luckmann 1967).¹³ Lyric’s agency, in this sense, can be impartial and often unwieldy—its hopeful illusions always intermixing with its alienated delusions. In poetry such as Mackey’s and Komunyakaa’s, processes of self- and world-construction engage the contingencies of African American political subjectivity by crisscrossing the boundaries of the real and ideal, the actual and potential. Their art’s vitality depends upon readers who might respond with likeminded dispositions toward a relatively greater degree of agency in a world constituted by limitation. While these two poets differently accentuate radicalized pragmatist understandings of poetry’s reorientation of thought and reconstruction of political or spiritual desire, their respective works demonstrate the ways in which vocation may configure a Janus-like perspective toward historical continuity and discontinuity through modes of “ritual form” in African American poetics. I will briefly consider this term in my final pages in connection to my discussion of Komunyakaa’s offering of one of many living options for contemporary African American poets. In the context of Warren’s critique of African American literature as an inadequate or inaccurate category in the postsegregation era of contemporary black politics, this living poetic option provides us with useful provocations for future inquiries.

“Autobiography of My Alter Ego,” the closing poem of *Warhorses* (2008), deploys a prosody that stresses interconnection within division, an asymmetric progression that recalls personal history in tandem with the poet’s cultural ecology. The multi-part sequence is concerned with composing an alternative ontogeny as it articulates

¹³ See also Peter Burger, *The Sacred Canopy* (1990 [1967]) for a related, and still highly relevant, postwar sociology of religion in terms of contemporaneous modes of “world-construction.”

the development of the speaker's vocation from multiple fragmented angles.

Komunyakaa recalls moments such as going to college, a moment that coincides with the emergence of his poetic career:

I went off to college
with colors & songs
inside my head. Lies
& stories that lasted for hours.
For days. Weeks. Months.
Years. For a lifetime
in no time. Like I said before,
if you start me talking
I'll tell everything I know. (*W* 53)

Komunyakaa's lines fall forward until consecutive moments of realization resolve the descending pattern of phrases cut off in mid-air. The macro-level challenge of Komunyakaa's linear interruptions is to stimulate or recover a form of attention that has been lost after what has been lost is only sensed as a phantom. The incorporative dynamics of the jazz workshop and soundtrack expose the organicist metaphor of jazz's "evolution" as only half-true, for the metaphor typically construes such artistic evolution in terms of tradition's absolute mythical continuity (*Bird Lives!*) or fundamental discontinuity (*"Jazz is dead"*). Poet Jay Wright names the dynamic process mitigating between absolutes "ritual form": "a process of separation, transition, and incorporation, a process which will place the poet on the mystic blade 'whose pain is wisdom and whose burden is responsibility'" (*"Desire's Design"* 14). As Wright continues, this process involves the perilous activity of reconstructing African American's poetry's "traditional values" while remaining alive to the pulse of one's place and time:

The ritual form of separation, transition, and incorporation that Wright draws out from African as well as African American writers eschews a correspondent relationship between poetry and ritual. A poem is not a ritual, Wright stresses, but rather “ritual form” illuminates an “epistemology of poetry” wherein poetic tradition denotes an adaptive and assimilative process, which like religious syncretism “do[es] not dispense with experience” but “undergo[es], understand[s] and finally transform[s] it” (15). Dewey’s familiar motif of art *as* experience, and of doing *as* undergoing, underwrites the logic of emergence expressed by Komunyakaa’s “alter-ego,” who reflects upon and incorporates contemporary world history with eras and events embedded deeper in the past:

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till light equals darkness:
an eye, nose, an ear, a mouth
telling a forbidden story,
saying, Sir, here's the skin
growing over a wound,
& this is flesh interrogating a stone. (*W* 83)

Wright's conception of ritual form, like the "maps & grids" flowing together in Komunyakaa's poem, reflect a pragmatist conception of religious belief as rooted in experience. Here, the experiences of witnessing, thinking through, and reconciling oneself with historical violence (the speechless, or almost articulate, vocative "Ah" that morphs into "Abu Gharib") are necessary to stimulate a "forbidden story" into being. In a similar way, "Ode to the Chameleon" echoes a Keatsian notion of the chameleon poet as a challenge to the sedimented associations between nature and nation, or self and environment. As a mode of negotiation between decision and deferral, cessation of desire and its revived affirmations, the chameleon's presence balances a deeper moral clarity with deeper moral uncertainty:

Little shape shifter, lingering
there on your quotidian twig
of indifference, you are a glimpse
of a rainbow, your eyes an iota
of amber. If nature is mind,
it knows you are always
true, daring the human eye
to see deeper.

[...]
You are a tilt of the head
& vantage point, neither this
nor that, clearly prehistoric
& futuristic, & then you are
gone.
[...]
Called into the hanging garden,

you sit there, almost unseen
as dusky shadows climb
the blooming Judas tree. (CC 16)

This “vantage point” is that of a radical pragmatist’s avoidance of hypostatized dogma—
“neither this / nor that”—a perspective that sees through a “tilt of the head.” A casually
recollected saying of Charles Sanders Peirce, used in his lectures at Harvard in the 1860s,
illustrates this ethos wonderfully: “Incline the mind to an angle of 45°, and periodicity
becomes non-periodicity and the ideal becomes real” (quoted in Menand, *Metaphysical*
154). Komunyakaa’s “Janus” registers this relativizing gesture with a sense of
“compromise unsimplified by sentimental egalitarianism” (*Metaphysical Club* 154).
More exactly, compromise is “wrested forth” as from a “wishbone pendulum”:

When something old is grafted
To something new, as if wrested forth
By the same song, a wishbone pendulum
Sways & drags the sap down into

Half-frozen roots. Balanced
There, like *Spinario*’s head
That’s at least one hundred years
Older than his body, he is

Standing & bowed before
Double doors. One foot
In fire, the other in muddy ice.
Tomorrow, yesterday, & never

Again. The new year
Gazes back to Lot’s wife
Lost in a dream of summer
While the season’s first snow falls. (TDG 13)

In the dialect of ritual form, the formal resources of lyric that Komunyakaa repurposes
are the

[...] Divining rod

Cut from one musical limb
& limp. Wounded into beauty,
This root-bound unblooming

Breaks midsentence & falls through
The bottom of chance. (*TDG* 28)

When the jazz soundtrack's "root-bound unblooming" breaks and falls through poems that Komunyakaa presents to contemporary readers, one must incline the mind, and ear, to such an angle as that of the balanced Spinario extracting a thorn from his foot. From this vantage, poetic insight and political ideology cannot be dissevered. A poem like "Janus" countenances the psychic and political stakes of poetry's "falling through / The bottom of chance"—the wager of living that poets continue to make.

These moments bring us back to the idea of poetry's "service" in a historical period during which something like a "will-to-poetry"—the contemporary legacies of a neo-romantic conception of poetic vocation—appears to be both overly inflated and overly exhausted by poets' chronic anxiety about their work's social, political, or spiritual ends. Citing Raymond Williams, Warren critiques the notion of literature's service to society as one inevitably preoccupied with the work of individual agents rather than systemic "explanations and remedies":

[...] although a commitment to service has undoubtedly 'been the charter of many thousands of devoted lives' [including literary authors] and provided opportunities for at least an equal number of the economically disenfranchised to better their situations, this commitment has also tended to set the stage for individual rather than systemic explanations and remedies. (*What Was* 147)

The bold assertions in Warren's book—including the culminating claim that "there is no broadly useful social end served by viewing contemporary black writing as a collective undertaking"—base their overarching critique of an imagined literary community on the presumption that African American literature categorically aspires to "creat[e] a future

for the past by recollecting the black community as a whole bound by the mystic chords of memory” (116, 106). While the literary, sociological, and political insights of Warren’s critique are indispensable to better understanding the class divisions involved in contemporary African American literary production and reception, the historical changes to the literary calling are not so historically absolute. The need to creatively confront lived racial inequalities, and the concomitant forms of piety that such confrontations provoke, persists despite the radically altered political and social landscape in which poetry is now written and read. Making a living as a black poet and making a living black poetry are contingent upon their shifting historical situations and the new “callings” produced thereby. *What Was African American Literature?* is, or was, one account of these ongoing shifts—a very important and provocative one, but not a point of critical closure. The reverence for political subjectivity that Komunyakaa affirms in his experiments with jazz’s improvisational ethos—an ethos that has much in common with pragmatism’s understanding of action as the “workshop of being, where we catch fact in the making”—helps us rethink of contemporary poetic practice not only in terms of its intrinsic formal properties, but in terms of its active *allopoeitic* capacities (*Writings 1902-1910* 613). That is, to think of poetry’s power to imagine, and in the imagining, *create* something other than what its linguistic materiality comprises, is at the root of this radical blooming and unblooming. *Living* poetry requires readers and listeners to pay deeper attention to the extemporized forms of expression and constraint that emerge within specific historical communities. These constraints, however, must neither be conflated with narrowly normative senses of liberal politics nor with a utopian sense of a multicultural and democratic aesthetic. Through its eclectic modes of lyric introspection

and historical engagement, Komunyakaa's jazz-derived poetics remind us that a poet's vocation—its authentic origins, political remedies, and ultimate ends—is not simply its *raison d'être*, but its *modus vivendi*. A poetic vocation is what poetry *becomes* over the course of constant practice, and Komunyakaa's version of this practice offers writers and readers another modulation of the process of vocation.

Epilogue

This World is not Conclusion.
A Species stands beyond—
Invisible, as Music—
But positive, as Sound—
It beckons, and it baffles—
Philosophy—don't know—
And through a Riddle, at the last—
Sagacity, must go—
To guess it, puzzles scholars—
To gain it, Men have borne
Contempt of Generations
And Crucifixion, shown—
Faith slips—and laughs, and rallies—
Blushes, if any see—
Plucks at a twig of Evidence—
And asks a Vane, the way—
Much Gesture, from the Pulpit—
Strong Hallelujahs roll—
Narcotics cannot still the Tooth
That nibbles at the soul—

-Emily Dickinson

If a life fulfilled its vocation directly, it would miss it. Anyone who died old and in the consciousness of seemingly blameless success, would secretly be the schoolboy who reels off all life's stages without gaps or omissions, an invisible satchel on his back. Every thought which is not idle, however, bears branded on it the impossibility of its full legitimation, as we know in dreams that there are mathematics lessons, missed for the sake of a blissful morning in bed, which can never be made up. Thought waits to be woken one day by the memory of what has been missed, and to be transformed into teaching.

-Theodor Adorno, Minima Moralia

I start this last chapter by stopping at a moment of reading. With no pencil in hand, and as sudden and transient as a casual glance, I came upon a moment of recognition that is still going on—right now. Call this moment a “form of attention” for which the stream of thought—the overdetermined and mutually fragilizing pressures of biological, mental, emotional, social, economic, and political life—rarely affords pause. Among other stand-alone lines in the first section of Srikanth Reddy's *Voyager* (2011), one line (consisting of two sentences and three words) made this impression: “Process. Blind Process.” (3). The semantic roar of these words transported me, with their strange kind of binary code, into a world of speculation and anxiety about the postwar poetics of

vocation that I have traced out in this study. What came to mind at this moment was a reminder of how the affirmative stance of such process-oriented conceptions of vocation strikes many contemporary poets and readers as dangerously sincere, optimistic, utopian, transcendental—heck, even *mystical*. Part of this project, as I postulated in my introduction, was to rethink the figure of James’s “pluralistic mystic” in terms of vocational models and modalities whose religious roots clutch at the heart of contemporary poetic ambition (even if poets claim that these roots have been extirpated by the latest forms of technocratic specialization or post-Fordist precarity). Vocation has taken on new valences in our current not-so-purely-secular horizon of apocalyptic rhetoric, messianic dreams, unforeseeable ends, and impossible confrontations with the unthinkable catastrophe of the “everyday” flooding the psychic lives of our present moment. At every step of the way, the question “What are poets for?” repeats itself from a new location—echoing at the back of our brains at yearly conferences, weekly class sessions, daily conversations with colleagues, friends, lovers, and strangers, and imaginary colloquies with the quick and dead, the near and the distant.

So now, as the line is still ringing, I step blindly into this river again, at a different place and time, and still in the process of transvaluing poetry’s contemporary callings amid differentially shared concerns about economic, social, and even spiritual “precarity.” As a term that Microsoft Word’s spell check doesn’t recognize, precarity operates among a wide range of related terms that together manifest the politico-aesthetic quandaries of contemporary poetic vocations: fragility, vulnerability, indeterminacy, and open-endedness. Furthermore, I provisionally propose a sub-genre, or super-genre, of these affective registers of contemporary poetry—the ongoing poem. The latter, I

contend, serves as a useful heuristic for recognizing how and why “serial” and “procedural” poetics have cross-fertilized in recent decades.¹ In a study published right around the beginning of Francis Fukuyama’s “end of history” discourse, Joseph Conte writes that, “the postmodern poet has arrived at a new position synthesis with regard to poetic form, having grown beyond the frequently exaggerated antithesis of the open and closed,” and thus “each [serial and procedural poetics] has adapted to the new contingencies of postmodernity” (*Unending* 15). So how about the *newest* contingencies of poetic vocation? That is, because socioeconomic forms of precarity created by neoliberal policies and ecological forms of fragility potentiated by global climate disruption situate us smack dab amid the fragile life of human institutions today, contemporary poets’ responses to these conditions will inevitably raise questions about the desirability or efficacy of radically pragmatist-oriented modes of poetic “cosmodicy”—the evaluation and justification of the world to which poetry calls, and is called.

The notion of cosmodicy may sound quite grand, romantic, and even mystical. The contemporary significance of the term comes to the fore in recent political theory such as William Connolly’s *The Fragility of Things*, which articulates a range of “role experimentation” in what Connolly calls “democratic activism”—including a proposal for political and psychic life in which multiple force fields and scales of action are taken in *at once* in order to “disrupt and redirect the flow of authority, habit, institutional

¹ See Joseph Conte, *Unending Design* (1991) 1-44. These categories bear with them a set of value oppositions—the “predetermined” and “aleatory,” “mechanical” and “organic,” “proteinic” and “protean,” or just the plain-old “closed” and “open”—which have organized both longstanding philosophical battles about immanence and transcendence, as well as the real-time give-and-take of current economic and ecological battles over the lived experience and cosmopolitical stakes of planetary conditions of fragility (Conte 5, 11).

regularity, and future projection” of the steady-states of both neoliberal political-economic hegemony and liberal democratic politics as usual (185). According to Connolly, it is crucial to

[...] simultaneously *slow down* at key points and moments as we enhance sensitivity to the course of things outside our habitual modes of perception, expectation, and security and *speed up* a series of changes in contemporary role definitions, identities, faiths, public ethos, state priorities, and economic practices. (11)

The tension between these two levels of speed “express[es] a torsion folded into the contemporary condition itself,” a torsion that, in conditions of permanent debt, infinitely-deferred transformations of social life, and perpetually imminent catastrophes calls for something like what I am calling the ongoing poem (11). As poets continue to experiment with their vocations—their “roles” in simultaneously reckoning with globalization and global warming, or working through, as Dipesh Chakrabarty writes, the “unintended consequence of human choices” that have transmuted human agency into “geological agency”—how might a poetics of radical or speculative process formally reckon, as a form of human agency, with this unimaginable scale (“Climate of History” 208)? Or simply put: how does one *manage* to go on practicing poetry as a sort of blind process that is constitutively unable to fathom—to *sound*—the endpoint of a more radical process: the human species’ becoming-a-force-of-nature?

I will center my remaining discussion first on Ron Silliman’s recent book, *Revelator* (2013), whose eschatological-sounding title certainly betrays no religious vision per se, but points toward a speculative self-conception of the ongoing poem that in many ways overlaps with what Peter Middleton calls the “very long poem” of modernism. I will then return to Reddy’s procedural experiment of blind process, or

poetic erasure, as a way to bring this investigation up to speed with current articulations of precarity as poetry's present-day "structure of feeling." According to Middleton, the cultural work of the very long poem (VLP) is one of "managing limitless relations," a work that requires, according to Middleton, *humble* and *penitent* attitudes toward poetic "inquiry" as a process of integrating the experiences of "negation and longing" ("Longing" 4, 17). Middleton asks, "What global system does a long poem require, what sort of mystery does it project, and how does its reading create community?" (7). His answer lies in no distinct set of formal criteria, but in a set of affective and cognitive values hinging upon aesthetic suspense: "immersivity," "curiosity," "speculation," and "overextended commitment" (25). Furthermore, these values comport well with recent speculatively-inflected work on the sociology of institutions—in particular, Bruno Latour's "anthropology of the moderns"—as well as the resurgence of interest in the work of process-oriented philosopher *par excellence*, Alfred North Whitehead. I will return to these figures in the final pages of the present study.

A key difference in the ongoing poem, as I see it, is how radically blind to all kinds of ends it is. Where "very long poems" *end* in failure, fractured promises, and diffusive trajectories—what, amid the "stylistic pluralism" of modern poetry, Barbara Herrnstein Smith identifies as the "song of uncertainty"—ongoing poems actively avoid closure because the sense of ending(s) has become all-too-blindingly omnipresent (*Poetic Closure* 240, 242). In certain senses, *Revelator* reads as such a radically mundane formalization of end times. It presents a micro- and macro-chronicle of lived, yet unendurable (i.e. impossibly extensive) duration. The poem engages the superabundant life of personal memory and the terrifying anticipation of future traumatic experiences to

which consciousness has no access. One can scroll through the poem's single-stanza, steady-state record of modulated phrases, perceptions, and locomotive transitions from moment to moment, world to world, but it seems as if the poem will never end. As the first part of *Universe*—a poem that, as the back blurb modestly states, “would take him [Silliman] three centuries to complete”—*Revelator* conceives itself in the spirit of infinite seriality à la Robert Duncan's *Passages*, Nathaniel Mackey's *Song of the Andoumboulou*, Rachel Blau DuPlessis's *Drafts*, or Stephen Ratcliffe's *Tryptich/Trilogy* collections (including *Temporality*, a work going on right now on Ratcliffe's blog). As part of its engagement with two world systems of power (the biosphere and capital), the question of secular cosmodicy comes back again and again via longer passages, as well as the momentary sparks that stop us dead in our tracks.

Let's look at one of those moments. Amid Silliman's recollected witnessing of Hurricane Katrina unfolding on the TV, and as the sounds of bourgeois life wash up to consciousness (car alarms, air conditioners, airplanes), one experiences a sudden flash of reckoning with the fact “we all someday / may live in the Superdome” (*Revelator* 47). This someday is non-countable. It is both radically shorter than the three hundred or so years of *Universe*'s projected composition and radically beyond any timescale it imagines. “Someday” unveils an apocalyptic vanishing, splitting, and rolling up of the scroll of the heavens. Silliman's placeholder very well could be a naturalistic antitype to Revelation 6:14—i.e. the hole growing in the atmosphere.² Indeed, Silliman's “someday” transposes the opening of the biblical seven seals into a secular key, registering a tone more like the “someday” of The Five Stairsteps' “Someday we'll get it

² Revelation 6:14 reads: “The sky was split apart like a scroll when it is rolled up, and every mountain and island were moved out of their places.”

together and we'll get it all done." *Revelator*'s blind process in this way involves what Roberto Mangabeira Unger has reclaimed as a "radicalized pragmatism"—an earlier iteration of which he calls a "transformative vocation"—the working out of next steps between preserving and transforming one's socio-historical context.³ Yet this "someday" also reveals the unevenly suffered terrestrial reality (the "we" here mediated by the society of the spectacle's steady functioning). That "someday" connotes both an unbearable form of witness and a cosmic prolepsis: we will all someday be divested of our living immediacy. Appropriated, you might say, by the dead—by the universe itself. Silliman's caesura marks out the reader's momentary vanishing into the eye of the storm: a haunted form of experience, inescapably couched within the sociopolitical frame of whiteness and its immanent political fallout, of the expropriation of the New Orleans Superdome into a meat locker for its abandoned poor, elderly, sick, and predominately African American residents.

In *Revelator* one finds oneself often committed to return to modern scenes of naturally-culturally induced disasters and destruction: after Auschwitz, Hiroshima; after Banda Aceh, Katrina; after Haiti, Fukushima, and on. However fraught the poem's claims of belonging or solidarity might strike different readers for different reasons, the constant threat of economic and ecological catastrophe involves this kind of writing in the eye of the storm. Such a form of writing plays out in longer sequences, of which I have less than world or time enough to offer a single example:

you are being driven, along
an unfamiliar route, through streets
of your own former home,
whole neighborhoods tinged with emotion,
one still dreams of jets

³ See Unger, *The Self Awakened* (2007) and *Social Theory* (2004).

sliding into houses, apartment complexes
gone, one millisecond of stillness
then the heat & burst
an orange ball of flame
explodes in the mind's eye
anxious in your hotel room's
great raft of bed,
for days the networks discover
new amateur videos, waves far
greater than we can imagine,
on the beach bathers not
even thinking to run, buses
floating through streets of debris
Banda Aceh, this week's geography
of the public imagination, Phuket's
stream of tourists washed away,
bulldozers scooping corpses, our newscaster
alone in an empty village,
only the battered mosque remains,
where are the people, how
does this outer life, apocalypse
reported, penetrate my dreams, three
men on the street walking
discussing who will reach 60
when, the way as teens
we spoke of 20, not
even seeing the homeless woman
asleep beneath the newspaper racks
at Mission & Fourth, fifth
of bourbon warms, warns, passed
between three beneath the bridge
day is done, day is
the ever-present challenge, wake
or not, the painter Jess
simply stays asleep, paint hardens
even cracks o'er decades, browns
grow muddy, green's mute, sky
goes pale, in the midst
of an abstract field blue
deep blue squiggles, Don Quixote
approaches, what is possible, seen,
heard, emotive prosody, heart because
it impacts one's breathing, gasp
to the truth of
what is not even visible
cannot be heard, red-haired

setter deaf to the world
lopes slowly, copes by smell
residual sight, my eyes shut
I can taste that I
grew up near, that train's
whistle in the distance unmistakable (20-22)

Here the route is unmistakably local, yet totally defamiliarizing. You, the speaker, Ron Silliman, “are driven” from the North Berkeley hills—a location to which the poem continually returns in rapturous, but terrifying, reminiscence (a “universal” locality about as close to home as it gets for me). The lines wander through mediated post-9/11 explosions in the mind’s eye, then are carried on an unthinkable wave of imagery of Banda Aceh and Phuket, to intimations of mortality (a intensely mundane revelation of aging, senescence, and sensory limitation at 60), and back to that city by the Bay where, in the interstices of “day is done, day is / the ever-present challenge, wake / or not,” the assurance of living on never settles in the poem’s stream of line breaks, clausal interruptions, homonymic puns, and traumatic images.

Silliman also embeds a memory of viewing Jess’s 1954 painting, “Don Quixote’s Dream of the Fair Dulcinea,” a sequence which pulls the poem’s stream of attention into the undertow of art’s semiotic form (i.e. not just a realization of art’s abstract formal principles, but the ongoing material relationships to art *with* and *as* human experience). The poem exposes the “ever-present challenge” of not seeing the “next step” of traumatic realization, of seeing the next day or the next line, in an embodied experience of art that evokes Whitehead’s concept of a form of relation that in he calls “objective immortality”:

All relatedness has its foundation in the relatedness of actualities; and such relatedness is wholly concerned with the appropriation of the dead by the living—that is to say, ‘objective immortality’ whereby what is divested of its own living immediacy becomes a real component in other living immediacies of becoming. (*Process* xiii-xiv)

While the painter “simply stays asleep,” Jess’s painting, as action and object, becomes a “real component” of the living immediacy of *Revelator’s* constantly shifting attention. The hardening and cracking of the paint, the deepening saturation of brown, and the blue’s silent approach to the visible and nearly audible—again, the paint is “cracking”—form the “emotive prosody” of gasping for air and grasping for the tangible truth of “what is not even visible / cannot be heard.” This synesthetic fluidity brings Silliman back to the home he can taste in the air and smell in the whistle of a train running along tracks just west of San Pablo Avenue along the San Francisco Bay. It is a train of thought whose unmistakable immediacy recedes over the course of the poem into pigments of the poem’s imagination as they saturate the world through which it runs. Put otherwise, Quixote’s fair Dulcinea is a kind of “fictive certainty” (in Duncan’s parlance): the breathing-into-life of a painted world by which poets cope, like the red-haired setter, through the residual sight—an incalculable aesthetic remainder of experience.

Reddy’s *Voyager*, meanwhile, literally writes “in the eye of the storm,” which is the title of ex-Nazi SS officer and Secretary-General of the UN Kurt Waldheim’s memoir erased and appropriated by Reddy. The poem is divided into three parts, each of which follows a different formal design. The first section contains unnumbered poems comprised of single lines that are gnomic and frequently cross-reference each other with the aforementioned echo-chamber effect. The second section is made up of prose meditations, as each poem recounts some aspect of the poet’s experience in writing the poem. The third section, which is the bulk of the book, is organized into longer poems whose basic unit is progressively indented tercet, a replica of William Carlos Williams’s “variable foot”—now an enduring object of contemporary American prosody.

The first section serves in some ways as a kind of *ars poetica*, and begins with a bald metaphysical assertion—"The world is the world"—that forms a tautology out of Wittgenstein's opening premise in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1918): "The world is everything that is the case" (*Major Works* 5). At the end of section two, this evocation of Wittgenstein modulates into a line that rhymes with Stein-like lines: "A world is a world is a world" (Reddy 4). There are at least two ways of worldmaking here—definite and indefinite. Furthermore, the poem's process is both one of erasure and erosion: "The world is water falling on stone" (3). We hear the tone of "one" throughout the later poems in sections, sparking distant end-rhymes with lines such as "Fact is the script of the unknown" (again that unfolding scroll or script comes into play to haunt us) or to speak in the binary language of lines such as: "One.", "One. One. Two. One.", or five repetitions of "One." in the penultimate poem of section one. This binary logic reverberates in lines such as "Is is.," "There there.," or "Peace. Peace." (6, 9, 12). These lines respectively draw out the conversational implicature of existential awareness ("Is is."), solace and comfort ("There there."—here Stein reappears), or intersubjective communion ("Peace. Peace."—which evokes the Catholic Mass's ritual gesture after prayer, or simply an extension of one's hand to acknowledge the other which, in the closing lines of Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004), transforms this ritual into a secularized deictic of lyric recognition: "Here you are") (Rankine 131). In these infralinguistic moments, the cadences of repetition and extension (of words, selves, relations, rituals, practices) move across and within *Voyager*, ambiguously culminating in an act of relinquishing religious speech, but doing so through the performative utterance of a pious poetic offering.

In contrast to such moments of rhythmic, rhetorical, and social reciprocity, Reddy also includes one-liners that act as thorns in the side of the poem's formal procedure: "War is." (9). This intransitive and non-tautological thought that grows into next line, "War is the failure of form" (9). Such a massive leap of scale comes to a head in section three, wherein Reddy's Dante-esque sojourn with the Minister (Waldheim) and a number of other allegorized guides (King If, General Un, Archbishop A, Professor F, a "Byzantine Emperor," Mohammed the Revolutionary, as well as traces of Siddhartha Gautama and Jesus of Nazareth) lead us through such failures. Section three reenacts a pilgrim's egress from the twentieth century, as it links the project of historical memory to the hypothetical trauma of erasing ourselves (the living) as well as to parts of Waldheim's text (a synecdoche for the irrecoverable millions buried not only in earth, but in the discursive distortions of the Holocaust ingrained within cultural memory). Reddy cannily alludes to this process as "the messianic sense of Paine": the unfinished project of modern civilizational and revolutionary projects (and their ongoing failures) in which we blindly take our next step. Like Silliman's locomotive poetics of the modulating and interconnected sensorium (or "emotive prosody"), Reddy's lineation in section three produces what in *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari call a "line of flight"—a partial definition of which is "the reality of a finite number of dimensions that the multiplicity effectively fills" (9). So the failure of form materialized by "War is." emerges, among other allusions, through the retelling Schopenhauer's fable of a group of hedgehogs. These animals figure the repulsion of subjects from each other, the pain of inter-human contact, and, if not the failure, at least the excruciating cost of all forms of sociality:

*On a cold winter's day,
a pack of porcupines huddled close
seeking refuge from the frost.*

*Soon however
they had to move apart,
their home being pain.*

Thus in his fable
~~Schopenhauer~~ the philosopher describes

(albeit unintentionally)
my emotions
on the train back again.

I recall a playground
in open country,
the sudden upsurge

of a building—
little perceptions
travelling the Union lines

to the conclusion within—
strange with wisdom,
to say nothing of

the messianic sense of Paine.
It was cold
in that tragically designed

techno-scientific vehicle of self,
a devil screaming in pursuit
The world is constraint (107-108)

Here the speaker's blocked cosmodicean desire—countered later on in the poem by the voice of Margaret Fuller, who elliptically exhorts the speaker: "*We should believe...for the only way out is to accept this world...*"—comes up against the world's constraint, whose social correlates are *institutions*: political, economic, philosophical, religious, and poetic (109). Reddy's formal project and lines of flight are indeed filled with

institutional multiplicities, even if such institutions are crossed out (such as “~~John 2:1~~,” the first of Jesus’ miracles). In his final denunciation of “silent prayers,” Reddy’s anticlosural Epilogue silences religious speech while recuperating an ambiguous hope that corresponds to Silliman’s “someday”:

Yet I am not without hope,
citizens.
I am a believer in silent prayers
relinquished. (115)

Both Reddy's and Silliman's poetry involve speech acts—or writing acts—in which “There there” or “Someday” does what it means, even if that meaning is to blindly grasp at straws, to cope with the senses we still have, to step again into the river of the precarious twenty-first-century, and to create a series of poetic next steps in order to figure out how to manage this blind process without all of the micro- and macro-management (indeed, the domineering weight) of past institutions. These poems, like Latour's experimental metaphysics of “ongoing collective inquiry” (and also like many other recent poetic projects one could cite that reject all things speculative or metaphysical), participate in the reinvention of social and communal institutions and their forms-of-living that have become almost unrecognizable within contemporary neoliberalism and in the face of our own geological agency (see *An Inquiry* 2013).

Furthermore, Reddy's chastened denunciation of religious speech calls to mind Bruno Latour's meditations on the "torment" of religious speech in *Rejoicing* (2013), as well as Latour's lifelong project of creating "diplomatic representations" between local ontologies in order to reinvigorate and recoordinate institutional life in the present. Latour's œuvre is, indeed, neither an apologetic for, nor revival of, a single religious institution or tradition (though he is radically "catholic," he is also exuberantly,

scrupulously, and generously suspicious of all religious institutions). Rather, Latour's sustained elaboration of how "religious utterance" resembles "love talk" (i.e. not referential language that grants clear access to a distant "beyond," but temporary, and endlessly repeatable, transformative speech acts) redounds to the complex scenes of interaction between religion and poetry in late modernity that I have investigated here (*Rejoicing* 25-27). For Latour, the religious speech regime, like love talk, constitutes a "savoir vivre" in which making and living intertwine (69). Such a process is analogous, Latour writes elsewhere, to the convocation between "longitudinal" and "transversal" rhythms of utterance—a set of terms whose formal and practical resonances I have addressed in terms of poetic careers and vocations:

Inspired phrases and texts have the same structure: they tell a story that has a beginning, a middle, and an end, but at the same time, they beat out a cadence, they create a rhythm, by endlessly reviving the same movements. They shatter temporal continuity to stop us from becoming attached to their longitudinal series, from letting ourselves get carried away by the meaning of the story, which is most often anecdotal, until we become capable of hearing, until we become attentive, until we manage to listen to the transversal, vertical series, that messages that is threaded obliquely inside the other. (82)

This positive form of repetition for Latour is not of the same, but the "*repetition of renewal*" whose grammatical case—the vocative—is so weighed down in the present so as to appear impossible (72, 11). And though Latour draws a distinction between art's "élan" and religion's "conversion effect" on the ground that art has too much transcendence—too much of the "beyond" in its regime of utterance to render speakers present the way religious speech or love talk does (i.e. the questions "Do you believe in God?" and "Do you love me?" both manifest radically presentist forms of speech)—he nonetheless admits that both art and religion "quiver in concert" (a persistently precarious music, to be sure) (95, 104-105). I have argued that the positive resonances ("as positive

as sound”) between poetry and religion, between making and living, between persisting and perishing in the present through a model of practice not based on the “craftsman’s domination of his œuvre” (142). For the revived and repurposed process of poetic vocation has materialized and continues to reshape itself across the melodic line of historical secularism’s progress. This process is a strangely pragmatic (pluralistic, percussive, polyrhythmic) response to the fact that poets, like philosophers, “know as no one else knows what their formulas express leaves unexpressed almost everything that they organically divine and feel” (James 1992, 1079). It is with this positive sense of a living remainder that, in the spirit of Dickinson’s poem, I offer a few remaining thoughts on poetic vocation’s precarious form of life, and the ongoing poem’s fragile sense of ultimacy.

One might be scandalized, or completely unsurprised, by the fact that “precarity” was coined in the early twentieth century by a French Catholic monk and eventual proponent of austerity, Lèonce Crenier. The term was picked up from Crenier’s writings at mid-century by Dorothy Day, who founded *The Catholic Worker* in Greenwich Village during the Great Depression. Here is Day writing during the Cold War on “real poverty” and “voluntary poverty” in her 1952 essay, “Poverty and Precarity”:

We must talk about poverty because people lose sight of it, can scarcely believe that it exists [...] And maybe no one can be told, maybe they will have to experience it. Or maybe it is a grace which they must pray for. We usually get what we pray for, and maybe we are afraid to pray for it. And yet I am convinced that it is the grace we most need in this age of crisis, at this time when expenditures reach into the billions to defend “our American way of life.” Maybe it is this defense which will bring down upon us this poverty which we do not pray for. (“Poverty and Precarity” Web)

Ongoing poems may help us hedgehogs come closer out of the ongoing cold war of the here and now. Without recoiling from the pain of contact, and despite the un-writable

fact that the fragile and unknown ends of poetic procedures and series remain outside of sight (but perhaps not out of mind), we might think of the strange and disturbing relation that Day's "prayer" for poverty has with William James's reflections in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902):

Poverty indeed *is* the strenuous life,—without brass bands or uniforms or hysteric popular applause or lies or circumlocutions; and when one sees the way in which wealth-getting enters as an ideal into the very bone and marrow of our generation, one wonders whether a revival of the belief that poverty is a worthy religious vocation may not be 'the transformation of military courage,' and the spiritual reform which our time stands most in need of. (*Writings 1902-1910* 333)

These contentions might leave one dumbstruck, somewhat skeptical, or totally dismissive. But nonetheless they have an uncanny power to help locate us in the eye of the ongoing storm of poetic vocation's cosmodicean desire.

But then again, this uncertain speculation or wager is the "wage"—as Duncan writes—of poetic vocation. And the ongoing poem *qua* post-secular anti-prayer is but one function amid other functions of poetry and/or religion in the present. As the constraints of time and space converge upon this present inquiry into modes of poetic vocation's precarious existence and endurance as a form-of-life, I retrace a few of my steps. Vocation, as I have argued, differentially embodies all three of Kenneth Burke's triad of "positive," "dialectic," and "ultimate" terms. That is, poetry's individual and collective callings manifest themselves as resonant sound ("capable of empirical recording"), interactive and communicative dynamics of calls and responses ("words that belong...in the order of *action and idea*"), and meaningful, worldmaking purposes (e.g. Grossman's "cosmic task") (*Rhetoric of Motives* 183-189). Yet I have also argued that many key late modern poets reconfigure the presumably hierarchical ordering of voices implicit in "ultimacy" as their various evocations of mysticism engender *heterarchical*

practices of creative survival—processes I have examined in terms of descent, syncretism, endurance, and improvisation. The process of vocation thus “beckons” poets (and “baffles” them as well) to modes of world affirmation that relinquish the totalizing hope of immortality—and the inherited debt of such an impossible “task”—in favor of a living participation in the riddle of “after all.” Whitehead also recognizes the confluence of vocation’s poetico-religious senses of abiding and perishing in a key moment of *Process and Reality*, in which he describes an “integral experience” of “ultimate feeling.” This feeling resounds with the tones and temporalities of vocation’s ongoing process:

The best rendering of integral experience, expressing its general form divested of irrelevant details, is often to be found in the utterances of religious aspiration. One of the reasons of the thinness of so much modern metaphysics is its neglect of this wealth of expression of ultimate feeling. Accordingly we find in the first two lines of a famous hymn a full expression of the union of the two notions in one integral experience:

Abide with me;
Fast falls the eventide. (208-209)

The feeling that these two short lines trace has emerged in different forms, at different locations, and toward different ends in American poetry after modernism, and can even be heard in the Jazz Workshop (Thelonious Monk arranged a version of the hymn, written by W.H. Monk, as the opening track on his 1957 album *Monk’s Music*). The second line’s response undoes the ideal of poetry’s “indestructible” wisdom (its ultimate abiding), as the hymn leaves a strange resonance in the ears of its contemporary listeners. It is a remainder that reminds poets and readers of poetry that, even as the shadows descend, this memory—this re-calling—makes up a form of living accomplishment:

...a sort of renewal
even
an initiation...

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