

INDEXICAL MODERNISM: AUTONOMY, COMMITMENT, AESTHETICS

SARAH MICHELLE OSMENT, DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, BROWN
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INTRODUCTION: When A Sign is Not a Sign

No one stays for long in this passage or chamber [of the microform room] because it's freezing and the noise from air-conditioning generators the university recently installed in a sub-basement immediately underneath resembles roaring or loud sobbing. [...] The [...] room at Sterling [Library] has several new microfilm readers with Xerox copiers attached. At the left of each viewing screen there is a thin slot for a copy card. Above each slot five singular electric letters spell H E L L O in red as if to confide affection / in all their minute and terrible detail these five little icons could be teeth.¹

So opens "Arisbe," the first chapter of Susan Howe's *Pierce-Arrow* (1997).

Recounting the temperature of the room, the shriek of the air-conditioner, and the menacing look of a microform reader, Howe describes in minute and comically terrible detail the environment at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale University. While irrelevant to the average reader, such details matter to Howe, for it is here that she spent hours conducting research for and writing the essay and poems that would become her book. For Howe, the sights and sounds of a writer's surroundings play a formative role in the making of a text. She implies as much in a 1989 interview in which she claims that what distinguishes one writer's works from another's is not a question of authorial intent or even subject matter, but environment: "The difference between say Melville and

¹ Susan Howe, *Pierce-Arrow* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 5.

Dickinson,” she notes, “would be (apart from gender) that Melville is from one side of the Connecticut River, and she is from the other side. Trust place to form the voice.”²

There’s an obvious sense in which Howe’s view is more than a little implausible. Why, among the myriad differences between Melville and Dickinson, should their proximity to the Connecticut River matter most? Yet Howe’s provocation recalls an earlier tradition of American philosophers and poets—Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, and Charles Olson—who held landscape and geography as central to the formation of their work and, more broadly, to the formation of an American imaginary. Indeed, her provocative insistence on the Connecticut River as the ultimate if seemingly arbitrary dividing line between Melville’s and Dickinson’s works revives, in particular, D.H. Lawrence’s much earlier notion of a “spirit of place.” “Every people,” Lawrence writes,

is polarized in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland.

Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality.³

If Lawrence thus calls for the writer to inhabit the conditions of her environment, and so to occupy them rather than to mend or deny them, then Howe’s work responds by locating her work, at least at first, in the spirit of an inhospitable room. And while the scale of Howe’s response here is hyper-local and therefore not invested in the same

² Susan Howe, “Talisman Interview,” conducted by Edward Foster, *The Birth-Mark*, 156.

³ D.H. Lawrence, “The Spirit of Place,” *Studies in Classic American Literature*, 12.

nationalist project as Lawrence, she nonetheless shares the latter's interest in what he calls "terrestrial magnetism,"⁴ or the way in which an environment exerts influence on the artwork. Howe admits as much when she explains how she came to write "Thorow," a poem about and composed on Lake George, and made up of lines which typographically and semantically intersect, producing "throughways" of thought in which the meaning of one line is bifurcated by another. "If there is a Spirit of Place," Howe says, describing the lake, "that Spirit had me in thrall."⁵ Taken together, then, Howe's comments and poems signal the persistence of a logic that has survived the nativist (nationalist, essentialist, and exceptionalist) ideology from which it first emerged. How and why it survived—how, in other words, the fantasy that an artwork could be contingent on and continuous with its world might be useful—is the subject of the chapters that follow.

Howe's work manifests this fantasy in *Pierce-Arrow* and elsewhere (*My Emily Dickinson* [1985], *That This* [2004]), whereby the materiality of the writer's environment is inscribed in the materiality of the text. We see traces of this logic everywhere in *Pierce-Arrow*, which includes descriptions of "Arisbe," the Pennsylvania estate where American philosopher and semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce lived and worked, alongside descriptions (like the above) of the Sterling, where some of Peirce's papers are held, and which is interspersed with photographs of those papers. In her attempt to foreground the compositional process, Peirce's and her own, Howe makes her text and its widening contexts (New Haven, CT; Milford, PA) inextricable and, in so doing, takes as

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Susan Howe. "The Difficulties Interview." Conducted by Tom Beckett. *Difficulties* 3.2 (1989): 20.

the basis of her poetics a significant principle from Peirce's work on semiotics. More surprising than the fact that a book about Peirce engages in Peircian logic is the extent to which this logic, the desire for a fully integrated work of art, captivated so many artists and writers in the Modernist period, an era typified by strident commitments to aesthetic autonomy. The conjunctions Howe creates between her world and Peirce's frame the work as legible only through those strange spaces, producing a kind of mutual dependency of world and artwork evident in the "Arisbe" chapter of *Pierce-Arrow* where Howe claims that "[i]n poetry things seem to touch so they are."⁶

The structure of the desire for "things to touch," for an artwork to be wholly continuous with its referent, and the practices and problems that arise from this desire, is the focus of this dissertation. For Howe's seemingly strange expression of intimacy between a work and its world, I will claim, is a formulation that is central to modernist American aesthetics. The idea that a work could not simply refer but belong to its referent exerted a transformative force on the literature of the modernist period. Like other recent scholarship that has sought to expand the field of modernist studies, I challenge the conventional wisdom that modernism is best characterized by its commitment to the work of art considered as detached from the world. In partitioning modernism from earlier movements, certain critical accounts tend to reproduce an oversimplified notion of aesthetic autonomy, casting modernist writers as naively committed to a notion of art neither governed by nor responsible to extra-aesthetic concerns. This version of modernism finds inspiration in moments such as T.S. Eliot's axiomatic assumption that

⁶ Susan Howe, *Pierce-Arrow* (New York: New Directions, 1997), 13.

“a creation, a work of art, is autonomous,”⁷ in Wallace Stevens’s treatise on abstraction in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,”⁸ and in Clement Greenberg’s career-long celebration of art which “determine[d], through operations peculiar to itself, the effects peculiar and exclusive to itself,” among myriad others.⁹ While such assertions of art’s autonomy have few defenders today, they nevertheless resonate alongside accounts that treat autonomy not as a locus of inherent value but as a point of resistance to the fragmentation of modern life—those, like J.M. Bernstein’s *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, which remain indebted to Adornian notions of art’s functionlessness.¹⁰

My study follows a different paradigm: that of writers and artists who imagine their work as impossibly yet inescapably continuous with the world it depicts, as intimately partaking of reality rather than representing it. In so doing, it finds within modernism’s major genres—the novel, the documentary, the epic poem, the

⁷ T.S. Eliot, “The Function of Criticism,” *Criterion* 2.5 (October 1923): 38.

⁸ Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 380-85.

⁹ Greenberg’s celebration of formalist painting became the basis for his thesis on modernism *tout court*: “Modernism includes more than art and literature. By now it covers almost the whole of what is truly alive in our culture. It happens, however, to be very much of a historical novelty. Western civilization is not the first civilization to turn around and question its own foundations, but it is the one that has gone furthest in doing so. I identify Modernism with the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant. Because he was the first to criticize the means itself of criticism, I conceive of Kant as [,] the first real Modernist. The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline to criticize the discipline itself, not in order to subvert it but in order to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence. Kant used logic to establish the limits of logic, and while he withdrew much from its old jurisdiction, logic was left all the more secure in what there remained to it.” Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York, 1966), 66-77.

¹⁰ J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2006).

autobiography—a vital and variegated commitment to what I refer to as non-representational realism, a term most legible through the figure of the index. Impatient with an increasingly self-reflexive notion of art perfected under high modernism, the writers in my study sought to reject or bypass the artwork and asserted, in its stead, a conception of literature predicated on external relations, those concerned with its production and reception. In each case, this aesthetic desire issues a pure contradiction: it denies the contours of literary form and aspires, instead, toward an unmediated relation between work and world. It is in light of this contradiction that we might understand George Oppen’s determination “to construct with language something other than language” alongside his lament for a wordless poetry, “Because I am not silent the poems are bad.”¹¹ Such statements, suffused with failure, value the goodness of art and of artists only in their dissolution.¹² And Oppen’s longing for silent communion is not unconnected, in my reading, from Howe’s theory of the lyric voice: both imagine the ideal poem as a porous medium, as vulnerable to its environment as it is attuned to the external world. By attending to the contradictory and often self-cancelling ambitions held by these and a number of other midcentury writers and thinkers, I show how modernism’s dissatisfactions with representation, underwritten by the logic of indexicality, express not the drive to retreat from the world but the necessity to engage it on different terms.

¹¹ George Oppen, “Meaning is to Be Here: A Selection from the Daybooks of George Oppen,” ed. Cynthia Anderson, *Conjunctions* 10 (1988).

¹² Oppen’s aversion to aesthetic form—“I would like the poem to be transparent, inaudible”—also comes to characterize the poet’s ability, since poetry’s creative force, what he terms “the power to originate,” resides “not in aesthetic man (the exercise of taste) but in ontologic man; man as he confronts the world.” (“Philosophy of the Astonished,” 225).

i. Autonomy and its Discontents

While the idea that modernist art is predicated on aesthetic detachment is as old as modernism itself, it continues to shape our understanding of literary production.¹³ Mark McGurl's account of *The Program Era* reinforces this belief when he wonders whether "the whole enterprise of literature as we have known it in modern times [hasn't] been driven by an impulse to artistic autonomy."¹⁴ In order to understand the enormous traction that the idea of autonomy held in the modern period, we might turn to the work of one its most important theorists, Theodor Adorno. In the "Society" section of *Aesthetic Theory*, which upholds the artwork as a discrete object of critique on the basis of its formal indifference and resistance to its social environment, Adorno determines art's social character to be neither wholly a result of its mode of production nor simply the backdrop from which it "deriv[es] [...] its thematic material."¹⁵

"Much more importantly," Adorno explains,

art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms and qualifying as "socially useful," it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing

¹⁴ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009), 325.

¹⁵ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minneapolis P, 1997), 225.

structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation evolving in the direction of a total exchange society in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society. Certainly through its refusal of society, which is equivalent to sublimation through the law of form, autonomous art makes itself a vehicle of ideology: The society at which it shudders is left in the distance, undisturbed. [...] Nothing social in art is immediately social, not even when this is its aim.¹⁶

Adorno goes on to detail how art's freedom from, and critique of, empirical society is double-edged, since art's autonomy from the social sphere coincides with its

¹⁶ Ibid., 225-26. Adorno makes a similar point regarding aesthetic autonomy and political protest in his essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" (1957): "You experience lyric poetry as something opposed to society, something wholly individual. [...] This demand, however, the demand that the lyric word be virginal, is itself social in nature. It [lyric poetry] implies a protest against a social situation that every individual experiences as hostile, alien, cold, oppressive, and this situation is imprinted in reverse on the poetic work: the more heavily the situation weighs upon it, the more firmly the work resists it by refusing to submit anything heteronomous and constituting itself solely in accordance with its own laws. The work's distance from mere existence becomes the measure of what is false and bad in the latter. In its protest the poem expresses the dream of a world in which things would be different. The lyric spirit's idiosyncratic opposition to the superior power of material things is a form of reaction to the reification of the world, to the domination of human beings by commodities that has developed since the beginning of the modern area [sic], since the industrial revolution became the dominant force in life" (Adorno, *Notes I*: 39-40). Lisa Siraganian condenses this paradox of aesthetic detachment and political relevance when she points out that "[i]n its refusal to submit to the world's heteronomy, the work becomes politically relevant" (16) with the added caveat that "[i]f the work is actively rejecting, holding off, or refusing the heteronomous world—instead of simply declaring that world irrelevant to its meaning—then autonomy has already failed" (17). Many of the modernists I discuss express the inverse of the rejection which Siraganian explicates, in which they refuse Art in favor of the heteronomous world, while others I examine try to undo the assumption that a work of art is composed of its own laws.

functionlessness and restricted political agency.¹⁷ As he continues, “Insofar as a social function can be predicated for artworks, it is their functionlessness. Through their difference from a bewitched reality, they embody negatively a position in which what is would find its rightful place, its own.”¹⁸ From the position of an ends-means rationality, in other words, art is superfluous—it exceeds the bounds of a utility-based economy by denying its status as commodity.

While his argument elegantly illuminates the connection between aesthetic autonomy, on the one hand, and social functionlessness—both as the origin and horizon of critique—on the other, the modernists I examine challenge what appears to be an inevitability in Adorno’s account. For many midcentury American writers, aesthetic autonomy was not a given but a condition to struggle against. To the extent that this study is in dialogue with Adorno’s project, then, it focuses on a group of modernists who negatively engage his thesis on aesthetic autonomy, and who imagine alternatives to an aesthetics founded on auratic distance and functionlessness. Rather than locating political critique, as Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* has it, in works that “emphatically separate[d] themselves from the empirical world, their other,” thereby “bear[ing] witness that that

¹⁷ Building on Adorno’s insight, Sianne Ngai has argued that literature is the privileged place to examine the expression of restricted agency—an aesthetic and affective problem which goes by the name “ugly feelings” in her study—since the odd combination of sovereignty and constraint that so many texts register and reflect on also describes the precarious position of the work of art in a fully commodified society (see *Ugly Feelings* 2). By contrast, my project suggests that although autonomy was the universal condition of modernist art, it was a condition that many modernists struggled against without recourse to affect. This is to say that aesthetic autonomy—and, further, aesthetics itself—was not as crucial or universal a category as was previously thought. In my archive, autonomy is only present in its violation.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 227.

world itself should be other than it is,”¹⁹ this study contends that for a certain modernist strain, critique is not measured by aesthetic distance but by envisioning new forms of intimacy.²⁰ From the perspective of Adorno’s account, which continues to inform our sense of what made modernism distinct from other aesthetic projects, this strain of modernism may appear guilty of false consciousness. Adorno, for one, reinforces the false equivalency between an artwork and its conditions of production when he writes that

[k]nowing that an artwork is something made does not amount to knowing it is an artwork. The exaggerated accent on its fabrication, whether to lambast art as human deception or to denounce its artificiality or preciousness in opposition to the delusion of art as unmediated nature, stands in sympathetic accord with philistinism.²¹

And yet while some of the works I consider reject the category of art on the basis of its artificiality—a rejection as old as Plato—others attempt to reinvent aesthetics by refusing the qualities—autonomy, functionless, auratic distance—that supposedly defined the

¹⁹ Ibid., 177.

²⁰ Adorno’s primary example of this emphatic separation in this section of *Aesthetic Theory*, subtitled “Toward a Theory of the Artwork,” is Mozart: “Even for an artist like Mozart, who seems so unpolemical and who according to general agreement moves solely within the pure sphere of spirit, excepting the literary themes that he chose for his greatest operas, the polemical element is central in the power by which the music sets itself at a distance that mutely condemns the impoverishment and falsity of that from which it distances itself. In Mozart form acquires the power of that distancing as determinate negation; the reconciliation that it realizes is painfully sweet because reality to date has refused it. The resoluteness of distance—as presumably that of all classicism that is forceful rather than vacantly playing with itself—concretizes the critique of what has been repulsed” (AT 177).

²¹ Ibid., 178-79.

essence of modernist art for its most pronounced critics, Adorno, Greenberg, Eliot and Stevens, among others.

Challenging the dominant association between modernism and aesthetic autonomy, as it reads objects which critique the “idealism [...] in which the art object *in and of itself* was seen to have a fixed and transhistorical meaning,”²² this dissertation examines a range of works that take issue with the long-held assumption that detachment is the universal condition of modernist art. Each chapter is devoted to a different solution to this problem and a slightly different renegotiation of terms like “art,” “aesthetics,” “autonomy”—and its opposite, “belonging.” In some cases (William Carlos Williams) this will look like an open rejection of the category of art on the grounds of its European connotations; in others (Richard Wright) this renegotiation will look like the recanting of a belief in the aesthetic realm; in others (Flannery O’Connor) it will take the form of an outright indifference to art; in still others (James Agee) it will resemble the attempt to redefine art as a socially necessary good. The writers discussed here find exceptions to the restricted notion of the work of art, and seek to recast, expand, or dismiss it altogether. These ongoing negotiations and renegotiations reverberate in unexpected ways: in how modernism as a formation is historicized and retrospectively consolidated around an increasingly narrow understanding of the work of art.

In reexamining midcentury challenges to a unified and restricted notion of the work of art, this project joins those of several recent scholars who have aimed to expand and complicate the current understanding of aesthetic autonomy.²³ Lisa Siraganian and

²² Douglas Crimp, *On the Museum’s Ruins* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 17.

²³ For other recent works on this subject, see Juliana Spahr, *Everybody’s Autonomy* (2001); Mary Esteve, “Shipwreck and Autonomy: Rawls, Riesman, and Oppen in the 1960s” (2005); Gregory

Andrew Goldstone provide necessary correctives to certain misunderstandings around the aesthetic and political meanings implicit in modernist claims to autonomy. Siraganian's *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (2012) explains how aesthetic and political autonomy became attenuated during the modernist period. Siraganian is alert to the ambiguity of aesthetic autonomy in the modernist period, explaining how art's autonomy was not a question of its liberation from the world but its "freedom from others ascribing meanings to art objects," an attenuated agency which, in its focus on the spectator or reader rather than structures of reference, "presents a way to imagine an individual's complicated liberty within yet enduring connection to the state."²⁴ Whereas one might be tempted to diagnose instances of this "complicated liberty" as uncertainty about the state and the role of the artist within it, Siraganian argues that it signals instead "a refashioning [...] of what autonomy and poetic use can and should mean."²⁵ Reading works by Gertrude Stein, Wyndham Lewis, and William Carlos Williams, her book traces this refashioning according to the spectator/reader's shifting relation to the art object (wherein the spectator is either irrelevant or fundamentally necessary to the work of art), the poles of which reveal debates about the politics of detachment and incorporation in a liberal(ist) state. While not concerned with liberalism, Andrew Goldstone's *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013) offers an equally important contribution to

Jusdanis, "Two Cheers for Aesthetic Autonomy" (2005); and Charles Altieri, "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter" (2009). Each piece interprets the concept of autonomy along a different axis (and with different objects), producing arguments about collective reading, countercultural ideology of the 1960s, contemporary crises in the Humanities, and histories of modernist painting, respectively.

²⁴ Lisa Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012), 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

scholarship on modernist autonomy, arguing that while “[w]e should treat autonomy claims with skepticism, and we must reject hyperbolic assertions that all literature is intrinsically autonomous, [...] we must take the forms of relative autonomy seriously as a genuine and significant aspect of modernist literature’s engagement with its world.”²⁶ In addressing the diverse range of modernist claims to autonomy, he rightly reminds the reader that the concept of autonomy assumes a set of relations, as his study attends to “what modernist writers, in particular times and places, most urgently seek autonomy *from*.”²⁷ In so doing, he proposes a useful taxonomy of the four major expressions of autonomy: autonomy from labor (art for art’s sake); autonomy from the person (impersonality); expatriation (cosmopolitanism); and autonomy from reference (tautology). My project borrows from Goldstone’s taxonomy in order to describe a set of overlooked but no less significant modernist expressions of aesthetic belonging, in which the work of art is made to belong to its conditions of production, to its referents, to the sites of its composition, and to its readers. As I trace these impulses in late modernism’s main literary genres—the documentary text, the novel, the long poem, and the autobiography—my project explores how each of these aspects of aesthetic belonging circumvent the hermetic work of art and, in so doing, envision an impasse between realist and modernist imperatives.

ii. Beyond Autonomy: Indexicality Outside and Within Literary Studies

²⁶ Andrew Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy: Modernism from Wilde to de Man* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013), 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

In order to explain the contours of “non-representational realism,” I employ Peirce’s concept of the index, his term for a sign which differs from symbols and icons, the two other kinds of sign in his taxonomy, in its capacity to simultaneously refer and belong to its referent. In his 1885 essay “On the Algebra of Logic,” Peirce explains the index’s properties in the following way, “An index is a sign which stands for its object in consequence of a real connection with it. [...] The index asserts nothing; it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops.”²⁸ A concept which “asserts nothing” can nevertheless tell us a great deal, in spite of itself, about the political and aesthetic circumstances in which it gains traction and to which it gives rise. The index, in short, is not a neutral concept but the name for a thoroughly historical set of desires for immediacy and connection with the real. My investigation here will concern the force of the index on literary modernism and consider the question of what the “indexical turn” in the twentieth century might be turning away from.

Since its discovery in the late nineteenth century, the index has occupied an awkward and often unstable position in the theorization of art. Originally theorized by Peirce in the late nineteenth century as part of an elaborate semiotic taxonomy, the index differs from other kinds of signs in its material or physical connection to the referent, a connection that threatens to disrupt its status as sign. Unlike the icon and symbol, which rely, respectively, on resemblance and the arbitrariness of convention, indexicality is not representational; rather, the indexical sign shares an existential quality with its referent—it is sutured to its object by a physical cause. Illustrated through phenomena as varied as

²⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce* vol. 1, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, Indiana UP: 1992), 226.

thunder, the footprint, a bullet-hole, the photographic image, linguistic shifters (pronouns and spatiotemporal words like “this,” “here,” “now”), the index has no privileged domain. Lacking any steady classification, it is not properly natural, mechanical, aesthetic or human but occupies instead an uneasy meeting point between these domains. In some instances the index even exceeds the ambit of representation, as Mary Ann Doane has recently explained: “At times, the disconcerting closeness of the index to its object raises doubts as to whether it is indeed a sign, suggesting instead that the index is perched precariously on the very edge of semiosis.”²⁹ Doane’s use of the word “disconcerting” in an analytical essay is striking as it condenses a post-structuralist anxiety that a sign could somehow, after Saussure, belong to its referent.

Peirce’s thinking around the index developed out of the need to establish a necessary and causal relation between certain signs and the phenomenal world. The index, which relies on a tripartite theory of the sign, composed of a sign, its object (or referent) and its interpretant (or meaning) (as opposed to Ferdinand de Saussure’s later dyadic theory of the sign, which displaced the index and, in turn, questioned the basis of representation in referentiality), is explained succinctly in a 1901 entry of the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. Unlike the icon and the symbol, the indexical sign relies neither on its resemblance to an object (as an icon would) nor on any meaning that might be attached to it through convention (as a symbol would). An index, by contrast,

is a sign which would, at once, lose the character which makes it a sign if its object were removed, but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant. Such, for instance, is a piece of mould with a bullet-hole in it

²⁹ Mary Ann Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign,” *differences* 18 (2007): 2.

as sign of a shot; for without the shot there would have been no hole; but there is a hole there, whether anybody has the sense to attribute it to a shot or not.³⁰

What separates the index from other kinds of signs is its intimate relation to its referent—it would cease to exist as such (it would, in Peirce’s words, “lose the character which makes it a sign” were the referent to disappear) as would its freedom from interpretation (“...but would not lose that character if there were no interpretant”). Peirce explains the irrelevance of interpretation with respect to indexical signs in greater detail in “On the Algebra of Logic” (1885):

Demonstrative and relative pronouns are nearly pure indices, because they denote things without describing them; so are the letters on a geometrical diagram, and the subscript numbers which in algebra distinguish one value from another without saying what those values are.³¹

Notice how Peirce frames indexicality: as the “nearly pure” sign which denotes without describing—this is because the index functions as the semiotic bridge between the external world and the sign system. We might therefore consider the index as an empty placeholder which, despite its “assert[ion] of nothing,” nonetheless grounds linguistic and philosophical propositions in the density of the phenomenal world.

Peirce would go on to define the index in similar terms in his “Prolegomena to an Apology for Pragmaticism,” published ten years after his first work on the subject.

³⁰ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, U North Carolina P: 1991): 240.

³¹ Charles Sanders Peirce, *The Essential Peirce* vol. 1, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Kloesel (Bloomington, Indiana UP: 1992), 226.

Referring to the oft cited scene of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Peirce likens the index to a "savage" footprint. As Peirce describes it, "The footprint that Robinson Crusoe found in the sand, and which has been stamped in the granite of fame, was an Index to him that some creature was on his island, and at the same time, as a Symbol, called up the idea of man."³² Thus the index is described as both a symbol of man and a mark of alterity: the footprint has a direct and determining relationship to the "other" who bears its trace and who in this particular example, we should recall, Crusoe assumed to be a savage or a cannibal. Here, as in Doane's account, the index is synonymous with the disruption of an order—there is something "disconcerting" and disruptive about the presence of an index. Though separated by centuries and disciplines, the link between Defoe (via Peirce) and Doane illustrates how the logic of indexicality continues to carry with it the baggage of primitivism, whether in Friday's footprint, which both Defoe and Peirce found so compelling, indexical ambitions often but do not necessarily require a primitive figure or philosophy in order to be legitimized.

Although not named as such, the strange, even disturbing intimacy that Peirce identifies through the concept of the index acquired an afterlife decades later when it appeared in two prominent works on the nature of photography, Andre Bazin's "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1960) and Roland Barthes's "Rhetoric of the Image" (1964), both of which attribute photography's unique aesthetic effect to something like the "disconcerting closeness" of the index to its referent. As Bazin writes,

Painting is, after all, an inferior way of making likenesses, an ersatz of the processes of reproduction. Only a photographic lens can give us the kind

³² Charles Sanders Peirce, *Peirce on Signs*, ed. James Hoopes (Chapel Hill, U North Carolina P: 1991): 252.

of image of the object that is capable of satisfying the deep need man has to substitute for it something more than a mere approximation, a kind of decal or transfer. The photographic image is the object itself, the object freed from the conditions of time and space that govern it. No matter how fuzzy, distorted, or discolored, no matter how lacking in documentary value the image may be, it shares, by virtue of the very process of its becoming, the being of the model of which it is the reproduction; it *is* the model.³³

Bazin eschews the logic of resemblance (iconicity) and symbol (convention) to describe the specificity of the photographic image. It does not represent its model; rather, the photographic image (or index) shares the qualities of its model by virtue of the conditions of its production: the model imposes itself on the image through the imprint of light on the sensitive surface of the photograph. Bazin therefore situates the difference between painting and photography as the difference between mimetic and non-mimetic arts: in contrast to pictorial perspective, “the original sin of Western painting,” the photograph occupies the place of the phenomenal world: “Photography affects us,” Bazin writes, “like a phenomenon in nature, like a flower or a snowflake whose vegetable or earthly origins are an inseparable part of their beauty.”³⁴ By associating the photograph with natural phenomena, Bazin insists on the presymbolic quality of the photograph.

In his essay “The Photographic Message,” published a year after Bazin’s work, Barthes would imbue the photographic image with a similar indexical or presymbolic

³³ Andre Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13.4 (1960): 8.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

quality, figured not in the natural world of flowers and snowflakes but in the language of communication theory, in which he first theorizes the photograph as a “message without a code.”³⁵ Barthes continues this line of inquiry in “Rhetoric of the Image,” published two years later, in which he asserts that what characterizes the “third” or photographic message is

precisely that the relation between signifier and signified is quasi-tautological; no doubt the photograph involves a certain arrangement of the scene (framing, reduction, flattening) but this transition is not a *transformation* (in the way coding can be); we have here a loss of the equivalence characteristic of the true sign systems and a statement of quasi-identity. In other words, the sign of this message is not drawn from an institutional stock, is not coded, and we are brought up against the paradox [...] of a *message without a code*.³⁶

Barthes’s paradox concerns the way in which a representation ceases to signify or “transform” into a discernable code or ground for interpretation; he insists, instead, on the “quasi-tautological” relation between signifier and signified, a relation that I want to connect to the index’s intimacy with its referent. Both propositions short-circuit or

³⁵ Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message,” trans. Stephen Heath, *Image Music Text* (New York, Hill and Wang: 1977), 17.

³⁶ Roland Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image,” trans. Stephen Heath, *Image Music Text* (New York, Hill and Wang, 1977), 36. Barthes confronts this problem again in his last meditation on photography and death, *Camera Lucida* (1980): “Photography is unclassifiable because there is no reason to mark this or that of its occurrences; it aspires, perhaps, to become as crude, as certain, as noble as a sign, which would afford it access to the dignity of a language: but for there to be a sign there must be a mark; deprived of a principle of marking, photographs are signs which don’t *take*, which *turn*, as milk does. Whatever it grants to vision and whatever its manner, a photograph is always invisible: it is not it that we see. In short, the referent adheres. And this singular adherence makes it very difficult to focus on Photography.” (6).

collapse the typical structure of reference. Although Barthes's semiotic system does not exactly correspond to Peirce's, in that Barthes's equation is not concerned with the object to which the photograph refers, I would argue that both Peirce and Barthes are attempting to understand semiotics at its limits: this is to say that both Peirce and Barthes are invested in signs that circumvent the order of representation altogether.

Drawing on the contributions of Bazin and Barthes, Rosalind Krauss reintroduced the concept of indexicality in a two-part essay on its implications for artistic representation in the 1970s. Striving for a term to capture the specificity of seventies art in relation to previous instances of aesthetic abstraction, Krauss identified a photographic logic at work across a range of artistic forms—including painting, photography, and dance—which expressed “the mute presence of an uncoded event.”³⁷ Krauss's intervention brought the term “indexicality” into dialogue with installations whose meanings are, in Krauss's analysis, overwhelmed by the fact of their irrefutable presence; in so doing, Krauss repositioned the index as an aesthetic virtue (I will return to this later). Distinguishing the abstraction of the 1970s from that of previous decades became a matter of recognizing a “decisive break between earlier attitudes towards the index and those at present, a break that has to do with the role played by the photographic, rather than the pictorial, as a model.”³⁸ Although previous abstract artists (namely Duchamp) had experimented with structures of reference, what defined this generation of artists, according to Krauss, was the short-circuiting of style at the expense of something like aesthetic immediacy or pure presence.

³⁷ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 2,” *October* 4 (1977): 60.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 60.

Krauss's instinct to rediscover the index as an aesthetic principle was spurred by a 1976 exhibition entitled "Rooms" held at P.S. 1, a public school building in Long Island City appropriated by a collective of artists, including Gordon Matta-Clark, Michelle Stuart, and Lucio Pozzi. Each piece in the exhibition made use of the dilapidated condition of the site including, for example, its "rotting floors, its peeling paint, its crumbling plaster."³⁹ Stuart's *East/West Wall Memory Relocated*, for example, made up of floor-to-ceiling rubbings of the building itself, imprinted the building's architectural details (chalkboard frames, traces of wainscoting) as well as its flaws (cracked plaster). Matta-Clark's *Cut*, an open-air vertical shaft, revealed the building's inner architectural support, created after the artist cut away the floorboards and ceiling from around the joists. What is important about each of these examples for Krauss is not only how the artist exploits the building itself, but how the work of art becomes inseparable from the space of its exhibition: each is not simply fixed to the building—its very possibility is inextricable from the site. It is in this sense as inappropriate to say that Stuart's work "represents" or "refers to," say, the Berlin wall as it is to say that Matta-Clark's piece "represents" the architecture of which it is composed. Each work bears an immanent and "quasi-tautological" relation to the architectural scene in which it belongs. Each affirms nothing more than its rootedness in time and space.

Since the publication of Krauss's groundbreaking essay over thirty years ago, the concept of indexicality has been fully recuperated in the aesthetic sphere to describe the specificity of the photograph in the photochemical era, an era that ended with the popularization of digital media. From this vantage point, the index is a deeply nostalgic

³⁹ Ibid., 60.

form, mobilized retrospectively in order to assert the referential certainty and intimacy of the photographic image and its referent. The index, in other words, has become the primary vocabulary through which art historians and film scholars insist on the specificity, and therefore the exceptionality, of modernist photography and film. In a 2007 special issue of *differences* devoted to the index, Mary Ann Doane frames the renewed investment in indexicality in precisely this way. “With the advent of digital media,” Doane writes, “photography, in particular, has seemingly lost its credibility as a trace of the real, and it could be argued that the media in general face a certain crisis of legitimation.”⁴⁰ Doubling as both the subject of and occasion for the special issue, the notion of “crisis” forces Doane to pose several incisive questions about the concept of the index in relation to ongoing debates about medium specificity and, of course, disciplinary specificity within the academy. I include several of them here, not merely for their usefulness but to give the reader a sense of the trajectory of Doane’s thought:

Why is the rhetoric of crisis so frequently deployed in discussions of the digital? [...] Does the alleged “death of the index” announce a transformation in modern attitudes toward death? Is it true that the digital heralds a “post-medium condition”? What is a medium and how has the concept of medium specificity functioned in the history of art and the history of mass media? [...] What is the status of indexicality in language, a medium usually described as purely symbolic? [...] Are the terms “index” and “indexicality” the most appropriate or accurate terms in gauging the impact of photographic and cinematic representation in

⁴⁰ Doane, “Indexicality: Trace and Sign,” 1.

modernity?⁴¹

Here, the birth of the digital in Doane's thinking coincides not just with the "death of the index" but, by extension, with certain radical transformations in the role of language and literature. At stake in this series of questions is the future not simply of photography and cinema "after" the digital, but of the kinds of technology—namely, literature—that precede, collaborate and compete with it.

Building on Doane's invocation of crisis, I want to argue that the index registers not just the crisis of a particular medium in light of a newer, more sophisticated one (painting vis-à-vis photography, photography vis-à-vis digital media), but a crisis of aesthetic representation *tout court*. Although it has been used in the service of aesthetic arguments since Peirce, the index bears a deeply ambivalent relationship to aesthetics. Another glimpse at this brief genealogy of the index reveals the degree to which Peirce's own relationship to aesthetics is a strained one. In his essay describing the discontinuity between art and logic in Peirce's thought, Michael Leja notes how

[i]n contrast to other members of his social class, such as his friends William James and Henry James, Peirce's interest in art was minimal. He had grown up in a household that provided every opportunity for the cultivation of a child's artistic sensibilities. It was one of the intellectual and cultural centers of Cambridge, visited by respected artists such as William Wetmore Story and Horatio Greenough, and aesthetes such as Charles Eliot Norton, not to mention renowned literary figures including Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Volumes of

⁴¹ Ibid., 7.

Art Journal were readily available on the bookshelves of his home, as his own adolescent catalog of the family library indicates. Yet when he toured Europe with his wife in 1871, Peirce was apparently moved more by meals and fine handkerchiefs than by the art he saw.⁴²

If Leja's use of biographical detail seems insufficient as a characterization of Peirce's thought, consider the following statement from a 1911 manuscript, in which Peirce distinguishes his own philosophical project against the "silly science of Esthetics" which "tries to bring us enjoyment of sensuous beauty—by which I mean all beauty that appeals to our five senses,—that which ought to be fostered in meditation, ponderings, day-dreams (under due control), concerning ideals."⁴³ Here, art seems principally a matter of appreciating beauty, rather than apprehending truth, a distinction which he reaffirms in a 1902 essay where he proclaims that esthetics had been "handicapped by the definition of it as the theory of beauty."⁴⁴

When he does not dismiss esthetics as a "silly science," Peirce openly asserts his ignorance of the tradition: "Like most logicians," he wrote in 1903, "I have pondered that subject far too little."⁴⁵ Elsewhere he confesses that "ignorant as I am of Art, I have a fair share of capacity of esthetic enjoyment; and it seems to me that while in esthetic enjoyment we attend to the totality of Feeling—and especially to the total resultant Quality of Feeling presented in the work of art we are contemplating—yet it is a sort of

⁴² Michael Leja, "Peirce, Visuality and Art," *Representations* 72 (2000): 97-98.

⁴³ Peirce, *Essential Peirce* vol. 2, 460.

⁴⁴ Peirce, *Collected Papers* vol. 2, 199.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

intellectual sympathy, a sense that here is a Feeling that one can comprehend, a reasonable Feeling.”⁴⁶ At one level, the phrase “a reasonable Feeling” betrays Peirce’s effort to rationalize enjoyment, which he dubs “intellectual sympathy.” At another level, though, the phrase “a reasonable Feeling” bears witness to the ambiguous place of art in Peirce’s oeuvre.⁴⁷ Beyond Peirce, too, one finds lasting traces of the strained relationship between indexicality and art. In the fourteenth and final “note” of part one of her treatise on 1970s art in America, Krauss distinguishes “[t]he Functioning of the index in the art of the present” in its “registration of sheer physical presence” from “the more highly articulated language of aesthetic conventions (and the kind of history which they encode).”⁴⁸ Seventies art, in other words, “substitute[s]” the highly “articulated,” (a term that suggests connotations such as *established*, *effete*, perhaps *European*) language of aesthetics for something simpler, more American.⁴⁹

Given this noticeably non-literary genealogy of the index, as well as Doane’s uncontroversial claim that language is a “medium usually described as purely symbolic,”

⁴⁶ Peirce, *Collected Papers* vol. 5, 113.

⁴⁷ Critics like C.M. Smith (in 1972) and Martin Lefebvre (in 2007) speculate on what a “Peircean aesthetic” might have been like with varying degrees of plausibility. Smith prefaces his analysis by qualifying it to a striking degree: “Hence what follows cannot be offered with a great deal of assurance and pretends to be nothing more than a few suggestions concerning how a degree of coherence might be lent to those portions of Peirce’s work that deal, directly or indirectly, with matters aesthetic” (Smith 21). Lefebvre, by contrast, fares slightly better in his attempt to articulate how a Peircean aesthetic functions as a corrective to a Hegelian notion of art, arguing that “what attracts us toward art is first and foremost a *semiotic* quality *qua* quality of mind or quality of Thirdness” (Lefebvre 319). While I do not completely reject the possibility that Peirce pursued aesthetics later in his career (Jeffrey Barnouw has convincingly considered the lasting impact of Peirce’s study of Schiller’s *Letters* on his conception of normative sciences), I am primarily concerned with his work on the index, the bulk of which was composed decades earlier.

⁴⁸ Rosalind Krauss, “Notes on the Index: Seventies Art in America, Part 1,” *October* 3 (1977): 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 81.

it might seem counterintuitive or even wrong-headed to consider the indexical dimensions of literary modernism. However, I take the index's figural and theoretical slipperiness within and after Peirce—as photograph, as footprint, as the point of contact between a trace and its environment—to be an invitation to consider how the index became a form through which writers resolved the dead ends of aestheticism for themselves. While their work is not indexical in the immediate, visual sense, writers like James Agee, William Carlos Williams, Flannery O'Connor, and Richard Wright struggled, each in his or her own way, with the symbolic limits of the word. In the chapters that follow, I read the suspicion of art, poetry, symbols and text as a complex and sustained confrontation with questions raised and worked through by the notion of indexicality. As I do so, I hope to add more coordinates to this topography of the index, partly to show its usefulness within literary studies and partly to better understand what happens in America during the half-century between Peirce's work on the index and its rediscovery by Krauss. My analysis explores the concept of indexicality not merely as a myth, weak utopianism, ideology or trope, but as a logic through which we might recover the particularities of what I identify as a modernist counter-tradition whose writers find recourse in indexicality when confronted with a particular crisis for which aesthetics and the very logic of representation fail them—in documenting the working poor, in capturing the African American experience under Jim Crow law, and in expressing the problem of faith in an increasingly secular world, all very different challenges which are resolved according to non-representational means. I am therefore less interested in the index as a trope or theme than in the dilemmas it condenses. The index, in my reading, is not a given property of language but a possibility to which language beckons. It is

aspirational and programmatic, and as such, often prone to failure. The relationship between word and world, in other words, is most typically understood within literary studies as one of mediation (words mediate world) or creation (world or “worldedness” is an effect of words), not of their contact or causality. But rather than dismiss literature as an insufficiently indexical medium, or the index as an inadequate concept for literary studies, I argue that many American modernist works harbor an indexical dimension which can tell us a great deal about the political and ethical dilemmas of modernist writers, and the degree to which those dilemmas are themselves shaped by intense attachments to place—site, region and nation.

In my efforts to show how the index is a useful heuristic for recasting a certain strain within literary modernism, I am guided by two recent critics who nevertheless employ the figure toward differing aims. Murray McArthur’s “‘The Index Nothing Affirmeth’: The Semiotic Formation of a Literary Mandate in James Joyce’s ‘The Sisters,’” identifies the index, which he calls “the central semiotic resource of literary language,” as a thematic and ethical “disposition” at the heart of Joyce’s early fiction (245). In noting the significance of pointing, both as a gestural and linguistic phenomenon, McArthur emphasizes the self-consciousness and ethical undecidability of Joyce’s prose since, like Peirce’s index, it insists on itself but “stops there.”⁵⁰ As he puts it, “Iconicism or realism asserts a relation of similarity between the order of referring and the referent, between realist narration and Joyce’s Dublin, a relation that indexicality, by compulsively pointing and pointing to nothing, disturbs and disorders” (249). Joyce’s

⁵⁰ Murray McArthur, “‘The Index Nothing Affirmeth’: The Semiotic Formation of a Literary Mandate in James Joyce’s ‘The Sisters,’” *James Joyce Quarterly* 45 (2008): 250-51.

assertion of nothing compelled by the index, itself the kind of sign that compels attention, is thoroughly Peircean:

Joyce structures the narrative [“The Sisters”] as an iconically realist representation that begins and ends with a full exploitation of the resources of indexicality. Almost all of the many types of the index cited by Peirce and later semioticians were added by Joyce when he was revising ‘The Sisters’ to be the first of the *Dubliners* sequence.⁵¹

Central to McArthur’s discussion of the index, then, is not Peirce, per se, but Joyce’s interest in the absence within the indexical claim to presence, wherein the index functions as a trace of some lost referent, or how a “showing that points to nothing and an owning that only marks a loss.”⁵² The index, in other words, is the figure through which McArthur illustrates the significance of absence and incommensurability within Joyce’s output. But while he persuasively argues how Joyce’s scenes of pointing destabilize the story’s otherwise mimetic qualities, it is unclear how, if indexicality is a “central semiotic resource of literary language,” (a point which his essay makes at the outset but then abandons), Joyce is different from any other novelist, modernist or otherwise. If, in other words, indexicality is an intransitive property common to all literature, what makes Joyce’s “literary mandate” worthy of critical attention? At the heart of this question is a fundamental ambiguity about whether we should read the index as an objective feature of language or a subjective “mandate” specific to Joyce. Indeed, McArthur’s tendency to treat the index as a authorial “disposition,” a “figure,” a “mandate” and a “genetic”

⁵¹ McArthur, 250.

⁵² Ibid., 259.

feature of Joyce's work makes indexicality seem overdetermined, existing at multiple registers of the work but not particularly useful for explaining what Joyce, or any writer for that matter, does beyond acknowledging by performing an incommensurability internal to language.⁵³

Although the index "affirms nothing" in McArthur's reading, I show how its logic is nevertheless put in the service of efforts that mark language's limits in order to disrupt and reconfigure forms of political subjectivity. James Agee and Richard Wright, in particular, find in indexical logic a way of bypassing the pitfalls of atomized subjects and their affective attachments. In disavowing reference, then, the word does not simply refer to itself or to its author's genius (as McArthur argues about Joyce) but rather strains toward a necessary and non-arbitrary contact with the world. Therefore while the works of the authors in my study point, they do so with consequences for the subjects to which their indices point. My use of indexicality therefore diverges from McArthur's in three significant ways: first, in emphasis. Whereas McArthur reads the index as a sign of lack insofar as it affirms nothing, I focus on its capacity to imply an existence beyond itself, even as it serves as an imperfect point of reference for that existence. Secondly, I am interested in the modes of relationality—physical contact, immanence, belonging—which the logic of indexicality expresses beyond its deictic function. Indices point, but they also imply direct, material and often causal modes of reference, all of which exceed the logic of representation. Finally, I depart from McArthur in where I see the index operating within the literary work. In his eagerness to make the case for the relevance of the index to literary studies and to Joyce studies, calling it "the central semiotic resource of literary

⁵³ Ibid., 245, 248, 250, 258.

language” and identifying its importance to Joyce’s “literary mandate,” McArthur implies that the index is an objective property of all literature, but he invokes it mostly as a trope—it matters to McArthur that Joyce’s Gabriel points in the direction of his absent wife. By contrast, the shared yet shifting desire for contact with that which lies outside the text is not, in my analysis, merely a trope or set of tropes that function in opposition to the material limitations of the work. Though populated with indexical figures, then, the works I consider beckon toward worlds outside of themselves at varying scales—at the level of figure *and* literary form.

In so doing, then, my engagement with the logic of indexicality as it operates at several registers in a range of modernist texts resolves an implicit yet ignored tension in McArthur’s essay: where do we locate the index? To what/whom should we attribute this “formation”? Is it a feature of all literary language or a function of authorial intent? My dissertation reads the indexical logic as neither a wholly objective nor subjective phenomenon—neither a property of all literary language nor merely a function of authorial intent—but as a mode that opposes the very distinction between objective and subjective realms.

The second piece of indexically oriented literary criticism, Natalia Cecire’s “Marianne Moore’s Precision,” offers a useful illustration of this opposition as it examines the ambivalence of “precision,” an attribute commonly used to describe Moore’s scientific, poetic mode. Although a widespread feature of modernism’s “scientific new realism,” a rigor most often applied to its male practitioners (Ezra Pound,

William Carlos Williams and Louis Zukofsky among them), Cecire convincingly shows how the claim to precision implies “two different but linked domains.”⁵⁴ As she has it:

Insofar as precision is the mark of a laudable accountability to reality, it is understood as a neutral scientific practice, independent of material or social contingencies. Yet insofar as it is read as fussiness, it is a quality inhering in the poet herself: Moore made out to be a precise *person*, making precision a feature of her personality—a virtue.⁵⁵

Moore’s “precision,” Cecire explains, has been doubly invoked by her contemporaries and by later critics, as an attribute of her poetry’s scientific epistemological commitments (objective), and as a symptom of a personal scrupulousness bordering on pathology (subjective), creating a deeply gendered dialectic between the profound and the petty, a dialectic which shaped modernist scientific and poetic knowledge alike. In order to detail the considerable ambivalence of Moore’s precision, which she finds in poems like “An Octopus,” “To a Snail,” “Marriage” and “When I Buy Pictures,” the author turns to the index. “Moore’s indexicality,” she writes, “occurs at multiple levels, for while she performs indexicality literally with her citations [citations refer to physical bodies, objects and texts outside the poem], she also *invokes* indexicality in a less direct sense by proposing indexical relations between things.”⁵⁶ “To a Snail,” in Cecire’s reading, entertains an indexical relation between the poem and the snail even as there is no strict, physical connection between the two—“there is no physical snail leaving a trail of slime

⁵⁴ Cecire, 84.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 88.

[...] as its index on the page.”⁵⁷ Nevertheless, the poem posits what Peirce calls “a correspondence in fact” between the snail’s physical characteristics and the poem’s form; “a necessary and direct relation between one and the other is being proposed if not enacted.”⁵⁸ Thus, in contrast to McArthur, whose analysis concerns how Joyce’s signs point by pointing to their own lack, Cecire’s interest in the indexical logic of Moore’s poems helps her explain how the index—indeed, the poem—implies an existence beyond itself.

My orientation to the index shares Cecire’s investment in the way in which artworks attempt to forge liaisons to the outer world along similar non-representational axes. Moreover, I treat the index as Cecire does, as a logic internal to the work but which is neither a necessary function of literary language⁵⁹ nor an effect of authorial will. By treating the index as a problematic of continuity and causality rather than a trope of pointing, I follow Cecire in expanding the possibilities of what Charles Altieri has called

⁵⁷ Ibid., 88-89.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 89.

⁵⁹ In an important footnote, Cecire notes how the concept of the index “has been useful to theorists of visual art and film because it affords a way of talking about physical presence,” adding that it is “has also [...] been assimilated to a Saussurian semiotics with which it is fundamentally incommensurate, as if Peirce’s sign were simply the Saussurian sign with an extra term superadded. That art and film theorists, often theorists who are deeply engaged with structural linguistics, have borrowed Peirce’s term registers the need for a theory relating signs to physical presence; on the other hand, the use of the term ‘index’ in art and film theory does not really engage Peirce’s semeiotics on its own terms (which are, fundamentally, the terms of a theory of mind rather than a theory of language)” (Cecire 105). While I disagree with Cecire’s claim that Peirce’s semiotics offer a theory of the mind instead of a theory of language, I find her distinction between Peircean and Saussurian semiotics crucial as it treats Peirce’s index not as a supplement to Saussure’s notion of a sign but as a term which precedes and diverges from the latter.

modernism's "new realism."⁶⁰ Indeed, while Moore's scientific commitments are one type of this new realism, the modernist fascination with the index is not limited to scientific method; several modernists, as I will go on to show, are drawn to the index for reasons that have nothing to do with objectivity, accuracy or mastery. Peirce's concept, in my reading, speaks to a collective and repeated desire for an intimate, immediate, and immanent relation between an artwork and its world, which gives us insight into questions that involve the status of literature *as it belongs to and partakes of* the shifting labor politics, religious commitments, emergent forms of nationalism and modes of political representation in midcentury American culture.

The index makes visible a vital and variegated commitment among late modernist writers and thinkers to non-representational realism, a term I use to describe how midcentury writers express and implement the desire for their works to belong to their referents; this desire in turn becomes legible according to the modes of belonging outlined in Peirce's notion of the index. Cecire gestures to one version of this belonging as she acknowledges the extra-textual ambitions of Moore's poems, which propose and enact a "necessary and direct relation" between the poem and the physical attributes of the object it depicts (89): "Poetic principles can inhere in the body of *a* snail," Cecire counterintuitively reasons, "just as a snail can be recapitulated in the physical form of a poem" (91). In statements like these, which proclaim the existential correspondences between Moore's poems and their objects, Cecire moves beyond a merely thematic and deictic conception of the index toward the articulation of an indexical poetics. But despite her focus on Moore's poetic precision, her account of their exact mode of work-world

⁶⁰ Altieri, Charles. "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter." *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (2009): 12.

relation is still hazy: how could a poem—or any artwork, for that matter—not merely depict but be a “necessary and direct” result of its object?

My dissertation answers this question, in the same counterintuitive spirit, through recourse to the index as both a crucial figure and form evident in the works I examine and as the registration of a very real desire for a correspondence between a work and the worlds it inhabits and constructs. At first this claim may seem like a contradiction. How could a work of literature possibly surpass its fundamental mediatedness? Isn't the writer's desire to move beyond the bounds of language dishonest in its idealism or, at the very least, flawed? Why should we take the expressions of such a desire as anything other than an escapist alibi? The task of this project, however, is not to import the problematic of the index into literary history. My point is not that literature is inevitably or even plausibly indexical. Rather, it is to show how a group of modernists were deeply invested, in spite of the innate and insurmountable limitations of language, in *imagining* a literature that was. This project charts the twisted course of that ongoing contradiction in the middle decades of the twentieth century through an earlier moment when literature's value and role were being reconsidered in the wake of total economic and cultural crisis, when the demands for a new mode of realism, impatient with the indirect, symbolic horizons of representation and eager for a more direct engagement with the new world outside, outweighed other aesthetic considerations. Thus to demonstrate, as my dissertation will, that the commitment to literary indices has proven consequential for how we understand modernism is not to concede that these texts are, in fact, indexical. Indeed, the works I examine do not have to be indexical in order for the belief in the immediacy, immersion and immanence held by their authors to be consequential.

iii. On Non-Representational Realism

Sliding between aesthetic theory and Peircean thought, this dissertation argues that it is possible to account for the realist demands of a literature thoroughly shaped by and devoted to extra-aesthetic concerns but nonetheless hostile to merely depicting them. Bertolt Brecht offered a succinct prescription for a non-representational realism in his response to Georg Lukács's theory of realism: "Even the realistic mode of writing, of which literature provides many very different examples, bears the stamp of the way it was employed, when and by which class, down to its smallest details."⁶¹ Realism, for Brecht, is not a matter of content or narrative style but an insistence that the work be attuned to its conditions of production and reception. In wresting the realist mode from Balzac and Tolstoy, Brecht made it possible to imagine realism in a wider sense—even non-mimetic works, in his account, can be realist. If Brecht thus calls for the critic to reimagine realism since "in order to represent [reality], modes of representation must also change,"⁶² then my project responds by testing a method that would locate and then read a realist impulse in forms typically associated with realism (documentary, memoir) *and* in those less straightforwardly realist (the epic poem, the late modernist novel).

One model for thinking about the contradictory aspects of a non-representational realism, in all its semantic richness, might be seen in Branka Arsic's recent study on Ralph Waldo Emerson, *On Leaving*. For Arsic, Emerson's thought is characterized by the dual insight that our reality and our minds are mutable and that we might nevertheless

⁶¹ Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism." *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Ronald Taylor (London: Verso, 1980): 81.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 82.

perceive and understand the modes of relation that accompany such profound and constant change to our shifting ethics, political allegiances, and identities. In exploring the repeated images and expressions of fluidity and disaggregation at the core of Emerson's work—water, but also the processes of thinking, dreaming and loving—Arsic challenges the common understanding of the Emersonian individual as coherent, autonomous and self-reliant. In the appendix to her book, she illustrates how this instability is not merely a virtue of transcendental thought; it also comes to characterize the very form of that thought. “Arguably the most widespread prejudice about Emerson's writing is that it is contradictory,” Arsic notes, adding how the contradictory quality of his prose cements him as a poet even as it disqualifies him as a philosopher. But rather than seeing contradiction as the mark of inconsistent thought or the sign of philosophical eclecticism, as Emerson's opponents and defendants have done, respectively, Arsic carefully examines the major logical and grammatical “shifters” or “modes of travelling” on which his thought depends. The term she uses to describe the logic of leaving and becoming, a logic that may appear illogical, is the *optative*, and it comes from Emerson's own well-known position on American letters as put forward in “The Transcendentalist” (1842):

[O]ur American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood; but whoso knows these seething brains, these admirable radicals, these unsocial worshippers, these talkers who talk the sun and

moon away, will believe that this heresy cannot pass away without leaving its mark.⁶³

To claim that American literary and religious formations operate in the optative mood, as Emerson does here, is to insist on both as the effect of a deep desire for the hypothetical. The term takes on particular philosophical weight with the Stoics (Plutarch among them) where, as Arsic notes, the optative mood “‘is adequately indicated by the if.’ Thus, the optative is not simply an expression of power (‘I wish’ or ‘I can’), but of its instability (‘If only I could’ or ‘If he only would’)” (Arsic 296). Unlike the more common uses of the subjunctive and conditional statements found in syllogism (“If only he could, then I would...”) the optative’s force does not reside in its capacity to be translated into the conjunctive (“He can, I will”) but in its power to comprehend and express a relation that might never be actualized but which is powerful nonetheless. Not a declarative proposition, the optative expresses relations rather than states of being; it is, in Arsic’s words, “invested in [...] ambivalences rather than substances, implications rather than determinations, and modalities rather than identities.”⁶⁴ The optative is therefore a contentless site of negotiation and tension between desire and the real. And, as Arsic suggests, it is also a mode prone to change and contradiction:⁶⁵ the optative will become

⁶³ Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson* volume 1, ed. Robert E. Spiller and Alfred R. Ferguson. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971), 207.

⁶⁴ Arsic, 297.

⁶⁵ Another place where we could find this contradictory logic is in Walt Whitman, whose “Song of Myself” (1855, 1892) celebrates the subject as the site of intersubjective relation and contradiction even as it abandons the optative “if.” Two well-known passages of the poem announce the conditions of relation and contradiction, respectively: the poem opens by declaring “I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.” Later, he adds: “Do I contradict myself? / Very well

the basis for her analysis of Emerson's modal thinking. But in those contradictions, the optative is not reducible to empty aspirations or hollow conditions. Rather, the optative is a grammar of relationality. The cost of ignoring the optative has been high, since, according to Arsic (building on the Stoics vis-à-vis Emerson), "the wholeness of the world is predicated on the fragility of the 'if.'"⁶⁶

I am guided in my analysis of late modernist American literature by Arsic's unusual claim regarding the enormous fragility and simultaneous power of the "if." In mid-century works of fiction (by Flannery O'Connor, Richard Wright), poetry (by William Carlos Williams, Robert Smithson), documentary (by James Agee, Richard Wright) and memoir (Wright again), I find thinkers and writers who were committed to modes of relationality (social, spiritual, political) that the form of the index makes available, relations that consistently took shape in the idiom of the optative. Never merely something to be avoided or overcome, the optative became an important register of artistic ambition, a herald of the new demands of a post-crisis literature, and the means by which authors negotiated those varying demands vis-à-vis the limits of their medium. Because these thinkers and writers often saw language (words, but also books and symbols), as a barrier to capturing these relations, and because language was their only tool for doing so, their aspirations will seem either contradictory, unrealistic or, worse yet, disingenuous. However, to the writers, artists and poets of the index, although they never came together as a movement that shared a common perspective, traditional modes of representation were flawed. For each, a different way of thinking was required, one

then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)," recasting social, political, and biological relation as a contradiction.

⁶⁶ Arsic, 299.

that would demand that language do something other than indirectly refer to its object or accidentally hail its reader. As such, this thinking required an open-ended reimagination of potential forms for aesthetic engagement that, in turn, challenged the very logic of representation, as we shall see.

In understanding these late modernist projects in terms of the modes of subjunctive relation they project, then, my dissertation follows Emerson's insight that "our American literature [operates] ... in the optative mood." However, this project is not about Emerson any more than it is about Peirce;⁶⁷ rather, it is about the modes of non-representational realism that each thinker made available to twentieth century American letters. Moreover, I address the fundamental questions of materiality, meaning and transmission bound up in the rhetoric of non-representational realism, which run counter to well-rehearsed claims of American self-reliance and modernist aesthetic autonomy, beginning with the post-Depression era and extending into the mid-century. In so doing, my dissertation revisits and rewrites assumptions about the development of modernism in the United States as it reconsiders the apparent givenness of aesthetic autonomy and abstraction.

⁶⁷ Though explicit about his opposition to transcendentalism, Peirce would eventually acknowledge its influence on him, albeit in a discontented manner: "I was born and reared in the neighborhood of Concord ... at the time when Emerson, [Frederick H.] Hedge, and their friends were disseminating the ideas they had caught from [Friedrich von] Schelling and Schelling from Plotinus, from Boehm[e], or from God knows what minds stricken with the monstrous mysticism of the East. But the atmosphere of Cambridge held many an antiseptic against Concord transcendentalism; and I am not conscious of having contracted any of that virus. Nevertheless, it is probably that some cultured bacilli, some benignant form of the disease was implanted in my soul, unawares, and that now, after long incubation, it comes to the surface, modified by mathematical conceptions and by training in physical investigations" (qtd in Brent 46-47).

What I insist on, then, is a mode of modernist production that is both abstract and realist rather than idealist (short-sighted) and compromised (failed), a mode whose works register the difficulties of describing and enacting political, nationalist and spiritual relations through words alone. Such a form of thinking sees works as having formed through these contradictions—aesthetic, political, spiritual—and eschews any assumption of unimpeded language even as those works repeatedly beckon to a world without mediation. This is to say that while each of the works I examine engages the tropes of immediacy, immersion and immanence condensed in the form of the index, differentiating them also requires a particular mode of reading attuned to the optative mood and the contradictory but powerful sites of negotiation embedded in each.

In Susan Howe's terms, to return to the Peircean poem with which I began, this would mean taking literally⁶⁸ her claim about the appearance of the letters in the Sterling Library microform, that "in all their minute and terrible detail these five little icons could be teeth."⁶⁹ What would it mean to treat icons as not merely resembling teeth, in how they appear to her on the microform page in the Sterling archives, but as representations that could be teeth and could, in their materiality, "confide affection" (Howe 5)? Icons, according to Peirce, signify according to their visual resemblance with their referents. But in comparing icons to teeth—indeed, to imagine if and how images could bite—Howe insists on the material and relational properties of the linguistic sign that exceed their representational capacity. Icons can be teeth, here, only insofar as they bite and "spell H

⁶⁸ Arsic proposes a similar revision of Emerson against the skepticism of his earlier critics who discredit Emerson's conflicted genealogy of Transcendentalism and Perry Miller's warning that "to take Emerson literally is often hazardous" (qtd in Arsic 295). Her reading practice entails "tak[ing] [Emerson] at his word" and embracing the contradictions internal to his thought.

⁶⁹ Howe, *Peirce-Arrow*, 5.

E L L O” rather than merely signifying a greeting.⁷⁰ Her treatment of icons here and elsewhere in *Pierce-Arrow* brings them close to the quality of the index, wherein the tension internal to her piece—between her word and Yale’s thing, between icon and index—register and illuminate the problematic that I examine throughout my dissertation. In *Pierce-Arrow* Howe follows her insight that Peirce’s work informs the way she understands poetics and materiality in the optative mode, as something that is conjectural and figural but no less real. And insofar as Howe rehearses a dissatisfaction with representation, she does so not simply to embrace her archive as a set of inert objects but to highlight the ever-expanding network of associations and connections between and among its materials. The title indicates her emphasis on these connections as it refers, in an act of transposition, to one of its main protagonists (Peirce) and the Cambridge street on which he lived (Arrow Street) while pointing to the luxury motor car manufacturer of the same name, headquartered in Buffalo, New York, Howe’s hometown, and pictured on the back cover. It is precisely in the strange liaisons between one arrow and another that Howe situates her work, poised between personal loss and historical knowledge and the American spirits of place (Yale, Cambridge, Buffalo) that haunt both.

iv. Modernist Aesthetics in an Expanded Field

My first chapter, “James Agee’s Literary Labor,” focuses on the conventions of New Deal documentary texts by examining the text that is frequently credited with exhausting that genre, James Agee’s *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Critics typically read this 1941 study of Alabama sharecroppers, created in collaboration with the

⁷⁰ Ibid.

photographer Walker Evans, as either a failure of the documentary form or a proto-postmodern deconstruction of it, given how much of the text records not the plight of the “other half” but Agee’s own concerns about writing and anxieties about art. I argue that Agee’s unease with art and his seemingly narcissistic and politically evasive preoccupation with writing are a necessary part of his project. Instead of documenting the lives of the working poor in order to sentimentalize them toward some greater cause (as other federally-funded writers and artists had done during the New Deal), *Praise* persistently counterposes two competing forms of labor: manual and intellectual; agrarian and writerly. To bring the index to bear on Agee’s laboring text is to revise the critical metric by which we measure the project’s realism and its author’s sincerity. *Praise*’s critics maintain that the text is governed by a photographic standard (Evans’s aesthetic) that Agee’s words could only ever approximate. By contrast, I show how Agee’s prose indexes the labor it portrays at the precise and paradoxical point at which it announces and performs its inability to signify. To level the notion of the index against a photographic reading of *Praise* may seem counterintuitive, since the concept has been historically used to cement the photograph’s association with the “absolutely, irrefutable present.”⁷¹ And yet to confine the index to the photographic realm is to neglect the ways in which sentences, too, bear the traces of their writer’s work and, further, the economy of other modes of labor which occasions such writing. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is the direct consequence of the laboring lives it cannot represent. Agee’s language, as I argue, most fully approaches the quality of indexicality at the very moment it is least like a camera.

⁷¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 77.

My second chapter, “Flannery O’Connor’s Mysterious Matter,” examines the index as a challenge to the critical hermeneutic mode. O’Connor’s work offers a particularly rich occasion to think through these questions since her role as a novelist was inseparable from her Catholic beliefs. Implicit in the structure of revelation in her two novels, *Wise Blood* (1952) and *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960) is an attentiveness to the literal potential of language, inherent in her statement on the Eucharist: “If it’s a symbol, to hell with it.” While O’Connor’s novels are typically understood within an allegorical frame, wherein characters symbolize the failure to know God, I examine how her position on the Eucharist and the role of sensation in her novels thoroughly interrupt such a reading. As much of her short fiction demonstrates, the state of salvation requires not the knowledge of being saved, but the feeling of salvation. The guiding assumption throughout her work, in other words, is that one cannot know if one is saved; one must feel it. This chapter thus reprises the form of embodied education that William Carlos Williams proposed twenty years earlier in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* by exploring the degree to which such knowledge exceeds its interpretation by O’Connor’s characters and readers alike.

In my third chapter, “William Carlos Williams’s Poetics of Contact,” I explore the shifting political content of what I term an “aesthetics of contact” as it evolves over the course of Williams’s career, arguing how it comes to compensate for the more abstract and far-flung attachments that modernist forms of nationalism entailed. While Williams’s involvement with the literary magazine *Contact* was sporadic and brief in light of his entire oeuvre, I argue that it consolidates the poet’s abiding commitment to immediacy and his desire to renew American verse. Such an assertion may not seem like news—after

all, one of Williams's most celebrated lines, "Say it—no ideas but in things," summarizes his penchant for a concrete and local poetics, one thoroughly opposed to the Symbolism of the late nineteenth-century.⁷² What is less clear, however, is how an aesthetics of contact acted as a proxy for the nation-state. Reading *Paterson* (1946-1958) in conjunction with his early treatises in *The Embodiment of Knowledge* and his editorial work at *Contact*, I demonstrate how his early attempts toward articulating an American aesthetic give way to a local landscape and a decidedly different poetic program. Building on Lytle Shaw's recent work on the connections between site-specific art and postwar American poetry, this chapter explores how Williams's nationalist sympathies evolve into a site-specific and thoroughly indexical poetic program.

My fourth chapter, "When a Commitment is Not a Commitment," confronts the authenticating grammar of the index as it emerges in late modernist autobiography by examining the political implications of such expression in the work of Richard Wright. Through an analysis of Wright's political essays alongside *Black Boy* whose purpose, as he states, was to "capture a physical state or movement that carried strong subjective impressions" and "[t]o fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget the words and be conscious only of the response," I explore how Wright's fantasy for expressive communion with his reader—here, not an aesthetic belonging but an intersubjective one—forms the basis of political activity.⁷³

As I challenge those accounts of modernist aesthetics that uphold autonomy as its most distinctive feature, I am also attuned to the ways in which later criticism tends to

⁷² William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1995), 6.

⁷³ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)* (New York: Harper, 2005). 280.

smooth over certain ambiguities of older accounts in order to position itself against a narrowly defined and falsely strident version of high modernism. Adorno, for instance, seems to reverse his sentiments on autonomy in the “*La nuance / encor*” chapter from *Minima Moralia* (1951):

Language is by its own objective substance social expression, even where it has abruptly severed itself from society as individual. Changes that it undergoes in communication involve the writer’s uncommunicative material. Words and phrases spoilt by use do not reach the secluded workshop intact. And the historical damage cannot be repaired there.

History does not merely touch on language, but takes place in it.⁷⁴

Rather than treating this passage as a contradiction internal to Adorno’s thinking, given how its embrace of social expression appears to contradict or at least undermine claims he makes in *Aesthetic Theory*, I take it as an opportunity to shed light on the ambiguities of how modernists themselves understood aesthetic autonomy and its alternatives.⁷⁵ My wager in this dissertation is that finding a way to grasp the range of indexical ambitions

⁷⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), 219.

⁷⁵ In *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, Jacques Rancière outlines the same paradoxical character of aesthetic autonomy we find in Adorno: “The politics of art in the aesthetic regime of art, or rather its metapolitics, is determined by this founding paradox: in this regime, art is art insofar as it is also non-art, or is something other than art. We therefore have no need to contrive any pathetic ends for modernity or imagine that a joyous explosion of postmodernity has put an end to the great modernist adventure of art’s autonomy or of emancipation through art. There is no postmodern rupture. There is a contradiction that is originary and unceasingly at work. The work’s solitude carries a promise of emancipation. But the fulfillment of that promise amounts to the elimination of art as a separate reality, its transformation into a form of life,” (36). Rancière’s discussion is significant for my argument in two ways: first, his analysis extends the modernist regime of art into the contemporary moment, thereby challenging the notion of a “postmodern break” and the very notion of postmodernity; second, it makes plain the inherently paradoxical qualities of autonomy, qualities which common accounts of autonomy oversimplify and which my project, in its reflections on indexicality and “non-art,” aims to restore.

among late modernist American writers and artists will transform our sense of what modernism was (and is) as it imagines realism along non-representational lines. If the first step in such a project is simply to notice that the artwork's strain toward immanence is not exclusive to visual media, as Howe's (as well as Olson's, Thoreau's, and Lawrence's) poetics indicate, the next is to produce the best explanation for why. This is the specific task of the chapters that follow.

CHAPTER ONE: James Agee's Indexical Modernism

The uneasiness with art is not only that of a stagnating social consciousness vis-à-vis the modern. At every point this uneasiness extends to what is essential to art, to its most advanced works. Art, for its part, seeks refuge in its own negation, hoping to survive through its death.

--Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The modern scribe is for the most part an employe [sic]. He is dependent upon wages; in times of acute economic crisis he learns the meaning of unemployment, not as a gifted young god who comes down to earth to sympathize with the working class, but in his own person, and as a discharged worker.

--Joseph Freeman, "Toward the Forties"

As part of the first generation of studies to examine the lives of American sharecroppers⁷⁶ since the Great Depression, James Agee's 1941 work *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* bore a heavy representational burden. What began in 1936 as an effort to

⁷⁶ A technical note: I will use the terms "tenant farmer" and "sharecropper" interchangeably as is characteristic of Agee's use, and common to American usage more generally. However, the terms bear a slight difference: a tenant farmer resides on and farms land owned by a landlord and who pays rent in cash, crop or a combination, whereas a sharecropper pays rent with a portion of the crop he raises. Therefore, some sharecroppers are tenant farmers, but not all tenant farmers are sharecroppers.

convey the lives of the nation's rural poor to a largely bourgeois readership⁷⁷ evolved, over the course of its composition, into a meditation on its failure to represent the farmers' lives, a failure that implicates the very conventions of documentary texts that had been codified during the previous decade. Originally assigned to Agee by *Fortune* magazine editor Eric Hodgins, the story was to appear in *Fortune*'s "Life and Circumstances" series focused on the lives of poor and lower-middle-class Americans. Depression-era documentaries, as Jeff Allred notes, typically "call[ed] attention to social problems in ways that hypostatized the positions of middle-class observers invested with social agency over and against the abject 'other half'."⁷⁸ Agee's story, however, never ran. The completed work was ten times the contracted length, its final state "[i]mpossible in any form and length *Fortune* can use," as Agee admitted in a letter.⁷⁹ But the piece was not only too long; it undermined the series' sensibilities. When the journal finally released its rights to the manuscript in 1937, Harper and Brothers offered Agee an advance to publish an early version of the work. But when *Praise* was completed in 1939, Harper's editors demanded extensive revisions not unlike those *Fortune* required. Though initially agreeing to make the changes Harper wanted, Agee decided not to touch the text; after quibbling with Agee, Harper and Brothers rejected *Let Us Now Praise*

⁷⁷ The first photojournalistic effort to represent the lives of disenfranchised American populations to a bourgeois audience was Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), which documented the squalor of tenements on the Lower East Side of New York City in the 1880s. The volume's considerable commercial success spurred a sequel, *Children of the Poor*, which detailed the living conditions of the largely immigrant children whose families he had captured in *Other Half*. Among the genre's most notable examples, both of which take Riis as a model, are Richard Wright's *12 Million Black Voices* (1941) which focuses on post-Depression slums in Chicago, and William T. Vollmann's *Poor People* (2007), a photojournalistic study of the lived experience of global poverty.

⁷⁸ Jeff Allred, *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 7.

⁷⁹ James Agee, *Letters of James Agee to Father Flye* (New York: G. Braziller, 1962), 94.

Famous Men. When the book was finally published by Houghton Mifflin, five years after Agee and photographer Walker Evans completed their fieldwork in Alabama, it sold only a few hundred copies before being remaindered.⁸⁰

Critics, however, characterized the failure of Agee's work in aesthetic-moral rather than commercial terms, often drawing a contrast between Agee's text and Evans's photographs. Lionel Trilling's 1942 piece for *Kenyon Review* noted, for example, how Agee's habit of dwelling on his own journalistic limitations, "intended in the interest of objectivity, does not succeed."⁸¹ According to Trilling, "the problem" of representing the sharecroppers faithfully "did not exist" for Evans; "or if it did exist, Evans and the camera solved it."⁸² The same year, Alfred Kazin argued in *On Native Grounds* that modernist writers sought alternatives to conventional prose forms because the Depression challenged the integrity of the literary imagination and demanded a new kind of reportage attuned to public events. Society, Kazin wrote, had been "changing too rapidly and violently for literature even to command the necessary detachment for imaginative

⁸⁰ William Stott attributes the commercial flop of the first edition to World War II: "It was published in September 1941, after the fall of Europe and as the Battle of Britain entered the terrible months of the Blitz. Five years earlier, when Agee began the article, tenancy was 'stylish' and a 'focus of 'reform''; by 1941 the America people had heard all they wanted to about the problem" (*Documentary* 264). By the time of its second printing in 1960, however, the book gained popularity during the "folk revival," particularly among civil rights workers. Jeanne Follansbee Quinn notes how the book "achieved iconic status among civil rights workers in the 1960s because it suggested to sympathetic whites a model for approaching disenfranchised Southern blacks" (Quinn 344). All details concerning the text's publication history can be found in Stott's *Documentary Expression in Thirties America*, pp 261-66.

⁸¹ Lionel Trilling, "Greatness with One Fault in It," *The Kenyon Review* 4 (1942): 102.

⁸² Trilling, "Greatness," 99-100.

truth.”⁸³ Among the changes Kazin identified was the impact of photography. “Ever since the daguerrotype had come into American life,” he writes,

writers had been affected by the photographic standard, but now they became curiously abject before it. Nothing in this new [documentary] literature, indeed, stands out so clearly as its attempt to use and even to imitate the camera. [...] Indeed, the technical and psychological fascination of the camera may be considered even to have given a new character to contemporary prose, a transformation which can be appreciated only in terms of its moral example, since it was the camera’s essential passiveness that made for its technical influence over so many writers.⁸⁴

Modern prose, in this account, tends to appropriate and mimic the objectivity and passivity of photography, though it can only imitate the camera’s claim to authenticity. Some forty years after Trilling and Kazin, Peter Cosgrove described *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* as a work of “aesthetic envy conditioned by [Agee’s] concurrence with the traditional metaphysics of the photograph that misapprehended its indexical character as having a representational power superior to that of the symbolic word.”⁸⁵ According to this conceit, the camera has an intimate relation to the reality it represents, deriving from its supposed neutrality (what Trilling called its passivity) and its refusal to draw

⁸³ Alfred Kazin, *On Native Grounds* (New York: Doubleday, 1942), 490.

⁸⁴ Kazin, *Native*, 385-86.

⁸⁵ Peter Cosgrove, “Snapshots of the Absolute: Mediamachia in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*,” *American Literature* 67 (1995): 330.

distinctions among elements in a visual field. Whereas Trilling's and Kazin's remarks can be said to generalize and reproduce the bad feelings—abjection, failure, and “aesthetic envy”—that Cosgrove attributes to Agee, all three critics explain Agee's shortcomings as the shortcomings of his medium: writing. What binds these differing accounts together is the failure of Agee's words to accomplish what Evans's images pull off effortlessly.

This chapter challenges the critical consensus around Agee's artistic practice: that Agee's words and Evans's images are agonistically entangled; that *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is, at its core, an ode to aesthetic envy or, worse, an exercise in bourgeois narcissism.⁸⁶ At a cursory glance, *Praise* may seem shot through with bad feelings like these. Agee is partially responsible for this impression, having punctuated *Praise* with

⁸⁶ For Michael Szalay and Mark Goble, as I will go on to show, Agee's materialist fantasies exist to compensate for his securely bourgeois class status. In *Patterns for America: Modernism and the Concept of Culture*, Susan Hegeman contends that “[f]or Cold War aesthetes, *Praise* redirected the documentary project from its roots in the New Deal modernization program, to a depoliticized act of moral introspection and aesthetic play. For our purposes, it can also be seen as representing the terminus of the kinds of ‘cultural’ concerns represented by its earlier counterparts—indeed, as challenging, from the perspective of high art, the political and moral value of representing the cultural other at all” (159). It is in recognizing the difficulty of representing the other that, in Hegeman's reading, causes Agee to turn inward: “Anxious about his own southern, middle-class, and probably also middlebrow, origins, the intellectual finds in the poor tenant farmers, their lives, their struggles, their houses and porches, the objects through which he can think about and locate himself without risking contamination from the corruptive features of his own class background. And yet, he has already shown the impossibility and immorality of representing these others. His new project of self-representation is thus rendered similarly fraught with immorality and impossibility. So Agee is caught, in the impossibility and necessity of his task, which is ultimately one of self-examination” (191). While I agree with Hegeman's claim that Agee is caught between impossibility and necessity, I contend that Agee is as skeptical of self-representation as he is of representing others, and that the very attempt to denaturalize the representational modes and identificatory relations codified a decade earlier is not without political value. Beyond the failure of Agee's project, my argument here is that the interest in the competing labors that make up *Praise* as its conditions of production is one instance of a broad tendency that sees the work of art as fundamentally inseparable from its world.

paean to the camera, dubbing it “the central instrument of our time”⁸⁷ because it is “like the phonograph record and like scientific instruments and unlike any other leverage of art, incapable of recording anything but absolute, dry truth.”⁸⁸ Language, by contrast, falsifies “by such a Rube Goldberg articulation of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence.”⁸⁹ While apparently invited by the text, then, the invidious comparison with Evans’s photographs is in fact doing nothing other than recycling Agee’s own rhetoric. In displacing the work of the writer onto the workings of the medium, Trilling, Kazin and Cosgrove show themselves oblivious to the painstaking labor of Agee’s text—a work that spends many pages recounting the impact of exploitative labor practices, at a moment when the vocation of writing, too, was undergoing profound change. Agee finds it both “obscene” and “thoroughly terrifying” that this project could be considered “an ‘honest’ piece of work,” not only because he and Evans were personally incapable of the

⁸⁷ James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton, 2001), 9.

⁸⁸ Agee, *Praise*, 206.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 209. Here is the full passage: “Words could, I believe be made to do or to tell anything within human conceit. That is more than can be said of the instruments of any other art. But it must be added that they are the most inevitably inaccurate of all mediums of record and communication, and that they come at many of the things which they alone can do by such a Rube Goldberg of frauds, compromises, artful dodges and tenth removes as would fatten any other art into apoplexy if the art were not first shamed out of existence: and which, in two centrally important and inescapable ways: falsification (through inaccuracy of meaning as well as inaccuracy of emotion); and ability to communicate simultaneity with any immediacy; greatly impairs the value and the integrity of their achievement. It may, however, be added: words like all else are limited by certain laws. To call their achievement crippled in relation to what they have tried to convey may be all very well: but to call them crippled in in their completely healthful obedience to their own nature is again a mistake: the same mistake as the accusation of a cow for her unhorsiness.”

“honesty” *Fortune* demanded, but because the economic and affective dimensions of writerly work are obscured by the ideals of the magazine and the genre.⁹⁰

This chapter will attempt to reframe our sense of Agee’s artistic practice along two lines of advance. Examining Agee’s consistent and outspoken hostility toward the category of art I will first seek to identify the economic and cultural forces that led Agee to imagine a writing freed from its medium, where the text would be read not as a work of art, nor even as a book, but would instead be placed, in his words, on the side of “human actuality.”⁹¹ How should we understand the interpretive demands of a text that might be at odds with its own textuality? What does it mean, in other words, that Agee’s ideal text is not a book but a body “torn out by the roots”?⁹²

This consideration of questions of aesthetic integrity, documentary form, and the work of representation, however, remains inextricable from the text’s representation of work. My second line of inquiry, then, takes up the inverse of the first by examining critical conversations around literary labor. To be sure, Agee’s agonized position as an artist is a different order from that of his sharecropping counterparts, even as many of his contemporaries argued the opposite. In a 1937 column for *Saturday Review*, for example, David Cohn likens writers’ book advances to the financial basis of share tenancy:

If he [the farmer] gets an advance of \$15 a month so he can eat and clothe himself while he is making a crop, I get a lump sum advance so I can eat and clothe myself while I am writing a book. In both cases, whether by

⁹⁰ Ibid., 5.

⁹¹ Ibid., 98.

⁹² Ibid., 10.

calculation or coincidence, the advance always seems to be just short enough to keep body and soul within hailing distance of each other^{93 94}

Whereas Cohn's analogy underscores the precarity common to the writer and the sharecropper by sanctifying their work—a sentimentalist gesture characteristic of many documentary works of the period—Agee refuses the analogy, wondering instead how his own book might prevent this identificatory mode:

And how is this to be made so real to you who read of it, that it will stand and stay in you as the deepest and most iron anguish and guilt of your existence that you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers [...]⁹⁵

In response to what he saw as the erosion of the sharecroppers' particularity in other works of descriptive non-fiction—especially in Caldwell and Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, dubbed the “*Uncle Tom's Cabin* of tenant farming”⁹⁶ in its tendency to sentimentalize the rural poor by claiming that they shared “many of the same ambitions

⁹³ Malcolm Cowley, *The Literary Situation* (New York: The Viking Press, 1954), 172.

⁹⁴ Cohn was not alone in using this writer-as-worker analogy. His colleagues at the first two American Writers' Congresses (1935, 1937)—including Nelson Algren, Malcolm Cowley, Theodore Dreiser, Michael Gold, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright—echoed Cohn's insistence that the interests of artists and the propertyless were inseparable. Joseph Freeman's 1937 essay on the second congress of American writers (held earlier that year) also describes the economic precarity of the writer under literary patronage: “[t]he modern scribe is for the most part an employe [sic]. He is dependent upon wages; in times of acute economic crisis he learns the meaning of unemployment, not as a gifted young god who comes down to earth to sympathize with the working class, but in his own person, and as a discharged worker” (Hart 16).

⁹⁵ Agee, *Praise*, 283.

⁹⁶ Stott, *Documentary*, 220.

and incentives that motivate the lives of all human beings”⁹⁷—Agee cautions readers against identifying with the rural poor on the grounds that such identification flattens the complexities of individual experience, treating the farmer as an instance of widespread poverty⁹⁸ and an object of middle-class pity, an inescapable dilemma of the form’s “empirical economy.”⁹⁹ By abstracting the poor, Caldwell and Bourke-White cast them as either romanticized versions of middle-class subjects or as passive objects of a denigrating gaze.¹⁰⁰ Readers and workers, reasoned Agee, cannot be analogized. And yet, the very tortured and repetitive syntax of this passage—a fragment from a twelve-line sentence—indicates how cotton-picking might nevertheless function as writing’s foil, opposed yet not unconnected.

The intersection of these two lines of inquiry—concerning the work of representation and the representation of work—locates Agee as a key figure within a

⁹⁷ Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: The Viking Press, 1937), 19.

⁹⁸ For an analysis of the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas that poverty poses to U.S. literature, see Jones.

⁹⁹ Jonathan Kahana, *Intelligence Work: The Politics of American Documentary* (New York: Columbia UP, 2008), 43.

¹⁰⁰ According to Kahana, this dilemma of the social documentary’s “empirical economy” is inescapable. As he writes, “...the empirical economy in which ‘oneself’ is both a unique entity and mere evidence of a larger social phenomenon, is inescapable for social documentary” (43). William Stott argues that the sentimentalizing aspects of documentary work—which Agee criticizes Caldwell and Bourke-White for perpetuating—are also inevitable. As he writes in *Documentary Expression*, social documentary “is instrumental and its people tend, like the innocent victims in most propaganda, to be simplified and ennobled—sentimentalized, in a word” (57). In *They Must Be Represented*, her study of the politics of the documentary form, Paula Rabinowitz argues that Agee and Evans produce a gaze that sees the bourgeois, sometimes sexual objectification and the mobilization of class consciousness as two aspects of the same practice. See 35-55.

larger phenomenon that I call “indexical modernism,” a term that I will be using to designate a non-representational realism common to a number of midcentury American literary projects. Though the forms and genres of these projects differ, all are marked by rhetorics of immediacy, immersion and immanence; and they often adopt ethnographic, anthropological or documentary modes in order to rethink the ideal of aesthetic autonomy established during the previous decades.¹⁰¹

Defenders of literary and visual modernism such as Cleanth Brooks and Clement Greenberg upheld autonomy as among its greatest virtues, while its critics dismissed the same features as “escapist denials of a plausible realism.”¹⁰² By contrast, indexicality offers a different basis for understanding the aesthetic imperatives of mid-century American literature, one that is beholden neither to a representational logic nor to the abstract claims of “autonomy,” but emerges, rather, from a physical, material or existential interaction between the sign and its referent. Unlike icons and symbols, indexes need not resemble their referents, and yet their connection is not in any doubt.

¹⁰¹ Agee’s rhetoric of immediacy draws heavily on the absorptive quality of listening to music. Early on in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Agee instructs the reader to do the following: “Get a radio or phonograph capable of the most extreme loudness possible, and sit down to listen to a performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony or of Schubert’s C-Major Symphony. But I don’t mean just sit down and listen. I mean this: Turn it on as loud as you can get it. Then get down on the floor and jam your ear as close into the loudspeaker as you can get it and stay there, breathing as lightly as possible, and not moving, and neither eating nor smoking nor drinking. Concentrate everything you can into your hearing and into your body. You won’t hear it nicely. If it hurts you, be glad of it. As near as you will ever get, you are inside the music; not only inside it, you are it; your body is no longer your shape and substance, it is the shape and substance of the music. Is what you hear pretty? or beautiful? or legal? It is beyond any calculation savage and dangerous and murderous to all equilibrium in human life as human life is” (12-13). I quote this passage at length because it demonstrates an obvious disregard for typical aesthetic criteria. Distance, pleasure, and even judgment are all abandoned for a kind of contact or immersion with the work of art.

¹⁰² Charles Altieri, “Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 32 (2009): 1.

Although a weathervane indicates the changing direction of a breeze, it in no way resembles it, any more than a footprint resembles a man's gait; both signs merely attest to the presence of their referents.

To bring Peirce's notion of the index, and with it the notion of a non-representational realism to bear on Agee's laboring text is to reorient the critical metric by which we measure the project's realism and its sincerity. Trilling, Kazin, Cosgrove and others maintain that *Praise* is governed by a photographic standard such that the text's veracity is guaranteed by Evans's photographs, which Agee's words could only ever approximate. Under this logic, the writer imitates the camera in its essentially automatic and passive qualities. In contrast to this figure of a non-laboring producer (the camera), Agee's prose indicates the labor it portrays at the very point at which it announces and performs its inability to signify. To recruit the notion of the index against a photographic reading of *Praise* is thus counterintuitive, since the concept has been historically used to cement the photograph's association with the "absolutely, irrefutable present."¹⁰³ And yet, to confine the index to the photographic realm is to neglect the ways in which sentences, too, bear the traces of their writer's work. Agee's language is most indexical, I will demonstrate, at the very moments in which it is *least* like a camera.

i. Invisible Labor

The case that documentary expression distinguished the culture of 1930s America was first put forward by Kazin in *On Native Grounds* (1942) and gained considerable traction a generation later with William Stott's 1973 study, *Documentary Expression and*

¹⁰³ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, Trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 77.

Thirties America. Tracing the evolution of documentary modes of expression across different media (radio, film, painting, dance and literature), Stott's project reinforced the sense that documentary was among the decade's most dominant genres and examined its portable and synthetic qualities: documentary expression, he argued, was not confined to writing (as Kazin had assumed), but motivated a wide spectrum of projects, such that "the heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content."¹⁰⁴ According to Stott, what bound the decade's diverse works together was a set of challenges: the desire for a direct and objective aesthetic experience, the difficulties of capturing such experience and making it known to a collective social body (as those difficulties concern both the public sphere and publicity), and the dangers of manipulating their content toward a particular end. It is also marked in this period by a false sense of simplicity, utility, and artlessness¹⁰⁵: as early documentarian and film historian Paul Rotha put it, "Documentary is a trade just as carpentry or pot-making. The pot-maker makes pots, and

¹⁰⁴ Stott, *Documentary*, 14.

¹⁰⁵ Critics since Kazin and Stott have revived critical attention to the 1930s documentary by disputing the notion of its role as the rearguard of High Modernism. Tyrus Miller urges scholars to realize how the two "converge" and "complement" each other (2002), while Jeff Allred's *American Modernism and Depression Documentary* (2010) observes that "it is difficult to narrate the cultural history of the period in which modernist and documentary art both emerged without uncovering connections that obscure, if not completely efface, the difference between them" (12). For other revisionist accounts of the documentary form vis-à-vis modernism, see Joseph B. Entin's *Sensational Modernism* and Michael E. Staub's *Voices of Persuasion: Politics of Representation in 1930s America*. For a deconstruction of the opposition between documentary realism and postmodernist form, see T.V. Reed, "Unimagined Existence and the Fiction of the Real: Postmodernist Realism in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*." Though a complete history of the critical reception of thirties documentary is beyond the scope of this chapter, the larger project is framed around late modernism because it is (still) regarded as the long twilight of aesthetic innovation.

the documentarian documentaries [sic].”¹⁰⁶ Not a genius or a professional, but a craftsman; not a gifted author but an industrious tinkerer.

Framed in this way, the documentary genre bears an intimate relationship to skilled labor. In a statement for a show of photographs at the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition in 1940, photographer and Works Projects Administration employee Dorothea Lange celebrated documentary for its democratizing potential:

A single photographic print may be ‘news,’ a ‘portrait,’ ‘art’ or ‘documentary’—any of these, all of them, or none. [...] Documentary photography invites and needs participation by amateurs as well as by professionals. Only through the interested work of amateurs who choose themes and follow them can documentation by the camera of our age and our complex society be intimate, pervasive, and adequate.¹⁰⁷

If accounts like this treat documentary as an occupation rather than an art form, it is perhaps because the vast majority of projects produced during the period were commissioned by the U.S. government, which popularized the form by giving it institutional legitimacy. “The arts projects began,” Stott tells us, “less to do a job than to make one.”¹⁰⁸ The government funded photographers and writers to travel to “Hooverilles,” shantytowns, migrant camps and slums in order to persuade Congress to

¹⁰⁶ Paul Rotha, in association with Sinclair Road and Richard Griffith, *Documentary Film* (New York: Hastings House, 1952), 7.

¹⁰⁷ Dorothea Lange, “Documentary Photography,” *Photographers on Photography*, ed. Nathan Lyons (Englewood Cliffs, N.J. and Rochester, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall and the George Eastman House, 1966), 68.

¹⁰⁸ Stott, *Documentary*, 102.

implement aid programs and reveal to the middle-class “how the other half lived.”

Franklin Delano Roosevelt was central to this project: Frances Perkins, U.S. Secretary of Labor under the New Deal, recalls how the Roosevelts not only enabled the documentary imagination, they embodied it. As she writes, “they got the idea that while you might not be able to see every family [who complained to the White House], you could find out about their plight by seeing some.”¹⁰⁹ Thus, the WPA created both jobs and a mass audience for its projects. Once codified, the genre gained mass appeal with the photo essay—which took shape in magazines like *Fortune*, *Life* and *Look* (founded in 1929, 1936 and 1937, respectively). The latter two each had a circulation of over two million readers by 1938.

The camera was therefore both the primary tool of the decade and its symbol. When Kazin describes how writers stood “curiously abject before” the camera he implies that they were challenged both by the automatic qualities of the apparatus and by the realism of the photographic standard.¹¹⁰ The camera transcribed nature directly, automatically, and therefore perfectly. The “realism” of the written works produced under this pressure therefore owes a great deal to the way in which authors struggled to omit any mention of their own work habits and disguise their presence. Thus, Sherwood Anderson would begin his 1935 travelogue *Puzzled America* by claiming to be as unobtrusive as possible, remarking that

the sketches, attempts at pictures of America now, here being made into a book are the result of a good deal of wandering about. I have tried to be as

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 95.

¹¹⁰ Kazin, *Native*, 385.

impersonal as I could. I am in the position of most writers nowadays. Formerly for a good many years, I was a writer of tales. It may be that I should have remained just that, but there is a difficulty. There are, everywhere in America, these people now out of work.¹¹¹

What becomes clear in Anderson's remarks is that anxieties about recording how the other half lived often ended up staging the writer's worry over his own changing vocation. Anderson portrays himself not as an expert but as an amateur faced with "difficulty," such that "you, the reader, must imagine the writer as going about, constantly puzzled as you are."¹¹² Anderson's puzzlement refers to his writerly anxieties even as it captures a nation in crisis: "women and children hungry and others without enough clothes. Middle-aged men and women, who but a few years ago felt themselves secure, are now suddenly facing old age, thrown out of their security."¹¹³

Taken as a description of both national and professional crisis, the insecurities voiced by Anderson—echoed most notably during the first American Writers' Congress in 1935—emphasize how charged the category of work (in general) and writing (in particular) became during this period. Against the backdrop of this vocational crisis, the number of book-length studies published in the 1930s testifies to the great lengths that

¹¹¹ Sherwood Anderson, *Puzzled America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935), ix-x.

¹¹² Anderson, *Puzzled*, x.

¹¹³ Ibid., ix-x. Despite claiming to adopt an impersonal style, Anderson will occasionally reflect on his anxieties as a writer. In the first chapter of *Puzzled America*, "At the Mine Mouth," he writes: "I am writing from the coal-mining country. There is too much to tell. On every side of me there are stories. The stories look at me out of the eyes of men and women. They shout at me. I should not be writing in this way. I should stay here in one of these shacks in this coal-mining town. I should know for a long time these men, women, and children. Why do I hurry from town to town? America is too vast. There are too many stories to tell" (5). Such reflections, I argue, lend Anderson's reportage an authenticity given how they frame him as a witness, albeit an impartial one.

writers and photographers would go to give their accounts the impression of detachment and transparency. Caldwell and Bourke-White's *You Have Seen Their Faces*, for instance, captures the rural south by ventriloquizing its inhabitants. A photograph of a white boy from Elbow Creek, Arkansas pushing a plow includes the following caption: "My father doesn't hire any field hands, or sharecroppers. He makes a lot of cotton, about sixty bales a year. Me and my brother stay home from school to work for him." A McDaniel, Georgia woman holds a baby whose hand leads the eye to the woman's mouth, under which a caption reads, "Snuff is an almighty help when your teeth ache." The caption to a close-up of an older, weary looking man in Locket, Georgia reads, "It ain't hardly worth the trouble to go on living."¹¹⁴ Although the reader learns on the first page that "[t]he legends under the pictures are intended to express the authors' own conceptions of the sentiments of the individuals portrayed; they do not pretend to reproduce the actual sentiments of these persons," this statement may be said to function like the standard disclaimers at the beginning of fictional works, to the effect that no character in the book is based in reality.¹¹⁵ The captions nevertheless speak for the photographs' subjects. Caldwell and Bourke-White thereby sentimentalize their subjects and collapse the affective distance between themselves and their readers. At the same time, the authorial hand is repeatedly and systematically effaced, the work of representation all but obliterated. While the subjects and rhetorical styles of Caldwell and Bourke-White's second collaboration, *Say, Is this the U.S.A.* (1941), are more varied than those featured in *Faces*—some simply list the contents of the photograph, while others

¹¹⁴ Caldwell, *Faces*, photograph 53.

¹¹⁵ Caldwell, *Faces*, 1.

address the reader directly—the effect is the same: both derive sentimental value by expunging the author.

Caldwell and Bourke-White were not alone in effacing their authorial hand. The subjects photographed by Dorothea Lange in Paul Schuster Taylor's *An American Exodus* (1939) were, according to Therese Heyman who penned the foreword of the 1969 edition, "largely oblivious to her camera and so continued to be themselves, to be human."¹¹⁶ The authenticity of Lange's photographs resides in her supposed ability to remove herself from the scene, a practice common to a number of the period's most successful photographers, including Paul Strand and August Sander. And the desire to produce direct, unsentimental portraits of "oblivious" subjects also guided Evans's aesthetic practice. Indeed, some of the photographs included in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* were taken with a dummy lens that disguised another working lens that surreptitiously shot its subjects from a right angle. "Walker made a picture of this," Agee later opined, "you didn't know, you thought he was still testing around."¹¹⁷ Evans would go on to perfect this technique in "Subway Portraits," which were made by camouflaging the camera, painting "the shiny chrome parts ... flat black," wearing it underneath his clothing, "with its lens peeking out between two buttons," and with "the shutter rigged to a cable release, a slender cord snaking down his sleeve and into the palm of his right hand."¹¹⁸ It's through elaborate techniques like these that Evans, among others, came to

¹¹⁶ Dorothea Lange and Paul Schuster Taylor, *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969), 9.

¹¹⁷ Quoted in James R. Mellow, *Walker Evans*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 315.

¹¹⁸ Quoted in Mia Fineman, "Notes from the Underground: The Subway Portraits," in *Walker Evans* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 111.

efface both the camera and the photographer's labor to produce unconscious or unsuspecting portraits.

It is in light of this ideology of photography, as a medium uniquely capable of directness and truth because it has no author, that many writers came to feel that their efforts were secondary, agonistically entangled with the photographs that defined the genre. In a postscript to his *Land of the Free* (1938), which combines poetry with images by government Farm Security Administration photographers (including Lange and Evans), Archibald MacLeish explains how “the original purpose had been to write some sort of text to which these photographs might serve as commentary. But so great was the power and the stubborn inward livingness of these American documents that the result was a reversal of that plan.”¹¹⁹ The logic of MacLeish's comment hinges on the “stubborn inward livingness” of his archive: the liveness of the image—a fantasy animated, of course, by the rhetoric of indexicality by which a sign not only refers to the real but belongs to it—effaces the effort that MacLeish took to collect the photographs and to compose poetry to accompany them (to say nothing of the work carried out by the photographers). The fantasy of presence that organizes these documentary works relies upon the careful elision of the apparatus as well as the author's work.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Archibald MacLeish, *Land of the Free* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1938), 89.

¹²⁰ While the text portions of Archibald MacLeish's *Land of the Free* appear as though they are direct speech by those depicted in the facing photographs, a closer reading reveals otherwise. *Land of the Free* is a mixture of direct address (through the use of the first-person plural) and allusion: one passage incorporates famous lines from “Pioneers! O Pioneers!,” one of the most recognizable sections from *Leaves of Grass*: “We told ourselves we were free because we were free. / We were free because we were that kind. / We were Americans. / All you needed for freedom was being American. / All you needed for freedom was grit in your craw / And the gall to get out on a limb and crow before sunup. / Those that hadn't it hadn't it. / ‘Have the elder races halted? / Do they droop and end their lessons wearied over there beyond the seas? / We take up

Kazin's phrase "literature of empiricism" to characterize the work of Depression-era documentary authors refers, therefore, to literature that *seems* unworked. Kazin explains the term as follows:

For here, in the revealing—especially revealing because it was so often mechanical—effort of so many American writers to seek out the reality of America in a time of crisis, is an authentic and curiously unconscious characterization of a tragic period. Here, in the vast granary of facts on life in America put away by the WPA writers, the documentary reporters, the folklorists preparing an American mythology, the explorers who went hunting through darkest America with notebook and camera, the new army of biographers and historians—here stocked away like a reserve against bad times, is the raw stuff of the contemporary mass record. What we study here is too often only a sub-literature—evidence of a nostalgia too easily content with the trappings of sentimental autobiography and romance; evidence of a need to retreat into the solid comfort of descriptive facts, of a social awareness that found its appropriate expression in photographic details and sociological captions.¹²¹

the task eternal and the burden and the lesson-- / Pioneers O Pioneers.' / We told ourselves we were free because we said so" (MacLeish 7). Here, the virtues of documentary—immediacy, transparency, reportage—sit uneasily alongside his allusions to other works of poetry.

¹²¹ Kazin, *Native*, 381.

Kazin's account pivots on the "rawness" of its materials: facts, like grain, are dry, unprocessed, collected and stored.¹²² But unlike the other accounts of documentary that minimize the author by making her invisible, here the literature's rawness and realness—its "revealing" qualities—stem from the author's lack of intention. Kazin speaks of the effort to write only to recast it as "mechanical" and "curiously unconscious."

In contrast to the ideology governing Evans, Kazin and so many others, Agee's contribution to the project is curiously self-conscious. Replete with reflections on the difficulties of writing and the failure of representation, Agee reverses the genre's demand for authorial invisibility. Rather than trying to expunge the author's labor so as to avoid disturbing or threatening the outcome of his fieldwork, Agee makes authorial labor the work's primary source of value. As William Stott puts it, Agee's work "epitomizes the rhetoric in which it was made" but also "explodes it, surpasses it, shows it up. [...] It reveals the limitations, the tragic superficiality, of a way of seeing and speaking."¹²³ Agee thereby radicalizes the tendencies of documentary work of the period—its claims to transparency, objectivity, neutrality and contingency. Suggestive as Stott's reading is, he tends to treat the category of work glancingly, as incidental rather than central to Agee's reimagining of documentary form.¹²⁴ The bulk of Agee's ambivalent self-reflections¹²⁵ in

¹²² Walter Benjamin described non-fiction reportage in terms strikingly similar to Kazin. In his essay "The Storyteller," Benjamin quips that "[Herodotus's] report is the driest. That is why this story from ancient Egypt is still capable after thousands of years of arousing astonishment and thoughtfulness. It resembles the *seeds of grain which have lain for centuries in the chambers of the pyramids* shut up air-tight and have retained their germinative power to this day" (Benjamin 90, my emphasis).

¹²³ Stott, *Documentary*, 266.

¹²⁴ This is not to say that the concept of labor has remained entirely outside the purview of literary studies, but that it remains at its margins. Recent analyses on the relationship between labor and

literature—in studies by Nicholas K. Bromell, Laura Hapke, and Christopher P. Wilson—unequivocally maintain that work is an underrepresented category in American thought. Bromell's *By the Sweat of the Brow* attempts to remedy this absence, rather than diagnose it, when he writes that “in the United States ... work takes place everywhere yet appears to find cultural representation almost nowhere” (2). Following Bromell, Hapke notes how tales featuring laboring groups—ranging from migrant workers to service employees—were “[o]nce controversial” but “save for a resurgent interest in the proletarian 1930s and scattered feminist and African American authors with labor sympathies, [are] now forgotten” (Hapke 4). By and large, the attempts to fill this literary critical void have involved broadening the canon: Wilson's *The Labor of Words* (1985) examines proletarian icons Jack London and Upton Sinclair alongside relatively obscure writers of the Progressive Era, writers such as David Graham Phillips and Lincoln Steffens. Likewise, Bromell considers the maternal labor at work in the antebellum domestic fictions of Catherine Maria Sedgwick and Susan Warner. Michael Denning's *The Cultural Front* (1996) provides the most robust history of how the art of the Popular Front imprinted itself on a popular social consciousness and an American political unconscious.

While the work of recovery is undoubtedly vital to critical thinking around questions of literary labor, it has not—with the significant exception of Denning—been able to address why “Work Studies” (a mode of cultural criticism that takes work as its primary subject, but that is separate from labor history) has not caught on as a field of inquiry, despite Bromell's hope of contributing to such a field (Bromell 2). Perhaps the portability of work as a concept is as responsible as the systems of capital that seek to obscure it. This is implied in Bromell's claim that studying work means “be[ing] able to move from one kind of activity to another, one kind of text to another with relative ease” (Bromell 12). Whereas Bromell seems encouraged by the lability of its central concept, Hapke remains suspicious. In an explicit critique of Bromell, she cautions readers against this slippage, confessing how she is “wary”

[...] of a trend, even in some of this fine criticism, to defend manual toil by intellectualizing it. [...] Furthermore, the aestheticizing of manual work implied in making a philosopher-king of the cowboy or in referring to the workingman's pain and exhaustion as the ‘problematics of embodied labor’ [Bromell's phrase] risks distancing laborers from what they do. (9)

Hapke's fears manifest the way in which theorizing the ontology of work, or the “problematics of embodied labor,” risks “aestheticizing” the worker such that he is estranged and unrecognizable, a risk that Agee was acutely sensitive to but guilty of nonetheless. At the same time, she cautions against collapsing manual and mental labor. While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a full analysis of the ethical implications of theorizing work, I will attempt to show how, in the case of Agee, mental and manual work bear profound differences, and yet one is forced constantly to compare them. It is nearly impossible, for example, to read of the sharecroppers' toil without being reminded of the writer's exhaustion. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* demands (and often performs) the kind of comparison that Hapke urges against. I therefore treat the two kinds of work in my reading as both distinct and inextricable.

As I examine the competing operations of labor in Agee's thinking, I am also attuned to the representability of these activities as they appear in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. Bromell offers a necessary starting point for such an inquiry when he writes that “[w]ork as a representation becomes more visible when we also see the work that made that representation” (11). This formula provides a useful model for thinking represented work and the work of representation together. In *The Literature of Labor and the Labors of Literature* (1995), Cindy Weinstein arrives at a similar conclusion as she examines the “powerful conjunction” between the antipathy toward allegory in antebellum America and the representation of mechanized or otherwise undeveloped persons in the discourse of labor (Weinstein 5). In light of the nation's

Let Us Now Praise Famous Men can be summarized by this contradiction: far from effacing its conditions of production, *Praise* avows its dependence on them by incorporating the work of representation into its content.

burgeoning market economy, Weinstein argues, allegory became “the literary mode that foregrounded its relation to labor, whether through allegorical characters who signified the nature or cost of being a laboring being or through signs which made visible the author’s work of representation” (Weinstein 5). Leaving aside her argument about allegory in particular, I find her larger claim regarding the inseparability of economic and aesthetic discourse—or the work of representation and the representation of work—indispensable for any engagement of labor and literature.

And yet her insight is not universally shared by critics, as Denning reminds us in a powerful, if passing, observation: “work itself resists representation” (*Cultural* 244). Here, Denning is referring specifically to the way in which the “ghetto pastoral,” or Depression allegory, confronted the monotony of manual labor, such that the act of ironing in Tillie Olsen’s “I Stand Here Ironing” or Jack Conroy’s *The Disinherited* is never finished, even when the narrative ends. But his point, that work is inimical to the plane of representation, reads less as a historicizing claim about a particular genre of fiction (as it was intended) and more as a comment about the ontology of labor. His point speaks, for example, to the temporal lags of reading and writing, as well as to the profound ambivalence of work in the documentary book I outlined above. The combined insights of Bromell and Denning outline a contradiction regarding the relationship between work and representation: *work is unrepresentable, but most representable when the work of representation is shown*. Many of Agee’s ambivalent self-reflections in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* can be summarized by this contradiction.

¹²⁵ Quite often Agee’s reason for writing—the reason, in other words, to make the writing process visible to the reader—is the belated realization that he has not acted appropriately or adequately. This is partially true, as we will see, in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, but is particularly poignant in “America! Look at Your Shame!,” which was drafted in response to the coverage of the 1943 Detroit race riots but not published until after Agee’s death. In the essay, Agee narrates his brush with a couple of white, southern sailors on a New York subway train, whose bigotry he was unable to adequately confront. Reflecting on his failure to communicate with the men, Agee writes: “It was all so much cotton-batting on my tongue. I couldn’t gather a phrase of it together and make it mean anything, even to myself. Talking to them, talking for the corroboration of most of the bus, unable to talk in my own language because my own language would mean nothing even if I could use it with enough belief to make it mean something to me” (*Rediscovered* 172). Later, upon recounting the episode to his friends, he remarks that they were “quite shocked by [the story], and seemed also rather favorably stirred by my honesty. That embarrassed me a good deal, but not as painfully as I wish it might have, and I found their agreement that they would have done the same almost as revolting as my own performance in the doing of it, and in the telling. So now I am telling it to you” (*Rediscovered* 173). While there is no sense that Agee could fully expiate his shame through the act of writing (or “telling”)—what, his anecdote seems to ask, is the difference between doing (or not doing) and telling?—the essay seems to have been entirely motivated by the idea that writing is a form of atonement.

ii. The Work against Art

“The ‘esthetic’ is made hateful and is hated beyond all other kinds of ‘knowledge,’” Agee explains of the education among tenant families, “[i]t is false-beauty to begin with; it is taught by sick women or sicker men; it becomes identified with the worst kinds of femininity and effeminacy,” adding that “it is made incomprehensible and suffocating to anyone of much natural honesty and vitality.”¹²⁶ Art, Agee suggests, has no function in a world governed by utilitarianism and necessity: it is emasculating, deceitfully obscure, and unnatural. A page later, he adds that there is

[n]o reason nor glimmer of reason to regard anything in terms other than those of need and use. Land is what you get food out of: houses are what you live in, not comfortably: the sky is your incalculable friend or enemy¹²⁷: all nature, all that is built upon it, all that is worn, all that is done and looked to, is in plain and powerful terms of need, hope, fear, chance and function.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Agee, *Praise*, 275. This anti-aesthetic logic runs throughout *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, in moments where Agee describes his own method: “If I had explained myself clearly you would realize by now that through this non-‘artistic’ view, this effort to suspend or destroy imagination, there opens before consciousness, and within it, a universe luminous, spacious, incalculably rich and wonderful in each detail, as relaxed and natural as the human swimmer, and as full of glory, as his breathing: and that it is possible to capture and communicate this universe not so well by any means of art as through such open terms as I am trying it under” (9).

¹²⁷ Elsewhere, Agee describes the sky as a harbinger of fate rather than an object of aesthetic beauty; his ability to tell the difference between necessity and beauty makes him “civilized”: “It is therefore not surprising,” he writes, “that they are constant readers of the sky; that it holds not an ounce of ‘beauty’ to them (though I know of no more magnificent skies than those of Alabama); that it is the lodestone of the deepest pieties; and that they have, also, the deep storm-fear which is apparently common to all primitive peoples” (297).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 277.

With this description, which outlines the life of the sharecropper as one of utmost simplicity, the “esthetic” exceeds the worker’s means. Yet (as the term “made” in the previous passage implies) it seems to take considerable effort on Agee’s part to position “the esthetic” in this negative light. Given the vehemence of this argument, Agee’s conclusion concerning the pedagogical value of art in the Depression-era South is hardly surprising: “...the ‘teaching’ of ‘the esthetic’ or of ‘the arts’ in Cookstown leaves, or would leave, virtually everything still to be desired.”¹²⁹ The esthetic is *made* hateful because it exceeds the “natural” economy of manual work. Work comes to be defined here by its refusal of art: whereas artistic work is unnatural (excessive, unproductive), the work of tenant families is natural.

Such an argument against aesthetics was not unfamiliar to Agee’s postwar audience. Indeed, one of the legacies of the New Deal, as Michael Szalay illustrates in *New Deal Modernism* (2000), was its campaign to recast art as a necessary good. As Szalay explains, “the otherwise discordant literary politics of the thirties and forties might well be united in their shared commitment to [...] depict literature as [as] necessary a commodity as food and other daily essentials.”¹³⁰ For Szalay, the New Deal Arts Projects not only combatted the problem of underconsumption in America by rendering art a necessity and providing security to some of its artists; they did so by camouflaging the status of art as an object of consumption, and treating it, instead, as an event of co-

¹²⁹ Ibid., 275.

¹³⁰ Michael Szalay, *New Deal Modernism: American Literature and the Invention of the Welfare State* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), 5.

production by federal government, author and audience. Szalay describes this operation as follows:

[A]rt would become not a system of commodities at all, but an administratively coordinated process of production. Ideally, there would be no literary artifact the demand for which the state needed to enhance; instead, art would become an entirely procedural activity, a form of recreation that all might perform, regardless of training or talent. Insofar as artists and writers did, invariably, produce objects, the New Deal Arts Projects reasoned that the consumption of these objects should approach as closely as possible the conditions of their production. In effect, art would solve the problem of underconsumption by making consumption and production one and the same process, a temporally defined activity detached as much as possible from the determining equivocations of market demand.¹³¹

Agee's literary production appears to participate in the same logic. *Praise* would be seen as merely disguising its form as an artwork by insisting on its performative qualities. Although not himself an employee of the state, Agee, according to Szalay, consistently framed his project in ways that disavowed its status as an object. We read in Agee's preface that "this is a *book* only by necessity. More seriously, it is an effort in human actuality, in which the reader is no less centrally involved than the authors and those of whom they tell."¹³² His is not a commodity to be passively consumed but an "effort" that

¹³¹ Szalay, *New*, 6.

¹³² Agee, *Praise*, xi.

itself demands effort on behalf of the reader. The rhetoric of effort appears again a few pages later, when Agee describes the transformative beauty of a sunlit street, which requires not “dissection into science, or digestion into art” but “the whole of consciousness,” or “the effort to perceive the cruel radiance of what is.”¹³³ Again, much later: “this is not a work of art or of entertainment, nor will I assume the obligations of the artist or entertainer, but is a human effort which must require human cooperation.”¹³⁴ And, as though afraid his reader might forget, he reminds us one more time: “it is important that you should so far as possible forget that this is a book. [...] It is simply an effort to use words in such a way that they will tell as much as I want to and can make them tell of a thing which happened and which, of course, you have no other way of knowing.”¹³⁵ His emphasis on effort acts as a reminder of the text’s conditions of

¹³³ Ibid., 9. The camera is therefore both the vehicle of and the metonym for reality: “I think there is at the middle of this sense of the importance and dignity of actuality and the attempt to reproduce and analyze the actual, and at the middle of this antagonism toward art, something of real importance which is by no means my discovery, far less my private discovery, but which is a sense of ‘reality’ and of ‘values’ held by more and more people, and the beginnings of somewhat new forms of, call it art if you must, of which the still and moving cameras are the strongest instruments and symbols” (*Praise* 216).

¹³⁴ Ibid., 98.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 217. “(On the Porch: 2” features a slightly more temperate version of Agee’s antipathy toward art: “The momentary suspension of disbelief is perhaps (and perhaps not) all very well for literature and art: but it leaves literature and art, and it leaves an attempt such as this, in a bad hole. It means that anything set forth within an art form, ‘true’ as it may be in art terms, is hermetically sealed away from identification with everyday ‘reality.’ No matter how strong and vivid it may be, its strength and vividness are not of that order which, in the open air of our actual, personal living, we draw in every time we breathe. Even at its very best it is make believe, requiring the killing insult of ‘suspension of disbelief,’ because it is art. This is in some degree true even of the most ‘real’ writing I know. It is simply impossible for anyone, no matter how high he may place it, to do art the simple but total honor of accepting and believing it in the terms in which he accepts and honors breathing, lovemaking, the look of a newspaper, the street he walks through. If you think of that a little while, and have any respect for art and for what it is or should be capable of it is to be held worthy of its own existence, that is a crucially serious matter. And yet is there any good reason why so-called [sic] art cannot, without any complicated wrench

production, signifying how its material is not simply discovered and stored (as in Kazin's "vast granary of facts," or the other photo-texts described earlier) but made.

Taken together, these passages make manifest Agee's attempt to foreground the text as a process rather than a product. As we are continuously reminded, it is "only [...] a 'book' at the best."¹³⁶ the text, like the effort put into it, is fleeting and finite.¹³⁷ It is not

of the mind, be accepted as living, as telling of the living 'truth,' so long as art meets you halfway, and tries to tell of nothing else? (212). Unlike breathing and sex—two metonyms for life, I think—art (even that which could be called "realist") does not seem to belong to the realm of the living. Agee will therefore juxtapose life and art: "Though I may frequently try to make use of art devices and may, at other times, being at least in part an 'artist,' be incapable of avoiding their use, I am in this piece of work illimitably more interested in life than in art" (214). By the end of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, however, Agee will go so far as to disavow not just the book form, but the words that compose it. In a section depicting women of two of the families, we read: "The last words of this book have been spoken and these that follow are not words; they are only descriptions of two images" (389). David Wills's incisive preface to his English translation of Jean-Luc Nancy's *On the Commerce of Thinking* describes the necessity of the book form in ways that illuminate Agee's reaction against it. "... [W]hen thinking or thought 'reaches' the book," says Wills, "it necessarily does so in a form that is the basis for commerce. [...] The book, and the bookstore, become the contexts within which quantities of thoughts get passed around, bought, sold, and exchanged. But those thoughts, now irrevocably plural, are passed around not in some rarefied vacuum but among readers, also necessarily plural: among the members, therefore, of a community. If thoughts become the objects of commerce, it is precisely only because they imply and require such a community of readers" (xv). Wills's point is that Nancy's notion of commerce (that which justifies the necessity of the book form) is double: at once financial and social or communal. Agee, by contrast, appears to want the second kind of exchange without the first, but knows that they are inextricable and therefore insists that the text is a book "only by necessity" (*Praise* xi).

¹³⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹³⁷ In "Plans for Work: October 1937," as part of an application for a Guggenheim Fellowship, Agee describes what is perhaps one of his most ambitious uncompleted projects, entitled "Notebook." The text would be "a catchall for all conceivable forms of experience which can in any way, scientifically, imaginatively, or otherwise, be recorded and analyzed. More than one person could contribute to such a work, and it would be handed ahead to others. It would not at any time be finishable. It would in course of time reach encyclopedic size, or more. It would be published looseleaf, so that readers might make their own inserts and rearrangements as they thought most relevant" ("Plans" 147). Not surprisingly, Agee never got around to drafting such a notebook. This project—as with so many others in the list—remained unrealized: this ideal text—infinite in scope, radically democratic, profoundly unstable—was never composed in any definite sense. This may be because the project was nothing more than a paradox: the notebook, over time, would exceed its material form and approach "encyclopedic size, or more"; as he points out, the notebook could never be "finishable," its completion utterly beside the point. Agee's "Plans

the record of a history, but a product of time itself. In another sign of his fascination with the ephemerality of work over the permanence of the artwork, Agee reportedly encouraged Houghton Mifflin to publish *Praise* on newsprint, not only so tenant families could afford it, as John Hersey recalls, but so that over time, the text would “crumble away to dust.”¹³⁸ Agee’s wish for decomposition contradicts the archiving imperative at the core of documentary work, thereby negating it; this book would preserve nothing—other than, perhaps, its own fugitive status.¹³⁹ By disintegrating, the imagined text would share the precarity of the people it depicted. Art would be made lifelike by enacting its own death.

Of course, Agee did not succeed in convincing Houghton Mifflin to publish a disintegrating text. What the book preserves instead, apart from the persistence of the commodity form and the literary market, is an author’s struggle to understand his “effort” in relation to the work of his subjects. In his analysis of the class affiliations of salaried writers under the New Deal, Szalay reads Agee’s rhetoric of effort as symptomatic of a “performative aesthetic,” in which the text is conceptualized as an activity rather than an object or artifact.¹⁴⁰ The Federal Writers’ Project, he notes, provided its workers with a wage but no “dividends from an artifact over whose marketing and consumption a worker

for Work” doesn’t merely tug at the limits of a particular representational medium; rather, it performs the limits of representation: his proposal literalizes the unfinishable work. Whether audaciously expansive or decomposing into dust, Agee’s designs circumscribe the extremes in finitude and infinity and in so doing figure the fault line between work and the work.

¹³⁸ John Hersey, “Introduction,” *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988), xxiv.

¹³⁹ Agee will often appropriate the logics of immediacy and preservation that motivate documentary realist projects in order to invert them. Agee explains how “problems of recording [...] are an organic part of the experience as a whole” (*Praise* 215).

¹⁴⁰ Szalay, *New*, 27.

had no control and for which he or she was never cited as author.”¹⁴¹ Although he was not a client of the FWP, Agee functions in Szalay’s argument as one who adopts the movement’s artistic aims in order to pass as a proletarian, while in actuality retaining his bourgeois privileges. As Szalay puts it, “...Agee struggles to forget that he is not just a literary producer ... but an owner as well. ... [T]he ‘necessity’ Agee speaks of when he observes ‘this is a book by necessity’ was his own, not *Fortune*’s,” adding that “Agee did eventually secure the rights for his work; he and not Luce Industries ended up owning and selling his now classic volume.”¹⁴² Fulminations to the contrary aside,” Szalay continues, “*Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* is in the end a book; Agee is in the end a capitalist.”¹⁴³

Szalay, of course, is right to point to the limits of Agee’s supposed self-identification as a worker. Unlike the sharecroppers and even other FWP writers, Agee eventually reaped the benefits of his labor by acquiring the rights to his project from *Fortune*. But insofar as Agee’s work is performative, it also cautions its reader against the dangers of over-identification, warning that “you are what you are, and that she is what she is, and that you cannot for one moment exchange places with her, nor by any such hope make expiation for what she has suffered at your hands, and for what you have gained at hers.”¹⁴⁴ Ignoring this pronouncement against identification, Szalay positions Agee’s work as an elaborate attempt to disguise the reality that he is “in the end a

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 28.

¹⁴² Ibid., 26.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 27.

¹⁴⁴ Agee, *Praise*, 283.

capitalist,” an effort to exempt himself from the rule of misguided identification. But disguise and dishonesty, as I will argue in the next section, are insufficient bases on which to evaluate Agee’s project, as they conflate authorial speech and intention.

iii. The Art of Exertion

Agee is never so adamant about the gulf between persons as when he discusses the differences between himself and the tenant families. The fullest account of Agee’s self-production vis-à-vis the production of cotton appears in a section of “(On the Porch: 2” entitled “Work.” Like many of the other sections, Agee begins by outlining his supposed shortcomings as a writer, but reasons that he must “go on, and try to make an entrance into this chapter.”¹⁴⁵ So framed, he begins to describe some of the distinguishing features of sharecropping. It is “arduous,” “without choice,” “plain,” and “iterative[.]”¹⁴⁶ It is a means almost without end. He goes on,

[W]ork as a means to other ends might have some favor in it, even which was of itself dull and heartless work, in which one’s strength was used for another man’s benefit: but the ends of this work are absorbed all but entirely into the work itself, and in what little remains, nearly all is obliterated; nearly nothing is obtainable; nearly all is cruelly stained, in the tensions of physical need, and in the desperate tensions of the need of work which is not available.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 281.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 282.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 282.

The sharecropper's work is therefore endless in two senses, habitual and self-cancelling: "the ends of this work are absorbed all but entirely into the work itself." It is this doubled endlessness that Agee finds difficult to convey, a problem that he performs by remarking on the iterative qualities of his own text. Having explained the twinned endlessness of sharecropping "three times"—in which to pick cotton is only ever a means to continued sharecropping (as opposed to turning a profit) and, therefore, it is ongoing—Agee laments that "If I were capable, as I wish I were, I could say it once in such a way that it would be there in its complete awefulness [sic]."¹⁴⁸ Bemoaning the finite qualities of his prose in light of the unceasing and totalizing structure of exploitation inherent to sharecropping, he goes on to note how this endless labor "is repeated upon each of them, in every day of their lives, so powerfully, so entirely, that it is simply the natural air they breathe, I wonder whether it could ever be said enough times."¹⁴⁹ What initially appears as the symmetry of form and content ("I have said this now three times"; "the plainness and iterativeness of work") ends with a meditation on their incommensurability ("I wonder whether it could ever be said enough times"). The implicit answer to Agee's rhetorical question, of course, seems to be an emphatic "no": Agee cannot say it enough times. And yet the difficulty of representing their work bears repeating, since work becomes representable only when the work of representation is made visible. Agee's prose claims an indexical relation to the labor it portrays at the precise point at which it announces and performs its inability to signify.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 282.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 282.

In painstaking detail, Agee proceeds to describe the entire process of cotton farming, from clearing or “breaking” the land, to plowing furrows, to planting, to harvest, and finally to the gin where work is “digested.”¹⁵⁰ Agee’s style, however, unlike the labor it represents, is far from cumbersome: he often supplements the plainness of the labor with his own literary flourishes. For instance, cotton seed floating in the air looks like “a dry nightmare fleece like the false snows of Christmas movies”; the cotton gin’s corrugated metal surface is “bright and sick as gas in the sunlight”; sunlight “stands and stacks upon [the worker] with the serene weight of deep sea water” until she becomes a “diving bell whose strained seams must at any moment burst.”¹⁵¹ There is a certain inelegance and misdirection to Agee’s method here and to the perception it assumes. In their beautiful opacity, an opacity inherent to all figurative language, Agee’s metaphors threaten to take over what is otherwise dull prose: they draw attention to themselves. In a scathing critique of Agee’s purple passages, Jonathan Morse insists that “metaphors have a constitutive reality in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; they, finally, and not the Woodses, Rickettses, and Gudgers, are what the book is about,” concluding that “Agee’s metaphors do not record or evoke a reality; they abolish its terms of existence and recreate them, in another image, in a purely esthetic domain.”¹⁵² For Morse, Evans’s stark

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 303.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 306, 300.

¹⁵² Jonathan Morse, “James Agee, Southern Literature and the Domain of Metaphor,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 76 (1977), 311-12. Morse critiques Agee’s convoluted figures by imitating them: “Having been immortalized, the Gudgers cannot be affected by bringing electricity to rural Alabama. Blazing with counterfeit life through Agee’s expanding nebula of metaphors, they have no more substantial reality than the star whose light an astronomer sees a million years after it has ceased to exist” (Morse 312). Morse’s fear of aestheticism echoes Laura Hapke’s *Labor’s Text: The Worker in American Fiction*, though with a difference: the enemy of the worker is not theory

photographic portraits of tenant farmers stand in profound contrast to Agee's figurative style. If "plainness" is the distinguishing feature of picking cotton, Agee's metaphors make his labor anything but. Agee's metaphors—the products of his work—provide the necessary contrast to the purported plainness of sharecropping, which is to say that their plainness is an effect of the contrast—the contrast of tenor and vehicle—that metaphors make possible.

More than plainness or adornment however, it is the structure of unceasing repetition that distinguishes cotton picking from writing. Agee obsesses over the drudgery of the sharecropping work because it is incalculable:

But just roughly, only as a matter of suggestion, compute the work that has been done so far, in ten acres of land, remembering that this is not counting in ten more acres of corn and a few minor crops: how many times has this land been retraced in the rolling-gaited guidance and tensions and whippings and orderings of plowing, and with the steadily held horn, the steady arc of the right arm and right hand fisting and opening like a heart, the heavy weight of the sack at the right side? ¹⁵³

What begins as a command to the reader ends as an open question. This is because the work cannot be calculated or quantified—its variables would necessarily exceed such a formula: "remember that this is not counting in ten more acres of corn..." At the end of "Work," Agee answers his own question with the only available answer: "That is

(as was the case for Hapke), but metaphor. Thanks to Stuart Burrows for alerting me to the mimetic aspect of Morse's critique.

¹⁵³ Agee, *Praise*, 292.

repeated as many times as you have picked a bale.”¹⁵⁴ His point is that while sharecropping is mechanical, it is also never-ending and therefore hard to quantify: there is always more to do. Like the nearly mechanical repetition of cotton picking, the writer, it seems, must begin anew. Unlike the sharecropper’s, however, Agee’s new beginnings are always also endings, a fact which is registered in the final sentence of the chapter entitled “Work”: “But I must make a new beginning.”¹⁵⁵

iv. The Art of Exhaustion

Despite the many anguished, self-conscious passages chronicling Agee’s ambitions as a documentary writer, only once does Agee entertain the possibility of quitting. In a curious and oft-cited passage near the beginning of *Praise*, Agee disavows not merely the book and Art, but writing altogether. “If I could do it,” Agee writes,

I’d do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and of excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust the majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game. A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 307.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 283.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 10. At times, Agee’s spirit of disavowal looks like defeatism. Just after this passage Agee remarks, “As it is, though, I’ll do what little I can in writing. Only it will be very little. I’m not capable of it; and if I were, you would not go near it at all. For if you did, you would hardly

Rather than recount what the tenant farmers ate and what their houses were built with, here Agee wishes he could provide samples. It's one thing to note George Gudger's tie, "of stiff and hard imitation watered silk,"¹⁵⁷ it would be another thing to furnish the reader with a swatch of the fabric. Between the two—between writing and not-writing, sign and artifact—lies a difference in kind. In writing, as Agee has it, things have their "existence entirely through the writer,"¹⁵⁸ a mode of expression that guarantees nothing other than the writer's limited point of view. "Words cannot embody," Agee writes elsewhere, "they can only describe."¹⁵⁹

Depending on the analytical frame and what he means by *writing*, this disavowal of literary labor can be read in three distinct ways. The first, perhaps most straightforward way (in which writing has the narrowest meaning, referring to ethnographic writing only), would acknowledge the declarative quality of these lines, announcing that Agee will never again embark on a literary, ethnographic project (thus abandoning the

bear to live. As a matter of fact, nothing I might write could make any difference whatever. It would only be a 'book' at the best. If it were a safely dangerous one it would be 'scientific' or 'political' or 'revolutionary.' If it were really dangerous it would be 'litearture' or 'religion' or 'mysticism' or 'art,' and under one such name or another might in time achieve the emasculation of acceptance. If it were dangerous enough to be of any remote use to the human race it would be merely 'frivolous' or 'pathological,' and that would be the end of that" (11). As the following pages suggest, I take seriously Agee's deep-seated fantasy for a mode of utilitarian art that cannot be extricated from its conditions of production.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 220. In "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin makes a similar claim about photography, arguing that it presents us with "authentic fragments of daily life" just as "the bloody fingerprint of a murderer on the page of a book says more than the text." For Agee and Benjamin, the materiality of the photograph is an extension of the thing it's a photograph of, and is most legible in somatic figures. Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" (1934) in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, pt. 2, 1931-1934, ed. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 774.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 9.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 210.

journalistic writing demanded by *Fortune* and its parent company, Luce Industries), but will instead move into other genres—film criticism, screenwriting, and drama—and with more success.¹⁶⁰ During his lifetime, indeed, Agee was best known for his tenure as film critic at *Time*, *Life Magazine*, and *The Nation* (the former two owned by Luce) and, some years later, for two screenplays, *The African Queen* (1951) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955). From the vantage of this later success, *Praise* certainly looks like a momentary wrong turn.

A second reading pits writing against images, wherein *all* writing (and not just a particular genre) remains inferior to the image, notwithstanding Agee's promise in the preface that the two media are "coequal, mutually dependent, and fully collaborative."¹⁶¹ Thus Kaja Silverman, for instance, argues that photography functions as writing's inevitable supplement, not only because of Agee's wish to move beyond writing, but because he places photography firmly among the matter of experience ("fragments of cloth" and "plates of food and of excrement"), as though "all these things belonged to the same ontological order."¹⁶² For Silverman, Agee's appeal to found objects reads like an aggressive commitment to the sensuousness of raw materials: the texture of dirt and cotton, the rough grain of the voice, and the smells of food and excrement. This passage from *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* has continued to interest and perplex critics not only because it presents them with a rivalry between media to either defend or dispute, but because it seems superfluous or insincere alongside the photographs with which the

¹⁶⁰ For a fuller account of his career in journalism, see Agee, *Selected Journalism*.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹⁶² Kaja Silverman, "Moving Beyond the Politics of Blame," *Desire of the Analysts*, Eds. Greg Forter and Paul Allen Miller (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), 130.

book begins. Caught within the double bind of disavowal and obligation, writing becomes a difficult and faulty enterprise. And yet one assumes that Agee could have truly given up writing altogether if he had really wanted to—nothing bound Agee to his career. In this light, appearing simultaneously condemned to and paralyzed by the word, Agee's toil seems entirely manufactured.

In a third possible reading, writing is taken in its most expanded sense, as a synonym for representation. What begins as an author's strangely self-suppressing desire to jettison writing in favor of a superior medium like photography ends even more curiously by imagining the end of representation *tout court*. In the context of a dismembered body, "a piece of the body torn out by the roots," both image and word are equally beside the point. In his recent account of the archiving impulses of literary modernism, Mark Goble argues that Agee's hypothetical text posits a materiality that offers nothing less than pure, asignifying presence. For Goble, the "piece of the body" is not a symbol of deprivation; rather, flesh testifies only to itself, resisting any outside referent and, in turn, any metaphoric abstraction; the body's (hypothetical) existence does not "represent, signify, or allude to anything."¹⁶³ And yet, as Goble goes on to argue, this materialist fantasy functions as a "compensatory performance of [Agee's securely bourgeois] politics" which are "relentlessly associative and additive, trying always to pursue more elaborate and self-involved connections."¹⁶⁴ Like Szalay, Goble finds Agee's disavowal merely dishonest, since the renunciation of representation is linked, in

¹⁶³ Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits* (Stanford: Stanford UP: 2010), 277.

¹⁶⁴ Goble, *Beautiful*, 277, 267.

his reading, to the renunciation of both political commitment¹⁶⁵ and economic privilege.¹⁶⁶ According to the logic of both critics, the only purpose of Agee's "materialist fantasy" is atonement.

I read Agee's fantasy differently. By fantasizing about "quitting his job"—the very thing, by the way, that a Depression-era sharecropper could never do—Agee imagines the limits of performativity: *Praise*, according to this fantasy, is no longer a living effort in human actuality, but its dead matter. To the extent that this passage and his project aspire to a book without writing, a desire that Szalay and Goble read as a symptom of Agee's bourgeois shame, it openly meditates on its own failures. What

¹⁶⁵ During his lifetime, Agee expressed sympathies with the Communist Party, though never became a member. The second epigraph that opens the book (following an excerpt from *King Lear*) cites the most famous lines from the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win." An asterisk at the end of the quote directs the reader to the following note at the bottom of the page: "These words are quoted here to mislead those who will be misled by them. They mean, not what the reader may care to think they mean, but what they say. They are not dealt with directly in this volume, but it is essential that they be used here, for in the pattern of the work as a whole, they are, in the sonata form, the second theme; the poetry facing them is the first. In view of the average reader's tendency to label, and of topical dangers to which any man, whether honest, or intelligent, or subtle, is at present liable, it may be well to make the explicit statement that neither those words nor the authors are the property of any political party, faith, or faction" (*Praise*).

¹⁶⁶ Goble makes a similar point to Morse, noting how Agee's "metaphoric abandon produces a picture of photography, as both medium and cultural practice, which does not look to have been 'handled cleanly and literally,' two adverbs we might well apply to Walker Evans's accompanying images, but possessing little relevance to the prose at hand" (Goble 266). As to the question of political commitments, Agee expressed sympathies with the Communist Party, though never became a member. The second epigraph that opens the book (following an excerpt from *King Lear*) cites the most famous lines from the Communist Manifesto: "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win." An asterisk at the end of the quote directs the reader to the following note at the bottom of the page: "These words are quoted here to mislead those who will be misled by them. They mean, not what the reader may care to think they mean, but what they say. They are not dealt with directly in this volume, but it is essential that they be used here, for in the pattern of the work as a whole, they are, in the sonata form, the second theme; the poetry facing them is the first. In view of the average reader's tendency to label, and of topical dangers to which any man, whether honest, or intelligent, or subtle, is at present liable, it may be well to make the explicit statement that neither those words nor the authors are the property of any political party, faith, or faction" (*Praise*).

Szalay and Goble miss, however, and what an indexical reading of Agee's language makes clear, is how thoroughly the book resists the logic of representation. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* was never about the plight of the sharecroppers because it never aspired to be a book *about* anything. Neither lives nor faces, to borrow the language of Riis and Caldwell, respectively, are the focus of *Let us Now Praise Famous Men*. In Agee's agonized staging of his own work alongside that of the differently agonizing work of those three families, we can begin to see the structural antagonism of class difference, a difference that every page of Agee's prose foregrounds and refuses to overcome. *Let us Now Praise Famous Men* approaches indexicality when its metaphors are most catachrestic, when the signs fail to represent the sharecroppers' lives and faces, registering instead the literary labor involved in trying to capture a foreign mode of work but failing to do so. This is because, when we read Agee's writerly straining at work, what we see is not faces or lives, but the work of language trying and failing to represent those lives, a labor that is not identical to but caused by the lives of the book.

Given that Agee published over 400 pages full of writing for this book, his desire for a book without writing looks at best like naïve ambition and at worst like failure. But for Agee and others after him, failure is a key aspect of the documentary form. Jonathan Kahana echoes this point when he interprets Agee's authorial anxieties in structural terms: "Because Agee here expresses textual and technical problems—his concerns about the 'clarity and truth' possible in a certain voice or medium—in moral terms, it is easy to mistake his reflections for attempts at self-expression."¹⁶⁷ Instead, he continues, "they should be read for signs of a structure of feeling that documentary made possible, since

¹⁶⁷ Kahana, *Intelligence*, 50.

such expressions of anxiety and alienation were a conventional gesture of the progressive intellectual.”¹⁶⁸ Thus, even Agee’s “aesthetic envy,” to borrow Cosgrove’s phrase, is not his own but functions as a condition and effect of the documentary mode itself. This is why the rare moments of explicit cross-class identification fall flat, as when Emma Gudger tells Agee that “we all like you, because you make us feel easy with you; it’s just like you was our own people and had always lived here with us.”¹⁶⁹ And, when Agee responds a page later by writing how he “certainly felt they were my own people.”¹⁷⁰ On a cursory read, this appears to be a rare moment of personal, unmediated understanding. But as soon as we acknowledge the thorny, laborious quality of Agee’s writing, any kind of account of feeling looks irrelevant. What the exchange between Emma Gudger and Agee stages, instead, is the irrelevance of feeling in light of unnavigable social inequality, a failure more often attributed to Agee than not.

Judging by the frequency with which scholars judge the documentary form to be an inevitable failure, the conventional “anxiety and alienation” were perhaps warranted. In *Voices of Persuasion*, which traces how 1930s writers acknowledged the ambiguity of historical truth, Michael Staub notes how “[i]t was not political intention that caused documentary to fail, but its self-definition. Documentary whose entire defense as a genre depended on its claim to represent the real, was, in effect, collapsing from the very

¹⁶⁸ Ibid

¹⁶⁹ *Praise*, 57.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 58.

first.”¹⁷¹ These pronouncements about the shortcomings of the form are striking, given that the documentary form, though much evolved since the 1930s, is still dominant in contemporary culture. These statements on failure—personal and professional, moral and formal—are worth meditating upon because they haunt Agee’s self-conception as well as the critical reception of his genre.

Rhetoric, however, does not begin to explain the complexity of Agee’s disavowal or the indexical dimensions of his project. Agee succeeds even as his fantasy of exhaustion fails: Agee cannot fail to write. This is not to suggest that the act of writing comes naturally or automatically to him—indeed, Agee reminds us at every opportunity of how worked through his writing is—but that the labor of representation is everywhere conditioned by the ineffable qualities of the work. Agee’s occasion for writing cannot be divorced from its difficulty: he is faced with an injunction, as Roland Barthes puts it in *Camera Lucida*, “to speak of the ‘nothing to say.’”¹⁷² Though Barthes’s nearly chiasmic formula refers to the profound irony of mourning, an idea which he develops through an extended reflection on a photograph of his deceased mother, it dramatizes what is so difficult to pinpoint about Agee’s pre-aesthetic wish. The irony explored by Barthes allows us to acknowledge the difference between Agee’s expressed intentions and his work without dismissing his project as, on the one hand, guilt-ridden or plagued by envy, as Trilling and Cosgrove have it, or on the other, insincere, as Szalay and Goble argue. If,

¹⁷¹ Michael E. Staub, *Voices of Persuasion: Politics of Representation in 1930s America* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994), 52.

¹⁷² Barthes, *Camera*, 93.

in Barthes's case, the name of the difference between expressed intention and actual output is irony, writing—that is to say, literary labor—is its condition of possibility.

What becomes clear in light of Barthes's ironic injunction is what Agee's critics miss: far from dishonesty, *Praise*'s bid for immediacy (its longing for a pre-aesthetic world—in which the category of art does not yet exist, and in which writing does not differ from manual work; and its preference for uprooted body parts over books) underscores the intellectual labor that made the book possible by restaging writing as a process of continuous working through. The writer's work is preserved by the very possibility of its negation. Furthermore, given the sheer incongruity of Agee's conceit (a writer who wishes to move beyond words), we must be wary of conflating the text with its author, or of identifying with the author at all. Rather than eliciting the kind of identification with Agee-the-author that his readers might expect, given the book's confessional mode and self-reflexive tone, this constitutive disavowal elicits a "perspective by incongruity," a phrase with which Kenneth Burke characterizes the structure of irony, wherein knowledge of a situation results in seeing it as its opposite.¹⁷³ Incongruity is the fundamental condition of Agee's entire project: recall how, in avoiding the sentimental works of Caldwell and Bourke-White and others, Agee urges his readers to discover the incongruities between themselves and the subjects they encounter in his text.¹⁷⁴ Irony is the ethical trope that suspends and preserves the differences that are sustained at the heart of this text—between types of people and kinds of work.

¹⁷³ Kenneth Burke, *Attitudes Toward History*, 1937 (Berkeley: U of California P, 1984), 308.

To argue for the primacy of the category of literary rather than manual labor in Agee's project, and to appropriate indexicality to the former, might be considered irresponsible, given that so much of the work that has emerged in labor studies has attended to lives of poor, disenfranchised, or otherwise exploited subjects. And yet, to exclude the concept and its repeated and evolving articulation—in all its intricacy and ambivalence—is to misunderstand what ensnares this text and its author. By equating physical work with the underclass, as many of Agee's critics tend to do, we risk rendering invisible the forms of work not associated with the sharecroppers, e.g. Agee's writerly work, and lose sight of the complex interactions between different forms of labor characteristic of both the New Deal economy, broadly, and Agee's aesthetic economy. Thus, I have attempted to expand our understanding of work as it is represented in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* since, as Nicholas K. Bromell has it, "work as a representation becomes more visible when we also see the work that made that representation."¹⁷⁵ To omit writerly work from the conversation would be to diminish the significance of the category of art, in all its insufficiency, to Agee's thinking—or worse, to read his "unease with art" (to paraphrase Theodor Adorno) as a symptom of disingenuousness.¹⁷⁶ This "unease" or anti-aestheticism was not an arbitrary invention of the Federal Writers Project, but a solution to a particular problem faced by a group of writers who struggled to reconfigure their professional identities vis-à-vis their ethical responsibilities to their

¹⁷⁴ In her reading of *Praise*, Jeanne Follansbee Quinn also describes the complexity of the structures of identification through Burke's concept. She concludes that identification, for Agee, is a thoroughly dialectical and decentering process by explaining Agee's pragmatist leanings.

¹⁷⁵ Nicholas K. Bromell, *By the Sweat of the Brow: Literature and Labor in Antebellum America* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1993), 11.

¹⁷⁶ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997), 175.

subjects. *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* treats its various labors as incongruous and unrepresentable; but it also recognizes the degree to which the representation of one form of labor depends exclusively, and intimately, on the other. To read Agee's text for its staging of a relation between two forms of labor is to concede nothing to the gratifications of representational sentimentalism. It's instead to confront the generic, conceptual and institutional mechanisms on which the pathos of documentaries and their repeated misreadings depend.

CHAPTER TWO: Flannery O'Connor's Mysterious Matter

It [poetry] must at best, quite truly, mean nothing as the antisymbolists say. A chemical experiment or discovery fraught with terrific consequence for the world, in the moment of its glow that suffuses the chemist, sensation with a vengeance if one must be so stupid, relates to the art of chemistry purely. Nothing may ever come of the thing any more than it may come of the amazing formula of the differential calculus. These things carry no symbolism, they have no meaning.

--William Carlos Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1928-30)

The novel is an art form and when you use it for anything other than art, you pervert it. I didn't make this up. I got it from St. Thomas (via Maritain) who allows that art is wholly concerned with the good of that which is made; it has no utilitarian end. If you do manage to use it successfully for social, religious, or other purposes, it is because you make it art first ...

--Flannery O'Connor, letter to Father J.H. McCown, 9 May 1956

Matter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position.

--Carl Andre, "Carl Andre: Art Worker" (Interview with Jeanne Siegel), November 1970

i. On Indices and Symbols

In the last chapter, I argued that James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* embraces and performs a non-representational realism in order to

index the relation absent in previous documentaries codified under the New Deal: that between the representation of manual labor and the relatively more bourgeois labor of writerly representation. When pitted against photography, language is typically taken as an inferior referential medium; Agee's critics tend to reaffirm this assumption about the book's competing media and the binaristic thinking that such an assumption requires. Yet Agee's prose expresses the work in representing the "other half" of post-Depression Alabama in a way that Evans's photographs could not. Its incessant anxiety about the difficulty of documenting sharecroppers is not a distraction from its subjects; its refusal to adequately represent them is, as I argued, not an evasion of his subjects but a solution to the problem of capturing working class labor alongside the middle class labor expended to capture it. Against the tendency to read Agee's project as committed to its subjects, to capturing the lived conditions of three families in Alabama, I insist that his project was instead committed to capturing the strained relations *with* its human subjects. Caught between his inability to represent class relations and the impossibility of producing "events in human actuality" out of words, Agee opts instead to render relationality itself.¹⁷⁷ My reading therefore shifts the critical focus away from the discrete group of individuals in Alabama to thinking about the relations between those individuals

¹⁷⁷ We might make this slight but crucial distinction simpler by routing it through a more concrete index, the thermometer. A thermometer is both a material device (made of glass, bimetals and mercury or alcohol) and a sign that measures changes in temperature through the expansion or contraction of its liquid elements. To the extent that a thermometer is a sign it is also a direct and non-arbitrary response to its direct environment. Agee knew that he couldn't produce thermometers out of words. But neither did he want to write about thermometers. Instead, he wanted to use words to render thermometer-ness. Neither treating words as pure indices nor simply thematizing indices (writing about photographs, for instance), Agee chose to represent their relations, which requires that we treat his words as signs *and* that we abstract those signs from their signifying properties.

and the people hired to document them. And this shift is made possible, in part, by the indexical logic that informs Agee's practice—a logic that, unlike other philosophical discourses of materiality, insists on *relations* between signs and referents, and between writers and workers. By insisting on labor, or rather on two competing forms of labor (manual and intellectual, proletarian and bourgeois), as the most fundamental yet critically-ignored problem in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, my reading maintains that Agee's text cannot be contemplated or critiqued apart from the interclass relations that made the initial project both possible while also becoming the very thing that *Fortune* magazine couldn't acknowledge in its running series. *Praise* thus requires an intersubjective mode of reading that captures neither the sharecroppers nor the author but the distance between them. In so doing, Agee's book discourages readers from thinking that sympathy or even well-meaning art is enough to mitigate economic inequality and attends, instead, to the larger socio-economic arrangements that these ways of relating and representing presuppose. Agee's challenge to New Deal structures of representation offers a compelling reminder of the social conflicts underlying the aestheticization of the underclass, making those underlying conflicts transparent in a way that other documentaries do not. In refusing an aesthetic notion of autonomy—in insisting, slightly more concretely, that the text be read not as a hermetic work of art but an “effort in human actuality”—Agee acknowledges the contingent and heteronomous aspects of documentary work: his theory of writerly labor literally depends on the work of sharecroppers for its legibility. The contingent character of documentary work therefore indexes and informs how we view the artwork, Agee seems to imply, even when no overt representations of laboring human beings are involved.

Agee's brief detour from human to animal labor neatly bears out this sense of contingency. In accordance with the rest of his book, Agee catalogues the treatment of the Gudgers' and Woods' animals in exhaustive detail—hogs, cows, kittens and chickens—distinguishing all the while those meant for food, those kept for pleasure, and those, like the mule, used for work. Regarding the mule, the animal most valorized for its labor power but also most exploited due to its size and strength, Agee writes the following:

[t]he mule stands readier than any victim because he is used in the main and most hopeless work, because he is an immediate symbol of this work, and because by transference he is the farmer himself, and in the long tandem harness wherein members and forces of a whole world beat and use and drive and force each other, if they are to live at all, is the one creature in front of this farmer.¹⁷⁸

What this account highlights is how easily the mule, an American symbol of agrarian work, can exceed its status as symbol and instead be regarded as an integral part of the workforce needed to plow fields. In Agee's unusual formulation, the mule and the farmer are united in their proximity and shared labor; both are "forces of a whole world [which] beat and use and drive and force each other."¹⁷⁹ To make the mule not merely a symbol of work, then, but an integral part of the plowing process is to cast doubt on symbolic relations, since the animal doesn't merely stand in place of the farmer but bears an intimate and causal relation to the work both produce.

¹⁷⁸ Agee, *Praise*, 190.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

As the expression of relationality tied to the association of heterogeneous agents or “forces,” Agee’s formulation thus points to the shortcomings of symbolism, or the way in which the animal’s labor is obscured the very moment it becomes a sign of it. Through the law of transference, then, the mule is not merely a symbol of agrarian work but an index of it. In his 1894 essay “What is a Sign?,” Peirce distinguishes between indices and symbols as signs which are formed through necessity or through convention and habit, respectively. In order to explain this difference, and in spite of his unorthodox religious beliefs,¹⁸⁰ Peirce turns to the Old Testament at the end of his essay:

Suppose a man to reason as follows: The Bible says that Enoch and Elijah were caught up into heaven; then, either the Bible errs, or else it is not strictly true that all men are mortal. What the Bible is, and what the historic world of men is, to which this reasoning relates, must be shown by indices. The reasoner makes some sort of mental diagram by which he sees that his alternative conclusion must be true, if the premise is so; and this diagram is an *icon* or likeness. The rest is symbols; and the whole may be considered as a modified symbol. It is not a dead thing, but carries the mind from one point to another. The art of reasoning is the art of marshalling such signs, and of finding out the truth.¹⁸¹

For Peirce, biblical exegesis involves all three semiotic operations: the symbolic, which involves the transfer of meaning through unmotivated and arbitrary relations (and thus

¹⁸⁰ In his biography, *Charles Sanders Peirce: A Life*, Joseph Brent notes how Peirce “had strong, though unorthodox, religious convictions. Although he was a communicant in the Episcopal church for most of his life, he expressed contempt for the theologies, metaphysics, and practices of established religions” (Brent 18).

¹⁸¹ Peirce, *Essential Peirce* vol 2, 10.

requires an interpretant and, by extension, a reader); the iconic, involving the mental diagrams of logical reasoning; and the indexical, through which the relations between world and work are expressed and in which the veracity of scripture seems most urgent (since indices, unlike symbols and icons, require extra-linguistic objects in order to function as signs). While intended to elucidate Peirce's tripartite semiotic system, this passage also underscores the difficulty in treating scripture as a straightforward kind of sign, its words appearing as symbols and indices in his analysis. Put simply: Does the scripture symbolize the ascension of Elijah and Enoch into Heaven, in Peirce's account, or does it indicate it? For Peirce, American philosopher and believer, this question is left unresolved.

But the question of indices and symbols, and the differences between them, does not begin and end with Peirce. Nearly half a century after Peirce, Flannery O'Connor, American novelist and devout Catholic, struggled with these questions as they pertained to her religious beliefs and her literary practice. Faced with an increasingly secularized readership and the narrow-minded expectation that her fiction should offer moral guidance, O'Connor was uniquely attuned to the demands and restrictions on a committed writer, a subject about which she spoke and wrote at great length during her brief career. "It is generally supposed, and not least by Catholics," O'Connor mused in a 1957 essay, "that the Catholic writer who writes fiction is out to use fiction to prove the truth of the Faith."¹⁸² In keeping with her training at Iowa, where she studied under New Critics and noted champions of aesthetic autonomy John Crowe Ransom and Robert Penn Warren, O'Connor explains how an author's motives are ultimately indiscernible in a

¹⁸² O'Connor, *Mystery*, 145.

text. “What the fiction writer will discover [...] is that he himself cannot move or mold reality in the interests of abstract truth. The writer learns, perhaps more quickly than the reader, to be humble in the face of what-is. What-is is all he has to do with; the concrete is his medium; and he will eventually realize that fiction can transcend its limitations only by staying within them.”¹⁸³ This chapter explores the meaning of O’Connor’s claim, that one might transcend limits by adhering to them, as an instance of the overlapping theological, aesthetic and institutional problems that formed in response to her work, problems that continue to inform her reception. In so doing, it explores these problems through the figure that dominates her reception most, the symbol.

ii. Nativist Blood

In *Our America* (1995), his searing critique of the valorization of cultural identity in the era of multiculturalism, Walter Benn Michaels begins by reading the Reverend Shegog’s Easter sermon in the final chapter of William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Michaels’s immediate purpose in turning to this scene is to prepare the ground for his analysis of what he calls “nativist modernism,” the particular form of 1920s American nationalism consolidated around intense opposition to minority groups on the basis of their supposed foreignness. The rise of American nationalism, he claims, is accompanied by an equally intense commitment to the ontology of the word. For Michaels, modernist aesthetics and political nativism are inextricable: both represent concerted efforts to fix the meaning of identity—aesthetic, national, cultural, and racial—after World War I. Though the figures Michaels invokes to diagnose the structural

¹⁸³ Ibid., 146.

intimacy of nativist politics and modernist aesthetics are myriad,¹⁸⁴ the central trope in his analysis is “blood,” which simultaneously refers to biological relation and the Eucharistic miracle and which, according to Michaels, gives way to tautology in Faulkner’s novel: “blood is blood and you can’t get around it.”¹⁸⁵ In order to make sense of Michaels’s argument, we should return to the first part of Shegog’s Easter sermon:

‘Breddren en sistuhn!’ His voice rang again, with the horns. He removed his arm and stood erect and raised his hands. ‘I got de ricklickshun en de blood of de Lamb!’ They did not mark just when his intonation, his pronunciation, became negroid, they just sat swaying a little in their seats as the voice took them into itself.¹⁸⁶

At the center of Shegog’s sermon is his belief in transubstantiation, the Eucharistic miracle which turns the sign of Christ’s blood into the blood itself, eliminating the very idea of a symbolic medium and the logic of representation implied in it. As Michaels notes, the form of this sermon enacts something akin to the Eucharist: the sermon begins in a “level,” “cold” and “inflectionless” voice and transforms into something “as different

¹⁸⁴ Other nativist tropes include “utopian incest,” impotence, and homosexuality, all of which function as “blood supplements,” or “strategies for insisting upon a race-based model of identity when more literal strategies for preserving it have failed” (*Our* 13). The most successful supplement, according to Michaels, is the notion of culture: “Culture, put forward as a way of preserving the primacy of identity while avoiding the embarrassments of blood, would turn out to be much more effective than incest, impotence, and homosexuality as a way of reconceptualizing and thereby preserving the essential contours of racial identity” (*Our* 13).

¹⁸⁵ Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury*, 303. The logic of matter in Faulkner’s formulation, “blood is blood and you can’t get around it” is distinct from that of O’Connor’s, as my reading of its material and tropological resonances in *Wise Blood* will demonstrate. Nevertheless, like the blood in *The Sound and the Fury*, the matter of Enoch’s wise blood cannot be bypassed.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 368.

as day and dark from his former tone.”¹⁸⁷ By the end of the sermon, the minister’s voice, which took on a “sad, timbrous quality like an alto horn” seems to disappear altogether, “until he was nothing and they [the congregation] were nothing and there was not even a voice but instead their hearts were speaking to one another in chanting measures beyond the need for words.”¹⁸⁸ As it bypasses language, Shegog’s sermon shuttles between two distinct notions of blood: substantive (“de blood of de Lamb”) and symbolic (“Breddren en sistuhn,” which imagines the congregation as kin), before abandoning the difference between them.

Put differently, Shegog’s sermon collapses two sets of conceptual oppositions: first, it folds together the symbolic and the physical dimensions of blood; and second, it conflates the theory that a group of believers are necessarily related by virtue of their shared faith—they are “brethren and sistuhn” and “children of God”—with the (opposite) claim that it is not blood (essence) but performance—“intonation, his pronunciation”—which determines one’s identity and relations to others. Both axes of opposition, as Michaels points out, involve a “repudiation of arbitrary or conventional relations” that Michaels likens to the novel’s preoccupation with incest, as manifested in Quentin Compson’s refrain, “*I have committed incest I said,*”¹⁸⁹ which equates speaking of committing incest with the act itself: “if I could tell you we did it would have been so and

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 366.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 367. The fourth chapter of my dissertation will examine the phenomenon to move beyond the need for words at greater length.

¹⁸⁹ Faulkner, *Sound*, 79. Another version of this refrain appears two pages earlier: “I said I have committed incest, Father I said” (Faulkner 77).

then the others wouldn't be so and then the world would roar away.”¹⁹⁰ In a maneuver characteristic of several of Michaels' works,¹⁹¹ he shows how the logics that undergird literary modernism and political nativism, the former largely revered for its aesthetic achievements and the latter reviled for its explicit racism and xenophobia, are “doubly linked”:

first because they both involve a repudiation of arbitrary or conventional relations (between word and thing, between husband and wife) and, second, because the repudiation of those relations is everywhere deployed in defense of a tautology that will find its definitive formulation in the proposition ‘blood is blood and you can't get around it.’¹⁹²

What begins as a set of oppositions concerning kinship and linguistic materiality ends, in Michaels's treatment, as a logical fallacy, evident in the aforementioned phrase “blood is blood,”¹⁹³ which requires the production of a cultural taboo—in this case, incest—in order to police and enforce a nativist (racialized, xenophobic) form of American identity. All of these nativist supplemental tropes—incest, impotence, and homosexuality—

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 177.

¹⁹¹ The structure of Michaels's argument in *Our America*, in which two phenomena, one privileged and one reviled by a largely liberal, academic readership, prove to be mutually implicated also appears in *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (2004) and in his forthcoming book, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy and Political Economy*, as I've encountered it in a number of articles and conference presentations.

¹⁹² Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, Pluralism*, (Durham: Duke UP, 1995), 2.

¹⁹³ In a tautological remark which, in light of Michaels's analysis, we might be tempted to read as an extension of nativism, Minimalist sculptor Carl Andre insists that “[m]atter as matter rather than matter as symbol is a conscious political position” (qtd in Kotz 2). One of the aims of this chapter is to determine whether or not this tautology—which insists not on the purity of people (“blood is blood”), but on the purity of the signifier (“art for art's sake”)—is a continuation of the same logic.

function as both problems and solutions in Michaels's study, since each figure ensures "racial suicide" at the same time as it implies racial purity. Most importantly, though, the nativist investment in blood and its supplements is, according to Michaels, a continued expression of a racism that seems to be reproduced, rather than displaced by the cultural pluralism of 1990s America. "[A]lthough the move from racial identity to cultural identity appears to replace essentialist criteria of identity (who we are) with performative criteria (what we do)," Michaels writes, "the commitment to pluralism requires in fact that the question of who we are continues to be understood as prior to questions about what we do."¹⁹⁴

Following Michaels's syllogistic analysis, we might be inclined to view the index—a sign that refuses conventional and arbitrary relations—as a thoroughly incestuous kind of sign. The desire for the word to be made flesh and the desire for endogamy are not only homologous in Michaels's argument: they are interchangeable. But how might we understand this commitment to substance after "nativist modernism," distinctive to the 1920s, gives way to alternate expressions of culture, heritage, national identity and other theories of language? In the pages that follow, I argue that the modernist commitment to matter—the insistence that the sacrament be the Host, or that "blood be blood," a commitment whose insistence on the naturalized or non-symbolic identity of things teeters on tautology—is simply too diverse for the implications of a retrograde politics to be simply inevitable. Put differently, the fantasy that a sign could

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 15. For a more thorough explanation of Michaels's argument regarding the consolidation of racial and cultural identity, see *Our 13*. For the purposes of this chapter, I am most interested in his reading of the representation of blood as a commitment to racial identity and, ultimately, as a marker of racism.

function “onomatopoetically, without reliance upon a system of syntactic and semantic conventions” is too complex to be reduced to an endogamous model of cultural identity.¹⁹⁵ Indeed, as I will show, the fascination with the sign as a (super)natural phenomenon free of convention cannot always be mapped along national lines.

Does the modernist preoccupation with the materiality of the signifier necessarily betray a nativist set of politics? Does an interest in the matter of language, in other words, inevitably lead to an exclusionary cultural heritage and a narrow conception of national identity? To evaluate this proposition, I turn to O’Connor’s novels, both of which insist on a complex commitment to the material properties of language as a *means* to a different end. In spite of such complex commitments, however, O’Connor has been largely ignored in critical discussions of what mid-century American materialism looks like. Her neglect may not be surprising given the overtly religious content of her work, a content that critics are typically forced to either uphold or awkwardly ignore in favor of another kind of determining ground, historical or aesthetic. And although some critics have discussed her work along different lines—Mark McGurl, Jon Lance Bacon, and Richard Giannone, among them—theological issues continue to dominate O’Connor studies. O’Connor’s criticism therefore can be divided into two broad tendencies: those who read her fiction according to religious or metaphysical categories (common especially in the 1960s and 1970s); and those who excuse or dismiss her religious beliefs in order to

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 2.

uphold her aesthetic practice.¹⁹⁶ Unable to square her religious beliefs with her aesthetic ambitions, most critics privilege one over the other.

While these critical camps seem methodologically divided—they remain at odds over the role of biographical detail and institutional history in literary criticism—neither has adequately explored the status of O’Connor’s materialism as it relates to her literary practice or her theology. In order to remedy this problem, I examine two works which not only meditate on but mediate this problem: *Wise Blood* (1952), a novel whose central mystery concerns the status of blood, and *The Violent Bear it Away* (1960), a novel which O’Connor later referred to as “a minor hymn to the Eucharist.”¹⁹⁷ The preoccupation with materiality in both texts is not simply an element of plot (which it is); it is built into their very form. Indeed, O’Connor contemplated the intractability of matter throughout her short life, as published collections of her personal correspondence and public lectures indicate. Critics have been consistently fascinated by a particular episode she retells in a 1955 letter to her friend Elizabeth Hester—who O’Connor calls “A”—in which she defends the real presence of Christ in the Catholic sacrament:

I was once, five or six years ago, taken by some friends to have dinner
with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr. Broadwater. [...] She departed

¹⁹⁶ For examples of the first group, see David Eggenschwiler, *The Christian Humanism of Flannery O’Connor* (1972); George Kilcourse Jr., *The Religious Imagination of Flannery O’Connor: A World With Everything Off Balance* (2001); Jon Lance Bacon, *Flannery O’Connor and Cold War Culture* (1993), and Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (2009). For examples of the second, see Wayne C. Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (1975); Edward Kessler, *Flannery O’Connor and the Language of Apocalypse* (1986); Frederick Asals, *Flannery O’Connor and the Imagination of Extremity* (1982); Ruthann Knechel Johansen, *The Narrative Secret of Flannery O’Connor* (1994).

¹⁹⁷ O’Connor, Flannery. *The Habit of Being*. Ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), 385.

the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual. We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing for me in such company to say. The people who took me were Robert Lowell and his now wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them. Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the 'most portable' person in the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest is expendable.¹⁹⁸

Like Faulkner's Shegog, O'Connor insists on the substance of the sacrament, a belief consistent with the way Christ's real presence has been understood in the Catholic Church since at least the 11th century, when the notion of transubstantiation was canonized: the doctrine regained popularity during Vatican II.¹⁹⁹ Under this doctrine,

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 124-25.

¹⁹⁹ John W. Healey's "Symbols are Not 'Just Symbols,'" an article written for *America* magazine, a national Catholic weekly, provides a brief history of the Catholic church's anti-symbolist beliefs: "Resistance to speaking of Christ's Eucharistic presence as 'symbolic' has a long history and is lined with a characteristically Western understanding of real presence. The terms of any subsequent debate about this realism were definitively set for the 11th century condemnations of

bread and wine are not mere signs of the Son of God: rather, they are his flesh and blood in their brute physicality, a position that places O'Connor on the side of "scrupulous realism," as Douglas Robillard calls it.²⁰⁰ But what kind of realism is this, exactly? By damning symbols, O'Connor effectively produces the distinction between the materiality of Christ's presence and its presence as pure sign, between denotative and connotative significance, only to abolish it altogether. Yet what is most striking in this anecdote about transubstantiation is the force with which O'Connor simultaneously invokes and rejects the distinction between matter and symbol: there is no meaning apart from the existence of the sacrament—no meaning, in other words, apart from the mystery of its mere being. As she explains in the same letter: "...I believe the Host is actually the blood and body of Christ, not a symbol. If the story ["A Temple of the Holy Ghost"] grows for you it is because of the mystery of the Eucharist in it."²⁰¹ The sacrament is shown to be reified precisely at the point at which it accrues symbolic significance. And, in keeping with the commitments she expresses here, the "mystery of the Eucharist" is shown to be not simply a thematic interest of O'Connor's, but a deeply formal problem that pervades her aesthetic practice.

O'Connor's ongoing suspicion of symbols forces us to rethink the terms on which her fiction is evaluated and in which she herself is so often made to represent the particularities of the American South. If her vehemence against religious symbols is any

Berengar of Tours. In reacting against what he took to be extreme 'realism,' including such eucharistic miracles as 'bleeding hosts' and even more direct statements like 'The Body of Christ is crushed by the teeth of the faithful,' Berengar argued that the body and blood of Christ were present 'in a sign' (in signo)"(Healey).

²⁰⁰Robillard, 177.

²⁰¹ O'Connor, *Habit*, 124.

indication, we would do well to reflect on the ways her novels suspend representation and, furthermore, on the challenges they pose to identitarian categories—in the case of O'Connor, categories like “Southern” and “Catholic”—that automatically foist meaning onto her works, a process that too often passes for critical thought. By repudiating the arbitrary and conventional relations between words and things, relations which Peirce theorizes under the rubric of “symbols,” O'Connor's thinking is instinctively though not explicitly indexical, and challenges deeply-held assumptions which continue to govern the mostly limited reception of her work as Catholic and Southern, even as those categories go largely uninterrogated. To claim that O'Connor “represents” the Southern gothic tradition, to say nothing of the South itself, is to ignore the ways in which her own fiction challenges such a logic of representation. Her fiction expresses a particular type of the non-representational realism that I trace throughout this project.

In considering the indexical aspirations of O'Connor's fiction, I follow Timothy Bewes's insight that we might “suspend[] the category of representation from the study of literature,” a conclusion that radically reorients the deep-seated tendencies among O'Connor's critics and which he arrives at, in part, from the interpretive and ethical dilemmas posed by O'Connor's short fiction.²⁰² To recognize the indexical (non-representational) strain of her novels—an aspect that many of her critics ignore—would be to expand our categories of literary materialism and reopen the question of literary mediation. By attending to the various means by which O'Connor's novels undo the logic of representation and the ways in which her texts gesture to mysteries but stop short of

²⁰² Timothy Bewes, “What is a Literary Landscape?: Immanence and the Ethics of Form.” *differences* 16 (2005): 94.

solving them, we can produce new ways of thinking through the vexed problem of literary substance. Taking seriously O'Connor's own refusal of representation, we must transfer our attention away from the received categories of her biography—the basic facts of O'Connor's Catholicism and her southern heritage—for the sake of a more integrated understanding of her beliefs, her regional belonging, and the ways in which her conception of literature is fully implicated in both.

iii. Literary Substance

Lest the reader think O'Connor's reflections on the Eucharist were occasioned by idle dinner party conversation, O'Connor consistently reflected on the substance of the sacrament in letters and lectures. In a July 1959 letter to her friend Ted Spivey, for instance, O'Connor notes how

If Christ actually teaches through many forms then for fifteen centuries, he taught that the Eucharist was his actual body and blood and thereafter he taught part of his people that it was only a symbol. The Catholic can't live with this kind of contradiction.²⁰³

O'Connor also wrestled with the contradiction between "actual" and "symbolic" notions of Christ in a letter dated December 1959 and addressed to Father John McCown, her spiritual advisor. In it, she objects to C.G. Jung's discussion of Christ's resurrection in *The Undiscovered Self*, a book which searches for a kind of self-knowledge untainted by "religious fanaticism."²⁰⁴ As O'Connor has it,

²⁰³ O'Connor, *Habit*, 341.

²⁰⁴ C.G. Jung, 35.

Jung has something to offer religion but is at the same time very dangerous for it. Jung would say, for instance, that Christ did not rise from the dead but we must realize that we need this symbol, that the notion has significance for our lives symbolically, etc. [...] You ought to get hold of it just to see what you have to combat in the modern mind.²⁰⁵ (*Habit* 362-63)

Here, as elsewhere, O'Connor objects to the notion that Christ is a symbolic figure,²⁰⁶ an objection she arrives at on two related grounds: first, because Jung treats Christ's resurrection as a parable rather than an historical event and spiritual fact; and second, because Jung treats Christian doctrine as fulfilling a psychic need. (It is for these reasons, I think, that she asks McCown to explicate what St. Ignatius of Loyola, major figure of the Counter-Reformation and minor target of Jung's analysis, meant by the phrase "the end sanctifies the means."²⁰⁷) O'Connor's objection to Jung is therefore also an objection

²⁰⁵ O'Connor, *Habit*, 362-63.

²⁰⁶ In a letter dated 28 December 1956, O'Connor explains to "A" that Christ is not a personified symbol in her story, "A View of the Woods." As she writes, "The first point is whether Pitts is or can be a Christ symbol. I had that role cut out for the woods. [...] Pitts and Mary Fortune realize the value of the woods, and the woods, if anything, are the Christ symbol. [...] The name of the story is a view of the woods and words alone are pure enough to be a Christ symbol if anything is" (*Habit* 190-91). In this remarkable passage, O'Connor refutes Hester's reading first on the grounds that Pitts cannot symbolize Christ because he "is a Christian and a sinner, pathetic by virtue of his sins" (*Habit* 190). As she goes on, however, she posits how the landscape might function as the closest equivalent to a Christ figure, then settles not on the "woods" but "the words alone" as symbols of Christ. It is precisely in the movement from symbol to "pure word[] alone," from meaning to matter, that I situate my analysis. This paragraph condenses a problematic that O'Connor confronted throughout her career, in spite of the fact that weeks later O'Connor conceded to Hester, somewhat disingenuously in my reading, that "You have convinced me that the Christ symbol is Pitts if there at all. You are right. It's got to be human" (*Habit* 196).

²⁰⁷ O'Connor, *Habit*, 362.

to a tradition of psychoanalytic thinking which, since Freud, made use of the symbols of dream-work as symptoms of psychic disorder. Her conflict with psychoanalytic thought has profound implications for how we read her fiction.

O'Connor's grievances with the limits of symbolic logic extend beyond her private correspondence. In a 1963 address to Sweetbriar College, she explains the difficulty of making belief credible to the modern reader, she attacks Ralph Waldo Emerson's emphasis on the purely symbolic significance of communion:

Today's audience is one in which religious feeling has become, if not atrophied, at least vaporous and sentimental. When Emerson decided, in 1832, that he could no longer celebrate the Lord's Supper unless the bread and wine were removed, an important step in the vaporization of religion in America was taken, and the spirit of that step has continued apace. When the physical fact is separated from the spiritual reality, the dissolution of belief is eventually inevitable.²⁰⁸

O'Connor's critique of Emerson here, about how he envisioned the "vaporization of religion in America," depends on the disappearance of the physicality of Christ's presence, a physicality that exceeds the limits of knowledge or understanding. But this isn't a plea for a lost materialism. Instead, it's a commitment that is not easily forged through signs alone.

The anti-symbolism that guided O'Connor, made legible through her indexical commitment to transubstantiation, was not only a belief that she held privately; it was one

²⁰⁸ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), 161-62.

that frequently appeared in her short fiction. A hermaphrodite in “A Temple of the Holy Ghost,” for instance, is at once a physical body whose parts signify “man and woman both,”²⁰⁹ and a temple of God (“God made me thisaway and I don’t dispute hit”²¹⁰). Though dismissed as a “freak,” the hermaphrodite finds redemption in the narrator, who echoes and confirms the believer’s radical faith in the description of a sunset. The story’s last lines recount how “[t]he sun was a huge red ball like an elevated Host drenched in blood and when it sank out of sight, it left a line in the sky like a red clay road hanging over the trees,”²¹¹ offering in simile a kind of truth that only the reader and the Freak can grasp.

Whether because her characters dramatize the transformative potential of transubstantiation, because her landscapes oddly naturalize the positions of the most estranged believers, or because the only signs of salvation come in unrecognizable forms, O’Connor’s fiction can hardly be discussed without recourse to the logic that the Eucharist puts forth. Nowhere else is the anxiety around the status of signs and their meaning more explicit than in *The Violent Bear it Away*. The novel follows Francis Marion Tarwater, the central character and possible prophet, who spends much of the novel anticipating and failing to find an adequate sign of his spiritual election. We find Tarwater at the start of the novel orphaned and reunited with his uncle, a schoolteacher

²⁰⁹ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 246.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 246. This character delivers a version of this line a page earlier, insisting that “God made me thisaway and if you laugh He may strike you the same way. This is the way He wanted me to be and I ain’t disputing His way. I’m showing you because I got to make the best of it. I expect you to act like ladies and gentlemen. I never done it to myself nor had a thing to do with it but I’m making the best of it. I don’t dispute hit” (245).

²¹¹ Ibid., 248.

named Rayber; together they try to defy Tarwater's late grandfather, Mason Tarwater, who prophesies that Tarwater will himself become a prophet and baptize Rayber's young son, Bishop. A series of struggles ensues as Tarwater fights an internal battle against the voices of an imaginary friend calling him to be a prophet while Rayber tries to mold Tarwater into a more "reasonable" modern world. The basic opposition here is between one form of Protestant Fundamentalism and another form of Intellectualism which end up mirroring each other in surprising ways. The course of the novel, as with much of O'Connor's fiction, hinges not only on the possibility of transcendence, and the attendant distinction between "religiosity" and "secularism," but on the form that such a revelation might take. A set of remarks which appear late in the novel foreground its strain toward authenticity and are made particularly interesting in the context of their Speaker, Tarwater's imaginary 'friend':

[Tarwater's] friend suggested he demand an unmistakable sign, not a pang of hunger or a reflection of himself in a store window, but an unmistakable sign, clear and suitable—water bursting forth from a rock, for instance, fire sweeping down at his command and destroying some site he would point to, such as the tabernacle he had gone to spit on.²¹²

Under the friend's formulation, the only reliable sign is destruction, a force that is neither felt ("not a pang of hunger") nor seen ("a reflection of himself in a store window") nor even interpretable. This is not to say that the unmistakable sign confounds interpretation; rather, it makes such a hermeneutic task redundant. The unmistakable, unambiguous sign,

²¹² Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), 162.

then, is not a sign in the linguistic sense—its existence needs no further confirmation or secondary representation. The unmistakable sign presents a sort of paradox: it is a desire for the *sheer force* of the real without representation, signification without the sign. We might even venture to say that here, form falsifies.

As the novel explores the fallibility of form, *The Violent Bear It Away* confirms the unreliability of resemblances—or, in Peirce’s terms—iconicity. While digging a grave for his great-uncle, Tarwater recalls a moment of sympathetic identification between himself and Rayber’s “idiot child,” Bishop, upon seeing him for the first time:

Tarwater had seen the schoolteacher once from a distance of about twenty feet and he had seen the dim-witted child closer up. The little boy somewhat resembled old Tarwater except for his eyes which were grey like the old man’s but clear, as if the other side of them went down and down into two pools of light. It was plain to look at him that he did not have any sense.²¹³

This passage seems to rely on two kinds of difference: first, that his kinship to Bishop is a relation based on slight variation: the little boy ‘somewhat’ resembled old Tarwater ‘except’ for his eyes. Further, the anatomical difference between Mason and Bishop is not a neutral one: the latter—whose eyes were “grey [...] but clear”—is, in Tarwater’s eyes, a poor facsimile of the former. Second, this episode hinges on the interplay between the two kinds of senses demonstrated here, perception and mental capacity: Tarwater senses that the boy lacks sense. In both cases, recognition depends upon a kind of misrecognition: Tarwater can only identify Bishop after he has mistaken him for old

²¹³ Ibid., 23.

Tarwater; we can only distinguish Tarwater from Bishop by noticing how his sense differs from Bishop's. In each case, too, the mistake reveals knowledge about the characters that would be impossible without it: the likenesses between these two faces and these two meanings do not merely disguise truth, they reveal it.

Yet by limiting the concept of semblance to outward appearances, we would miss an entirely separate register of this encounter which alters the category of semblance altogether. The following lines continue those quoted above, and recast the scene in a mimetic light. Notice how the point of view shifts ever so slightly from Francis to Mason, a shift which depends on our misrecognition of one Tarwater for the other:

Tarwater had seen the schoolteacher once from a distance of about twenty feet and he had seen the dim-witted child closer up. [...] The old man had been so shocked by the likeness and unlikeness that the time he and Tarwater had gone there, he had only stood in the door, staring at the little boy and rolling his tongue around outside his mouth as if he had no sense himself. That had been the first time he had seen the child and he could not forget him.²¹⁴

Here, Old Tarwater betrays Bishop's lack of sense by imitating him—an act of imitation, I would argue, that stems from a moment of sympathetic identification between the old man and the child, which, in turn, confirms the likeness that Tarwater sees in both. This scene of similar faces, exchanged glances, and mirroring gestures makes it nearly impossible *not* to mistake one character for another. The difference between Bishop's *actual* lack of sense and Mason Tarwater's *perceived* lack of sense is nearly

²¹⁴ Ibid., 23.

imperceptible and hinges on the ‘as if,’ a literary mode which O’Connor relies upon heavily. Here, though, let us simply recognize that this moment is structured out of an economy of resemblances—visage, gesture, gaze—that destabilizes the very idea of what it means for one thing to resemble another, making the promise of “unmistakable signs” an ambivalent, if not impossible, one.

Three years after the publication of *The Violent Bear It Away*, O’Connor herself echoed the need for unmistakable signs in fiction. In the following remark, uttered in a 1963 address on the place of theology in the literature of an increasingly secular world, she rehearses Tarwater’s friend’s passion for a similar real, thus inviting a comparison between O’Connor and her fictive counterpart. “...[I]f writers with a religious view of the world excel these days in the depiction of evil,” she claims, “it is because they have to make its nature unmistakable to their particular audience.”²¹⁵ The mere mention of unmistakable signs is particularly striking in the context of a novel whose own signs and characters are consistently mistaken for what they are not. Misrecognition, it seems, is one of the guiding principles of O’Connor’s text: at its most obvious, characters are victims of mistaken identity. Missionaries and madmen occupy the same positions, nephews are misrecognized as uncles, cousins for cousins. Through repetition, this pattern of misrecognition begins to seem like more than just a series of odd misreadings; indeed, the plot depends upon a pattern of repetition: two uncles—one, a self-professed prophet and the other, a schoolteacher—vie over the fate of one boy, a dynamic which is in and of itself the product of a former failed conversion.

²¹⁵ O’Connor, *Mystery*, 168.

iv. Wise Blood

So far we've seen how the only unmistakable signs in O'Connor's fiction are the non-signifying ones, those whose bare existence conveys proof of something that cannot be easily interpreted or understood. Conversely, then, those signs that turn out to be readable are the very ones that turn out to betray their characters. Like *The Violent Bear it Away*, *Wise Blood* (1952) features characters confronted with false forms of God. The most telling example is Asa Hawks, the blind evangelist of the Free Church of Christ who is revealed to be neither blind nor a man of the cloth. Asa attempts to publicly blind himself as a demonstration of his commitment to Christ; yet he fails, and his apparent blindness, in this case, turns out not to be a symbol of spiritual election. At the calling of his "wise blood," Enoch Emery steals a mummified, shrunken corpse from the aforementioned museum and consecrates it as part of Hazel Motes's would-be revolutionary church, The Church Without Christ which, according to Haze, "don't have a Jesus but it needs one! It needs a new Jesus! It needs one that's all man, without blood to waste, and it needs one that don't look like any other man so you'll look at him."²¹⁶ Enoch initially puts the corpse in a cabinet about which he had previously fantasized about crawling into:

As far as Enoch was concerned, this piece had always been the center of the room and the one that most connected him with what he didn't know.

More than once after a big supper, he had dreamed of unlocking the

²¹⁶ Flannery O'Connor, *Wise Blood*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1952): 140-41.

cabinet and getting in it and then proceeding to certain rites and mysteries that he had a very vague idea about in the morning.²¹⁷

Though this symbol is laden with meaning for Enoch, it is unclear to him what the cabinet might represent. If anything, the cabinet is a symbol of the limits of his own understanding and interpretation since, as we learn, it was the thing “that most connected him with what he didn’t know.”²¹⁸ Like so many underdetermined forms in the novel—including coffins, cages, chicken crates, and train berths—the cabinet fails both as a container and conveyer of meaning. It is, like the zoo animals that Enoch obsesses over, “only a form [...] to get through.”²¹⁹ In spite of his wise blood, Enoch lacks the knowledge that O’Connor’s belief in the Eucharist insists upon: that a sign’s form plays a necessary (non-arbitrary) relation to its content.

Beyond the cabinet, too, the new Jesus turns out not to be a mummified holy child but a “dead shriveled-up part-nigger dwarf.”²²⁰ Later we learn that “[t]wo days out of the glass case had not improved the new Jesus’ condition. One side of his face had been partly mashed in and on the other side, his eyelid had split and a pale dust was seeping out of it.”²²¹ New Jesus is the most explicit instance of *matter as matter*: its “shriveled body” is thrown against the wall and decapitated as “the trash inside sprayed out in a little

²¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 90.

²²⁰ Ibid., 176.

²²¹ Ibid., 184.

cloud of dust.”²²² Here, the novel rehearses its lesson on substance in the most profane of forms. It is difficult to imagine a more violent violation of symbolism.

And yet, O’Connor’s suspicion of symbols can neither be fully contained nor explained by these instances alone, as O’Connor herself was keenly aware. In a letter to Charlotte Gafford, O’Connor relays a telephone conversation she had with a group of students at Vanderbilt University who were curious about the details of “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” her most well-known story, that O’Connor saw as insignificant. As she recalls, “They asked me such things as ‘Miss O’Connor, why did they stop at *the Tower*?’—trying to make something of the word *tower*. They try to make everything a symbol. It kills me.”²²³ What O’Connor finds objectionable is the students’ desire to imbue an insignificant fictional detail with meaning. She continues:

...one of them said, “Miss O’Connor, why was the Misfit’s hat *black*?”

“Well,” I said, “he stold [sic] it from a countryman and in Georgia they usually wear black hats.” [...] In a few minutes he says, “Miss O’Connor,

what is the significance to the Misfit’s hat?” “To cover his head,” I say.²²⁴

Bad reading, for O’Connor, is transcendental reading: it treats each detail as though it were decodable and abstractable from the text itself—e.g. the color black is symbolic of the Misfit’s evil. The degree of her intolerance toward the students’ relationship to words, in which words are vehicles of a fully-knowable significance to which they can only

²²² Ibid., 188.

²²³ O’Connor, *Habit*, 465.

²²⁴ Ibid.

allude, is made clearer upon the realization that the same incident appears in a letter written three years earlier to Spivey, though the Vanderbilt students she encounters in that version are neither students nor from Vanderbilt, but “young teachers” of an “earnest type” from Wesleyan.²²⁵ Either the symbol was a recurrent problem for O’Connor’s readers—Vanderbilt students and Wesleyan professors alike—or it was a recurrent problem for O’Connor herself, who (perhaps) changed the details about her readers in each case to reflect on what she felt was an ongoing interpretive misstep. Her polemic against the symbol, then, not only speaks to the relationship of bread and wine to the Host; it also describes the relation between fiction and reality, a relation which presumes that fiction does something else than represent reality.

The reader’s mistake, therefore, is not of degree but of kind. Students who mistake fictional details for significant symbols—the color black signifies evil—are unable to understand the semantic plane on which O’Connor’s fiction operates, which is to say that meaning is non-hierarchical. Recalling her position on the Eucharist, significance is inseparable from the thing itself. To abstract “evil” from the hat is to overlook the semantic opacity that O’Connor continuously insists upon. To read hermeneutically, in other words, as O’Connor’s readers are often prone to do, is to approach the text as a vehicle of meaning. And, as we’ve seen thus far, her fiction exceeds transparency. Bewes poses this problem of reading O’Connor by wondering “[w]hy [we] read at all, if not to discover something that in some sense transcends the text?”²²⁶ Taken as something other than a rhetorical question, Bewes’s query seems like a

²²⁵ Ibid., 334.

²²⁶ Bewes, “Landscape,” 64.

rejoinder to O'Connor. Yet, as he goes on to argue, this question is continually and uniquely staged by her texts, which perpetually interrupt the process of transcendental reading, one that would violate the substance of the text in order to arrive at a message or maxim. As he writes

The importance of reading O'Connor's works at the present time [...] is that they force us to consider what is at stake in the *materiality* of the literary text in a way that has not been possible before. She requires us to set aside the metaphysical "taboo" by recognizing it for what it is, to avoid the blackmail of interpretation; and she enables us to develop a precise sense of the substance of the literary itself.²²⁷

In focusing on the materiality of the literary text, Bewes indicts two dominant ways of reading O'Connor which seem at first to be diametrically opposed: those which ignore the materiality of her writing and read her as primarily a Catholic writer, on the one hand, and those "sympathetic secular critics," on the other, who tend to read her along aesthetic lines, in which her belief "is an awkward foible that can only detract or distract from the aesthetically pleasing qualities of her work."²²⁸ Both tendencies, in his view, violate what O'Connor's work makes plain: that the truth of her texts is inextricable from their form as literature and that they bear an immanent relation to the phenomena they represent.

Building on Gilles Deleuze's account of the work of literature as a "plane of immanence," Bewes explains that "[i]mmanence implies no difference *in priority*

²²⁷ Ibid., 71.

²²⁸ Ibid.

between the text and what is not the text: no frontier upon a plane hitherto uncharted, or unchartable, by literary or artistic representation.”²²⁹

Another equally useful model for understanding the immanence of O’Connor’s work is possible through the concept of the index, which similarly refuses the distinction between the work of art and world on the basis that the two are ontologically linked. The refusal of such a distinction has profound consequences for how we understand the innerworkings of O’Connor’s texts. If it could be shown that belief were a material entity, whose material substance is better felt than read, resistant to interpretation and preserved intact in the concept of “mystery,” then the terms in which O’Connor’s work is understood would have to be reconsidered, particularly the assumption shared by many of O’Connor’s critics that her works are primarily allegorical.

Nearly halfway through *Wise Blood*, Enoch Emery, the “Sancho Panza to [the protagonist’s] Don Quixote,”²³⁰ is confronted with an odd series of markings that he fails to decode. Led on a mysterious journey by his “wise blood” with Hazel Motes in tow, Enoch stumbles on a building that he has visited countless times. This time, however, it looked different:

In a second, Enoch gripped [Hazel’s] arm again and stopped him. He pointed down through the trees. ‘Muvseevum,’ he said. The strange word made him shiver. That was the first time he had ever said it aloud. There were columns at the front of it and in between each column there was an eyeless stone woman holding a pot on her head. A concrete band was over

²²⁹ Ibid., 75.

²³⁰ Gooch, 204

the columns and the letters, M V S E V M, were cut into it. Enoch was afraid to pronounce the word again.²³¹

What Enoch cannot interpret or understand, O'Connor's reader, of course, can: the "strange word," we learn without much difficulty, through the narrator's accompanying description of the building's design, is "museum." Yet, as Steven Pinkerton notes, the word "itself affects [Enoch] as an incantation or holy word—[it is] Enoch's version, even, of the unutterable Tetragrammaton."²³² This scene of misreading, then, of Enoch's failure to know what we can easily gather, amounts to more than a story of dramatic irony or even mysterious spiritual awakening.

In its arrangement of capital letters, the novel reproduces Enoch's misrecognition on the page. Accordingly, the reader is forced to confront the shape of the signifier while imagining the place to which it refers. The hieroglyphic M V S E V M, with its Latinate Us—functions not only as a sign, then, but an object in its own right, a sign whose appearance carries with it a mystery not dissimilar to the relics inside its referent. The sign's ability to induce a shudder has everything to do with its substance. The sign—or, rather, the sign of a sign which demarcates the space of the museum—means, but also, very simply, is. What Enoch experiences, and what the novel restages, is the interaction between showing and being. Enoch's affective reaction to the word has little to do with its message. And in its capacity to resist interpretation, such a sign is particularly striking in a novel whose readers so often tend to read its lines as evident allegories of spiritual salvation and damnation. One example of this kind of invited allegory can be found in

²³¹ O'Connor, *Wise*, 92.

²³² Pinkerton, 458.

O'Connor's coy use of proper names to indicate characters' moral compasses and struggles: the name Hazel Motes, for instance, recalls Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: "Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote of thy brother's eye."²³³ In light of this biblical "mote," we might be inclined to read Hazel as a figure whose literal and spiritual vision is obstructed. And yet, as compelling as that kind of interpretation is, such reading is not my aim. To put it in the terms laid out by the Book of Matthew: I am more interested in the mote—the speck of substance in the proverbial eye—than in the clarity of vision.

Encountering this "strange word" in the space of the text raises a number of questions about its power over Enoch as well as its function in the novel. Recall how Enoch's utterance made him "shiver" and that he was subsequently "afraid to pronounce [it] again."²³⁴ Why does sensation (the shiver) come to replace knowledge (an interpretation of the mark's meaning)? What exactly is the source of Enoch's "unutterable" fear? Put differently, what is the power of a non-signifying sign? And why is it reproduced in the space of the text, despite the fact that we know very well what it means, or what it should mean?

The source of Enoch's fear is not the "shape of the signifier," per se, but the knowledge it imparts to Enoch, a knowledge that, however paradoxically, remains a mystery both to Enoch and to the reader, and whose status as mystery is all the more terrifying for both. That source is Enoch's "wise blood," whose logic is worth examining in detail. After all, Enoch and Hazel are drawn to the museum through this substance, an

²³³ *The English Standard Version Bible*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) Matthew 7:5.

²³⁴ O'Connor, *Wise*, 92.

embodied and nonetheless alien will which drives the plot in several crucial moments. When asked by Hazel why they must travel to the museum by foot, the reader is met with a paradox: “‘I don’t know,’ Enoch said. He knew something was going to happen to him. His blood stopped beating. All the time it had been beating like drum noises and now it had stopped.”²³⁵ As a channel of unintelligible and uninterpretable messages, the concept of “wise blood” is itself a mystery for Enoch as for the reader: we know that it was inherited from “his daddy,”²³⁶ and that it “beat[s] like drum noises,”²³⁷ which is to say that it is non-semantic. As the narrator explains, “His blood was more sensitive than any other part of him; it wrote doom all through him, except possibly in his brain, and the result was that his tongue, which edged out every few minutes to test his fever blister, knew more than he did.”²³⁸ *Wise Blood* literalizes the proposition of incest that haunts *The Sound and the Fury*: insofar as “blood is blood and you can’t get around it,” Enoch’s blood cannot be taken as trope (à la Michaels). Rather, the wisdom of Enoch’s blood, whose content is withheld from both Enoch and the reader, is inextricable from its substance.

That Enoch’s wise blood knows more than he does makes him a servant of its will: “He didn’t want to justify his daddy’s blood, he didn’t want to be always having to do something that something else wanted him to do, that he didn’t know what it was and

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Ibid., 75.

²³⁷ Ibid., 92.

²³⁸ Ibid., 129-30.

that was always dangerous.”²³⁹ Though described as writing “doom all through him,” the messages are not written but sensed, and cannot be decoded or understood: they have no form or discernable origin, and, like the MVSEVM, are only perceptible to Enoch and the reader as dangerous known unknowns. Enoch’s wisdom is inimical to interpretation: “All morning his mind was not on the gate he was supposed to guard but was chasing around after his blood, like a boy with a mop and a bucket, beating something here and sloshing down something there, without a second’s rest.”²⁴⁰

This is to say that the significance of wise blood is rather felt than interpreted. That Enoch’s wisdom is given form by his blood—itself an extreme version of the “embodied knowledge” that William Carlos Williams championed decades earlier, as the next chapter will explore—means that its status as medium is entirely dependent on its material substance. Unlike the caged animals whose existence was “only a form he had to get through,”²⁴¹ Enoch’s blood cannot be abstracted from its substance. As Enoch prepares his room for the arrival of the new Jesus, he is struck with a revelation. In polishing the stubborn dirt off a chair, he thinks to himself:

Enoch didn’t know if it [the chair] was for him or against him. He had a nasty impulse to kick it to pieces, but he let it stay there, exactly in the position it had sat down in, because for the time anyway, he was not a

²³⁹ Ibid., 135.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 90.

foolhardy boy who took chances on the meanings of things. For the time, he knew that what he didn't know was what mattered.²⁴²

Enoch is therefore wise not only because of the matter (as matter) he inherited, but also because of his willed ignorance: he does not “[take] chances on the meanings of things” but instead preserves those unknowns as mysteries to be felt. As the vehicle for this mysterious and intractably material substance, Enoch personifies the novel's overall project which, in rehearsing the limits of interpretation, reproduces the logic of “wise blood” as its own.

The only other model of interpretation put forth by the novel is a debased form of exegesis known to Onnie Jay Holy, self-professed “artist-type” and founder of the Holy Church of Christ Without Christ (a response to Hazel's Church Without Christ which, we should recall, is itself a response to the Free Church of Christ), as “interpitation.” He explains “interpitation” in the following way: “You don't have to believe nothing you don't understand and approve of. If you don't understand it, it ain't true, and that's all there is to it. No jokers in the deck, friends.”²⁴³ The logic of interpitation is therefore the exact inverse of wise blood: it is a belief based entirely on understanding, rather than a belief in that which confounds understanding; it resides in the “heart,” or one's feelings, not the blood. But Onnie Jay (whose real name is Hoover Shoats) continues:

‘I want to tell you a second reason why you can absolutely trust this church—it's based on the Bible. Yes sir! It's based on your own personal interpitation of the Bible, friends. You can sit at home and interpit your

²⁴² Ibid., 131.

²⁴³ Ibid., 152.

own Bible however you feel in your heart it ought to be interpreted. That's right,' he said, 'just the way Jesus would have done it.' [...] When you're in this church you can know that there's nothing or nobody ahead of you, nobody knows nothing you don't know, all the cards are on the table, friends, and that's a fack!'²⁴⁴

Haze objects to Onnie Jay on the grounds that he is not only a business competitor but a bad imitation and a "liar,"²⁴⁵ and we might be inclined to agree with him, given how the religious huckster reduces faith to a card game—"No jokers in the deck, friends"; "all the cards are on the table, friends," and, perhaps even more significantly, how he mistakes Jesus for one of his disciples. But the model Onnie Jay proposes is not entirely without historical precedent: it is a caricature of the democratizing and pluralist potential of Protestant belief which holds that believers have a more direct communion with God, suggested by his claim that "there's nothing or nobody ahead of you, nobody knows nothing you don't know."²⁴⁶ The meaning of scripture does not require the translating authority of a priest, but can be discerned "however you feel it in your heart to be interpreted."²⁴⁷ The novel discredits Onnie Jay's model as spiritually bankrupt. And yet, his presence in the novel problematizes the relationship between being saved and knowing it: both Francis Tarwater (in *The Violent Bear It Away*) and Hazel Motes maintain that you cannot only be saved, you must know it; but the urge to know in

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 152-53.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 153.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

²⁴⁷ Ibid.

advance seems evidence of damnation. Furthermore, the incommensurability between salvation and interpretation raises fundamental questions for the critic: how might we avoid the dead ends of interpretation? What might it mean to avoid being an “innerleckchul,” who, as Onnie Jay sees it, “never [has] nothing to show for what you’re saying?”²⁴⁸ And, finally, what relationship should critique have to a novel whose protagonist “had learned to read and write but [learned] that it was wiser not to”?²⁴⁹

Unlike so many of the novel’s false forms of God—caged animals, words, train berths—the power of Enoch’s blood remains rooted in its capacity to function as medium and matter simultaneously. That both the “wise blood” and the “new Jesus” share the same ineluctable materiality speaks to the reversibility of sacred and profane categories in O’Connor’s theology. In a letter dated 3 March 1954, O’Connor reiterates this materiality as it relates to the symbolic failures of *Wise Blood*:

When you start describing the significance of a symbol like the tunnel which recurs in the book, you immediately begin to limit it and a symbol should go on deepening. Everything should have a wider significance—but I am a novelist not a critic and I can excuse myself from *explication de textes* on the ground. The real reason of course is laziness.²⁵⁰

What O’Connor attributes to ignorance—“I am [...] not a critic”—and laziness, we should take seriously as O’Connor’s sustained resistance to symbol, as the novel’s

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 159.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 17.

²⁵⁰ O’Connor, *Habit*, 70.

openness to a “wider significance” that cannot be confined to a single reading, or extracted from the form of the text itself.

The rejection of symbol is not only personified by O’Connor’s characters; it is also carried out at the level of her style. Her metaphors are often so overdetermined that they cease to function like metaphors at all. Consider this description of Haze upon reluctantly revisiting a prostitute, Mrs. Watts: “He began to move around the room, examining this and that. His throat got dryer and his heart began to grip him like a little ape clutching the bars of its cage.”²⁵¹ This figural “little ape” returns later in the novel in the form of an actual big gorilla, when Enoch’s obsession with animals (mentioned above) results in him becoming one. After a humiliating encounter with “Gonga! Giant Jungle Monarch and a Great Star!”²⁵² who initially greets him with a warm handshake (the first, we learn, that had been offered to Enoch since he had come to the city), only to tell him afterwards in “a surly voice inside the ape-suit” to “go to hell,”²⁵³ Enoch does what Gonga could not: after murdering the man in the Gonga suit and burying his clothes which, we are told, “was not a symbol to him of burying his former self,”²⁵⁴ Enoch becomes the gorilla. The description of his transformation is worth quoting in full:

In the uncertain light, one of his lean white legs could be seen to disappear and then the other, one arm and then the other: a black heavier shaggier figure replaced his. For an instant, it had two heads, one light and one

²⁵¹ O’Connor, *Wise*, 56.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 177.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 182.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 198.

dark, but after a second, it pulled the dark back head over the other and corrected this. It busied itself with certain hidden fastenings and what appeared to be minor adjustments of its hide.

For a time after this, it stood very still and didn't do anything. Then it began to growl and beat its chest; it jumped up and down and flung its arms and thrust its head forward. The growls were thin and uncertain at first but they grew louder after a second. They became low and poisonous, louder again, low and poisonous again; they stopped altogether. The figure extended its hand, clutched nothing, and shook its arm vigorously; it withdrew the arm, extended it again, clutched nothing, and shook. It repeated this four or five times. Then it picked up the pointed stick and placed it at a cocky angle under its arm and left the woods for the highway. No gorilla in existence, whether in the jungles of Africa or California, or in New York City in the finest apartment in the world, was happier at that moment than this one, whose god had finally rewarded it.²⁵⁵

This passage begins with a cold detachment: Enoch is no longer a man but a “figure” that disappears along with the pronoun, “he.” The shift from “he” to “it” encourages us to read the transformation as transubstantiation, a comic expression of O'Connor's adjudication on the Catholic sacrament. But the last sentence signals a shift in narrative voice: no longer detached but focalized, we are given access to Enoch's emotional and spiritual state. This is a moment of redemption and truth in spite of its bathetic rendering.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 199-200.

The point here is not just that Enoch is literally transformed, but that metaphors too—“the little ape clutching at the bars of its cage”—have afterlives as material entities. What the novel illustrates through this bathetic echo is the capacity of vehicles to abandon their tenors. O’Connor’s metaphors, in other words, are exhausted to the extent that they refuse not just a single meaning, but refuse to stand in as anything other than themselves. It is in their refusal of the allegorical function that they take on a substance of their own.

What I’ve tried to demonstrate is that O’Connor’s deep suspicion of the symbol occurs at multiple registers of the text: both at the granular level (word and character) and that of the work as a whole: its metaphors cease to function as figures and instead become forms that cannot simply be transcended. Condensed in the remark, “if it’s a symbol to Hell with it,” O’Connor’s abiding commitment to signs that simultaneously partake of and exceed their referents offers a profound interpretive frame through which to read her fiction. In apprehending the materiality of her signs, we can begin to see how she translates indexicality into a religious idiom and an aesthetic practice. We can glimpse the correspondences between, say, the impossibility of an unmediated relationship to a Christian God and the thorniness of words that act more like dense matter than gauzy mediums of thought. In this light, then, her novels cannot be taken as mere allegories of Catholicism, as most of her critics are wont to do. But neither should they be read as merely allegorizing the institutionalization of creative writing, as Mark McGurl has it when he writes in *The Program Era* how her fiction “can also be read as passionate allegorical arguments for the necessary pleasures of the ‘discipline’ they so famously manifest.”²⁵⁶ Against these modes of reading, which treat her fiction as transparent

²⁵⁶ McGurl, *The Program Era*, 134.

vehicles of meaning, I argue that O'Connor's fiction stages a kind of theological materialism.

Furthermore, O'Connor forces us to reconsider what is at stake in the materiality of the literary text in a way that has not yet been recognized by her critics. To the extent that O'Connor's novels stray from a realist mode of representation, they do so not simply to uphold the sheer materiality of language for its own sake. Rather, her fervor for mystery and her wariness of symbolism²⁵⁷ and allegory alike invite us to see what her characters so often can't: that suspending the signifying properties of a sign is the precondition for grace. It is also the precondition for the aesthetic. To read her work as allegory is to miss the challenge that O'Connor puts to us: to imagine the ends of representation—the cruel paradox of unmistakable signs—and to recognize that her words are not mere vehicles for Christian dogma. Both of her novels dramatize the folly of searching for a sign that would confirm one's spiritual election: *Haze* and *Tarwater* illustrate how interpretation undermines salvation. If O'Connor's works can be said to allegorize anything, it is this: that structures of reference are not as straightforward as they seem. The important thing about O'Connor's expression of God's grace is precisely its immanence—the imperative of salvation can only become realized to the extent that it mingles with the world.

O'Connor's refusal of representation carries profound implications for the position she continues to occupy in literary criticism. As a regionalist author made to

²⁵⁷ In "Novelist and Believer," O'Connor qualifies her wariness of pure symbolism, noting how symbols require supplementary writing. "The good novelist," she writes, "not only finds a symbol for feeling, he finds a symbol and a way of lodging it which tells the intelligent reader whether this feeling is adequate or inadequate, whether it is moral or immoral, whether it is good or evil. And his theology, even in its most remote reaches, will have a direct bearing on this." (MM 156)

represent the American South and to stand in for religious writers, but who was always uneasy with the logic of representation, O'Connor was acutely aware of the limits of representation with regards to her work and to her position as an author. This is also something about which she had much to say. In another letter to "A," she writes about her belief that there is only one Reality and that that is the end of it, but the term, "Christian Realism," has become necessary for me, perhaps in a purely academic way, because I find myself in a world where everybody has his compartment, puts you in yours, shuts the door and departs."²⁵⁸

While consistently confined through the guiding assumption that, as a Catholic writing in the largely Protestant South, she should remain faithful to her region, O'Connor nevertheless resists this reasoning. "[I]t is the particular burden of the fiction writer," she suggests, "that he has to make one country do for all and that he has to evoke that one country through the concrete particulars of a life that he can make believable."²⁵⁹ Allow me quickly to point out, recalling the discussion of nationalism with which I began, that the words "nation" and "nation-state" do not sit easily within O'Connor's lexicon, a tension that I read as evidence of a competing affiliation to the region, indicated, for instance, by the "homely" resonances inscribed in a term like "country," as opposed to "world," the term O'Connor explicitly rejects.²⁶⁰ Returning to the essay at hand, however, the question of fidelity here is not only one of theology, but geography. Southern writers, she goes on to explain, bear the acute burden of being ambassadors to

²⁵⁸ *Habit*, 92.

²⁵⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery*, 27.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

their country whether they choose to or not since they are isolated from the rest of America.²⁶¹ “The woods are full of regional writers,” she writes, “and it is the great horror of every serious Southern writer that he will become one of them.”²⁶²

The *country* that mediates regional writing and national writing—the former bound to represent “everything deformed and grotesque”; the latter condemned to “express[ing] this great country—which is ‘enjoying an unparalleled prosperity,’ [and] which is ‘the strongest nation in the world’” is theology.²⁶³ With this third term, theology, O’Connor avoids the double-bind of the Southern writer, who becomes free to express her observations without the burden of traditional realism. Christian dogma, she writes, “frees the storyteller to observe. It is not a set of rules which fixes what he sees in the world. It affects his writing primarily by guaranteeing his respect for mystery.”²⁶⁴ In the same gesture, Christian dogma is here conceptualized as an enabling constraint; her “country” becomes internalized: “When we talk about the writer’s country,” she continues, “we are liable to forget that no matter what particular country it is, it is inside as well as outside him. [...] To know oneself is to know one’s region. It is also to know the world, and it is also, paradoxically, a form of exile from that world.”²⁶⁵ In turning toward mystery, O’Connor makes room for the possibility that a Southern writer remain rooted—not to a landscape, but to the inner substance of her faith. In her “respect for

²⁶¹ Ibid., 28.

²⁶² Ibid., 29.

²⁶³ Ibid. 28, 29-30.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 31.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 35.

mystery,” in other words, the writer need not represent the South faithfully and, perhaps more profoundly, need not represent at all.

What separates the anti-symbolism of O’Connor from the anti-symbolism we find in William Carlos Williams or minimalist artist Carl Andre which open this chapter? This is one animating question of my project, whose archive coheres around and is circumscribed by the complex positions several American midcentury writers take toward the category of aesthetics, the alternatives to representation, and art’s utilitarian ends. Despite her suspicion of the symbol, O’Connor maintains that “art” is a category to be preserved—the social and religious efficacy of any work is for her secondary. For Williams, by contrast, the work of art is only useful when fully instrumentalized, as “a chemical experiment” or a “work of differential calculus.” What separates O’Connor’s suspicion of the religious-literary symbol from Williams’s anti-symbolism also depends, as the next chapter will show, on our taking up the category of the region once more through the material landscape of Paterson, New Jersey.

Despite their diverging views on the function of art, O’Connor and Williams complicate the well-known and often short-sighted dichotomy between modernism and realism. By examining instances of “non-representational realism,” my account of modernist aesthetics demonstrates how works can be both abstract and realist, both experimental and nonetheless intimately tied to—and responsible to—their subject matter. O’Connor’s disavowal of the symbol is one expression of a lingering modernist interest in the index, as a sort of material trace that achieves significance precisely because it is apparently but “the physical manifestation of a cause.” To read O’Connor’s work as an extension of the modernist project, in turn, forces us to reconsider not only

when modernism ended (or if it ended) but, more importantly, why the modernist fascination with the index persisted—why, in other words, the modernist investment in indexical signs and the logics of materiality and immediacy that accompany it do not always imply nativist nationalism, as Michaels has it. American literature's expressions of indexicality, as the next chapter will show in more detail, reveal attachments to local history and regional landscape that exceed and complicate dominant forms of midcentury nationalism.

CHAPTER THREE: William Carlos Williams's Poetics of Contact

"The land! don't you feel it? Doesn't it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves, to steal from them—as if it must be clinging even to their corpses—some authenticity."

--William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain* (1925)

"The poem to me (until I go broke) is an attempt, an experiment, a failing experiment, toward assertion with broken means but an assertion, always, of a new and total culture the lifting of an environment to expression."

--William Carlos Williams, Letter to Henry Wells (1950)

North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
North by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northeast by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northeast by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
East by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
East by South—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Southeast by East—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
South—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
South by West—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Southwest by South—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Southwest by West—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
West by South—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
West—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
West by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northwest by West—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water
Northwest by North—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water

North by West—Mud, salt crystals, rocks, water [move?]

--Robert Smithson, "The Spiral Jetty" (1972)

i. "every grain of sand ... a dead metaphor"

Robert Smithson may be best known for his *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a monumental sculpture made of rock, salt crystals and mud settled in the increasingly deep waters of Utah's Salt Lake. Indeed, his site-specific manipulations of soil and terrain on large swaths of remote land, known as Earthworks, inspired several generations of post-minimalist artists (Carl Andre, Claes Oldenburg, Sol LeWitt, Walter De Maria and Dennis Oppenheim, among others) to create sculptures that were similarly massive and prone to decay. But to characterize him simply as a Land Artist would overlook the fundamental role that the written word played in his work. As he pushed against the institutional (financial, spatial) strictures of the art gallery, and as he sought to find an aesthetic form coterminous with (not autonomous from) the outside world, Smithson realized he could not get around language. Published less than a year before the exhibition that coined the term "Earthworks,"²⁶⁶ Smithson recounts a trip to the relics of New Jersey's industrial past—bridges, plumbing systems, roadways—all of which are abandoned sites. What becomes clear, though, in Smithson's account of these neglected sites is the role of written text:

²⁶⁶ The exhibition that would eventually spawn Land Art and other loosely affiliated postminimalist schools, titled "EARTH WORKS," was held at the Dwan Gallery in New York in October 1968 and featured artists with a range of commitments and expertise, including Happenings (Claes Oldenburg), Fluxus (Walter De Maria), *Arte Povera* (De Maria, Michael Heizer, Robert Morris, Dennis Oppenheim, and Smithson), Minimalist installation (Carl Andre, Sol LeWitt), Conceptual Art (LeWitt, Stephen Kaltenbach), architecture, landscape, and environmental design (Herbert Bayer) and archaeological excavation (Heizer).

A little statue with right arm held high faced a pond (or was it the sea?).
'Gothic' buildings in the allegory had a faded look, while an unnecessary tree (or was it a cloud of smoke?) seemed to puff up on the left side of the landscape. [...] My eyes stumbled over the newsprint, over such headlines as "Seasonal Upswing," "A Shuttle Service" and "Moving a 1,000 Pound Sculpture Can Be a Fine Work of Art, Too."²⁶⁷

Smithson's description of the New Jersey industrialist landscape is punctuated by the texts—here, that day's *New York Times*—which he happens to be reading while travelling. What becomes clear, though, is the way in which Smithson's interest in landscapes is completely mediated by the written word: the details of Passaic are interwoven with news stories, road signs and billboards with messages like "THE EMERGING POLICE STATE IN AMERICA SPY GOVERNMENT," and passages from "a Signet paperback called *Earthworks* by Brian W. Aldiss," after which he would name the show that became synonymous with his practice.²⁶⁸ Written text is therefore not merely juxtaposed with but fully integrated into Smithson's landscape.²⁶⁹

Smithson's tour doesn't document the specific aspects of the land as such, but instead describes a ground thoroughly permeated with language. This dynamic becomes evident when he frames the environment in textual terms: the sky was a "subtle newsprint

²⁶⁷ Smithson, 69

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁶⁹ For a reading of a similar phenomenon in *Paterson*, see Margaret Lloyd Bollard, "The 'Newspaper Landscape' of Williams' 'Paterson,'" *Contemporary Literature* 16 (1975): 317-27. My interest in *Paterson* dovetails with Bollard's, but differs in its emphasis on the non-representational aspects of the poem, not on structures of mediation.

grey;” later, the sunshine “cinema-ized the site, turning the bridge and the river into an over-exposed *picture*,” such that the bridge’s rotations, making way for cargo, “suggested the limited movements of an outmoded world.”²⁷⁰ As he illustrates it, the landscape is doubly outmoded, given its postindustrial decay and his analogy to weathered aesthetic forms—“grey” newsprint and “over-exposed” photographs. In its portrait of competing media (newspapers, film), then, Smithson’s theory of monuments suggests the extent to which the very idea of a monument is a fully-mediated concept whose failed future is preserved in commercial signs: “A Utopia minus a bottom, a place where the machines are idle, and the sun has turned to glass, and a place where the Passaic Concrete Plant (253 River Drive) does a good business in STONE, BITUMINOUS, SAND, and CEMENT.”²⁷¹ Advertising copy, newspaper headlines and science fiction exist alongside stone, bituminous coal, sand and cement; work and world, here, are mutually entangled.

Insofar as Smithson documents the gritty reality of a 1976 industrial New Jersey, then, he does so along literary lines, wherein the “Passaic center loomed like a dull adjective” and where “every grain of sand was a dead metaphor that equaled timelessness, and to decipher such metaphors would take one through the false mirror of eternity.”²⁷² Literature’s legacy can be found not only in this austere environment; it’s among Smithson’s most profound sources of inspiration. In a 1972 interview with Gianni Pettena, Smithson admits the impact of American modernist verse on his practice:

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 69-70.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 72.

²⁷² Ibid.

In a way, this article I wrote on Passaic could be conceived of as a kind of appendix to William Carlos Williams's poem 'Paterson.' It comes out of that kind of New Jersey ambience where everything is chewed up. New Jersey [is] like a kind of destroyed California, a derelict California.²⁷³

What binds Smithson to Williams isn't simply an affinity for the rustbelt (though they certainly share it).²⁷⁴ For both, the artwork does not merely represent a landscape, it *is* that landscape.²⁷⁵ Such a relation is easy enough to imagine with an earthwork—*Spiral Jetty* is nothing apart from its site, and will cease to exist once the waters of Salt Lake have eroded and submerged the sculpture. But it is considerably more difficult to begin to understand how a poem might bear the same intimate relation with a landscape. The desire for this difficult poetic undertaking, in spite of its practical failures, is the subject of the sections to follow.

In the last chapter, I argued for a reconsideration of the symbolic potential of Flannery O'Connor's novels. Against the overwhelming tendency to read her work as religious allegory, a mode of reading which her work appears to endorse, I show how her

²⁷³ Ibid., 298.

²⁷⁴ Of the "aspect of falling" involved in Smithson's dumping pieces like *Asphalt Rundown* (1969), in which he poured a dump truck full of asphalt down a steep dirt incline in a quarry near Rome, Italy, the artist : "You might say that there's also a correlation to Williams. You know, all the associations with the falls from Paterson. [...] All the aspects of gravitational flow" (Smithson 216). One can see these reflections an early sign of the artist's later interest in entropy. Williams's influence on Smithson seems to have been overdetermined—in addition to being a New Jersey native, geological enthusiast and protoconceptual artist, Williams was Smithson's pediatrician.

²⁷⁵ In the same interview, Smithson describes his aesthetic practice in a manner suggestive of the same sense of belonging and relationality: "I like landscapes that suggest prehistory. As an artist it is sort of interesting to take on the persona of a geologic agent where man actually becomes part of that process rather than overcoming it—rather than overcoming the natural processes of challenging the situation. You just go along with it, and there can be a kind of building that takes place this way" (Smithson 298).

literary practice—her fascination with non-signifying signs, on the one hand, and signs that exceed interpretation, on the other—amounts to what I call a “theological materialism,” or an abiding faith in meaning’s immanence. O’Connor’s position on the Eucharist, in my reading, pertains equally to poetics and to the sacrament. In examining her rejection of symbolism at multiple registers, I noted how her poetic vehicles continually abandon their tenors; images that would seem to have metaphorical value do not, in the end, transcend their status as things. O’Connor forces us to consider what is at stake in the *materiality* of the literary text in a way that has not been recognized by the main currents of her criticism. By focusing on the alternatives to those currents—namely, symbolism and allegory—evident in her statement on the Eucharist and in the logic of “wise blood,” I argued against the habit of reading her work as a thinly veiled, encoded religious message. The kind of transcendental interpretation implied by hermeneutic reading is interrupted at every turn. For O’Connor, matter is not transcended easily, if at all. If her works can be said to allegorize anything, it is that mere symbols are not vehicles of truth, and that grace is only legible through extra-representational means.

O’Connor was not alone in her skepticism toward symbols. In 1949, while she was at work adapting two stories from her master’s thesis into what would eventually become *Wise Blood*, William Carlos Williams published Book Three of *Paterson*, a six-volume, unfinished poem²⁷⁶ which, though a secular work, no less dogmatically struggled

²⁷⁶ As with *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, critics often deem Williams’s unfinished epic to be a failed project. In *The Modernist Papers*, Fredric Jameson provides an insightful critique of the false logic of modernist innovation at work in such a judgment, noting how the poem’s condition of failure is both intentional and internal: “William Carlos Williams’s *Paterson* is [...] a modern epic that knows in its deepest structural impulses—unlike its great models in the pocket epics of Pound and Eliot, and in ways quite unlike the naivete of cognate efforts like Hart Crane’s *Bridge*—that it must not succeed, that its conditions of realization depend on a fundamental

to find a language close to his subject: the city of Paterson, New Jersey. In developing an idiom and poetic practice unique to the industrial town, Williams strove to find a way to combine his work with the material history of the area—in a sense, to merge the work and its world, much in the way landscape artists sought to merge a work of sculpture with its site. In developing a site-specific poetics, then, the poet necessarily refuses to convert materials into vehicles of meaning. Fossilized animal remains, like many artifacts in the site, offer nothing except “a paper weight / of sufficient quaintness.”²⁷⁷ In *Paterson*’s non-representational realism, I will argue, Williams offers a solution to the problems posed by a poetics of contact attempted decades earlier. In exploring how Williams turns vague aesthetic ambition into formal strategy, this chapter considers two kinds of traces: the material remains along the Passaic River and the poetic aims that haunt Williams’s work.

ii. “to have a contact”

In the autumn of 1931, Williams wrote to E.E. Cummings to solicit poetry for a little magazine he had revived after nearly a decade of dormancy, and which he had previously edited with Robert McAlmon. *Contact*, which ran five issues between December 1920 and June 1923, initially endeavored (as Williams wrote in the first issue published in 1920) to feature “native work in verse, fiction, criticism or whatever is

success in failing, at the same time that it must not embody any kind of will to failure either, in the conventional psychology of the inferiority complex or in the willful self-crippling of the accident prone or the writer’s block” (Jameson 3). In expressing this structural (non-psychological) failure, Williams incorporates notes and letters about the poem’s production into the poem itself and, in so doing, collapses the frame between the poem and its outside.

²⁷⁷ Williams, *Paterson* 143.

written ... insisting on that which we have not found insisted upon before, the essential contact between words and the locality that breeds them, in this case America.”²⁷⁸ The journal’s first run boasted poems, letters, and essays by Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Hilda Doolittle, Marsden Hartley and Rex Slinkard (among others). By 1931, however, its *raison d’être* faced a crisis. As Williams puts it:

Who has the effrontery today to inaugurate a new magazine or to revive an old must justify himself for so doing in some way above the ordinary.

With the confusion there is about us and the despairing minds there are, what in the world is writing good for anyway? ... Why not take the money there is for a magazine like this and give it away—as food—to [those] living in packing cases over near the East River these winter nights?²⁷⁹

This question, asked in one form or another by Agee and countless others throughout the thirties, caused many socially committed writers to reformulate the assumptions upon which American letters was based. And like Agee after him, Williams’s solution to the ethical and political problems posed by the Great Depression required a total reconceptualization of aesthetic work as something neither arbitrary nor excessive but necessary to national survival. Comparing the value of letters against the necessity of foodstuffs, Williams reasoned that the only justifiable post-Depression American aesthetic is one marked by “contact,” steeped in the everyday experiences of Americans, but avoiding the kind of propagandist orthodoxies championed in Mike Gold’s 1930 manifesto “Proletarian Realism,” which called for an explicitly proletarian literature that

²⁷⁸ Williams, *Contact* (first ser, 1.1): 10.

²⁷⁹ Williams, *Contact* (second ser., 1.1): 1.

represented “the *real conflicts* of men and women who work for a living.”²⁸⁰ Williams’s notion of “contact”—a loose ethos more than a coherent aesthetic program—asserted that discourse has a real, physical connection with its world; but this connection is not, or not simply, one of representation. Rather, a literature of contact was to be written in direct engagement with one’s immediate social and geopolitical circumstances, yielding (ideally) a singularly American aesthetic scrubbed of any foreign influence.

The reply Williams received from Cummings reflected, albeit somewhat parodically, the magazine’s renewed vision:

let’s start a magazine
to hell with literature
we want something redblooded

lousy with pure
reeking with stark
and fearlessly obscene
but really clean
get what I mean
let’s not spoil it
let’s make it serious

something authentic and delirious
you know something genuine like a mark
in a toilet

graced with g-ts and g-tted
with grace

squeeze your n-ts and open your face²⁸¹

²⁸⁰ Williams goes on to imply that the “same sort of stupidity” that permits “bad writing” also allows for the reproduction of social inequality. While his likening of economic justice to bad prose is certainly naïve and impractical, I am interested in the bases upon which he makes this assertion—namely, the assumption that literature has, or should have, a direct impact on economic inequality.

²⁸¹ Ibid.

If *Contact* was to amount to more than the other magazines of its time, and if it could adequately reflect and respond to a nation in financial crisis, the editors—Williams and now Nathanael West—maintained that its contents must be “red[-]blooded,” “lousy with pur[ity]” and “reeking with stark[ness].” Cummings’s response, which was published in the opening pages of *Contact*’s second run, exposes the shortcomings of the journal’s ambition by ironizing its rhetoric: real writing, like the real American, is equally pure and profane, “clean” and “obscene”—its authenticity not spiritual but scatological. “Let’s Start a Magazine” recasts Williams’s pursuit of pure literature as perverse.

As Williams had it, literature’s value is determined by its origin in local circumstance. “[A]rt may be the supreme hypocrisy of an information-cultured people without contact,” Williams announced on the first issue’s cover, “justifiable perhaps it if becomes at last actually the way sensitive people live.”²⁸² Just what that meant, however, is difficult to say. The journal’s title was first proposed to Williams in 1920 by its eventual co-editor, Robert McAlmon, who had heard it used by pilots upon landing a plane. But their conception of contact was much more expansive and abstract than a plane touching down to land. Combining the spirit of leftist political commitment with the aesthetic experiment of high modernism, *Contact* sprang from the belief that “art which attains is indigenous of experience and relations, and that the artist works to express perceptions rather than to attain standards of achievement.”²⁸³

For Williams and McAlmon, then, “contact” was only possible when the writer steeped himself in local circumstance, yet their notion of experience was increasingly

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Williams, *Contact* (first series, issue 1): 10.

articulated within a national frame: “Nothing from abroad would have the reality for me that native writing of the same quality would have. [...] I object to appreciative articles on foreign work being written at me from Europe. The environment gets into the writing every time and is inimical to me.”²⁸⁴ As a thinly veiled objection to T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and the broader Eurocentric canon promoted in magazines like *The Little Review* and *The Dial*, this statement is clear enough. *Contact* eschewed the cosmopolitanism that became synonymous with Eliot.²⁸⁵ But as an aesthetic program—an agenda which implies the work of art’s relationship to its surrounding world—it raises a host of questions: what does he mean by “environment,” exactly? Where does it start and stop? What kind of relation does Williams’s theory imagine between a work and its world? What kind of political commitment is entailed in such a relation? Whereas Williams uses a rhetoric of indexicality to legitimate his approach—*Contact*’s claim to authenticity depends on its proximity to local history, not its representational techniques—Cummings’s playful jeer raises doubts about the legitimacy of such an enterprise by taking nativist impulses—authenticity, purity—to their extremes. The quest for literary purity, here, is at once “serious” and “delirious,” “obscene” and “clean,” its traces both pure and excremental (“you know something genuine like a mark / in a toilet”). In

²⁸⁴ Williams, *Contact* (first series, issue 3): 15

²⁸⁵ Upon the publication of Eliot’s “The Wasteland,” Williams wrote that it “...wiped out our world as if an atom bomb had been dropped upon it,” and that “Eliot had turned his back on reviving my world,” away from a new art form “rooted in the locality which should give it fruit” (Autobiography 174).

attempting to circumvent one set of (proletarian) vulgarities, *Contact* ran the risk, as Cummings's poem playfully warned its readers, of lauding another.

This chapter seeks to explore the shifting content of the aesthetics of contact as it evolves over the course of Williams's career. While his involvement with *Contact* was sporadic and brief in light of his entire oeuvre, I argue that it establishes a significant basis for the poet's abiding investment in local poetics. Such an assertion may not seem like news. After all, one of Williams's most celebrated lines, "say it—no ideas but in things,"²⁸⁶ though taken out of context as a modernist mantra, nevertheless distills such a poetics. What is less clear, however, is how Williams's local poetics interact with certain forms of American nationalism—how, in other words, the relative concreteness of local landscapes comes to compensate for the more ethereal notion of the nation state and, moreover, for the far-flung attachments that nationalist ideologies require. Williams most clearly draws out the fuzzy parameters of the lived distinction between regions and nations in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, his 1930 treatise on pragmatist education. Written to demonstrate the virtues of "organic education," a concept that draws heavily on John Dewey (a student of Peirce's and a major figure in American Pragmatism), Williams's attitudes on the distant aspects of the nation-state are most lucid in his discussion of William Shakespeare. In a 1929 entry, he writes,

In Shakespeare there was a certain stopped condition of mind, English and rural, which permitted him infinite elaboration and variety inside the confinement. (Greek genius, as a whole, had the same incentive, a rigid enclosure of physical actuality penetrated only by touches of inspiration

²⁸⁶ Williams, *Paterson*, 6.

from Egypt, Mesopotamia, India or as it might be, Shakespeare in like manner was touched by the keen minds, like nations, about him with which he was not really in connection half as much as he was in physical contact with the bare actualities of his difficult life.)²⁸⁷

English and Greek genius, Williams argues, is not innate; instead it developed through contact with a writer's immediate environment. Nations in Williams's account are as distant and ephemeral as "minds"; this passage might even suggest that for Williams's Shakespeare, the idea of England is as distant as the idea of Mesopotamia—both are merely "touches of inspiration" but nothing more. Williams puts the problem programmatically in a later essay in the collection:

The effect of education is surely to keep us, as Americans, from each other; the history we are taught is particularly blank—or rather the history we are not taught is terrifying when one looks back at the years that have been spent solely to keep us ignorant. But the chief effect of it all is to have allowed time to pass during our most impressionable years without coming into contact, actually, with what happened and is happening around us.²⁸⁸

A familiar narrative follows Williams's abiding interest in "physical contact" with life's "bare actualities" from his earliest contributions to Imagism, through his interwar writings on American history from *In the American Grain* to *The Embodiment of*

²⁸⁷ Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, 16.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

Knowledge,²⁸⁹ through his editorial work at *Contact* and through the postwar years, finally, to *Paterson*. This narrative is, as has often been noted, both part and parcel of Williams's interest in developing an idiom native to the States, itself goaded by the poet's belief that "every individual, every place, every opportunity of thought is both favored and limited by its emplacement in time and place."²⁹⁰ And to the extent that his verse (here, *Paterson*) might "lift[] an environment to expression,"²⁹¹ Williams's poetics have

²⁸⁹ Although the aims of these two works differ considerably, I read both as companion pieces to D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*, particularly as they elaborate on Lawrence's belief in "terrestrial magnetism," a concept I discuss at greater length in my Introduction.

²⁹⁰ Williams, *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, 149-50. What seems like the usual expression of American exceptionalism turns inward, when Williams continues two paragraphs below: "Thus we are to work in our own 'locality': not piggishly, not narrowly. We must see, steal, beg, borrow—but borrow only that *which we want*. What we feel, think, conclude that we need. Not what is imposed on us (unless we can't help it, then we use that too: Negro American music). And the justice of this is that by such a pluralism of effort in each several locality a 'reality' is kept; in plural—and so verified" (EK 150). Though I don't have the time nor the space to do justice to the bizarre rhetorical work that the example of "Negro American music" does here, I'd like to point out that what is deemed "real" is derived from the proximate, "our own locality." I will return to this point in my reading of *Paterson*, but note it here in order to show how Williams's brand of nationalism recruits the idea of the local to ground the pluralism of American experience.

It is because of patriotic, essentialist sentiments like these that Walter Benn Michaels is inclined to claim that "the criteria of poetic ambition in Williams are indistinguishable from the conditions of national identity as he and others understood them" (*Our America* 76). Bob Johnson echoed Michaels's sentiment in 2002 when, in an article on the political ideology of Williams's early output, he observed how "[p]oetry and America—together they indicate Williams's concern with form and with content, the one with the other" (198). Indeed, *The Great American Novel* (1923) and *In the American Grain* (1925) were early efforts to reinvent national identity through literary renewal.

What Michaels, Johnson and others overlook, however, is the degree to which an investment in locality—and, further, a poetic interest in the kind of contact promised by indexicality—complicates the easy conjunction between poem and national identity. As geopolitical abstractions with actual ideological effects, nations cannot be easily indexed; its lived reality—"material base"—is ideological, not physical. Furthermore, Williams's poems do not always act as analogs of national identity, for the poem's own identity is less coherent—less autonomous—than Michaels admits. This is because Michaels focuses exclusively on works Williams (and others) published in the 1920s.

²⁹¹ Williams, *Selected Letters*, 286.

been consistently read as profoundly material and highly emplaced. Furthermore, the desire for contact between the artwork and its environment appears as early as 1914, in a poem called “Rendezvous,” whose speaker longs for a meeting of both

My Song! It is time!
Wider! Bolder! Spread the arms!
Have done with finger pointing.
Open windows even for the cold
To come whistling in, blowing the curtains:
We have looked out through glass
Long enough, my song.²⁹²

By counterposing his verse to “finger pointing,” a phrase that Lisa Siraganian concludes to be a “gesture of distancing” in its suggestion of blame, the speaker imagines a companionship whose “rendezvous” between sign and referent is predicated on the destruction of the poetic frame.²⁹³ Despite its longing for aesthetic contact, however, the poem is uneasily poised on both the possibility and the failure of such a phenomenon, for the poem can only *gesture* beyond its frame. This paradox is preserved in the liminal status of the pointing finger, an index of *simultaneous* presence and distance, the trace of a here (a textual effect) and an elsewhere beyond it.

This contradiction, invited by the competing claims of pointing fingers and open windows in “Rendezvous,” is reproduced in much of Williams criticism since the 1960s, which can be divided roughly into two camps: a materialism that repudiates the frame

²⁹² Williams, *Collected Poems vol. 1*, 36.

²⁹³ Siraganian, *Modernism's Other Work*, 87.

and a formalism that relies on it. On the one hand, J. Hillis Miller's *Poets of Reality* (1965) and Joseph Riddel's *The Inverted Bell* (1974), upheld Williams as a poet whose work modeled an "approximate co-extension with the universe"²⁹⁴ and a poetry that "deconstructs itself in the same time of its unfolding."²⁹⁵ On the other hand, a competing but equally influential set of accounts—among them, Henry Sayre's *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams* (1983) and David Markos's *Ideas in Things* (1994)—emphasize the formal properties of Williams's poetry, finding in it the evidence of New Critical organicism. For Sayre, Williams "constantly resisted the 'leap into things' of which Miller speaks,"²⁹⁶ a sentiment that echoes Hugh Kenner's watershed study, *A Homemade World* (1975), where he insists that Williams "never supposed that 'things' got onto the page."²⁹⁷ Those on both sides of this methodological divide have complained of the dominance of the other.²⁹⁸ Within these competing interpretations, Williams emerges as a poet who anticipates a kind of postmodern deconstruction of the text, or he's upheld as an advocate of New Critical formal unity.

Admittedly, this account simplifies the diversity of scholarly opinion on Williams. Yet the thoroughgoing debate between formalist and materialist readings of the poet's

²⁹⁴ qtd. in Miller, *The Poets of Reality*, 289.

²⁹⁵ Riddell, *The Inverted Bell*, xiii.

²⁹⁶ Sayre, *The Visual Text of William Carlos Williams*, 5.

²⁹⁷ Kenner, *A Homemade World*, 87. Though his mode of analysis is clearly formalist, and though he studied under Cleanth Brooks at Yale, Kenner's interest in textuality is not entirely consistent with New Criticism. Instead of finding in the text a coherent and organic whole, Kenner tended to focus on differences between and among representations. For more on this, see Majorie Perloff, "Hugh Kenner and the Invention of Modernism," 465.

²⁹⁸ See Sayre, 4; Peter Halter, *The Revolution in the Visual Arts and the Poetry of William Carlos Williams*, 4-5.

work continue to dominate his reception. More importantly, they foist a philosophical debate onto Williams's poetics that ignores the terms from which the poet conceptualized his own poetic project. As my reading of "Rendezvous" makes clear, a reading that resonates with Williams's developing interest in the aesthetic promise of contact, neither purely formalist nor wholly materialist readings can fully capture the imperatives that drove the poet's evolving practice, since both positions mistake relations—attempts at a mode of contact or a "rendezvous"—for ontology.

This chapter, by contrast, takes a longer view toward Williams's career in order to examine two tendencies: first, how the poet conceptualized this shifting relation between work and world²⁹⁹; and second, how that mode of aesthetic relation both engages and exhausts the modes of relation that forms of nationalism require. After analyzing the overtly nationalist tendencies in Williams's early texts—including *In the American Grain* (1925), *The Embodiment of Knowledge* (1928-30), and *Spring and All* (1923), I focus on the works of his later career—mainly but not exclusively his epic poem, *Paterson*—in order to suggest how we might begin to understand the geopolitical consequences of his evolving rejection of autonomous aesthetics. I trace the limits of "separate" or autonomous art by examining Williams's early treatises and volumes in light of *Paterson*, his late experiment. While the most recognizable Williams is the early one who, in defending poetic autonomy, sometimes bordered on tautology, late in his career the

²⁹⁹ In repositioning the critical reception of Williams within the poet's (idiosyncratic and imperfect) language, my analysis finds inspiration in Lisa Siraganian's *Modernism's Other Work: The Art Object's Political Life* (2012). Siraganian reframes the question of aesthetic autonomy in Williams as one of framing itself, where she traces the impact of Marcel Duchamp and Juan Gris (among others) on Williams's early works. As it shares her interest in the problem of autonomy for Williams, my reading nonetheless diverges from Siraganian's by attending to a different set of primary texts and a slightly different set of aesthetic problems.

category of Art takes on a different character. The tautological insistence on the self-identity of the work of art can be read as a kind of artistic hand-wringing—an anxiety over the essential character of the work of art—that, by the time of *Paterson*, gives way to a model of art premised not on aesthetic distance and autonomy but on their contraries. Under this model, a poem does not simply refuse to represent its subject—it partakes of it. In examining the materiality of Williams’s poetry through his own rhetoric of contact—a rhetoric that is at least partially responsible for Susan Howe’s observation that “in poetry things seem to touch so they are”—my reading enables a shift in critical focus away from reading the poet’s texts as things or things as such and instead toward the meaning of their mutual belonging.

iii. questioning “the material base”

J. Hillis Miller, in his 1986 presidential address to the Modern Language Association, reflected on what he called the “question of the material base,” or the “sudden, [...] widespread, [...] spontaneous” disciplinary shift from language to history (Miller 283). In musing on the state of literary studies amidst broad methodological shifts, Miller draws on a section from Williams’s *In the American Grain* to allegorize two theories of culture, and two corresponding reading practices. In “The Destruction of Tenochtitlan,” Williams counterposes two responses to native culture: that of Cortez, who destroyed Montezuma’s capital under the guise of European values, and that of Pere Sebastian Rasles, a late seventeenth-early eighteenth-century Jesuit missionary who was “particularly sensitive and daring in [his] close embrace of native things.”³⁰⁰ The

³⁰⁰ Williams, *In the American Grain*, 120-21.

difference between Cortez and Rasles, Miller points out, articulates a difference in cultural transmission: if the first model imposes an alien culture on the American ground, the second is “responsive to a furtive indigenous spirit or spark hidden in the American grain, secreted in its very substance.”³⁰¹ In discussing Cortez (and the Puritans, and Benjamin Franklin) alongside Rasles, Williams offers a theory of what “good culture,” and, by extension, good art looks like; it is embedded in the natural environment, evolves organically and is not superimposed by colonial forces. But, as Miller rightly notes, Williams’s parable about good and bad modes of culture is also a parable about good and bad modes of criticism: “Whether we view Williams’s notion of the radiant gist as a deep insight or as an unfortunate residue of mystified religiosity,” Miller declares, “his formulations have the virtue of forcing us to recognize that all meanings have a material base—cultural meanings as well as meanings embodied in written or printed texts. We ignore that base at our peril.”³⁰²

Miller’s point in turning to *In the American Grain* is to demonstrate how “good reading or good criticism” can be “productive” if it accepts the double-valenced notion of “materiality”—historical, textual—within literary studies. Referring to Williams’s quasi-adamic dedication to the book, which uses the language of discovery when he remarks that “it has been my wish to draw from every source one thing, the strange phosphorous of the life, nameless under an old misappellation,”³⁰³ Miller argues that

³⁰¹ J. Hillis Miller, “Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base” *PMLA* 101: 281.

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 28.

³⁰³ Williams, *Grain*, dedication.

Williams wants meaning or value to have the possibility of being not arbitrary, conventional, or simply positional but responsive to a potentiality that is already there, in the ground, waiting to be embodied in all the facets of culture. He sees America, correctly again, as the denial of this responsiveness. The American grain is, paradoxically, not grainy. The possibility that the initial decree of signification is arbitrary, rather than based on a potentiality of signification already there, has haunted American writers throughout the nation's history—for example, the Melville of 'The Encantadas,' or the Hawthorne of the remarkable preface to *Mosses from an Old Manse*, or the Henry James of the early book on Hawthorne, with its celebrated passage about the superficiality of American culture.³⁰⁴

As a parable for how to do "good criticism" in light of two critical methods often taken as mutually exclusive—post-structuralism's "linguistic turn" and new historicism, respectively dominant and emergent at the time of this address—Miller's comment is fair enough. But—and this question lies outside the ambit of his address—how does this will to avoid the arbitrariness of signification inform Williams's poetic practice? What does a work's intimacy with the external world look like? What forms might an indigenous poetics take? Furthermore, how did Williams translate the need for a material base in American culture and historiography into his poetic practice?

There is no better place to begin to answer these questions than *In the American Grain* (1925), probably the most explicitly nationalist work Williams completed and a

³⁰⁴ Miller 283.

text that laid the foundation for his later fascination with indigenous culture in *Paterson*. *In the American Grain* builds on the familiar mythos and mythical figures of early America; its chapters feature well-known episodes of violent invasion, exploitation and westward expansion on events and topics ranging from Columbus's expedition to the institution of slavery. And yet it is precisely against the backdrop of empire and cultural intermingling that Williams develops his most cogent ideas around the emergence and formation of a distinct American culture, at turns "pure" and hybrid. In his chapter on Rasles, whom Miller calls "one of [*Grain*'s] heroes,"³⁰⁵ Williams bemoans the lack of vitality among white Americans. As he writes,

There *is* the Indian. We are none. Who are we? Degraded whites riding our fears to market where everything is by accident and only one thing sure: the fatter we get the duller we grow; only a simpering disgust [...] reveals any contact with a possible freshness³⁰⁶ (*Grain* 108)

A few pages later, Williams hints at the reason for America's profound and defining lack:

Why does one not hear Americans speak more often of these important things? Because the fools do not believe that they have sprung from anything: bone, thought and action. They will not see that what they are is growing on these roots. They will not look. They float without question. Their history is to them an enigma.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵ Miller 281.

³⁰⁶ Williams, *In the American Grain*, 108.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 113.

Unlike indigenous tribes, white Americans are unable to sustain any “contact with a possible freshness,” or vitality. Here, identity is predicated on a naturalized proximity to the land, one’s history—in short, one’s “roots”—that Williams counterposes to the arbitrary relations that whites maintain, “where[in] everything is by accident.”³⁰⁸ Already we can glimpse the beginnings of an indexical logic, wherein the refusal of arbitrary relations depends upon a “primitive” figure—the native—whose foreignness and “simplicity” make them the envy, and the dialectical opposite, of the modernist project. As Bob Johnson puts it, “Williams, intent on bringing the American past forth into the present and consolidating amongst Americans a collective sense of the self, reached back to what he saw as a primary moment of contact, a national origin to which Americans might root themselves,”³⁰⁹ and in which contact denotes “an elemental, unmediated relationship between the self and its world, an originary experience which represented the ‘authentic,’ the ‘true,’ and the ‘essential.’”³¹⁰ So defined, Williams’s aesthetics of contact conceals its epistemological mystifications. Ignoring the mediating properties of language, and quoting Sandra Kumayoto Stanley’s reading of Williams’s early aesthetic ambitions, Johnson explains how Williams valorized

‘an elemental contact with the object before him, an interpenetration of subject and object ... [that] interpenetration [wa]s a poetic act akin to both religious incarnation and sexual intercourse.’ Thus, while Williams’s aesthetics sought to affirm a unity of life over the anxieties of modern man

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Johnson 207.

³¹⁰ Ibid., 190.

through contact with nature outside the self, it did so by way of a theoretically-suspicious belief in the immediate and vaguely-defined notion of the true made possible by a mystical reunion of the Cartesian subject.³¹¹

Whether expressed as religious incarnation or sexual congress, Williams's aesthetic ambitions and fantasies of immediacy remained dependent not only on a Cartesian subject, but a primitivist one.

Williams's emphasis on contact would become even more pronounced in a later chapter of *In the American Grain* entitled "Jacataqua," named after the French-Abanaki woman most famous for accompanying Aaron Burr on Benedict Arnold's expedition to Quebec in 1775. It is in light of his romantic portrait of American colonialism that Williams writes the following:

We believe that life in America is compact of violence and the shock of immediacy. This is not so. Were it so, there would be a corresponding beauty of the spirit—to bear it witness; a great flowering, simple and ungovernable as the configuration of a rose—that should stand with the gifts of the spirit of other times and other nations as a standard to humanity. There is none. [...] The characteristic of American life is that it holds off from embraces, from impacts, gaining, by fear, safety and time

³¹¹ Ibid.

in which to fortify its prolific carcass—while the spirit, with tongue
hanging out, bites at its bars—its object just out of reach.³¹²

This passage expresses with extraordinary pathos a life of alienation, or what Williams sees as the fundamental condition of Americans. Bereft of “the shock of immediacy,” life in modern America is defined by its deadness (“prolific carcass”): it is profoundly atomistic, forever out of reach from the object which might revitalize it.³¹³

Throughout “Jacataqua,” Williams insists on the difference between the New and the Old worlds in haptic terms. Americans have been robbed from contact through the demands of industry and capitalist exchange:

Deanimated, that’s the word; something the sound of ‘metronome,’ a mechanical means; Yankee inventions. Machines were not so much to save time as to save dignity that fears the animate touch. It is miraculous the energy that goes into inventions here. Do you know that it now takes just ten minutes to put a bushel of wheat on the market from planting to selling, whereas it took three hours in our colonial days? That’s striking. It must have been a tremendous force that would do that. That force is fear

³¹² Williams, *Grain*, 174-75.

³¹³ Williams returns to the condition of modern alienation in *The Embodiment of Knowledge*, once again finding its remedy in the idea of contact. As he writes, “The effect of education is surely to keep us, as Americans, from each other; the history we are taught is particularly blank—or rather the history we are not taught is terrifying when one looks back at the years that have been spent solely to keep us ignorant. But the chief effect of it all is to have allowed time to pass during our most impressionable years without coming into contact, actually, with what has happened and is happening around us” (EK 64).

that robs the emotions; a mechanism to increase the gap between touch and thing, *not* to have a contact.³¹⁴

Yet as the essay progresses this alienation seems overdetermined, a symptom of sexual, scientific, and intellectual crises:

Men weaving women, women sprouting men [...] Our life is tortuous and grotesque, huge fetishes by which we are ruled in utter darkness—or we fly abroad for sensation: Anything to escape—we fear simplicity as the plague. NEVER to allow touch. [...] We are blind asses, with our whole history unread before us and helpless if we read it. Nothing noticed. Nothing taught in the academies. You’d think that THAT would force us into some immediacy. NEVER. [...] Our life drives us apart and forces us upon science and invention—away from touch. Or if we do touch, our breed knows no better than the coarse fiber of football.³¹⁵

In contrast to this lost intimacy, Williams introduces the character of Jacataqua whose “[p]rimitive and direct”³¹⁶ manner he valorizes when, so the story goes, she offered her hunting skills to Burr and his fellow explorers. While her appearance in this essay is fleeting, she embodies the kind of immediacy that Williams seeks to recover.

It is tempting, and not altogether incorrect, to read these passages as a naïve and wistful fetishization of aboriginal culture. *In the American Grain* firmly belongs to the “Mayan revival” that captured the interest of so many American writers, artists and

³¹⁴ Ibid., 177.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 178-79.

³¹⁶ Ibid., 187.

architects in the modernist period. But the tendency to read these moments as a symptom of racist exoticism seems to me too narrow, in light of the hints of irony: “The land!,”³¹⁷ he exclaims in one instance, “don’t you feel it? Doesn’t it make you want to go out and lift dead Indians tenderly from their graves to steal from them—as if it must be clinging even to their corpses—some authenticity.”³¹⁸ Indigenous culture, in other words, served as a site of national promise—the idea that one could discover the nation’s future in its pre-colonial past—even as irony accompanied such a promise. Like Cummings’s poem, Williams’s sincere investment in an authentic American tradition teeters on irony. In his article “Mesoamerican Modernism: William Carlos Williams and the Archaeological Imagination,” Stephen M. Park makes this point when observing how Williams simultaneously mocks and recapitulates the impulse to “‘revive’ indigenous cultures for the benefit of the vigorous nation to the north.”³¹⁹ Williams’s aesthetics of immediacy legitimizes itself through its recourse to indigenous figures and in so doing exoticizes them—a fact which Williams can only confront through awkward humor.

Like Cummings, then, Williams was aware of the dangers of the quest for an American passion for the real—namely, that a search for an American authenticity would end up mythologizing its original inhabitants and become a vehicle for nationalist

³¹⁷ In an effort to trace American historiography and culture back to its roots, Williams’s consistently describes his work in archaeological terms. In “The Virtue of History,” Williams explains this recovery project as a process of unearthing: “I say that what [Aaron] Burr stood for—and that this is typical of us—is lost sight of in the calumny that surrounds his name, through which the truth is not so easily to be discovered. Let us dig and we shall see what is turned up—and name it if we can” (*Grain* 196). We will see how Williams’s investment in the land (not as a metaphor for history, but as substance itself) here gets literalized in Book Three of *Paterson*.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹⁹ Stephen M. Park, “Mesoamerican Modernism: William Carlos Williams and the Archaeological Imagination,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 34 (2011): 22.

nostalgia. And yet, in spite of this awareness, Williams cannot avoid locating the real in racial minorities. In other words, various forms of “contact,” or the promise of a renewed American aesthetic, were legitimized through recourse to the racialized subject. His own contributions to *Contact*’s second run demonstrate the severe limitations inherent in his ambitions for a nativist nationalism. In “Colored Girls of Passenack,” for example, Williams recalls his encounter with a variety of black women. Each vignette follows a similar narrative strategy wherein each meeting is typified as a confrontation with the potency of the “real”; each vignette grounds the “real” in the “sheer vitality and animal attractiveness”³²⁰ of the black woman’s body. In becoming a figure of actuality, the sexualized body is turned into a spectacle, an object of the narrator’s gaze. One vignette concludes with the young Williams spying on his naked maid:

I remember my own turn at the peep hole as if it were this morning.... She had nothing but a china basin to wash herself in. This she had placed on the floor. She was standing in it, facing me fully naked and washing herself with a sponge. My view was not too good, I was half lying on the floor with the others pulling at me to take their turn also, but it was a thrilling picture.³²¹

In its pursuit of an aesthetics of American indigeneity and intimacy between sign and referent, then, *Contact* presents an altogether different form of intimacy: the sexualized female body is put on display. Contact, here, is a way of seeing; its “authenticity” fully

³²⁰ Williams, *Contact* (second series, 1.1): 58.

³²¹ Ibid.

implicated in the narrator's furtive glance. In another vignette, Williams describes a similarly voyeuristic scene:

I've seen tremendous furnaces of emotional power in certain colored women unmatched in any white.... Once I went to call on a patient in a nearby suburb. As the door opened to my ring, a magnificent bronze figure taller than I and fairly vibrant with a sullen attractiveness stood before me. She said not a word but stood there till I told her who I was. Then she let me in, turned her back and walked into the kitchen. But the force of her—something, her mental alertness coupled with her erectness, muscular power, youth, seriousness—her actuality—made me want to create a new race on the spot. I had never seen anything like it.³²²

In his search for some mark of uniquely American authenticity, Williams abandons the formal conditions that might enable contact in favor of the exoticization—the distancing—of its racial minorities. Here, the vitality of contact between subject and object gives way to its opposite: the fully alienated, black female body. In mapping racial difference onto the relation between signs and things, Williams reveals his aesthetics of contact to be completely dependent on the fetishized, non-white body.

As the animating ethos of a renewed American letters, then, *Contact* falls considerably short of actualizing its democratic ideals. The magazine's failure is due in large part to Williams's naivete on the subject of racial difference. Despite his critique of artists or ethnographers who derive authenticity by dredging up dead "Indians"—Williams's portraits of people of color are at turns romantic and objectifying. Rather than

³²² Ibid., 61.

offering a specific aesthetic program, the magazine endorsed a vaguely American ethos based entirely on the exoticization of its natives, a logic that Jonathan Veitch calls the “unacknowledged but omnipresent universal law of compensation,”³²³ in which systematically deprived populations (native Americans, African Americans) become coupled with an innate and embodied “vitality.” And yet, as a national project, *Contact* could only ever fall short: in its purest form, the nation-state is a groundless abstraction, not an index of the real. In the next section I will examine how Williams revised his poetics of contact in *Paterson* by replacing the national with the local. In so doing, it demonstrates how indexical modernism relied on a robust theory of the region, and explores how a work, in spite of its circulation, is rooted in the particularities of a landscape.

iv. “an identity / surmounting the world”

Describing the overall design of *Paterson* in a note prefacing the first book (in 1946), when the poem was to consist of only four books, Williams notes the allegorical impulses of his project:

Paterson is a long poem in four parts—that a man in himself is a city, beginning, seeking, achieving, and concluding his life in ways which the various aspects of a city may embody—if imaginatively conceived—any city, all the details of which may be made to voice his most intimate convictions.³²⁴

³²³ Veitch, 29.

³²⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, xiv.

So framed, *Paterson* is part-autobiography, part-ethnography; the poem's main conceit involves the poet's efforts to make contact with his native New Jersey. The relations between the poem's main speaker, a "poet" whose proximity to Williams remains slippery throughout, and his world are expressed through metaphor and personification and play out against the backdrop of a landscape at turns abundant and polluted by industrialization. The poem's drama centers around the poet's ongoing attempt to redeem the landscape and its inhabitants through language by offering a hybrid historical record-living myth that might unify and sustain them. Williams maps these uneven relations through the use of parataxis—that is, the juxtaposition of ostensibly unrelated elements. Lines of free verse are set off against fragments of historical prose³²⁵ and Williams's personal correspondence, producing a collage-like effect more akin to bricolage than to "pure" poetry. Near the beginning of Book One, for instance, in response to the question, "(What common language to unravel? / . . . combed into straight lines / from that rafter of a rock's / lip),"³²⁶ a different, epistolary voice emerges:

In regard to the poems I left with you; will you be so kind as to return them to me at my new address? And without bothering to comment upon them if you should find that embarrassing—for it was the human situation and not the literary one that motivated my phone call and visit. Besides, I

³²⁵ In "The Geography of *Paterson*," George Zabriskie notes that "in its geography and history *Paterson* is as literal as a Baedeker [travel guide], with the special qualification that Williams does not feel restricted in time" (Zabriskie 201).

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

know myself to be more the woman than the poet; and to concern myself
less with the publishers of poetry than with ... living ...³²⁷

These fragments appear side by side without any explicit organizing principle, save that both concern expression at its limits—a language derived “from that rafter of a rock’s / lip” and less “literary” than “living.” The speaker’s strained relationship to language is soon echoed by a second speaker, the poet, whose self-censure interrupts the confidence of the first: “Say it! No ideas but in things!” becomes, by the second section of Book One, “There is no direction. Whither? I / cannot say. I cannot say / more than how. The how (the howl) only / is at my disposal (proposal) : watching— / colder than stone .”³²⁸ With scaffolding like this, it becomes difficult to read the poem’s allegorical features as anything other than Williams’s reflections on his own poetic practice. Insofar as the Falls pose a challenge to the poet to discover a “common language,”³²⁹ the very structure of the poem turns inward and contemplates its own conditions of production. In this light, the poem tends to reinforce aesthetic separation or distance rather than contact. In *The Inverted Bell*, Joseph Ridell argues just this, claiming that the project of unearthing the encoded histories in *Paterson* does not allow one to “arrive at a place outside the poem.”³³⁰

³²⁷ Ibid.

³²⁸ Ibid., 17.

³²⁹ Williams explains the importance of the Falls in his *Autobiography*: “The Falls let our a roar as it crashed upon the rocks at its base. In the imagination this roar is a speech or a voice, a speech in particular; it is the poem itself that is the answer” (*Autobiography* 392).

³³⁰ Joseph Ridell, *The Inverted Bell*, 21.

And yet, despite the poem's allegorical and self-reflective strains, the later books confound any stable notion of inside and outside and, in turn, interrupt the conditions for aesthetic autonomy *and* for the poet's own claims to allegory. Organized like the previous two books around this mode of parataxis, book 3 of *Paterson* explores a series of past disasters and current environmental conditions which undermine the integrity of the archive. Consider the following lines, which bemoan the very institutions that shield and separate archives and artworks from their surrounding environment:

Flown in from before the cold or nightbound
 (the light attracted them)
 they sought safety (in books)
 but ended battering against glass
 at the high windows

The Library is desolation, it has a smell of its own of stagnation and death³³¹

Here, the library operates in much the same way as the gallery or the museum does for Smithsonian. In containing literature, the library imposes a separation between a work and its world and renders the work toothless and lifeless. Williams continues, “The place sweats of staleness and of rot / a back-house stench . . . a / library stench.”³³² Aesthetic autonomy, in the figure of the stale library, gives way to alienation and decay.

For Williams, then, the library functions as an arbitrary frame which gradually naturalizes the artwork's false autonomy, or lack of contact with the contingent forces that produced it. Given Williams's career-long obsession with contact, it's not surprising that the poem destroys the library as quickly as it is mentioned. In section 2 of book 3, Williams pictures the library engrossed in flames:

³³¹ Williams, *Paterson*, 101.

³³² Ibid., 103.

Whirling flames, leaping
from house to house, building to building

carried by the wind

the Library is in their path

Beautiful thing ! aflame .

a defiance of authority
—burnt Sappho’s poems, burned
by intention (or are they still hid
in the Vatican crypts?) :
beauty is
a defiance of authority³³³

Here, the aesthetic value of the library is undermined by the section’s refrain: though repeatedly expressed as a “Beautiful thing!,” the poet-speaker’s judgment of this scene of book-burning gives voice to an ironic anti-textual imperative. The poet-speaker continues:

Vulgarity surpasses all perfections
--it leaps from a varnish pot and we see
it pass—in flames!

Beautiful thing

--intertwined with the fire. An identity
surmounting the world, its core—from which
we shrink squirting little hoses of
objection—and
I along with the rest, squirting
at the fire

Poet.³³⁴

³³³ Ibid., 119.

³³⁴ Ibid., 120. The combination of “vulgarity” and “beauty” recalls Cummings “obscene” and “clean” manifesto of poetic renewal.

In the light of this imaginary fire that haunts all six volumes, Riddell's reading of *Paterson*'s inviolability seems implausible. It is precisely in this imagined act of destruction that the text confronts—and makes contact with—its world. No longer textual but elemental, the library and, by extension, the works of art contained within it become “intertwined with the fire,” which daunts even the poet who, along with the other poets and objectors, “shrink” their “squirting little hoses” in vain. Indeed, Williams's lineation indicates that the “Beautiful thing” and “Poet” share the same impotent fate. The work of art, in other words, only gains its “surmounting” force once it loses its self-identity.³³⁵ Unlike that which befell the Great Library of Alexandria, this library's destruction does not represent a loss to human civilization. Its destruction clears the ground for a new idiom.

v. Site-Specific Poetics at its Limits

³³⁵ One could extend Williams's rejection of autonomous aesthetics even further by noting the ways in which the city of Paterson was financially and culturally dependent on New York and Newark. Michael Andre Bernstein speaks to the geopolitical resonances of non-autonomy when he notes how “[Paterson] was known, if at all, largely as a once beautiful site ravaged by industrialization and deprived of any notable ‘local’ characteristics by the cultural and economic dominance of nearby New York and Newark. In effect, the extent of Paterson's dependence upon the nearby metropolis was so extensive as to make the notion of an autonomous ‘local’ community as deceptive a myth as any nostalgia for a golden age. [...] Too often in *Paterson* there is little awareness of the modern city's role as part of a monolithic industrial and financial network whose control is effectively centered *elsewhere*” (Bernstein 203-04). According to the logic of Bernstein's argument, Williams's notion of a distinctive idiom—what I am calling “site-specific poetics”—is a symptom of nostalgia for a pre-industrial age. While nostalgia may certainly be at work in the formation of Williams's historiography, I nevertheless find the notion of site specificity useful in a poetic context as it allows us to capture the resonances between his aesthetic practice and Robert Smithson's and the non-representational realism that many of their works share in common.

Once the fictional library is destroyed, the poem turns its attention to an expanded notion of textuality in which language bears a largely non-representational relationship to the land. At the center of the poem's new language are the sounds of the Passaic Falls, which fill the poet's "ears with its sound, hard to interpret."³³⁶ As it strains against language, Williams's verse upholds prelinguistic noise as the bearer of truth and an important source of inspiration for Williams's "variable foot," a method of line division which freed the poetic foot from a regular meter. The poet struggles with the status of these sounds from book 1: "A false language. A true. A false language pouring—a language (misunderstood) pouring (misinterpreted) without dignity, without minister, crashing upon a stone ear."³³⁷ It is not that the sound itself is false, but that the sound is falsified as language. To find a language adequate to the changing landscape is perhaps the most heroic feat in Williams's epic.

In order to discover this idiom, Williams digs. His thematic preoccupation with the possibilities of American soil in *In the American Grain* takes on a distinct procedural quality in book 3: one doesn't simply reinvent American identity by exhuming its forgotten myths, as the poet implied when he invited the reader to "dig and we shall see what it turned up—and name it if we can."³³⁸ Instead, Williams turns his attention to the site's material sediments to find traces of authenticity. In a striking section in book 3 entitled "Substratum," Williams details the specimens of a soil sample taken at the

³³⁶ Ibid., 16.

³³⁷ Ibid., 15.

³³⁸ Williams, *In the American Grain*, 196.

Passaic River Mill between 1879 and 1880. This catalog-turned-poem is reproduced below in full:

DEPTH		DESCRIPTION OF MATERIALS
65 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, fine
110 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, coarse
182 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, a little shale
400 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, shaly
404 feet.	. .	Shale
430 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, fine grained
540 feet.	. .	Sandy shale, soft
565 feet.	. .	Soft shale
585 feet.	. .	Soft shale
600 feet.	. .	Hard sandstone
605 feet.	. .	Soft shale
609 feet.	. .	Soft shale
1,170 feet.	. .	Selenite, 2 x 1 x 1/16 in.
1,180 feet.	. .	Fine quicksand, reddish
1,180 feet.	. .	Pyrites
1,370 feet.	. .	Sandy rock, under quicksand
1,400 feet.	. .	Dark red sandstone
1,400 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
1,415 feet.	. .	Dark red sandstone
1,415 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
1,415 feet.	. .	Fragments of red sandstone
1,540 feet.	. .	Red sandstone, and a pebble of kaolin
1,700 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
1,830 feet.	. .	Light red stone
2,000 feet.	. .	Red shale
2,020 feet.	. .	Light red sandstone
2,050 feet.	. .	
2,100 feet.	. .	Shaly sandstone ³³⁹

This passage, whose visual arrangement anticipates concrete poetics by a few years,³⁴⁰ abandons the metaphorical underpinnings of verse—the poetic “substratum”—in order to

³³⁹ Ibid., 139.

³⁴⁰ Concrete poetry makes use of typographical arrangements in order to make meaning, and first emerged in Brazil during the late 1950s. Its pioneers include the Noigandres school poets

approach something closer to the “material base” Miller evokes in his Modern Language Association address. In its collapse of metric and poetic feet, the poem shuttles between poetic and non-poetic registers. But what becomes clear beyond its playful punning on feet, as a unit of distance and verse, is Williams’s deep desire to connect with the land itself, in all its material monotony. His is not a materialism for matter’s sake. Unlike the archaeological aims outlined in *Contact* and *In the American Grain*, this list performs and literalizes the archaeological impulse, incorporating the layers of sediment into the poem’s form.

With this indexical gesture, Williams begins to articulate what Lytle Shaw calls a “linguistic site-specificity,” by which the poet’s interest in the region takes on a material and decidedly non-representational quality.³⁴¹ Drawing on the disparate domains of anthropology and 1970s sculpture, Shaw situates *Paterson* within a wide-ranging network of postwar poets and artists who “ground and enact their relations to specific locations—to research and then realize new social formations by digging into the vertical ground of history, and into both the literal, horizontal ground of rural locations and [...] blighted cities.”³⁴² Regarding *Paterson*, Shaw notes how, in spite of the poet’s success, “the legacy of Williams ‘contact’ is deeply vexed,” adding that “while *Paterson* is obviously organized around this value, the social relations it depicts in the present are

(Augusto and Haroldo de Campos, Décio Pignatari), Wladimir Dias Pino and Ferreira Guilar. Their manifesto, “Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry,” was published in 1958.

³⁴¹ Lytle Shaw, *Fieldworks: From Place to Site in Postwar Poetics*, 33.

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 8.

certainly not instances of unproblematic contact.”³⁴³ I share Shaw’s simultaneous investment in the potential and limits of contact as Williams articulates it. As it motivates an historically-inflected poetics of place, the concept of contact seems like a plausible project. But as the basis for social relations, its ethos fails miserably. Indeed, Williams implicates himself in this failure by including semi-autobiographical passages in which the poet-speaker remarks as a physician: “You smell as though you need a / bath. Take off your clothes and purify / yourself.”³⁴⁴ This model of contact, as it anchors aesthetic immediacy in the reified yet purified female body, reeks of the corrupted project that Cummings warned about. These lines also recast Book 3’s “Beautiful Thing” refrain in a much less redemptive light: “”TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES! I didn’t ask you / to take off your skin . . . I said your / clothes, your clothes. You smell / like a whore I ask you to bathe in my / opinions, the astonishing virtue of your / lost body (I said).”³⁴⁵ Equally damning is the speaker’s confession to being “much more concerned with detaching the label from a discarded mayonnaise jar” than with examining and treating “the twenty and more infants taking their turn from the outer office.”³⁴⁶ The bureaucratic boundaries between doctor and patient, here, couldn’t be further from the aesthetically open rendezvous between work and world that Williams staged decades earlier. These curiously confessional passages function as blockages to the very kind of contact on which *Paterson* is premised.

³⁴³ Ibid., 42.

³⁴⁴ Williams, *Paterson*, 105.

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 105-06.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 32.

To the extent that he “lifts the environment” of Paterson through his poetics of contact, then, Williams’s poem nevertheless fails to imagine how he might translate that same kind of contact into a social program. Insofar as *Paterson* is an exercise in poetic site-specificity, its model of contact retreats to the land precisely where it can’t conceptualize how its citizens might relate. Confronted with the challenge to document the particularities of Paterson and with the desire to capture “a local pride [...] in distinctive terms; by multiplication a reduction to one,” Williams solves the problem of inventing a specific American linguistic vocal idiom by attempted to incorporate extra-linguistic elements into the text. Insofar as he aimed to “lift[] an environment to expression,” then, he was equally committed to that environment’s weighty resistance to that act.

The notion that Williams grounds American poetics in the actual ground of Paterson might seem short-sighted in light of the grand ambitions of an aesthetics of contact that he articulated thirty years prior. Indeed, this catalog appears unremarkable even in light of the other formal poetic innovations of *Paterson*, namely the variable foot and his use of parataxis. And yet it is in the protoconceptualist catalog of soil I referred to above that Williams comes the closest to translating his ethics of “contact” into an actualizable poetics. By folding this catalog into the poem, Williams addresses and resolves his early-career concerns about the possibility of a simultaneously rooted and renewed national aesthetic, even as that aesthetic lacks social value.

In attending to *Paterson*’s extra-textual ambitions, I have tried to illustrate the ways in which Williams’s materialism, in its gravitation toward non-linguistic sources (the Passaic falls and their sediment) bypasses the problems of national representation

and aesthetic autonomy through the logic of indexicality. I have also alluded to the limits of Williams's undertaking in his fetishization of dead matter at the expense of living bodies. By undermining the poetic frame and approaching the ground of American culture as actual land, *Paterson* anticipates the commitment to the index that partially inspired Robert Smithson's land art, as the epigraph to this chapter attests. "The universality of the local," Williams repeated in "Against the Weather" (1939) was what he had "all my life [...] striven to emphasize."³⁴⁷ Williams's poetics were not merely driven by a "local pride"³⁴⁸ or patriotism, then, but the need for poetry to recover a reality resistant to verse. As he explains,

[Art] closes up the ranks of understanding. It shows the world at one with itself. And it solves, it is the solvent—or can be—of old antagonisms. It is theoretical, as opposed to philosophy, most theoretical when it is most down on the ground, most sensual, most real.³⁴⁹

What matters for Williams, then, is less what constitutes an American idiom or a local landscape but the modes of relation between them—how each is said to participate in and belong to the other. In 1944 Williams writes to Horace Gregory:

³⁴⁷ Williams, *Selected Essays*, 198.

³⁴⁸ The phrase "local pride" comes from Williams. In his 1969 *PMLA* article, "A Local Pride: The Poetry of 'Paterson,'" Joel Conarroe identifies the poem's generic hybridity (as epic, picaresque) and its myriad poetic influences (Whitman, Pound, and Eliot chief among them). In the course of tracing Williams's poetic lineage, Conarroe notes that "[b]oth [Whitman and Williams] were poets of things and of *contact*" (549). Tellingly, the implications of this claim go unexamined, and the meaning of the "local" in Williams's work is invoked but never theorized.

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

There has to be a recognition by the intellectual heads ([T.S.] Eliot among them), of the work-a-day local culture of the United States. In fact, there can be no general culture unless it is bedded, as he says, in a locality—something I have been saying for a generation: that there is no universal except in the local. I myself took it from [John] Dewey. So it is not new.³⁵⁰

The essay to which Williams refers is Dewey's "Americanism and Localism," first published in the *Dial* in 1920, which upholds the virtues of local-attachments against charges of provincialism and nativism, and declares the newspaper America's "only genuinely popular form of literature we have achieved,"³⁵¹ a form that will become important for both Williams and Smithson. Dewey's claim that "locality is the only universal"³⁵² provides a foundation for Williams, Smithson and others who turn to site-specificity, a non-representational virtue, in order to avoid the nativist baggage of American nationalisms. And yet Williams and Smithson move beyond Dewey in that they translate his theory of localism and the relations of belonging it condenses into an aesthetic practice.

³⁵⁰ Williams, *Selected Letters*, 224.

³⁵¹ John Dewey, *The Middle Works 1899-1924* vol. 12, 14.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 15.

CHAPTER FOUR: When a Commitment is Not a Commitment

“For us, an author is indeed neither a vestal virgin nor Ariel: he is ‘implicated,’ whatever he does—tainted, compromised, even in his most distant retreat.”
--Jean-Paul Sartre, “Presentation” (1945)

Indexical modernism, as the previous chapters have argued, coincides with an abiding and multivalent aversion toward an autonomous notion of art. In each case, the allure of the index, which promises non-arbitrary and relational properties of language, emerges out of the twinned recognition that the word is necessarily faulty in its arbitrariness and yet the only tool at the writer’s disposal. And in each case, this recognition is borne out of some kind of commitment to something far removed from the business of writing—the unlikely survival of the working poor, or the strange grace of God, or the vexed status of American soil. Despite their myriad differences in position and practice, however, the thing these writers share, aside from their vexed relationship to the linguistic sign, is the sensibility, linked to the middle decades of the twentieth century but difficult to periodize, of commitment itself.

In May 1939, the *Partisan Review* sent a questionnaire to a number of American writers in an attempt to gauge the political climate of cultural production in a moment of

profound economic and political change. The questionnaire contained seven questions—some asked writers to reflect on their reception, others on the financial and professional aspects of literary work.³⁵³ Of the seven, two asked the writer to address his party allegiances and the political tendencies of American letters since 1930: “Do you find, in retrospect, that your writing reveals any allegiance to any group, class, organization, region, religion, or system of thought, or do you conceive of it as mainly the expression of yourself as an individual?” and “How would you describe the political tendency of American writing as a whole since 1930?”³⁵⁴ Agee’s response, reprinted as an interlude in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, openly dismissed the questions as “so bad and so betraying [that] they are virtually unanswerable; and are indeed more interesting as betrayals.”³⁵⁵ Objecting not merely to the *Review*’s questions but to the nationalist allegiances they assume, Agee confesses kinship with a group of an altogether different order:

³⁵³ The five questions of Partisan Review’s 1939 survey which I do not discuss at length appeared as follows: “1. Are you conscious, in your own writing, of the existence of a ‘usable past’? Is this mostly American? What figures would you designate as elements in it? Would you say, for example, that Henry James’s work is more relevant to the present and future of American writing than Walt Whitman’s? 2. Do you think of yourself as writing for a definite audience? If so, how would you describe this audience? Would you say that the audience for serious American writing has grown or contracted in the last ten years? 3. Do you place much value on the criticism your work has received? Would you agree that the corruption of the literary supplements by advertising—in the case of the newspapers—and political pressures—in the case of the liberal weeklies—has made serious literary criticism an isolated cult? 4. Have you found it possible to make a living by writing the sort of thing you want to, and without the aid of such crutches as teaching and editorial work? Do you think there is any place in our present economic system for literature as a profession? [...] 7. Have you considered the question of your attitude toward the possible entry of the United States into the next world war? What do you think the responsibilities of writers in general are when and if war comes?” (*Praise*, 311) The last question anticipates the theoretical debate about committed and autonomous literature in postwar Europe, which this chapter will soon address.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 312.

5. 'I find, in retrospect,' that I have felt forms of allegiance or part-allegiance to Catholicism and to the communist party. I felt less and less at ease with them and I am done with them. I feel sufficiently intense allegiance toward certain shapes of fact and toward certain ideas that I prefer not to speak of them here, beyond saying that no organization of thought or persons has ever held them, that they are antipathetic to any such, and that I feel a rarity but by no means a lack of company, and that this company is made up entirely of men who do not breathe one another's breath nor require anything of one another: but are of the only free human beings [...] I feel violent enmity and contempt toward all factions and all joiners.³⁵⁶

Not only religious or political affiliation but any kind of allegiance, Agee argues, is at odds with the kind of total freedom that "only free human beings" may experience, a conclusion he arrives at after his stint in Alabama, where he identified as "Communist by sympathy and conviction."³⁵⁷ Liberation, here, amounts to a freedom from affiliation altogether. Agee further invites and forestalls *Partisan Review*'s interest in political affiliation in an epigraph (the second of two) that opens the book, which quotes the last and most famous lines of the Communist Manifesto.³⁵⁸ Taken together, these passages

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 315.

³⁵⁷ Ibid., 220.

³⁵⁸ Ibid., front matter. Agee's second epigraph reads, "Workers of the world, unite and fight. You have nothing to lose but your chains, and a world to win." These sentences do not appear in any official English translation of the manifesto, but have nevertheless acquired power as a rallying cry of the Left.

amount to an attitude shift or a contradiction. In either case, the reader might be inclined to see Agee's aversion as political evasion. And such a reading appears to be endorsed by Agee himself, who adds in a postscript to the epigraph that "neither these words nor the authors are the property of any political party, faith, or faction."³⁵⁹ A reasonable reader might conclude, as Michael Szalay has, that Agee's vexed commitments can be explained by the "mundane realities of his employment."³⁶⁰ As an employee of *Fortune*, Szalay claims that "the Catholic humanist *cum* anarchist avers that it is next to impossible to protest the institutions of bourgeois society from inside their pockets."³⁶¹ But Szalay's reading of the author's strange allegiances cannot account for why Agee preserves this apparent contradiction in the final version of his book, years after his contract with *Fortune* ended.

In returning to Agee, the figure who first inspired the thorny aesthetic and semiotic questions at the heart of this dissertation, I want to address a significant but as yet unexamined component of the writers and poets through whose diverse positions and practices I call *indexical modernism*. In spite of their pursuit of the literary word at its boundaries, and despite their explicit devotion to phenomena outside the institution of literature, the writers in my study bear a complicated relationship to the received notion of postwar literary commitment. And yet while they aren't normally assembled around the term "commitment," the writers' interests in the promises of immanence, intimacy

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Szalay, 25.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

and immediacy become newly legible, in my reading, through the field of positions that it makes available.

Four years after the *Partisan Review* circulated its questionnaire, Jean-Paul Sartre developed his program for *littérature engagée* or “committed literature” in a series of editorials for the first issues of *Les Temps modernes*,³⁶² which sparked a debate among several French artists and intellectuals in the postwar period.³⁶³ In “Presentation,” the magazine’s inaugural editorial, Sartre denounced writers who claimed freedom from any social responsibility while simultaneously outlining the journal’s strict devotion to publishing pieces that tried to make sense of the postwar moment. Writing against the backdrop of the purge trials, which began in 1944 and which made the role of literature in political life a newly urgent national concern, Sartre insisted that writing was only meaningful insofar as it inscribes a writer’s words against the horizon of his death. So framed, writing becomes a grave procedure whose products are bound to mean, regardless of their author’s intent. “We do not want to be ashamed of writing,” Sartre explains, “and we don’t feel like writing so as not to say anything. Moreover, even if we wanted to we would not be able to: no one can. Every text possesses a meaning, even if that meaning is far removed from the one the author dreamed of inserting into it.”³⁶⁴ For Sartre, then, writing necessarily entails a commitment, even when that commitment is

³⁶² These editorials would be developed and published, two years later, in a volume called *What Is Literature?*.

³⁶³ Simone de Beauvoir would echo Sartre’s call for a timely, committed literature. Their call was met with resistance from a number of French writers and philosophers, including Jean Paulhan, Maurice-Merleau Ponty, Julien Gracq and Roger Caillois.

³⁶⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Presentation,” reprinted in *Literary Debate: Texts and Contexts, Postwar French Thought*, vol. 2. Ed. Denis Hollier and Jeffrey Mehlman, The New Press (1999): 31.

neither consciously held by its author nor readily available in the text. In short, aesthetic disinterestedness is impossible under Sartre's analysis. A later essay confirms the absoluteness of Sartre's postwar vision where he writes, in response to nearly two decades of critiques, that

If literature is not everything it is worth nothing. This is what I mean by 'commitment'. It wilts if it is reduced to innocence or to songs. If a written sentence does not reverberate at every level of man and society then it makes no sense. What is the literature of an epoch, but the epoch appropriated by its literature?³⁶⁵

From this totalizing perspective, Agee's commitments look like compromises, as they ignore the ways in which the very freedom of the "only free human beings"³⁶⁶ (the only group with whom Agee affiliates) is conditioned by choice and commitment. Further still, Agee's ambivalence toward art, which I discuss at length in the first chapter, raises a host of questions in light of Sartre's later work. How might we make sense of the apparent contradiction between renouncing language and continuing to write?³⁶⁷ Sartre's

³⁶⁵ Sartre, *Between Existentialism and Marxism*, NLB (1973): 13-14.

³⁶⁶ Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, 315.

³⁶⁷ When asked in an interview to address a similar contradiction in her career, American writer Laura Riding Jackson said the following: "I have not immured myself in a monastic commitment to self-abnegation in regard to the trial of poetic possibilities to a straightness of utterance. I give way in these instances to a free-will impulsion to take advantage of the special potency of poetic speech as allowing a forceful avoidance of the delay in communicative advance, the circuitous linguistic spaciousness of which prose allows. This potency inheres in poetry." As for the poems themselves, she maintains, "I wrote them as poetic brevities of incidental emergency [...] as a person committed to peaceful procedures may on very rare occasions use his fists." Elizabeth Friedmann, "Laura (Riding) Jackson in Conversation Elizabeth Friedmann," *PN Review* (Mar./Apr. 1991), 74. I am grateful to Andrea Actis for bringing this interview, and the fascinating turns of (Riding) Jackson's commitments, to my attention.

assumption that writers “do not want to be ashamed of writing”³⁶⁸ precludes the possibility that the act of writing—or any act that requires representation—might be at odds with that which a writer wants to convey. This predicament is as true for Agee as it was for George Oppen when he wrote in his “Daybook” that “Because I am not silent the poems are bad[.]”³⁶⁹ My point in invoking Oppen and Agee here is not to criticize Sartre. Still less do I mean to conflate the post-Depression conditions of Agee and Oppen’s commitments and refusals with those of Sartre and his interlocutors after the second World War. Rather, my point in juxtaposing these different models of commitment is to widen the frame through which we might interpret what at times look like competing or even contradictory commitments. In the field of positions available to a given writer, a field crossed by two axes—between writing and not writing; and between writing something that refers to the world and writing something that refers to itself—Agee’s and Oppen’s shifting commitments are difficult to reconcile.

Perhaps a more precise way to think about this combination of commitment and resistance is through the language of Richard Wright, whose works straddle the gulf between Agee and Sartre and who became known as the “major exponent of American ‘protest literature’” in the postwar period.³⁷⁰ Like Agee, Wright collaborated with Walker Evans (among other photographers employed by the Farm Security Administration,

³⁶⁸ Sartre, “Presentation,” 31.

³⁶⁹ Oppen, “Selections from George Oppen’s ‘Daybook’,” ed. Dennis Young, *The Iowa Review* 18.3 (1988), 3.

³⁷⁰ Fernanda Pivano, “Richard Wright.” *Il giorno*, 19 January 1957. Trans. John C. Stubbs. Reprinted in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, eds. Kenneth Kinnamon and Michel Fabre (1993), 169.

including Dorothea Lange and Arthur Rothstein) to produce *12 Million Black Voices* (1941), a portrait of Black poverty in 1930s America. Wright also collaborated with Sartre after being invited by him to Paris shortly after the war. Their partnership flourished through their mutual participation in antiracist and anticolonial struggles; indeed, Wright's interest in negativity as a strategic political device emerged, at least in part, from his encounter with Existentialist thought, even as Wright rejected the label once he "ha[d] stopped practicing the '-isms."³⁷¹

Wright describes his gradual disenchantment with political "-isms" most thoroughly in *Black Boy* (1945). Part-autobiography and part *bildungsroman*,³⁷² the text follows Wright from his humble beginnings in Mississippi, through his formative years as an activist in Chicago, and finally, to writerly acclaim. And insofar as his trajectory ends in denouement, Wright's eventual enlightenment has everything to do with his break from the Communist Party, which he openly criticizes for being "impatient of extended processes, of results that could not be obtained overnight, of an act that could not be

³⁷¹ Wright, "Richard Wright, the Black Dostoevski" (Interview with Ramuncho Gomez), *El Hogar*, 28 October 1949, Trans. Keneth Kinnamon. Reprinted in *Conversations with Richard Wright*, 137.

³⁷² *Black Boy* has undergone significant changes in its long publication history. Wright wrote the manuscript in 1943 under the original title *Black Confession* and changed the title to *American Hunger* upon submitting it for publication. After the Book of the Month Club expressed interest in only the first fourteen chapters, focused on Wright's childhood and adolescence in the South, Wright agreed to cut the last six chapters, dealing with his early writing career in Chicago and his involvement with the Communist Party, and renamed the book *Black Boy*, which Harper and Brothers published in 1945. In 1977 the last six chapters were posthumously published together under the title *American Hunger* and in 1991 all twenty chapters were published for the first time, as Wright originally intended, by the Library of America under the name *Black Boy (American Hunger)*. My references are to the 1991 edition. For a fuller account of this history, and for its insights into questions of authorship, politics and the literary marketplace during wartime, see Jeff Karem, "'I Could Never Really Leave the South': Regionalism and the Transformation of Richard Wright's American Hunger," *American Literary History* 13 (2001): 694-715.

performed within a day.”³⁷³ Strangely, however, the protagonist’s writerly acclaim is predicated on a second kind of metaphorical abandonment, in which Wright imagines circumventing language. The book ends by affirming a humanist vision of literature in which words take on a complicated role. “Humbly now, with no vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity, I wanted to try to build a bridge of words between me and the world outside, that world which was so distant and elusive that it seemed unreal.”³⁷⁴ Notice how Wright’s metaphor imagines language as a mechanism of relationality—a bridge between two worlds. This theory of language, in which what matters is not the words themselves but the bonds they articulate and presuppose, is at odds with an earlier model of language in *Black Boy* in which words, in their very failure to communicate, take on a material, elemental quality. As Wright recounts his inability to pray as a child, he explains how he was “convinced that if I ever succeeded in praying, my words would bound noiselessly against the ceiling and rain back down upon me like feathers.”³⁷⁵ Literature, unlike prayer, gestures to a “world outside,” by which Wright, despite disavowing any “vaulting dream of achieving a vast unity,” means something utopian. Racial unity, here, is strangely predicated on the unity of word and thing. As Wright continues, signs take an increasingly active role in the project of world-building:

I would hurl words into this darkness and wait for an echo, and if an echo sounded, no matter how faintly, I would send other words to tell, to march,

³⁷³ Ibid., 373.

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 384.

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 120.

to fight, to create a sense of the hunger for life that gnaws in us all, to keep alive in our hearts a sense of the inexpressibly human.³⁷⁶

Black Boy ends on a surprisingly hopeful note, transforming the book's central trope—hunger—from a symptom of poverty and racial inequality into a sign of desire. As it does so, it trades the “I,” whose formation prior to this passage had been the book's main subject, for a universal “us,” whose inclusiveness threatens to completely gut Wright's critique of Jim Crow era race relations. Why, in a book devoted to the lifelong struggles of one man, does Wright choose to abandon the form of the individual for a non-specific, raceless and nationless depiction of humankind?

If Wright's broad invocation of “humanity” raises such questions, earlier moments in *Black Boy* attempt to answer them. Imaginative and aspirational statements on the role of language run throughout Wright's critical reflections. In every case they pursue an identification that suspends conventional understandings of how words work. One such passage occurs in chapter 15, when Wright recounts his emergence as a writer. Hunger, here, begins to take on the aforementioned utopian character, as Wright equates eating with reading. As he puts it,

While I crammed my stomach I read Stein's *Three Lives*, Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Dostoevski's *The Possessed*, all of which revealed new realms of feeling. But the most important discoveries came when I veered from fiction proper into the field of psychology and sociology. [...] I studied tables of figures relating population density to insanity, relating housing to disease, relating school and recreational opportunities to crime,

³⁷⁶ Ibid.

relating various forms of neurotic behavior to environment, relating racial
insecurities to the conflicts between whites and blacks...³⁷⁷

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 278.

Apart from cementing Wright's modernist literary lineage, and aside from showing how sociology and psychology—two modern disciplines—inform his thinking, this passage underscores something more important. The term that binds this list of novels and studies, one that Wright uses repeatedly here, is “relating,” illustrating his interest in the connections—indeed, the causal relations—between seemingly discrete phenomena of social life. In his interest in modes of relation that connect population density and insanity, housing and disease, environment and neurosis, and not their interferences, Wright provides a model for conceptualizing modes of relation in which social phenomena were not entirely separate, even though Jim Crow laws mandated that persons remain segregated.

What appears, therefore, from one vantage as a sterile and compromising affirmation of “humanity” is, in light of earlier moments in *Black Boy*, an insistence on the necessity of social relations. Wright's articulation of these modes of relation—which refuse total autonomy as well as complete inclusion—finds expression as a relation between persons which also reimagines the function of linguistic signs. Wright makes this last point clear in a statement about the ideal author-reader relation. “My purpose,” he writes,

was to capture a physical state or movement that carried a strong subjective impression, an accomplishment which seemed supremely worth struggling for. If I could fasten the mind of the reader upon words so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt that I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative. I strove to master words, to make them disappear, to make them important by making them new, to make them melt into a rising spiral of emotional stimuli, each greater than the other, each feeding and reinforcing the other, and all ending in an emotional climax that would drench the reader with a sense of a new world. That was the single aim of my living.³⁷⁸

As it imagines an author-relation so profound as to approach a collective corporeal identity, this passage outlines the aesthetic and political virtues of a state of belonging. The kind of communion that Wright imagines here—wherein the reader might forget the words and “be conscious only of his response”—meaningfully echoes how he imagines collective consciousness; both entail a kind of forgetting:

...as I listened to the Communist Negro speakers, I wondered if the Negro, blasted by three hundred years of oppression, could possibly cast off his fear and corruption and rise to the task. [...] It seemed to me that for the Negro to try to save himself he would have to forget himself and try to

³⁷⁸ Ibid 280.

save a confused, materialistic nation from its own drift toward self-destruction.³⁷⁹

As his aesthetic and political commitments reverberate, Wright's vision requires a production of words so powerful that their status as signs fades, leaving only the trace of a bond between writer and reader. Like Agee, Wright expresses this horizon of political and aesthetic belonging in the conditional tense—"if I could fasten the mind of the reader so firmly that he would forget words and be conscious only of his response, I felt I would be in sight of knowing how to write narrative." Rather than reading the conditionality of this statement as a symptom of its failure, I take it as an imperative (as I have throughout the dissertation) to find better ways of accounting for the non-representational but nonetheless realist demands of American modernism, demands that have been too long forgotten.

In highlighting the modes of belonging we find in Wright, Agee, O'Connor, and Williams, the concept of relationality is fundamental even to the identity of the artwork. Wright's imperative to "forget [the] words," like Agee's fantasy of a dismembered body in place of a book, refocuses our attention away from textuality toward the relations—between author, reader, and subject—crystallized by their texts. Together they offer an alternative to the several aesthetic theories inspired or informed by modernism in which distance functions as a metaphor for the autonomy of the artwork. These modes of belonging undermine dominant conceptions of distance, as evinced in Walter Benjamin's definition of "aura" as "the unique phenomenon of a distance, no matter how close [the

³⁷⁹ Ibid. 298.

aesthetic object] may be,”³⁸⁰ Adorno’s account of the work of art’s guilty “separation” from “the social,”³⁸¹ and in Michael Fried’s account of the modernist artwork’s aloofness or indifference to its audience.³⁸² Indeed, Wright’s investment in the reader is so intense that it becomes embodied, biological; the ideal contact he imagines with his reader is so profound as to forgo the individual—but not, as Williams has it, in order to reinvent a literary tradition. Instead, Wright’s fantasy of belonging affirms intersubjective social relations as an effect of the dissolution of the word.

³⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproductions,” *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 222.

³⁸¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 14; 225.

³⁸² Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1988).

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