

**UNDERSONGS:
LEFT ELEGIES AND THE POLITICS OF COMMUNITY, 1940-1965**

by

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ABSTRACT

The years between 1940 and 1965 constitute a comparatively dormant era in the history of radical political activity in the United States—a brief interval that begins in the fading light of widespread labor organizing and ends just before the student movement’s sparks of militant energy catch flame. In “Undersongs: Left Elegies and the Politics of Community, 1940-1965,” I argue that the literary vehicles for radical politics do not in fact disappear between the *New Masses* and the new social movements but, rather, begin to draw inspiration and energy from a seemingly unlikely genre: the elegy. Across chapters on poets as formally and temperamentally diverse as Kenneth Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser, Jack Spicer, and W. H. Auden, I consider how the elegy is used to reflect on both the promise of radical ideologies and practices and the disappointments of political realities. The elegies I discuss in this dissertation ultimately turn to small-scale sociability—to what Auden refers to as “the polis of [one’s] friends”—for consolation and, in many instances, as a mode of resistance. These turns begin in optimism during the early years of the war, but by the mid-1960s, they begin to articulate a sense of civilizational crisis. In a recent monograph, Mark Greif coins the phrase “crisis of man discourse” to refer to the tendency among midcentury intellectuals to probe and pressure the category of “the human.” Where Greif demonstrates how narrative and philosophical genres were scaled up to accommodate accounts of humanity in crisis (the weighty philosophical tome and the “great American novel” are his touchstones), my project examines poetry’s capacity to “think big” even as it locates the kernel of social transformation in the communal and aesthetic practices of small, marginalized groups.

Seminal studies of the genre by Peter Sacks, Jahan Ramazani, and Max Cavitch define elegies as (respectively) tools for the work of private mourning, open-ended meditations on grief that afford neither consolation nor closure, and material legacies that help shape the “historical self-understanding” of individuals and collectives. Each of these

accounts offers a possible framework for understanding how elegies in the English-language tradition register and critique shifting historical conditions and structures of feeling. My dissertation builds on this work by examining the political valences of the modern elegy within a narrow historical frame. The project as a whole argues that poetry is a medium uniquely equipped to suspend the contradictory moods and affects generated during moments of political, economic, and environmental crisis, and helps reorient scholarly attention toward voice and tone, aesthetic features that have tended to take a back seat to formal indeterminacy in discussions of the relationship between poetry and political struggle.

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“The best thing about the past
is that it’s over”
when you die.
you wake up
from the dream
that’s your
life.
Then you grow up
and get to be post human
in a past that keeps happening
ahead of you

—Joanne Kyger, “Night Palace”

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INTRODUCTION

UNDERSONGS AND MINOR LOSSES: MODERN ELEGY'S SECRET HISTORIES

Weepe, shepheard, weepe, to make my undersong.

—Edmund Spenser (1591)¹

This dissertation tells the story of modern elegy's intersection with Leftist and utopian politics in the twentieth century. It is a partial story—one more invested in the luminous details of literary and cultural history than in the broader strokes of theoretical speculation. I have resisted offering any overarching and transhistorical account of what elegies are and what they do, preferring instead to attend to what a limited constellation of elegies achieve within a specific historical context. Though I tend to think that strong claims about generic coherence run the risk of obscuring textual and historical particulars, one cannot undertake even a partial history of elegy (or of any genre) without an awareness of the conventions that make it cohere. Therefore, this project keeps the background of genre perpetually in focus as it considers how social pressures shape literary objects and how those objects in turn perform a kind of cultural or political work within (and beyond) their contemporary moment. It charts, in other words, a middle way between generic mastery and textual fugitivity—between the law of genre and the poem unbound.

The ways in which elegies express and interrogate political commitments are manifold, and in order to keep this project manageable and coherent, I have established narrow historical and geographic parameters for the poetry under consideration. The United States in the mid-twentieth century witnessed an unprecedented rise of the elegy, especially

¹ Edmund Spenser, "Daphnaida," in *The Complete Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. R. E. Neil Dodge (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1908; Bartleby.com, 2010). <http://www.bartleby.com/153/106.html>. [June 2017]

among Left-leaning poets. Kenneth Rexroth, the dissident autodidact who was instrumental in setting the stage for what would become known as the San Francisco Renaissance, famously identified an “elegiac tone” as the “unifying principle” of much of the poetry being written in the Bay Area in the 1940s.² Looking back on the early years of this so-called Renaissance, poet Robin Blaser similarly emphasized the importance of elegy for his small Berkeley cohort (which included, most notably, Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer):

Curiously ... one thing that does fascinate me about the whole Berkeley period [of the late 1940s] is the way in which it went into nostalgia. In other words, everything is elegiac. The greatest poems of this period are Duncan’s *Medieval Scenes*, the *Domestic Scenes*, and *The Venice Poem*. They are simply beautiful, but they are elegies—all three are elegies. Now, it’s not that Duncan taught us elegy, it’s that Duncan has a central focus of elegy. Then that elegiac tends to be something like the absence of a landscape, the absence of a place, the determination to let one’s life fall and rise upon love itself, and love itself then bringing an order that passes all the time ... Now when I look at that nostalgia, I see what enormous intelligence that nostalgia has because what it does is throw all of us, and in this instance I have to say myself, into the realm of not what T. S. Eliot, say, is doing—irony about the modern condition—but an actual grief and tears of the modern condition.³

The nostalgic, utopian, elegiac, and apocalyptic poetry of the kind Rexroth, Blaser, and their peers were writing became part of the texture of that time and place. But it was more than just a local vogue.

A review essay by John Berryman that appeared in the February 1948 issue of *Partisan Review* reflects critically on a version of the “everything is elegiac” trend, highlighting its wider sphere of influence. Since the mid-1930s, Berryman laments, poetry had become increasingly “ominous, flat, and social ... casual in tone and form, frightening in import.”⁴ In a word, apocalyptic (though Berryman doesn’t use this precise term). Robert Duncan’s

² Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 33.

³ Miriam Nichols, ed., *The Astonishment Tapes: Talks on Poetry and Autobiography with Robin Blaser and Friends* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2015), 167.

⁴ John Berryman, “Waiting for the End, Boys,” *Partisan Review* vol. 15, no. 2 (February 1948): 254.

Heavenly City Earthly City is Berryman's first example of such ominous, flat, and frightening verse. Where Blaser attributes an "enormous intelligence" to Duncan's elegiac outlook, Berryman dismisses it as a product of "dark and mindless California."⁵ However, he's quick to position Duncan's book in relation to what he calls variously "Auden Ltd." and the "Auden Climate": a brand of committed writing that lingers over the literary landscape like a thick fog.⁶ In linking the small elegiac eruptions happening in the Bay Area to a more widely recognized and firmly established literary "climate," Berryman's essay helps us to see Auden and Duncan as part of a shared—if widely dispersed—literary network. The essay's title, "Waiting for the End, Boys," provides a further clue to role of elegy within this network. "Waiting for the end, boys" is the refrain of William Empson's 1938 parody, "Just a Smack at Auden," which lampoons the elegiac and often resigned sensibility of Auden and his peers.

Ironically, Berryman found himself the subject of another largely negative omnibus review, by Leslie Fiedler, published later that year in the same magazine. Placing William Everson's *The Residual Years*, Randall Jarrell's *Losses*, Berryman's *The Dispossessed*, and William Carlos Williams's *Paterson (Book Two)* in conversation with one another, Fiedler identifies several interconnected trends in the poetry under consideration. The first is the sense that this writing places itself willingly "at the mercy of large sightless shifts in feeling outside the poet's will or the exigencies of his poem."⁷ Fiedler rationalizes his resistance to the poetry under review by aligning himself with a generation that was "brought up to regard poems as [autonomous] structures" impervious to such shifts—someone, in other words, fully indoctrinated in New Critical methods of reading. The poems under review, on the other

⁵ Berryman, "Waiting," 255.

⁶ Berryman, "Waiting," 260, 255.

⁷ Leslie Fiedler, "Some Uses and Failures of Feeling," *Partisan Review* vol. 15, no. 8 (August 1948): 924.

hand, are “spectacularly not autonomous.” They “yield to changing fashions in emotion, themselves prompted by inscrutable adjustments in the gross social mind.”⁸ Fiedler is reluctant, at best, to accept that poetry might be permeable to its non-literary surround because, for him, such permeability results in the second trend he identifies among the four books: an unrestrained and thus risky embrace of sentimentality. “[W]e submit now,” he writes, “to a revolution in sensibility, called sometimes with moderate accuracy neo-Romanticism, which involves ... a restoration to legitimacy of the more dangerous uses of emotion and the consequent difficulty in the discrimination of sentimentality.”⁹ Astutely identifying D. H. Lawrence as an important influence on California poet William Everson (as well as on contemporaries who figure more prominently in this dissertation: Kenneth Rexroth and Kenneth Patchen), Fiedler avers that there might be “possible profitable revivals of Lawrence ... particularly those that would lead to a contemplation of his extraordinary *conquests of tone*.”¹⁰ Ultimately, though, for Fiedler, “Lawrence serves primarily as a guarantor of bad writing, that is to say, flagrant sentimentalizing,” especially in the case of Everson.¹¹

There is much to take issue with in “Some Uses and Failures of Feeling”—its crypto-misogynist approval of Lawrence’s “conquests of tone” over and above contemporary verse that “yield[s] to” its wider social matrix, for one. And lurking between the lines of Fiedler’s sexualized language of submission is an equally alarming crypto-elitism, signaled by his characterization of collective feelings and historical moods as “sightless”—shaped not, as he would prefer, by the strong will and exemplary intellect of the poet, but by the “inscrutable

⁸ Fiedler, “Some Uses,” 924.

⁹ Fiedler, “Some Uses,” 924.

¹⁰ Fiedler, “Some Uses,” 925, emphasis mine.

¹¹ Fiedler, “Some Uses,” 925.

adjustments in the gross social mind.” But for all its “truculent” (Fiedler’s term) nostalgia for the “handsome and useful fiction” of poetry’s autonomy, Fiedler’s review accurately (if acidly) identifies a common investment, shared by four otherwise very different poets, in “extend[ing] the poem’s range of feeling.”¹²

Fiedler ultimately emphasizes feeling’s failures. *Undersongs: Left Elegies and the Politics of Community, 1940-1965* looks more closely at its uses and its triumphs. It considers the ways in which elegies of the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s extend the genre’s range of feeling by registering precisely those “large sightless shifts” in mood and “inscrutable adjustments” of affect that Fiedler disparages.

It also articulates a seam between the major chords of canonical elegies and the minor key of the coterie poem. In his preface to *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, Jahan Ramazani urges us to “listen more carefully to the mourning tongues of our major poets.”¹³ As justification for the monograph’s author-centered approach, he proclaims that “*strong* poets”—poets of the sort he includes within the pages of *Poetry of Mourning*—“have remade the elegy for modernity.”¹⁴ *Undersongs* tells a different story about elegy’s refashioning in the modern age. Most of the poets under consideration, with the exception of W. H. Auden and Muriel Rukeyser, are minor poets. Kenneth Rexroth has received far less scholarly attention than mentees and inheritors like Robert Duncan and Allen Ginsberg. Jack Spicer was a contemporary of Duncan’s and Ginsberg’s and a frequent guest at Rexroth’s anarchist salons. And although he has garnered more attention within the academy in recent years—prompted in part by the publication of a revised edition of his

¹² Fiedler, “Some Uses,” 924, 927.

¹³ Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), ix.

¹⁴ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, x, emphasis mine.

collected poems in 2008—he is by no means a household name. Spicer’s marginality is as much a matter of design (his own truculence) as of fate (the whims of the academic marketplace). Studded with proper nouns and cryptic references, his poems flaunt their embeddedness within a specific milieu (Berkeley in the two decades after WWII) and reflect repeatedly on that milieu’s ephemerality.

If Spicer and Rexroth occupy a middle ground between marginality and canonicity, Auden and many of the figures that appear in chapter 1 serve as limit cases. In reading one of the twentieth century’s most celebrated elegists (Ramazani includes Auden among his “strong poets”) alongside some marginal, if not forgotten, writers, I aim to make a case for the U.S. Auden’s latent investment in the kinds of sociality espoused by his anarchist contemporaries. His adoption of techniques we tend to associate with midcentury coterie poets (an interest in occasional poetry and epistolary address; his cultivation and celebration of small-scale communities) and his proximity to dissident, Leftist intellectual networks shed new light on his poetic and political legacies. If Auden’s anarchist sympathies have been overlooked in studies of his work, so too has his influence on more avowedly marginal writers like Rexroth and Spicer. Rather than reinforce the schism between major and minor (academic and bohemian; confessional and avant-garde) that opened most dramatically during the anthology wars of the 1950s and has remained a dominant scheme for thinking about midcentury verse, this study attends instead to some surprising, and largely suppressed, continuities.¹⁵ These continuities cohere, in large part, around the uses to which elegy is put during this period.

¹⁵ Robert Lowell described the schism dividing American poetry of the 1940s and ’50s as a competition between the “cooked and the raw.” According to Lowell, the former—represented by Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson’s *New Poets of England and America* anthology (1957)—is “marvelously expert, [but] often seems laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar.” The latter—which appears in Donald Allen’s *The New American Poetry* (1960)—serves up “huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned

i. NOTES ON GENRE

Part of what this project sets out to do, then, is to make visible some secret or marginalized histories of the mode: those local eruptions and broader dispersions of elegiac writing that have gone unremarked upon in major studies. It also, if only obliquely, positions elegy as itself a kind of secret history—a recessive genre or “undersong” eclipsed by lyric’s dominance. Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins begin their introduction to *The Lyric Theory Reader* by observing that “it has become as notoriously difficult to define the lyric as it is to define poetry itself.”¹⁶ Karen Weisman makes a similar observation about the difficulty of characterizing and categorizing the elegy. “Few scholars,” she owns in her introduction to *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, “would profess certainty in knowing precisely what *elegiac* denotes.”¹⁷ While the lyric has become the ground for rich and varied scholarly debate—from a constellation of monographs, to the 2008 special issue of *PMLA* on “The New Lyric Studies,” to Jackson and Prins’s anthology, and beyond—the elegy remains a comparatively under-theorized poetic mode. The ease with which lyric poetry becomes a synecdoche for “poetry itself” is exemplified in Jackson and Prins’s introduction. Not only do a great many poems get categorized as lyrics based on a wide variety of criteria (from length to musicality), the adjective “lyrical” is regularly applied to works of prose (as well as works in other media) that operate, in whatever ways, *like poetry*. This descriptive promiscuity serves as further

experience...to midnight listeners.” Lowell’s remarks capture something of the stylistic and political divisions that defined American poetry and poetics at midcentury. They also simplify many of the nuances of both trends/anthologies in favor of establishing a neat binary—one reinforced by many literary critics and historians. For critical accounts of the period that challenge some prevailing assumptions about the aforementioned divisions, see Alan Golding’s *From Outlaw to Classic: Canons in American Poetry* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1995) and Mutlu Konuk Blasing’s *Politics and Form in Postmodern Poetry: O’Hara, Bishop, Ashbery, and Merrill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁶ Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, “Introduction,” in *The Lyric Theory Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 1.

¹⁷ Karen Weisman, “Introduction,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1.

evidence of how the lyric's categorical slipperiness has helped perpetuate its generic dominance.

While my aim here is not to promote a similarly wanton proliferation of the elegy and the elegiac as category and descriptor, it's worth pointing out that elegy, like lyric, has served as a synecdoche for poetry in a variety of contexts, from Greco-Roman mythology to contemporary literary theory. From Pan's pursuit of Syrinx to Orpheus's descent into the underworld, loss and mourning have long been figured as the origins of poetic expression. Geoffrey Hartman, drawing on one such classical myth, historicizes poetry's drift toward the elegiac:

The tension between prophetic voice and fictive world becomes acute after Milton. Not only is paradise understood to be lost (that is, understood to have been, or now always to be, a fiction) but the great voice seems lost that knew itself as logos: as participating in real influence. The *philomel moment* of English poetry is therefore the postprophetic moment, when the theme of loss merges with that of voice—when, in fact, a 'lost voice' becomes the subject or moving force of poetic song.¹⁸

Writing from within Hartman's "philomel moment," John Stuart Mill contends that lyric song "has always seemed ... like the lament of a prisoner in a solitary cell, ourselves listening, unseen in the next."¹⁹ Mill's mournful prisoner lends a distinctly elegiac (and, if we care to go there, political) valence to his well-known definition of lyric poetry as overheard speech. That this figure tends to get erased from accounts of Mill's theory brings into focus elegy's secret history as lyric's unacknowledged other. Considered in this light, elegy looks intrinsically rather than incidentally subcultural—an archive of "undersongs" that, as we shall see, has supplied coterie poets and dissident Leftists with measures, tropes, and fantasies in times of crisis.

¹⁸ Geoffrey Hartman, "Evening Star and Evening Land," in *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*, eds. Geoffrey Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 63.

¹⁹ J. S. Mill, "What Is Poetry?," in *The Broadview Anthology of Victorian Poetry and Political Theory*, Thomas J. Collins and Vivienne J. Rundle, eds. (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1999), 1217.

While elegy is by no means the only mode in which poets interrogate their relationship to tradition, it is a privileged one, especially for the poets I discuss in this dissertation. Their elegies tell stories of poetic and political inheritance (and revolts against that inheritance) across time as much as they help shape local communities and transnational networks in real time. *How* these poems do so depends in large measure on the time and place in which they were written (the mid-twentieth-century United States) as well as on the set of political commitments motivating their composition (Leftist, broadly speaking; anarchist, more precisely). *That* they do so is part of what situates them within the long tradition of elegiac verse.²⁰

ii. THE LEFT, BEREFT: SOME EPISODES

Light upon Waldheim! And the earth is gray;
A bitter wind is driving from the north;
The stone is cold, and strange cold whispers say:
What do ye here with death? Go forth! Go forth!

—Voltairine de Cleyre (1897)²¹

The close readings and framing apparatuses of this dissertation's body chapters build cumulatively toward an anatomy of the American political elegy in the twentieth century. By way of a preface, I want to touch briefly and schematically here on some uses (laying lost ideals to rest, reanimating usable pasts, and so on) to which poets on the Left have put the

²⁰ Elegies have been instrumental in the making of literary history since at least the early modern period. Indeed, many of the most well-known elegies in the English language—from Edmund Spenser's "Astrophel" to Percy Bysshe Shelley's "Adonais" and beyond—were written to commemorate the death of a poet's mentor, predecessor, and sometimes, peer. But along with mourning and honoring their intimates, many elegists aimed to distinguish their own voice from the example set by the deceased. Thus, the push and pull between tradition and novelty is part and parcel of the genre.

²¹ Voltairine de Cleyre, "Light Upon Waldheim," *Selected Works* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing Association, 1914), 66.

genre. I begin in the 1890s, end in the 1990s, and linger along the way in those midcentury decades—the 1930s through the 1960s—with which the project is most concerned.

Anarchist poet Voltairine de Cleyre begins her belated elegy for the four men executed in the aftermath of the Haymarket uprising of 1886—one among many local eruptions of a broader, national struggle between labor and capital in the last decades of the nineteenth century—with a short preamble describing the monument that marks the radicals’ grave in Chicago’s Waldheim Cemetery. “The figure on the monument,” she writes, “is a warrior woman, dropping with her left hand a crown upon the forehead of a fallen man just past his agony, and with her right drawing a dagger from her bosom.”²² The poem’s speaker goes on to apostrophize this woman carved in stone, asking for her guidance about what form the mourners’ grief should take: “May we not weep o’er him that martyred lies, / Slain in our name, for that he loved us much? // May we not linger till the day is broad? / Nay, none are stirring in this stinging dawn— / None but poor wretches that make no moan to God: / What use are these ...”²³ Set at the break of day, when “none are [yet] stirring,” the poem aligns the sun’s rising with a revolutionary dawn that heralds a new era for humanity. Thus the exclamatory refrain “Light upon Waldheim!” can be read as an observation as well as a kind of fiat (as in “*Let there be* light upon Waldheim! And, by extension, upon all of humanity!”) that occasions the repeated directive to “Go forth!” by the light of the newly risen sun. The poem’s emphatic refusal to “dissolv[e] in [the] coward peace” of grief, and its imperative to abandon the pastoral cemetery (“Brother, let us go!”) for the noise and grime of Chicago, and the work still to be done there, anticipate a continued legacy of solidarity and struggle inspired by the men buried at Waldheim.

²² de Cleyre, *Selected*, 66.

²³ de Cleyre, *Selected*, 66.

The rhetorical energy of these lines, and the physical momentum they evoke, are cast in direct opposition to the stationary comportment of those gathered at the grave, pitting the latter's quietism against the quickening effect of morning's call to arms. Yet even as the disembodied voice of the statue (which also externalizes the mourners' collective social conscience) warns against "Stand[ing still] to weep ... Till, weakened with your weeping, like the snow / Ye melt," the slant rhyme of "linger" and "stinging" in this same stanza helps us to feel—somatically—the difficult transition from the still, dark hours that protect the immobile mourners to morning's hastening sting.²⁴ This subtle, sonic evocation of the struggle to disentangle the consolation of contemplation from the radical *vita activa* that the rest of the poem champions is made more explicit in the poem's preamble. While the speaking statue in the poem conveys a fairly unequivocal message ("Quit mourning and go riot!" would be an accurate, if glib, paraphrase), the description of the statue in the preamble helps us to see these two activities, and the feelings they index, as inseparable. Illuminating the relationship between consolation and confrontation that the poem itself disavows, the preamble fuses militancy and grief into a single figure: the female warrior who places a laurel wreath on her dead comrade's head with one hand while at the same time reaching for a concealed weapon with the other.

The body that mourns militantly is a fitting figure for the kinds of elegies written by twentieth-century American poets on the Left who carried on de Cleyre's legacy. One such poet—Kenneth Rexroth—published an elegy and homage to de Cleyre in the first issue (from the winter of 1942) of the anarchist magazine *Retort*. The poem's title, "Again at Waldheim," signals not only the resurrection of de Cleyre's 1897 elegy, but Rexroth's own return to his home city of Chicago, and to the burial site of four of the American labor

²⁴ de Cleyre, *Selected*, 66.

movement's martyrs, just after the U.S. entry into WWII—a time that is often seen as the start of a downturn in radical activism and foment.²⁵

Now in Waldheim where the rain
has fallen careless and unthinking
For all an evil century's youth,
Where now the banks of dark roses lie,
What memory lasts, Emma, of you,
Or of the intrepid comrades of your grave,
Of Piotr, of "mutual aid,"
Against the iron clad flame throwing
Course of time?
Your stakes were on the turn
Of a card whose face you knew you would not see.²⁶

De Cleyre, Emma Goldman, and Piotr Kropotkin (along with Rosa Luxemburg, Thomas More, and Boethius, all mentioned in the stanza before the one quoted above) have, the poem suggests, been forgotten by the "word drunk, power drunk[,]" and (from the perspective of a pacifist writing on the eve of war) trigger-happy authorities that have earned the twentieth century the descriptor Rexroth gives it: evil.

This collective amnesia may be an unsurprising turn of events given the paradoxical disjuncture between techno-economic progress and social good, but, as Rexroth suggests, it is one worth mourning nonetheless. More striking, however, is the twist that occurs in the last four lines of the stanza quoted above, in which time gets figured as a flame-throwing revolutionary who, ironically, forgets her forebears even as she seeks to realize their visions of a more democratic society to come. Here, Rexroth suggests that historical erasure extends beyond the expected scenarios (the mainstream smudging out the margins; the state quashing insurrectionary uprisings) to include even revolutionaries who would "go forth," as

²⁵ For a discussion of the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact's influence on Left intellectual communities in the U.S., see Daniel Aaron, "Literary Scenes and Literary Movements," *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, Ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 733–757, 749. See, also, chapter 1 of this dissertation.

²⁶ Kenneth Rexroth, *Collected Poems* (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2003), 221.

in de Cleyre's elegy, into an unwritten and unseen future without properly acknowledging the past. What Marx dismisses as "the tradition of all dead generations [that] weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living," preventing them from accurately perceiving the nuances of their own potentially revolutionary moment beneath the historical drag in which they've draped it, is proffered in Rexroth's poem as a necessary ballast for a "careless and unthinking" orientation toward the future.

De Cleyre's elegy and Rexroth's homage—two points on a timeline of Leftist American poetry—help us to see the ways in which grief can be a spur to, rather than an idle distraction from, political thought and action. They also make a powerful bid for the present tense of the past—what Elizabeth Freeman has dubbed "temporal drag."²⁷ "Temporal drag" refers to the repeated contact we make with history, often in the form of outmoded or obsolete roles we perform. For Freeman, as for Rexroth, the friction generated during these moments of contact serves to decelerate certain kinds of progress and make available other modes of living. Literary impersonation of this kind is crucial to the elegy. When, for example, Auden sheds his typically dense, metaphysical lyricism in the last section of his 1939 elegy for W. B. Yeats, and adopts instead the simpler music of the iambic tetrameter line, he makes felt in the very texture of the poem his effort to locate a useable poetic history.²⁸ More than mere ornamentation, then, these textual vestments can signal complex emotional and literary-historical *investments*. But the "time-honored disguise and borrowed language" of poetic tradition can also weigh their wearer down.²⁹ Historical drag can become

²⁷ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 62-65.

²⁸ "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" doesn't fully resolve the question of whether Auden's imitation of the elder modernist is reverent or sardonic. This question—which is, by extension, a question about what tones or compartments the elegy might accommodate—will come into play most explicitly in my third chapter.

²⁹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

historical lag: a necessary counterforce against modernity's blind and breathless forward momentum or, in a more pessimistic register, the dead weight of a reified past that distorts the present in unproductive ways.³⁰ The push and pull between nostalgia and futurity, the selection of historical models and counterfactual fantasies from the storehouse of tradition—these dynamics become wearisome, disappointing, sad (*a drag* in the idiomatic sense) when they remain unresolved or unfulfilled.

Cultural historian Daniel Aaron, one of the preeminent scholars of the literary Left and the first to chronicle the rise of U.S. literary radicalism in *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (1961), reckoned with shifting attitudes about the 1930s in essays published throughout the 1960s and 1970s. The closest thing to a conclusion Aaron reaches during this period is that the 1930s were a moment that remained intractably yet intangibly present in the culture of the '60s—its influence still felt, but often ambiguously and imprecisely.³¹ Aaron's epilogue to *American Notes* is, for the purposes of a project about

³⁰ For more on this latter dynamic as it relates to modern political thought, see Wendy Brown's "Resisting Left Melancholia," in which she argues that the twenty-first-century Left "suffer[s] with the sense of not only a lost movement but also a lost historical moment, not only a lost theoretical and empirical coherence but also a lost way of life and a lost course of pursuits." In response to such losses, the left has become melancholy. In other words, marshaling Freud's definition of pathological melancholia, Brown admonishes the contemporary (circa 2003) Left for what she sees as its inability to divest itself from older models of political analysis and collective life. Such pathological attachment to "long-held sentiments and objects" forecloses, on her account, "possibilities of political transformation in the present" (Brown, "Resisting Left Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, eds. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003], 460, 459). Though aspects of Brown's argument are compelling, the adherence to the past at the expense of new and innovative political thought she identifies as endemic to contemporary left movements is by no means unique to the last twenty years. Further, in claiming such melancholic nostalgia to be the object of Walter Benjamin's scorn in "Left-Wing Melancholy" (his 1928 review of a book of poems by Erich Kastner), she fundamentally misreads Benjamin's essay, which is preoccupied less with putative Leftists' misuse but, rather, with the unreflective and derivative imitation of Leftist literary conventions by poets Benjamin deems to be out of touch with working class resistance.

³¹ Aaron has reflected elsewhere on whether and, if so, how the earlier generation of Leftist intellectuals and agitators influenced the New Left. See, for example, his article "The Thirties—Now and Then," *The American Scholar*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Summer 1966): 490-494. See also the transcript from a 1967 symposium, "Confrontation: The Old Left and the New," hosted by the Poetry Center of the Y.M-Y.W.C.A. in New York, moderated by Aaron, and published in *The American Scholar*, vol. 36, no. 4 (Autumn 1967): 567-588. Its participants included Tom Hayden, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Richard Rovere and Dwight Macdonald, and its title reveals much about the symposium's conclusions. For a study that highlights rupture rather than continuity between Old Left and New, see Maurice Isserman's *If I Had a Hammer: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York:

elegy, perhaps the most interesting piece in the volume. Originally delivered as a lecture at Harvard University in the spring of 1978, in the widening wake of the New Left, “The Etiquette of Grief: A Literary Generation’s Response to Death” tells the story of how the art of the condolence letter was refined by American writers in the second half of the nineteenth century. One might reasonably wonder whether Aaron is picking up on a trans-generational echo. Where writers like Henry James, William Dean Howells, Henry Adams, and Emily Dickinson revolutionized the art of losing in the form of the masterful condolence letter—itsself a kind of prose elegy—Aaron’s generation was grappling with losses of a different order and struggling toward a textual form that would accommodate them.

Communist poet Walter Lowenfels called the poems he was writing throughout the 1930s “eleg[ies] for idealism,” which suggests that intimations of impermanence were felt even in an undeniably fecund moment for the Left.³² With the rise of anti-Communism in the 1950s—fueled by revelations about Stalin’s Soviet Union that shocked many avowed Leftists out of any complacent relationship to the Party—came a more acute sense that the Left’s ideals were irrevocably compromised if not irretrievably exhausted. And if the Civil Rights Movement in the second half of the decade, and the new social movements that gained traction in the next, appeared to breathe new life into the American radical imaginary, they also sparked debates about the value of continuity and the appeal of rupture.

Basic Books, Inc., 1987).

³² Walter Lowenfels to Granville Hicks, January 5, 1938, Granville Hicks Papers, b35, Syracuse University Special Collections Research Center. Quoted in Alan Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word*.

iii. USES OF THE PAST

Lauren Berlant's 1994 article, "68, or Something," serves as one among many potential touchstones for thinking about the use of political histories within contemporary struggles, and the role that genre and mourning might play in making these histories available to new generations. The article begins with an anecdote about Berlant's dissent from a progressive faculty group, which she initiated by issuing a memo outlining her critique of the group as it existed and her hopes for its future. For all its white-collar, bureaucratic associations, one can't help but see in Berlant's professional memo a trace of the *mimoe*d comminiqués distributed by an earlier generation of poets and activists. Her colleagues at the University of Chicago were quick to pick up on the parallel as well, reacting with, at best, tender mockery ("You're ... a real flower child.") and, at worst, scorn. That Berlant's radical utopian aspirations—ambitions that take, in this anecdote, the form of ephemeral remnants—provoked this kind of response prompts her to meditate on "the centrality of waste, failure, loss, pain, and chagrin to the project of inciting transformation itself."³³ "This is an essay," she writes, powerfully and polemically, "about the political risks of becoming minor—or '68'—by embracing utopian logics and tonal disruptions of theoretical, descriptive, and analytic norms in and outside of the academy."³⁴

A large part of what makes these disruptions possible is a Janus-faced approach to history—one that looks to the past not out of mere nostalgia or naïve sentimentality (though nostalgia and sentimentality are important both to Berlant and to the poets in this dissertation), but to imagine better ways of living in the present and alternative futures on which to set our sights.

³³ Lauren Berlant, "68, or Something," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 21, no. 1 (Autumn 1994): 127.

³⁴ Berlant, "68," 126-127.

If 1968, and the set of associations this year had accrued by the early 1990s, serves as Berlant's starting point for thinking about what Wendy Brown has since termed "genealogical politics," a more specific date (September 15, 1963) becomes central later in the article to discussing how literature accommodates (both formally and tonally) the accumulated matter of history. In novels by Michelle Cliff and Toni Morrison, it's the deaths of four young black girls in the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama (on Sept. 15, 1963) that stand in for the history of racial violence in the U.S. and that trigger characters' coming to political consciousness. The protagonist (Clare) of Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*, Berlant notes, "cut[s] the picture [of one of the victims of the bombing] from the paper and put[s] it in a celluloid pocket in her wallet—to glance at even when they buried the President."³⁵ Clare's material remnant of violent injustice demonstrates mourning's disruptive potential and the openness of the past to reclamation and reinterpretation.

With this in mind, I turn to two elegiac poems that act as repositories for both emergent and outdated models of political struggle: Adrienne Rich's "Leaflets" (1968) and Tim Dlugos's "The Sixties" (1990). "[T]he centrality of waste, failure, loss, pain, and chagrin to the project of inciting transformation" that Berlant tracks in "'68 or Something" is made most palpable in Rich's poem, the final section of which imagines an exchange between two people at a demonstration: "I want to hand you this / leaflet streaming with rain or tears / but the words coming clear / something you might find crushed into your hand / after passing a barricade / and stuff in your raincoat pocket."³⁶ These lines suggest the inseparability of art and activism by painting a portrait of the poem as political pamphlet.

³⁵ Quoted in Berlant, "68," 145.

³⁶ Adrienne Rich, *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), 333.

Although the speaker reminds her interlocutor (and her readers) that poems deserve no special status—they are “no more sacred . . . than other things in your life”—a few lines later, poetry does in fact take on a peculiar charge:

I want this to be yours
in the sense that if you find and read it
it will be there in you already
and the leaflet then merely something
to leave behind, a little leaf
in the drawer of a sublet room.
What else does it come down to
but handing on scraps of paper
little figurines or phials
no stronger than the dry clay they are baked in
yet more than dry clay or paper
because the imagination crouches in them.³⁷

Poetry doesn't just contain the past's residue but, through some subtle magic, brings it to life. And if the first lines of this section (“The strain of being born / over and over has torn your smile into pieces”) offer a hellish, Sisyphean vision of political resurrection, the poem's final lines imagine futurity not as endless, fruitless repetition, but as modest recuperation—resolving, if only uncertainly, the poem's discordant strains of hope and resignation: “I am thinking how we can use what we have / to invent what we need.”³⁸

The longer view of Tim Dlugos's poem (written in the early 1990s) results in a different stance toward the radical apogee of the 1960s. The poem feels both irritably anti-nostalgic and proleptically self-elegiac (Dlugos was diagnosed with AIDS in 1989 and would die of complications related to the disease nine months after writing “The Sixties”). It begins with a backward glance at the poet's radical past through the eyes of a younger generation, several decades removed from the Vietnam War protests and the Gay Liberation movement in which Dlugos had been active. With a good deal more of scorn than fond nostalgia, the

³⁷ Rich, *Collected Early Poems*, 334.

³⁸ Rich, *Collected Early Poems*, 333, 334.

voice of the poem's opening lines sounds older than Dlugos's forty years, and more disillusioned than we might expect:

When boys of 25 explain
the Sixties to me
I want to rip their tongues out

“A period when every structure
was besieged but cooler
heads prevailed

and now we're on the high road
back to basics”—hell,
I lived through it

the impulse wasn't wrong
and didn't fail, the people did³⁹

Unlike “Leaflets,” “The Sixties” struggles to find a contemporary use for “the tools for freedom that we used back then.”⁴⁰ Unlike Rich's enlivening spirit (“imagination”) that “crouches” in otherwise inert matter (“clay”), Dlugos captures “*the final gasp* / of a perspective in which to inhabit / the moment was an impulse // worthy of respect and trust.”⁴¹ But for every dismissal Dlugos lobes at the past, he issues, in turn, a reminder of what is worth preserving from that moment. The lack of punctuation in the poem helps us perceive its tonal and rhetorical twists and turns as part of a single, unresolvable vision, the nostalgia of which resides paradoxically in its very opposition to nostalgia. In the same, long breath (and the pace of this poem *is* fast, breathless), Dlugos mocks free love and bad trips while also subtly acknowledging (via the deftest, most imperceptible tonal shifts) that to don the temporal drag of “Aquarian dawn” hippiedom is to reclaim it from the “network news

³⁹ Tim Dlugos, *A Fast Life: The Collected Poems of Tim Dlugos*, ed. David Trinidad (Callicoon, NY: Nightboat Books, 2011), 508. Dlugos also, curiously enough, wrote an elegy for Walter Lowenfels in the late 1980s, which looks farther back to the radical history of the 1930s.

⁴⁰ Dlugos, *Fast Life*, 510.

⁴¹ Dlugos, *Fast Life*, 509, emphasis mine.

// satanic factories of false desire” that have coopted it, and to restore the utopian dimension that has been evacuated by the engines of capital.

In “The Sixties,” political ideals and their lived realities can be worn (or worn away) like an article of clothing, through which, like the spark of Rich’s “imagination,” the light of “human possibility” might still shine:

the knowledge that the warp
and woof of the quotidian

like every fabric was composed
of threads, and a human possibility
existed to see through them to the light

behind, beyond, within

Dlugos’s turn to the quotidian in the face of despair and disillusionment is a move we will see in much of the poetry discussed in this project.

iv. THE WORK OF MOURNING AND THE WORK OF GENRE

Sigmund Freud alludes to mourning’s place within the sphere of politics when he defines it as not simply “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, [but also] to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.”⁴² He doesn’t dwell on the more abstract, immaterial objects of grief beyond these opening remarks, devoting the essay instead to the process, or “work,” of healthy mourning, as distinct from what he takes to be an abnormal melancholia. Mourning, on Freud’s account, is a finite process at the end of which the grieving subject relinquishes a lost object by reinvesting her affections in a substitute. In his essay “On Transience,” written at

⁴² Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 243, emphasis mine.

around the same time as “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud declares emphatically that “[m]ourning, as we know, however painful it may be, *comes to a spontaneous end*. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (in so far as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious.”⁴³ Melancholia, on the other hand, frustrates and delays mourning’s resolution. By incorporating or encysting the lost object into her ego, the melancholic directs feelings associated with grief (love, sorrow, anger, and so on) inward, creating a kind of feedback loop of ultimately unproductive emotion. The melancholic cannot replace the lost object because she persists in the fantasy that the object is not in fact lost.

Scholars of the literature of mourning, as well as thinkers invested in its implicit or explicit politics, have long debated Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia. In *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, Peter Sacks draws on Freudian paradigms of mourning and linguistic mediation and argues that “the mourner or elegist must submit to the mediating fabric of language, a tissue of substitutions that may cover a preceding lack.”⁴⁴ If the mourner is to find consolation, the poem must “intervene” between her and the original, now lost, object of her attachment—a process that, as Sacks points out, parallels Freud’s Oedipus scenario. “The dead, like the forbidden object of a primary desire, must be separated from the poet, partly by a veil of words.”⁴⁵ Elegies, for Sacks, act as these “mediating fabrics”—they are (literary) works of mourning that aid in the work of mourning.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: Vol. XIV*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1994), 307.

⁴⁴ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 18.

⁴⁵ Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 9.

Seth Moglen applies a version of this paradigm to American modernism specifically. Unlike Sacks's readings, which deal mostly with personal bereavement, Moglen's concentrate on "the problem of socially induced loss."⁴⁶ He contends that the mourning and melancholia characteristic of interwar literature in the U.S. was the result not just of the fracturing effects of WWI, but also of the shifting ground of economic life in the first decades of the twentieth century: from the rise of monopoly capitalism and its intensification of workers' struggles to the Great Depression's immiseration of large swaths of the American population.⁴⁷ After outlining the causes that gave rise to this structure of feeling, Moglen establishes a dichotomy between two modernist strains: the melancholic modernism of writers like Eliot, Toomer, Faulkner, and Hemingway, and a submerged, mostly Leftist modernism of mourning. "Canonical modernism . . . , which has played so decisive a role in the official narrative of twentieth-century American culture, is a literature in which traumatic collective loss has been grieved melancholically, and which records the consequent cauterization of love—and, indeed, of the capacity to feel."⁴⁸

Practitioners of the modernism of mourning also recognized the "intensifying crisis of alienation" as one of the "traumatic effects of capitalist modernization."⁴⁹ However,

they did not mystify that toxic social forces they had named, nor did they disavow or displace the anger that accompanied their grief. In some cases (though not in all), they self-consciously criticized the aesthetic fetishization of loss . . . In every case, they sought to direct their anger at the social formations that seemed to vitiate the possibility of love and social solidarity . . . Through the work of mourning, they sought—tentatively and cautiously—to imagine how those libidinal investments could flourish in the future.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Seth Moglen, *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 11.

⁴⁷ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, 3-25.

⁴⁸ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, 43.

⁴⁹ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, 45.

⁵⁰ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, 45-46.

In Moglen's typology of modernism, mourning is the province of dissident, marginalized figures whose work attempts to repair and restore a damaged sense of intimacy. Melancholia, on the other hand, goes hand in hand in Moglen's study with a dominant, canonical modernism that merely replicates the alienation and resignation endemic to the age.

Many theorists and literary scholars have troubled Freud's schema—along with critical accounts like Sacks's and Moglen's that reinforce it—in various ways. Some affirm melancholia's desirability as both a response to loss and a politicized affect within emancipatory struggles. As Moglen points out, “those who have adopted this view have generally been motivated by an appropriate criticism of Freud's . . . suggestion that a nonpathological mourning requires a withdrawal of investment (a “decathexis”) from what one has loved and lost” as well as by an aversion to the language of normalcy and pathology that Freud employs.⁵¹ Jose Muñoz, for example, has valorized art that enables members of oppressed groups to “take our dead to the various battles we must wage in their names.”⁵² In a reading of Walt Whitman's elegiac writing, Michael Moon similarly contemplates the potential uses of melancholic haunting. The “recognition and acceptance” we often associate with the work of mourning can, according to Moon, also “be part of a process that is not a displacement or a dismemberment . . . but a re-memberment that has repositioned itself among the remnants, the remainders, and reminders that do not go away; loss is not denied, but neither is it ‘worked through.’ Loss is not lost.”⁵³ For Muñoz, Moon, and others, then, the schism between mourning and melancholia cannot hold. In its place, we might find our

⁵¹ Moglen, *Mourning Modernity*, 239.

⁵² Jose Muñoz, “Photographies of Mourning: Melancholia and Ambivalence in Van Der Zee, Mapplethorpe, and *Looking for Langston*,” *Race and the Subject of Masculinities*, eds. Harry Stecopoulos and Michael Uebel (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 356.

⁵³ Michael Moon, “Memorial Rags,” *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Boston: MIT Press, 2002), 239.

way toward more progressive, perhaps even radical, conceptions of politicized grief. Rather than seeking to demystify and discard the melancholic process of integration, these theorists see it as rich ground for meditation—as Moon’s elliptical conclusion suggests—and as catalyst for political action—as evinced in Muñoz’s evocation of a battle waged for and with our dead.

Freud himself eventually came to question the idea that mourning is a process that can ever be completed. In a 1929 letter to Ludwig Binswanger, he writes

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And, actually, this is how it should be, it is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not want to relinquish.⁵⁴

In a suggestive gloss of Freud’s letter—one that helps us see the structural relationship between mourning and genre—Louis Fradenburg suggests that

if we try to de-essentialize this concept [of de-cathexis and substitution], we might focus instead on the problem of how we become attached to—how we develop bonds and relationships with—*particulars*. What makes grief so agonizing is precisely that when someone or something particular has been lost, it cannot recur. Thus in the concept of substitution there continues a [paradoxically melancholic] defense against the loss of the particular . . . If the particular cannot be repeated, it remains forever lost; and this is why there can be no final closure to mourning. There can only be, *alongside* mourning, learning to love new particulars.⁵⁵

If we cannot master loss through the work of substitution (which, as Moon reminds us, is an “idea constructed under the signs of compulsory labor and the cash nexus”), we might attend instead to the ways in which an ongoing and unending sorrow not only perpetuates our love for what is lost (Freud), but also multiplies other possible amorous configurations—configurations that aren’t surrogates for but complements to mourning

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Letter to Binswanger,” in *Letters of Sigmund Freud*, ed. E. L. Freud (New York: Basic Books, 1960).

⁵⁵ Louise O. Fradenburg, “‘Voice Memorial’: Loss and Reparation in Chaucer’s Poetry,” *Exemplaria*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1990): 181-183.

(Fradenburg).⁵⁶ Fradenburg's interrogation of Freud's hierarchical logic of substitution, and the more lateral theory of particularity and relatedness she offers in its stead, can, as Max Cavitch has convincingly pointed out, be brought to bear upon *literary* questions. Questions, more specifically, about the work of genre.⁵⁷

In his contribution to a collection of essays from the English Institute's 2009 conference on "The Work of Genre," Jonathan Culler helps clarify the stakes of reconciling genre's *longue durée* with the singularity of any given poem:

If one avoids the temptation to separate generic categories into the theoretical and the empirical but insists that genres are both historical and based on some sort of theoretical rationale, they are more defensible as critical categories, essential to the understanding both of literature as a social institution and of the individual works that take on meaning through their relations to generic categories.⁵⁸

Robyn Warhol, the volume's editor, paraphrases Culler's argument with the aid of a helpful metaphor. "[G]enre," she writes, "is not a set of rules that authors ought to follow but rather a background of convention against which the singularity of a text can emerge."⁵⁹ I find this

⁵⁶ Moon, "Memorial Rags," 234.

⁵⁷ Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 20-25.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Culler, "Genre: Lyric," *The Work of Genre: Selected Essays from the English Institute* (Cambridge: The English Institute, 2011).

⁵⁹ Robyn Warhol, "Introduction," *The Work of Genre: Selected Essays from the English Institute* (Cambridge: The English Institute, 2011). Warhol offers a useful elaboration on the demise of genre studies elsewhere in her introduction: "What killed genre? The likeliest suspects would be the historically oriented theory and criticism that have shaped the field of English studies since the 1980s. While formalism, structuralism, neo-Aristotelianism, and early iterations of poststructuralism could unselfconsciously propose universal theories about the properties of literature, formalism lost its footing under the influence of New Historicism, Frankfurt School and Birmingham School cultural studies, and such politically grounded approaches as feminism, neo-Marxism, critical race theory, queer studies, disability studies, and postcolonial theory. Whereas it had once been possible to generalize about genre, late twentieth-century developments made that project suspect, if not downright wrong. To detach form, structure, and theme from a text's specific historical moment, or to sketch out taxonomies of literary types in the abstract, began to be regarded as perpetuating received wisdoms that are intrinsically Eurocentric, androcentric, heterocentric, and economically privileged in their origins. As the discipline of English studies has more conscientiously devoted itself to the local, the referential, and the material aspects of literary production and reception, most critics have put aside generalizations about genre so as not to set up norms that would inevitably exclude examples of texts on the periphery—or indeed, beyond the boundaries—of the individual critic's own knowledge. Studies of genre have become studies of genres delimited by time and place, as are the topics of most of the essays in that issue of *Genre*: modern America, early modern England, the Reformation, the Renaissance, and so on. In its twenty-first-century version the journal might better be titled *Genres*." For more on the reanimation of genre studies, see "Remapping Genre," a

figure for talking about genre both compelling and problematic. Compelling because it encapsulates how distinctness and convention might exist as part of a unified field; problematic when the question of which “singular” texts are chosen as exemplary objects of study and by whom.

Cary Nelson—whose recovery of marginalized histories of Leftist American poetry in the twentieth century has informed my own contribution to the field—mobilizes the same metaphor to describe the relationship between the singularity of canonical texts and the undifferentiated surround of minor literature. But, unlike Culler and Warhol, Nelson suggests that the structural relationship between background and foreground is ideological, hierarchical, and (at the time of his writing) in desperate need of deconstruction:

[L]ittle is gained if ... we construe literary history as providing the context and background for the great literature of the past. Then a hierarchical distance opens between those canonized texts and the productive literary and social relations in which they were once embedded. When political and social history, along with “minor” literature, become mere background for our most idealized works, the relations between foreground and background acquire structural and ideological effectivity.⁶⁰

Rather than relegate minor literature to the realm of the non-literary and the time-bound—just one more piece of the social and political milieu out of which great and enduring literature emerges—Nelson argues instead that the “distinction between major and minor literature is convincing only because it is unthought.”⁶¹ Minor literature, according to Nelson, is “a category suggesting major literature in potentia.” It is “that which—but for the drag of circumstance—might have been major.” Reframing the distinction between major and minor as a continuum poses “an epistemological threat to the socially constructed

suite of essays selected by Wai Chee Dimock and Bruce Robbins for a special feature in *PMLA*, Vol. 122, No. 5, October 2007.

⁶⁰ Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 38.

⁶¹ Nelson, *Repression and Recovery*, 38.

transcendence of literary excellence.”⁶² Nelson’s injunction to not only expand the canon but to critique the very structural relationships upon which it is founded is very much an argument of its time: the late 1980s, in the midst of the canon wars. Though much work has been done since then to bring new objects into the orbit of literary criticism and university instruction, and to think more carefully about our ways of looking at and talking about literature, Nelson’s argument about the relationship between literary history and ideology critique remains, for me, persuasive.

I cite Nelson to signal my allegiance to his archive as well as to his method. I also want to suggest that the politics of literary marginality he espouses in *Repression and Recovery* is one that many dissident poets theorized within their elegiac verse. The mobilization of elegy by Left-leaning poets in the years between 1940 and 1965 constitutes a “social act” in a number of ways.⁶³ As a poetic mode concerned with lost pasts and imagined afterlives, with the making of history and the experience of the present, elegies are virtual spaces in which continuity and coherence tug against innovation and irregularity. They also make space for new modes of sociality. If, as Fradenburg and Cavitch suggest, mourning and genre are homologically linked—both posing equally troublesome questions about the relationship between generalities and particulars—this dissertation attempts to further interrogate this space *between* (text and genre; occasional and canonical writing; lived experience and ideology; perception and abstraction). It places some illustrative particulars (i.e. poems) alongside each other and invites you to attend to them. What challenges the methodological and archival

⁶² Nelson, *Repression and Recovery*, 39.

⁶³ Ralph Cohen pithily encapsulates the argument of his essay “History and Genre” as follows: “the transformation of genre can be a social act.” See Ralph Cohen, “History and Genre,” *New Literary History*, vol. 17, no. 2 (Winter 1986): 203-218.

hybridity of this project poses, and what opportunities it makes available in terms of thinking about literary history and genre studies, remain open questions for me.

v. ELEGY'S 'TENUOUS WE'

In the final chapter of her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant accounts for the struggle to navigate political realism and political fantasy in terms that sound a lot like Michael Moon's recuperation of Freudian melancholia as a "loss [that] is not lost":

[A]ttachment to the political would ideally be *an attachment to the process of maintaining attachment*. In psychoanalytic terms, the anarchist political depressive would enact repair by performing a commitment to repairing politics without needing clarity or consensus on either of the two traditionally legitimating motives for political action: an ends-oriented consensually held good-life fantasy or confirmation of the transformative effectiveness of one's actions ... This locates politics in a commitment to the present activity of the senses. It sees the work of citizenship as a dense sensual activity of performative belonging to the now in which potentiality is affirmed.⁶⁴

This project echoes such a desire to relocate political affects and effects within the processual and phenomenological unfolding of the present—in "embodied processes of making solidarity" and in "the pure mediality of being in the present of the political and the sensual."⁶⁵ The poets and "anarchist political depressive[s]" that are the subject of this dissertation "reimagin[e] the possibility of community on the basis of vulnerability and loss"—loss that, as Judith Butler has argued, "ma[kes] a tenuous 'we' of us all."⁶⁶

Chapter 1 of *Undersongs* compares a largely under-studied archive of anarchist periodicals to the body of poetry written in its orbit. These print ecologies help us to see elegies as poems concerned as much with taking stock of the present and speculating about

⁶⁴ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 260-61, emphasis mine.

⁶⁵ Berlant, *Cruel*, 260.

⁶⁶ Judith Butler, "Violence, Mourning, Politics," in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 20.

the future as they are with reflecting on lost pasts. This temporal flexibility makes the genre a useful literary analogy to the prefigurative politics theorized in essays by Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, Andrea Caffi, and others. At once militant and melancholic, these essays make use of the tones and tropes of the elegy to advocate private refusal and small-scale sociability. Likewise, the era's Left-leaning elegists—among them Robert Duncan, Kenneth Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser, Kenneth Patchen, and Jackson Mac Low—take up radical political thought (and action) as the subject matter of their verse. My second chapter, “Mixed Feelings: The Elegiac Impasse in Auden’s ‘New Year Letter,’” considers W. H. Auden’s ambivalence about his shifting relationship to Leftist politics. The typical narrative of Auden’s career tends to emphasize his repudiation of Marxism in the 1940s and his subsequent embrace of a liberal humanism grounded in his return to Christianity. But a closer look at Auden’s elegiac poems from this period complicates this narrative. Central to this chapter is a reading of Auden’s “New Year Letter,” a long poem that synthesizes a variety of elegiac tropes (intimate addresses to friends; melancholic worry over the fate of civilization) and introduces a newly essayistic format to the genre—one indebted to the political writing I discuss in chapter 1.

Chapter 3 turns to the work of contrarian Bay Area poet Jack Spicer, whose commitment to coterie writing led him to publish and circulate his work within a very small radius, and in whose hands elegies become cautionary missives to a younger generation of would-be poets and radicals. I argue that a more robust sense of the relationship between Spicer’s politics and his poetry crystallizes around questions of poetic mode and poetic tone. Though Spicer could not have foreseen the cohesion of disparate student movements into what has become known as the New Left (he died in 1965), the last poem in his corpus is oddly prescient in its evocation of Allen Ginsberg’s brand of poetry and of protest, both of

which would become important touchstones in the youth movements of the next decade. In a brief coda, I look at contemporary poetry that reflects on the intersecting (economic, environmental, humanitarian) crises of the last ten years, blending Ginsberg's mid-career exuberance with the elegiac, often scornful, comportment of Spicer and his predecessors.

ONE

“THE REVOLUTION IS NOT IMMINENT”: THE USES OF ELEGY IN THE LONG
1940S

Continual revolutions of the blood
Continual cataclysm of the brain catharsis of
 thoughts
things deeds We need to be
the continual animation of a dream
to bend the steel or be bent by it.
A man should live these things as he lies in graves
neither up nor down but sideways with his head
 and feet
pointing to human and more human poles
and the hand touches another and we meet.

—Walter Lowenfels, “Steel” (1937)¹

Remember now there were others before this;
Now when the unwanted hours rise up,
And the sun rises red in unknown quarters,
And the constellations change places,
And cloudless thunder erases the furrows,
And moonlight stains and the stars grow hot

—Kenneth Rexroth, “From the Paris Commune to the Kronstadt Rebellion” (1940)²

Kenneth Rexroth’s 1940 poem “From the Paris Commune to the Kronstadt Rebellion” does not immediately or explicitly announce itself as an elegy. It does, however, position itself quite conspicuously within a history of politically engaged poetry on the Left. The title establishes the poem’s historical parameters, a fifty-year timeline of revolutionary struggle, and the repeated injunctions to “rise up” invite us to read it as more deeply invested in militant solidarity than in meditative solace. Despite the poem’s more obvious reliance on the rhetoric and rhythms of violent insurrection, it is also invested, more subtly, in scenes of elegiac *resurrection*. Its speaker imagines him/herself as at once a manifestation of past

¹ Walter Lowenfels, *Steel* (Atlantic City, NJ: Unity Publishers, 1938), 13.

² Kenneth Rexroth, *The Complete Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*, eds. Sam Hamill and Bradford Morrow (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2003), 143.

models (the Paris communards; the Kronstadt sailors) and a prefiguration of “people remembering in the future.”³ This suspension between a backward-looking directive to “remember” and a speculative invocation of a future time when the speaker’s radical ideals have been realized invites us to consider the ways in which elegiac expression might be a spur to, rather than an idle distraction from, revolutionary action. My categorization of the poem as an elegy also has broader implications, as I hope to show, for thinking about genre and tone in midcentury American poetry.

In this chapter, I offer an account of the rise of the elegy and the anarcho-pacifist essay during what I am calling the long 1940s.⁴ I compare a largely under-studied archive of small-circulation, trans-Atlantic anarchist periodicals to the body of poetry written in their orbit, and argue that the dissident politics of private refusal and small-scale sociability being theorized within these print networks—and in particular, in essays by Dwight Macdonald, Paul Goodman, and Andrea Caffi—are marked by an elegiac sensibility. In the final section of my essay, I turn to a selection of political elegies by Muriel Rukeyser, Kenneth Patchen, and Jackson Mac Low. In these poems, encounters between ephemerality (in the form of fragile bodies and social configurations) and durability (in the form of inert matter and centuries-old poetic traditions) serve as occasions for reflection on the perceived narrowing

³ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 144.

⁴ My title takes as inspiration Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of a slightly extended 19th Century flanked by epoch-making events—the French Revolution and WWI—rather than calendrical dates. Scholars and historians have noted the difficulty of pinning down the 1940s as a decade. For instance, Mark Greif has observed that “the 1940s ... are often just treated in American intellectual history as interim years of war (as if thought stopped during the largest single cataclysm of the century), or as a divided period, a wishbone that goes half to the ‘thirties’ and half to the ‘fifties’” (*The Age of the Crisis of Man: thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015], 15-16). Al Filreis refers to the ways in which the 1930s appear as a slur, mood, and set of associations that extend beyond the temporal limits of the decade itself: “The thirties’ quickly became the term of choice for those who fingered the whole radical period (roughly 1927-46). For many, ‘the thirties’ referred less to a decade than to vast and secret aims, to generational delusion, to collective bad style” (*Counterrevolution of the Word*, 34). This chapter attempts to extend the 1940s into “the long 1940s” in a similar manner.

of viable political outlets for writers and thinkers on the Left and on the hopes engendered by uprisings past. They reimagine the English elegy's expression of private grief in an expanded frame, one that allows elegies to act as barometers of large-scale historical trends (the rise of totalitarianism; the lost Leftism of American liberalism) and their attendant structures of feeling. In a recent monograph, Mark Greif coins the term "crisis of man discourse" to refer to the tendency among midcentury intellectuals to probe and pressure test the category of "the human"—thought, at an historical juncture marked by ideological disappointments, global war, and rapid technological advances, to be under assault in unprecedented ways.⁵ Where Greif demonstrates how narrative and philosophical genres get scaled up to accommodate accounts of humanity in crisis (the weighty philosophical tome and the "great American novel" are his touchstones), I hope to give a sense of the unique capacity of this era's poetry to "think big" even as it locates the kernel of radical social transformation in the communal and aesthetic practices of small, marginalized groups.

My attention to the elegiac within this context is, admittedly, not entirely novel. In the first chapters of *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century*, Michael Davidson characterizes the Bay Area poetry of the 1940s as "the convergence of elegy and utopia," citing Rexroth's remark, echoed by Robert Duncan, that the "unifying principle" of the early years of the San Francisco Renaissance was the "elegiac tone" that came to dominate much of the region's avant-garde verse.⁶ Part of what makes Davidson's formulation so striking, in addition to its encapsulation of a particular mood, is the way it collapses literary mode (elegy) and social configuration (utopian communalism). Building on

⁵ Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁶ Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 32-33.

Davidson's work, I place the writing of a small cohort of poets in conversation with broader intellectual trends of the decade, with the aim of de-localizing the structure of feeling that Rexroth, Duncan, and Davidson so keenly perceive. The archive of anarchist thought with which I engage helps situate the poetry of this roughly fifteen-year period in relation to a longer, more involved narrative, allowing us a different vantage on postwar poetry's intersection with Leftist politics.

By most accounts, the 1940s was a decade during which all that seemed solid began to melt into air, when political action among those on the Left was being radically rethought, collective imaginaries disassembled and realigned in new configurations. At best an "age of anxiety," at worst a period of "somnolence" for those on the Left, the years between 1939 and 1950 saw a confluence of events leading to the formation of the "new objectives [and] new cadres" that Rexroth seems to presciently anticipate in his 1938 poem by that title, including the defeat of the Spanish Republican army, the establishment and dissolution of the Hitler-Stalin pact, the fraught beginning and cataclysmic conclusion of a global war against fascism, and the inauguration of the Cold War.⁷ As historian Daniel Aaron has observed, much of the literary community in the U.S. "donned real or metaphoric uniforms in 'the fight for national survival' during the first half of the decade."⁸ As a result, the collective into which many felt called to gather was an anti-fascist, liberal-democratic state—a state that remained hostile to those holdouts on the Left who refused to sanction military violence, even provisionally. One of those holdouts was poet Kenneth Patchen, whom

⁷ "The Age of Anxiety" is the title of a 1940 book of verse by W. H. Auden. In Maxwell Geismar's "Introduction" to the 1969 *New Masses: Anthology*, he writes: "I had always thought of the Thirties as a brilliant, lively, exciting and hopeful period: in my later thinking I saw it as the last true outburst of our social and literary creativity before the somnolence of the 1940s, the silence of the 1950s" (6; quoted in Larry Smith's *Kenneth Patchen: Rebel Poet in America*, 89).

⁸ Daniel Aaron, "Literary Scenes and Literary Movements," in *The Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed. Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 755.

Rexroth characterized as notably distinct from “the official spokesmen of the Official Revolution,” and who, in his 1937 poem “The Executions in Moscow,” expresses his criticism of the Popular Front’s alignment with an equally dictatorial and oppressive regime.⁹ The poem’s epigraph, by Ignazio Silone, sums up its message: “I refuse to be a Fascist—even a Red Fascist.”¹⁰ Unambiguously expressing his refusal to condone violence of any kind (“I shall endorse no bloody erect / Murder and go on looking with my own eyes.”), Patchen imagines instead a revolution of the heart and mind (“a different way of looking at life and at human beings,” as Silone has it): “Like a woman in a warm room / Will make a church of her hands // When she touches her lover: / I put my heart to the revolution.”¹¹ “The Executions” ends by inviting readers to question the very “nature of war,” anticipating both the U.S.’s entry into WWII four years later and the attendant, if marginalized, anarcho-pacifist resistance movements with which Patchen was involved.

The years *after* WWII also tend to be characterized as a period of consensus (of a slightly different kind), when comparative peace and economic prosperity in the U.S struck blows to the militancy of the previous decade. Daniel Bell famously diagnosed the “exhaustion,” during the postwar years, of the political ideals of the 1930s in *The End of Ideology*.¹² Likewise, in the realm of aesthetics, a sense of “generational discontinuity” was beginning to be felt in the 1940s as a younger generation of writers, born between the wars, inherited a Modernism denuded of any original revolutionary content and hailed for its depoliticized formal difficulty—an inheritance brokered by university English departments

⁹ Kenneth Rexroth, “Kenneth Patchen, Naturalist of the Public Nightmare,” in *Bird in the Bush: Obvious Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1959), 100.

¹⁰ Kenneth Patchen, *The Collected Poems of Kenneth Patchen* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 1968), 134.

¹¹ Patchen, *Collected Poems*, 134-135.

¹² Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology: On the Exhaustion of Political Ideas in the Fifties* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960).

and, more specifically, by the New Criticism.¹³ And indeed, for many on the Left (committed Communists, say), this era might have seemed unequivocally optimistic: the U.S.S.R. had helped defeat fascism, China was soon to become socialist, and anti-colonial insurrections threatened Western capitalism's hegemony in the global south. But for those more suspicious of State power in all forms (be it Communist or capitalist), these victories seemed pyrrhic at best. As Al Filreis has shown in his study of modernist experimentation's intersection with Leftist politics, the 1940s was a decade rich with highly charged debates about the future of the Left.¹⁴ This history was largely submerged, he argues, by the rise of anticommunism and the attendant aesthetic and political deradicalization of the postwar era. As we shall see, far from peacetime consensus, far from the "end of ideology," the predominant mood of this moment for radical poets and thinkers was one of both uncertainty and possibility, of both crisis and conditional optimism.

In his account of the link between melancholia and the experience of modernity in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century literature, Jonathan Flatley considers those "melancholias [which] are the opposite of depressing, functioning [instead] as the very mechanism through which one may be interested in the world."¹⁵ The ending of Walter Lowenfels' 1937 "Steel," this chapter's first epigraph, compresses this relationship into a single, surprising metaphor: the interred body as figure for revolutionary solidarity.

Reminiscent of the moment in Walt Whitman's elegy for Abraham Lincoln, when the

¹³ James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 9-10. One might even argue that the nebulous, transitional character of the decade has been re-inscribed by periodizing categories like "postwar" and "post-45" which, by positioning the end of WWII as the major pivot over which material and aesthetic histories of the 20th Century are seen to turn, either divide the 1940s into two temporally and ontologically distinct units, or subsume the decade, as category, to the longer and implicitly more significant timeline of the century.

¹⁴ Alan Filreis, *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2008), 1.

speaker's grief is manifested as an elegiac coterie surrounding and supporting him, Lowenfels' lines suggest that the sparks of revolutionary consciousness and the surge of fellow feeling that erupt in moments of collective action (like the Little Steel Strike of 1937, to which *Steel 1937* is dedicated) are inseparable from the deaths of those who lost their lives in struggle.¹⁶ This is of course true in a practical, straightforward sense: people unite in grief and outrage over violent injustices. But this more quotidian understanding of how private grief gets transmuted into public outcry is complicated by the curious figure in the poem's final lines: the corpse whose head and feet "point[] to human and more human poles" (Lowenfels, 13). Anticipating Rexroth's Janus-faced elegy, Lowenfels' body-cum-chronology situates the cyclicity of revolutionary upheavals and the vastness of geological timescales (both of which appear elsewhere in the poem as "mother ore" and "the earth[']s] shivers") in relation to more personal moments of embodied, elegiac solidarity—human hands that quietly touch each other (Lowenfels, 12-13).

Both Lowenfels' "Steel" and Rexroth's "From the Paris Commune..." encode an etymological connection between "corpse" (as in body, living or dead) and "course" (as in a trajectory of events) that might serve as a guide to many of this era's Left elegies, and to the relationship between mourning and militancy they advocate. If the body over which one grieves is somehow inseparable from, and contains the same material traces as, the historical and geological records in which it is embedded, then to focus one's attention on the former is at the same time to contemplate and potentially intervene in the latter. The consolation of elegiac expression for midcentury poets on the Left was, thus, not its permission to indulge in private grief, but rather its potential to mobilize future action and imagine other possible

¹⁶ I am thinking specifically of these lines: "Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me, / And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me, / And I in the middle as with companions, and as holding the hands of companions"

worlds. The readings with which I conclude this chapter allow us to see how poems not only reiterate, but also interrogate, discourses of political resistance; how poetic expression tries to accommodate, and often chafes against, other kinds of rhetoric; and how literary artifacts register and express, via the long history of a malleable poetic genre, a sense of poetry's use in a time of crisis.

i. POETRY'S PLACE IN ANARCHISM'S NETWORKS

Central to this renewed perspective on avant-garde poetry at midcentury is the anarchist notion of prefigurative or personalist politics. While these terms tend to be used interchangeably to refer to an anti-statist, dissident politics of private refusal—one centered on the pre-political work of individual development and small-scale sociability—their connotational dissimilarity is, for our purposes, more suggestive. Prefigurative implies a particular temporality of aspirational struggle in which the decisions, encounters, and relationships that structure the daily life of a community are made to approximate the political ideals previously imagined possible only after the revolution. Personalist, on the other hand, would seem to locate the nucleus of social change in the evolving mindset and attendant lifestyle choices of the individual.¹⁷ And it is precisely this tension between collective life and autonomous self-development that we find being reproduced, reframed, and questioned in the work of many poets during this era.¹⁸

¹⁷ As Andrew Cornell puts it in his article “A New Anarchism Emerges, 1940-1954,” “practical anarchists’ sought to prefigure the world they hoped to live in rather than wait until after a revolution that now seemed impossibly far off. It was this new style of anarchism—not the classic variety that obtained before the war—that would most directly inform and inspire the movements of the 1960s” (Cornell, “A New Anarchism Emerges, 1940-1954,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 5, no. 1 [2011]: 106).

¹⁸ For a discussion of prefigurative politics, see Wini Breines’s *Community and Organization in the New Left: 1962-1986* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1989). Here, she defines the prefigurative politics of the New Left and its predecessors as a hybrid of participatory democracy and direct action that made manifest, *in nuce*, the larger-scale societal sea change their activism aimed to spur: “The term *prefigurative politics* is used to designate an essentially anti-organizational politics characteristic of the [New Left] movement, as well as parts

A radical imaginary that viewed personalist politics as deeply intertwined with poetic production was taking shape on the pages of anarchist periodicals in the late 1930s, many of which were in turn eagerly read by and exchanged among avant-garde poets. A closer look at midcentury poets' biographies reveals the countless networks through which these ideas were channeled back into communities of writers. Robert Duncan's seminal essay "The Homosexual in Society," which was first published by Dwight Macdonald in *politics*, is among the more widely discussed links between the New American poets and the New York intellectuals; however, it is by no means the only one. During Duncan's tenure in New York in the late 1930s and early 1940s, he participated in the meetings of an anarchist collective that included Paul Goodman and Jackson Mac Low.¹⁹ In the spring of 1945, Duncan left the city for the upstate town of Bearsville, where he would reside with Holley Cantine for a time and publish a short piece in his magazine *Retort*.²⁰ While Duncan served as temporary ambassador from the west, Kenneth Rexroth maintained correspondences with various anarchist thinkers, activists, and editors, and served as a pipeline to the Bay Area for ideas being generated in east-coast magazines.²¹ Even Frank O'Hara can be seen, in a photograph

of new left leadership, and may be recognized in counter institutions, demonstrations and the attempt to embody personal and anti-hierarchical values in politics...The crux of prefigurative politics imposed substantial tasks, the central one being to create and sustain within the live practice of the movement, relationships and political forms that "prefigured" and embodied the desired society" (6). Breines's triangulation of prefigurative politics, community, and counter-institutionality is important for the purposes of a *literary* historical project because the word "community," in the last twenty years or so (and with increasing frequency and nuance in the last five to ten), has become something of a critical paradigm for discussing postwar American poetry. This emphasis on the link between poems and the social configurations that give them a shape and a life beyond the page is reflected not just in recent criticism, but in the very format of the anthology widely considered to be the harbinger of the "social turn" in American verse: Donald Allen's 1960 *The New American Poetry*. See also Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016); Cindy Milstein, *Anarchism and Its Aspirations* (Oakland, CA: AK Press and Institute for Anarchist Studies, 2010).

¹⁹ Lisa Jarnot, *Robert Duncan, The Ambassador from Venus: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 90-91.

²⁰ Jarnot, 95.

²¹ Rexroth purportedly "ordered copies of *Retort*, *Why?*, and *politics* in bulk and distributed them among writers and released conscientious objectors ... By 1946 he could brag, "We seem to have got together a very healthy little "Circle." The first English speaking one since [Alexander] Berkman was out here.'" Cornell, 120.

taken during his time in the Navy and published in Brad Gooch's biography of the poet, reading an issue of *politics* magazine in his bunk aboard the U.S.S. Nicholas.

Marcus Graham's journal *Man! A Journal of the Anarchist Ideal and Movement*, published in San Francisco between 1933 and 1940, provided a home for debates about art's centrality to struggles for social justice. One of the most explicit, if somewhat ham-handed, articulations of the connection between the creative individual and the political radical appeared in the "Art and Literature" section of a 1938 issue.²² The article's title tells us most of what we need to know about its author's argument: "Anarchists Like Poets Are Born Not Made." In the body of the article itself, author Ray Goodheart suggests that the poet, like the anarchist, is above all an individualist: "He stands out from the crowd unaffected by the crowd's feelings, its longings, its standards . . . He is distinct; unique. He does not exult with the pettiness that sway[s] the mob; nor is he overcome with the trivial dreads that overwhelm the herds. He disdains to follow."²³ Goodheart distinguishes the mass, the "standards" and "longings" of which are seen as merely ephemeral and "petty," from the individual, who by contrast is presented as thoughtful and intrepid, a "hardy explorer[], inventor[], [and] discoverer[]." As these characterizations suggest, this editorial is largely an essentialist explication of the origin and nature of artistic genius (and, by extension, of radical political acumen) and an elitist excoriation of the "ordinary [men] of the world." However, despite his depiction of the masses as violent "mobs" unable to channel their emotions effectively, and as ignorant "herds" in need of a shepherd, Goodheart does not entirely ignore the relevance of collectivity to political struggle. The vision of collective life that begins to take shape here is one that emphasizes the smallness, as well as the exemplarity and

²² Ray Goodheart, "Anarchists Are Born Not Made," *Man! A Journal of the Anarchist Ideal and Movement* 6, no. 6 (June 1938).

²³ Goodheart, "Anarchists."

cliquishness, of the coterie: “There is nothing of the flock-gregariousness about [the anarchist]. The comrades he craves are, like himself, conscious of their individuality, their uniqueness.”²⁴ Although the assertion Goodheart makes in his title seems to discount the extent to which historical and material conditions shape individual consciousness, he alludes to the fact that other kinds of pressures might take the place of “vogue, fashion, [and] tradition”—those guardians of the status-quo that must be bucked against—in the development of revolutionary consciousness. “Such characters [as the poet and the anarchist],” he tells us, “are not molded in the schools,” allowing the question of precisely how and where (aside from in the womb) they are molded to be taken up by countless others in the pages of *Man!* and elsewhere.

Graham’s “Towards an Anarchist Society,” which appeared in the January 1940 issue of *Man!*, similarly presages the conversations between poets and activists that would gain further traction throughout the decade. Again we see anarchist principles and practices aligned with those of artists and writers: “Against the triumphant march of the State with its coercion in every phase of life, the anarchist points to the expression of freedom as achieved by ... art, in all its branches, as the effervescent fountain from which he has been drinking of imagination, knowledge and understanding.”²⁵ Much of the discourse of libertarian anarchism during and just after WWII does the kind of “pointing to” that Graham refers to here by holding up the labor and the lifestyles of artists and writers as exemplary of the good life:

By what standards do the critical minds of the world measure the work of the dramatist, novelist, poet, painter, sculptor and musician? The work of these artists is measured by its degree of truthfulness, imagination, beauty, by the imaginary dreams of a better and more beautiful life, by pointing at freedom as the sole guide and hope

²⁴ Goodheart, “Anarchists.”

²⁵ Marcus Graham, “Towards an Anarchist Society,” *Man! A Journal of the Anarchist Ideal and Movement* 8, no. 1 (January 1940).

for the accomplishments of a civilization wherein justice and happiness for every human being will be possible.

... Even today, when the work of an artist almost always takes on the form of a protest against conditions, the artist must work in an atmosphere of some sort of freedom. The artist today is the dreamer, the trumpeter. The great possibilities for art, under a system of real freedom, can readily be imagined.²⁶

Graham suggests here that freedom is the metric by which a civilization's evolution is determined. And what he means by "pointing at freedom" in this instance, it seems, is not necessarily the speculative act of representing scenes or narratives of a better, more just social order. Rather, for Graham, artists, writers, and activists serve as small-scale models for a larger "system of real freedom" that might someday develop. Put differently, if freedom is the condition most conducive to creative life—if, in other words, the act of writing a poem or composing a score can be said to be a "form of protest" which enables the protestor to be, if only momentarily, free—then artists, on Graham's account, are the seeds from which social change on a larger scale might erupt.

In a letter to the editors of *Retort*, Kenneth Rexroth echoes, with characteristic candor and no excess of humility, Graham's belief in the inseparability of art and political struggle: "As for [Kenneth] Patchen, [William] Everson, [Paul] Goodman, [Henry] Miller, [Robert] Duncan, myself and a few others—Lamantia for instance for the past year—we are the freedom you are fighting for. Frankly, I think one poem by Kenneth Patchen worth all the possible theoretical journal articles that ever have been and ever will be published—and I don't think Patchen the greatest poet" (Cornell 121). In naming a loose association of writers who shared real estate in countless little magazines, Rexroth emphasizes the importance of collective life both to the poetry of the period and to the political discourses that inform it. The list of names serves a rather straightforward rhetorical function in the context of this

²⁶ Graham, "Toward an Anarchist Society."

letter; however, we might view it as metonymic of a personalist anarchist politics more broadly, according to which the integrity of the individual is equally as important as the coming together of the collective. Just as each poet Rexroth names in his letter contributes a unique voice and vision to the whole of contemporary political poetry worth reading (according to him), so individuals' lived experience and creative expression constitute a quotidian horizon of struggle. Be the change you want to see, as it were.

The verb in Rexroth's declarative statement is just as worthy of unpacking as the subject, its bold present tense serving as a kind of shorthand for the arduous and ongoing "practice of freedom," an expression that appears in David Wieck's 1948 essay "Anarchism." Editors of *Resistance* magazine adopted "Anarchism" as a concise statement of position:

The revolution is not imminent, and it is senseless to expend our lives in patient waiting or faithful dreams: senseless because the revolution of the future requires active preparation: not the preparation of conspiracy and storing of arms, but the preparation of undermining the institutions and habits of thought and action that inhibit the release of the natural powers of men and women ... The revolution as a "final conflict" exploding out of the condition of man is an illusion; revolutionary growth is necessarily the hard-won learning and practice of freedom.²⁷

The modest immediacy of small-scale experiments in communalism are similarly figured as the vanguard of the revolution in Holley Cantine's "Mechanics of Class Development," published in his and Dachine Rainer's magazine *Retort*:

Since both violent revolution and parliamentary activity seem to lead away from the realization of fundamental liberty, a realistic radical movement should concern itself with building up a nucleus of the new society "within the shell of the old." Communities and various other kinds of organization must be formed, wherein the ideals of the revolution are approximated as nearly as possible in daily life.²⁸

²⁷ David Wieck, "Anarchism," *Resistance* 7, no. 3 (November-December 1948): 4.

²⁸ Holley Cantine, "Mechanics of Class Development," *Retort* 1, no. 2 (June 1942), 13.

For these writers and thinkers, the temporality of revolution is neither gradual nor cataclysmic, neither (strictly) liberal nor (strictly) Marxist. Instead, we get what I want to call an accretive model of social transformation, in which the “nucleus of the new society [takes shape] ‘within [and eventually, so the metaphor goes, *breaks*] the shell of the old.’” Cantine’s vision sounds a great deal like Paul Goodman’s in his “May Pamphlet,” when he declares that “[a] free society cannot be the substituting of a ‘new order’ for the old order; it is the extension of spheres of free action until they make up most of the social life.”²⁹

As these examples and intersections suggest, the relationship between anarcho-pacifism and poetry in the 1940s was something of a two-way street. While anarchists repeatedly turned to the figure of the poet to flesh out their ideas of what radical politics at midcentury might look like, poets, in turn, frequently published in anarchist periodicals and espoused, both within and beyond their verse, a personalist, prefigurative politics. They cited small-scale sociability as an ideal, albeit a fragile and contingent one, and this sense of fragility is part of what led poets toward the elegiac as an apt mode of expression.

In the following section I turn to a set of coordinates that brings to light the convergence of anarchist politics and elegiac poetry in the 1940s. Several essays serve as touchstones: Andrea Caffi’s “Violence and Sociability,” published in the January 1947 issue of *politics*, Dwight Macdonald’s 1946 “The Root Is Man,” published in *politics*, in two parts, in April and July of that year, and Paul Goodman’s 1951 *Kenyon Review* article “Advance-Guard

²⁹ Paul Goodman, *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings*, ed. Taylor Stoehr (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2010), 25. “The May Pamphlet” first appeared in its entirety in Goodman’s *Art and Social Nature* in 1946, and was reprinted in 1962 in *Drawing the Line: A Pamphlet* and again in Taylor Stoehr’s *Drawing the Line Once Again: Paul Goodman’s Anarchist Writings* (2010). “On Treason Against Natural Societies” was first published in Vol. 3, No. 1 of Holley Cantine’s *Retort*. “Revolution, Sociolatriy, and War” first appeared in the December 1945 issue of *Politics*. “A Suggestion for a Libertarian Program” published in *Why?* No. 1 (April 1942) would become the basis for the “Touchstone for the Libertarian Program” section of “The May Pamphlet.”

Writing, 1900-1950.”³⁰ Each conforms to a similar format, breaking down into roughly three rhetorical sections. The first is diachronic: a compressed historical arc of Leftist and communalist thought and tradition (in Caffi and Macdonald), and of Western literary avant-gardes (in Goodman), in relation to which the crises of the present are situated. This historical work is followed by a turn to the diagnostic and elegiac: a taking-stock of the Left (and, more specifically in Goodman’s case, the literary Left) in the wake of war and the disappointments of the Soviet experiment. The final sections of each essay are prescriptive and, as we will see, community becomes the horizon of political possibility for these thinkers and for the poets who were reading them. Paeans to small-scale sociability, their conclusions express deeply felt hopes for what groups of individuals exchanging ideas and sharing in the practical work of literary production might accomplish, and what they might eventually make possible on a larger scale. The sense of anxiety and uncertainty that undergirds these essays’ tentative visions of social change permits, I think, my categorization of them as elegiac. They fuse the mournful invective of the jeremiad with the speculative lyricism of the elegy, and they capitalize on the friction between private experience and public outcry that we find throughout the elegiac tradition.

³⁰ Dwight Macdonald served as co-editor, with Philip Rahv, of *Partisan Review* from 1937 to 1943. He went on to found *politics* magazine in 1944. With Macdonald and Nicola Chiaromonte, Andrea Caffi, was “the third member of the journal’s ‘vital core’” (Sumner 172). As Sumner notes, “[f]or the *politics* circle, Caffi was a voice from an earlier generation, a living ‘ancestor’ whose life and ideas embodied the best of a damaged [European] cultural tradition” (172). Considered the “philosopher of the New Left,” Paul Goodman published work in a variety of fields, from Gestalt psychology to poetry to social criticism to anarchist philosophy. For more on Goodman’s influence on New York School poetics, see Terence Diggory’s “Community ‘Intimate’ or ‘Inoperative’: New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy” in *The Scene of My Selves: New Work on New York School Poets*, eds. Terence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono, ME: The National Poetry Foundation, 2001).

ii. BLEAK RADICALISM

Much of the intellectual discourse of the postwar years was marked by “ends” and “failures” rather than hopes, by renunciations of Leftist ideals by members of intellectual circles that overlapped with those discussed here.³¹ Rexroth described the end of WWII and the years just after as characterized by “an extraordinary upsurge of what might be called apocalyptic optimism,” and what might just as easily be described, inversely, as revolutionary pessimism—hope tempered by doom, on the one hand, and despair mobilized into political action and creative output on the other.³² Robert Duncan’s 1947 “Ode for Dick Brown,” for instance, characterizes the Berkeley writing community as a “fraternity of despair” in a “defiled country.”³³ Duncan’s language here echoes Arthur Koestler’s call, in a 1943 editorial published in *The New York Times Magazine*, for “an active fraternity of ... short-term pessimists” to “create oases in the interregnum desert” of mass violence and bureaucratic collectivism.³⁴ In the face of what he calls the “bankruptcy of Left horizontalism,” Koestler

³¹ The history of *Partisan Review*—by the 1950s one of the symbols of “academic verse” and the bête noir of Kenneth Rexroth, Jack Spicer, and countless other poets affiliated with Donald Allen’s *New American Poetry* anthology—is an interesting case study of the lost Leftism of American liberalism. What began in 1934 as the print organ of the Communist John Reed Writers’ Club of San Francisco under the name *Partisan Review and Anvil* moved gradually rightward (both geographically—it was transplanted to New York later in the ’30s—and politically) throughout the next several decades. Curiously, Rexroth himself is named among the founders of *PR*’s original West-Coast incarnation, and published a poem in its third issue (1936). A decade later, in a letter to *New Directions* editor James Laughlin, Rexroth denounces the magazine, pitting it against Holley Cantine and Dachine Rainer’s more radical, anarchist periodical *Retort*: “The readers of *Retort* are not interested in has-beens of Paris America or in the stormtroopers of the *P[artisan] & K[enyon] R[evue]*” (Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin, *Selected Letters*, ed. Lee Bartlett [New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991], 112). In 1956, Norman Podhoretz would publish “The Know-Nothing Bohemians” in *PR*’s pages, an excoriation, not dissimilar from Brady’s, of the writers associated with the burgeoning San Francisco Renaissance. My “ends” and “failures” refer to Daniel Bell’s “The End of Ideology in the West” and Sidney Hook’s “The New Failure of Nerve,” both of which are a good place to begin to get a sense of the general drift, among the former Communist Party members and Leftists that made up the *Partisan Review* circle—often referred to en masse as the New York Intellectuals—toward liberalism and, in the case of Hook and others, conservatism. For a discussion of the “bleak liberalism” of the New York intellectuals affiliated with the *Partisan Review*—in particular, Lionel Trilling—see Amanda Anderson’s “Character and Ideology: The Case of Cold War Liberalism,” *New Literary History* 42, no. 2 (2011): 209-229.

³² Richard Candida-Smith, *Utopia and Dissent: Art, Poetry, and Politics in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 51.

³³ Robert Duncan and Jack Spicer, *An Ode and Arcadia* (Berkeley: Arc Press, 1974).

³⁴ Arthur Koestler, *The Yogi and the Commissar and Other Essays* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), 101.

urges his fellow “homeless Leftists” who view the world’s proliferating atrocities from a particularly “melancholy angle” to seek refuge in small groups (Koestler, 101). These groups in turn “will watch, with open eyes and without sectarian blinkers, for the first signs of the new horizontal movement; when it comes, they will assist its birth; but if it does not come in their lifetime, they will not despair.”³⁵

Certain passages in Duncan’s poem share Koestler’s messianic vision of the interregnum cadre: “When I sing in the evening, praise of Apollo, / when I touch upon the heart of song, / then I remember there are countrymen of my heart, / there are brothers of my keen desire.”³⁶ In the poem’s second section, native geography supplants ancient myth, as the California landscape gets figured as a potential ground for revolutionary promise: “Yet this is the country of my life. / It is the westward edge of dreams, / the golden promise of our days / ... a true country to which we hold. / These are its groves, the eucalyptus and the oak, / the cypress and the madrone.”³⁷ Over the course of the ode, the small collective, figured here as pastoral, gets realized as a viable, if fragile, alternative to the State—a place for those “wanderer[s] ... lone fellows of a vast despair” to congregate. The words “desire” and “despair” cycle repeatedly in and out of Duncan’s long stanzas. The two affective poles between which the poem shuttles, they help differentiate Duncan’s depiction of the material realities structuring life in the postwar U.S.—the ethically “defiled country” that has become a military-industrial State—from the real and imagined convergences of counter-institutional communities he refers to as “the country of our desire.”

Drastically different in imagistic range, if only subtly different in tone, the penultimate stanza of the collaborative “Canto for Ezra Pound” that Duncan, Jack Spicer,

³⁵ Koestler, *Yogi*, 101.

³⁶ Duncan, *Ode*.

³⁷ Duncan, *Ode*.

Hugh O'Neill, Jo Frankel, and Fred Fredman wrote and sent to the aging modernist in 1946 evokes a similar, if more modest, vision of an alternative society:

When one is discontented it is impossible to be happy.
Sticky chocolate crucifies our fingers.
All we have now is velvet.
We hate America too.
If we could find a nationality, something to love
other than persons.
We want more pleasant situations,
A stick of Nirvana perhaps; a dust bowl of ivy;
A tree without beetles, perhaps; or a quieter night.
A place for poets to grow.³⁸

The formal echo of the stanza's two compressed lines reinforces the sense that this imagined community arises as much out of a shared antipathy as out of fellow feeling. It is bigger than the love between persons, but not as impersonal as a nation, and untainted by the latter's chauvinism. While Koestler's (and to some extent Duncan et al.'s) formulations of the predominant mood among Left intellectuals circa 1945—with its emphasis on the poet/intellectual as midwife of a future time of peace and social justice—believe the importance of action in the present to these personalist credos, they nonetheless help us to see the connection between a collective feeling and the social formations advocated for and established by those living in its midst.

A similarly accretive radical imaginary, in which small, local collectives supplant a large-scale uprising of an international proletariat, is championed in Andrea Caffi's "Violence and Sociability." Caffi, an Italian member of the intellectual circle surrounding *politics*, locates the seeds of revolutionary potential in the spontaneous social configurations that take shape outside of larger institutions. Particularly striking is his definition of "revolution" as "the outcome of a spontaneous agreement between the aspirations nourished for a long time

³⁸ Jack Spicer, Robert Duncan, et al., "A Canto for Ezra Pound," *Fulcrum* no. 3 (2004): 434.

among the people at large, and the ideas developed by smaller groups, the ‘society.’ Hence the atmosphere of joy, of radiant hope, of brotherly getting together, which characterizes these ‘dawns of a new era.’ The outbursts of violence that mark the triumph of such movements are as sudden as they are short-lived and limited.”³⁹ Caffi references Thomas More’s *Utopia* and Campanella’s “City of the Sun,” the “messianic communism” of the Middle Ages, and Christian sects such as the Quakers and Anabaptists as models for the kinds of “pre-political” or “extra-political” work he is championing. “In all these cases, the means might be discussed, but the aim is clearly a more human *society*. And the attainment of such an aim is thought to be possible only *outside of* the framework of existing institutions.”⁴⁰ He echoes both Koestler’s pessimistic tone as well as his clarion call for the convergence of small coterie amidst and against a world in crisis: “What is left? A few scattered individuals, and groups, that might find in a resolute pessimism about the immediate future the courage not to despair of the ‘eternal good cause’ of man.”⁴¹ But Caffi is more specific than Koestler about what form these scattered groups should take. He envisions friendship as a rubric for more intimate and spontaneous modes of sociality and as an alternative not just to the State but to other revolutionary collectivities (the mass; the political party; the union): “Today the multiplication of groups of friends, sharing the same anxieties and united by respect for the same values, would have more importance than a huge propaganda machine. Such groups would not need any compulsory rule. They would not rely on collective action, but rather on personal initiative and effective solidarity, such as can be developed only by friends who know each other well.”⁴²

³⁹ Andrea Caffi, “Violence and Sociability,” *politics* 4 (January 1947): 25.

⁴⁰ Caffi, “Violence and Sociability,” 27.

⁴¹ Caffi, “Violence and Sociability,” 27.

⁴² Caffi, “Violence and Sociability,” 28.

In “The Root Is Man,” Dwight Macdonald relies on a kindred vision of collective life to flesh out the “new radicalism” toward which he suggests those on the Left in 1946 ought to move. As historian Gregory D. Sumner puts it in his history of the *politics* circle, “Macdonald became an enthusiastic publicist for the small subculture of ‘revolutionary pacifists’ emerging from World War II, and his magazine served as an important forum of discussion and debate among C.O.’s. Besides being outraged by the injustices war resisters suffered, Macdonald found inspiration in their example of individual and small-group resistance to the state and was intrigued by the tactical potential of their brand of direct action.”⁴³ Macdonald begins the short preface to his two-part essay with a seemingly bleak assessment of the current political landscape: “The war is now ended, in unparalleled devastation, hunger, misery in Asia and Europe and the loosening of imperialist bonds in the colonies. Yet no revolution has succeeded anywhere, or even been attempted . . . The ‘revolutionary opportunities’ which we socialists expected to occur after this war have indeed materialized; but the masses have not taken advantage of them.”⁴⁴

One among numerous thinkers invested in theorizing a viable alternative to a Marxism they saw as impoverished by its fusion with the State in Soviet Russia and its manifestation in/as party politics, Macdonald envisions what it would mean to move, as the title of part two of his essay states, “Toward a New Radicalism.” Here, Macdonald sketches out an alternative to the class-based program for revolutionary action and social change. Rather than locating revolutionary potential in what he sees as a vast and heterogeneous proletariat, he locates it in something like the cadre or the coterie, and advocates strongly for an emphasis on “the emotions, the imagination, the moral feeling, the primacy of the

⁴³ Gregory D. Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle: The Challenge of Cosmopolitan Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 87.

⁴⁴ Dwight Macdonald, *The Root Is Man: Two Essays in Politics* (Alhambra, CA: Cunningham Press, 1953), 15.

individual human being” (Macdonald, 54). The feelings to be mobilized are often ugly ones, akin in some ways to Koestler’s pessimism and Rexroth’s apocalypticism: “What seems necessary is ... to encourage attitudes of disrespect, skepticism, ridicule towards the State and all authority,” in short what Macdonald refers to as “negativism.”⁴⁵ While his vision of political action in the postwar years hinges upon the dissenting individual—the tiny, “gritty particle” that troubles “the smooth running of the vast mechanism ... precisely because of the machine’s delicately-gear’d hugeness”—he also advocates for “the creation of small fraternal *groups*” which will converge around a shared “negativism” in order to “keep alive a sense of our ultimate goals, and...act as a leavening in the dough of mass society.”⁴⁶ So we see a relinquishing of the promise of mass action in favor of a more modest “polis of [one’s] friends.”⁴⁷

Paul Goodman locates the specifically literary (though also, by implication, political) vanguard in small communities as well. In “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” he sketches a timeline of the American avant-garde during a fifty-year period marked by a “deepening ... crisis”—a crisis made visible, he suggests, in the progression “from an advance-guard of subject-matter to an advance-guard of form to an advance-guard problem of the worth of the art itself and its relation to the audience.”⁴⁸ As antidote to this contemporary “crisis of alienation,” Goodman recommends a turn to “personal writing about the audience itself...in a small community of acquaintances, where everybody knows everybody and understands what is at stake.”⁴⁹ Much like Macdonald’s call for “an art and a politics scaled to human size,” and for collective action in the form of people “talking to

⁴⁵ Macdonald, *Root*, 53.

⁴⁶ Macdonald, *Root*, 52, 53, emphasis mine.

⁴⁷ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 224.

⁴⁸ Paul Goodman, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1951): 362.

⁴⁹ Goodman, “Advance-Guard Writing,” 375.

fewer people more precisely about ‘smaller’ subjects,” Goodman prescribes the coterie as salve for large-scale societal crises.⁵⁰ And the poetic form best suited to these “physical reestablishment[s] of community” is, according to Goodman, the occasional poem.

Addressed to a particular person or persons, temporally bounded (in the sense that they are written to commemorate a specific event), and avowedly modest in scope and circulation, occasional poems are formally homologous to the small-scale intimacy of the coterie. As commemorations of, dedications to, and gifts exchanged among real people, they also have the capacity to help sustain the bonds of friendship that make a coterie cohere in real time.

Shuttling between fact and speculation, between “what is” and “what could be,” the occasional poem is at once a realist and a utopian endeavor. It gives a shape and a form to otherwise ephemeral social facts, situating them within literary and material histories. And while elegies are just one among many kinds of occasional poems that Goodman champions, they are, it seems, the most significant for writers of the long 1940s. Turning, in the following section, to poems that similarly entwine their hopes for the future (of the Left; of humankind) in the life of the small community, I hope to illuminate the homological relationship between literary form (elegy) and social formation (anarchism). In other words, if the small anarchist community is invested in casting itself into a projected future—in prefiguring the large-scale social change it hopes to enact—the elegy is similarly preoccupied with keeping open a corridor between points in time. And it is precisely elegies’ preoccupation with temporality, along with their tendency to shuttle between melancholia and optimism, that makes them a useful literary analogy to the kinds of political thinking and feeling being expressed among the New American Poets and the New York Intellectuals at midcentury.

⁵⁰ Macdonald, *Root*, 52.

iii. "THE CRITIQUE OF A WHOLE EPOCH"

The English elegy has long taken private grief as an occasion for public outcry: John Milton railing against the clergy in "Lycidas"; Alfred Lord Tennyson taking stock of the age in "In Memoriam."⁵¹ But by the middle of the twentieth century, the balance of private and public had shifted, at least within the context of American poetry, quite conspicuously. W. H. Auden's 1939 elegy "In Memory of Sigmund Freud"—about which I will have more to say in the next chapter—is an exemplary poem in this regard. Written shortly after his arrival on U.S. shores, and published in the third section ("Occasional Poems") of his 1940 collection *Another Time*, the elegy begins with the question of how to define and demarcate the present, anticipating the diagnostic register of Macdonald et al.'s essays, and foregrounding the collective, speculative strain that often gets suppressed within the long history of the genre.⁵²

When there are so many we shall have to mourn,
when grief has been made so public, and exposed
to the critique of a whole epoch
the frailty of our conscience and anguish,

of whom shall we speak? For every day they die
among us, those who were doing us some good,
who knew it was never enough but

⁵¹ In his article "The Death of Righteous Men: Prophetic Gesture in Vaughan's 'Daphnis' and Milton's *Lycidas*," Cedric C. Brown writes: "I would suggest that one feature separating [Milton's "Lycidas"] out from other pastoral elegies is the prophetic investing of particular deaths with a political significance. In this ... [it is] characteristic of authors who are most aware of history. A particular prophetic formula which seems worth considering for both poems is one well-known in the seventeenth century, that of the death of the righteous man, as described by Isaiah ... The art of elegiac celebration is in itself a laying to heart: thus private grief and public consideration might be combined." (*The George Herbert Journal*, 7 vol. 1-2 (Fall 1983): 1.

⁵² In his seminal book on the modern English-language elegy, Jahan Ramazani accounts for this strain, specifically in his treatment of Thomas Hardy's "Elegies for an Era." He addresses the "social mourning" of "epochal elegies" like Hardy's; however, his monograph as a whole is more invested in the concept of the modern "anti-elegy"—those poems that resist consolation and closure, that fail to mourn (in the Freudian sense) successfully. In his opening bid for the contemporary relevance of a scholarly account of the elegy, he suggests that "listen[ing] more carefully to the mourning tongues of *our major poets*" might help us better examine the multifarious and "vexed experience of grief in the modern world" (ix, emphasis mine). His work has been incredibly informative, though my own treatment of midcentury elegies differs in its turn away from major poets and toward the minor, the marginal, the subcultural, the radical. (Jahan Ramazani, *Mourning Tongues: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]).

hoped to improve a little by living.⁵³

While the rest of the poem goes on to mourn the death of a particular individual, Sigmund Freud, it begins in a broader key by imagining a multitude of mourners and mourned. It expresses the difficulty, even impossibility, of mourning properly when death has become impersonal and grieving is bound up with state-sanctioned speeches about armed intervention. For Auden, modern grief has “exposed” (to public critique) any frailty, uncertainty, or weakness of will that might undermine one’s commitments.

But grief also has the capacity to serve *as a* “critique of a whole epoch,” especially when it takes the form of political elegies like the ones I will turn to momentarily. While this gloss goes against the grain of Auden’s grammar, I want to suggest that the impasse these lines document (How do we grieve, now?) eventually allows other expressive registers (critique, invective) to enter the purview of the elegy more explicitly. And though Auden couldn’t know this, his choice of subject (Freud’s death) in this poem anticipates the tendency, in so many elegies of the 1940s, to jettison Freudian paradigms of mourning and melancholia. As I will show in greater detail in the readings that follow, many midcentury poets on the Left replaced the consolatory labor of the former and the self-abnegating navel gazing of the latter with varying ratios of critique, lament, invective, and utopian speculation, mobilizing the elegy to reflect on the current condition of humanity and to imagine new forms of solidarity that might someday take shape.

In a 1957 review essay on the work of Kenneth Patchen, Kenneth Rexroth diagnoses a contemporary state of affairs that sounds something like Bell’s “end of ideology” thesis: “The first twenty-five years of the century were the years of revolutionary hope ... [but w]e

⁵³ Auden, *Collected*, 273.

have come to the generation of revolutionary hopelessness.”⁵⁴ For Rexroth, the generational turning point comes slightly earlier than it does for Bell: in 1927, with the executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. But although Rexroth marks August of 1927 as the definitive moment when the revolutionary optimism of an earlier era was quashed, he makes a point of mentioning the global protests that the executions sparked: “When the sirens of all the factories in the iron ring around Paris howled in the early dawn, and the myriad torches of the demonstrators were hurled through the midnight air in Buenos Aires, the generation of revolutionary hope was over. The conscience of mankind went to school to learn methods of compromising itself.”⁵⁵ We’re lead to wonder, in light of these acts of resistance, whether things were in fact as hopeless as he claims. Though Rexroth cites various compromises and disappointments of the next three decades (“[t]he Moscow trials, the Kuo Min Tang street executions, the betrayal of Spain, the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the extermination of whole nations, Hiroshima, Algiers”) as evidence that the clock of social progress was further and more irrevocably turned back in the years between 1927 and 1957, Patchen’s irrepressibly engaged and outraged poetic voice, like the “myriad torches of the demonstrators,” offers something like tentative optimism amidst the “absolute darkness” of the age.⁵⁶

Rexroth’s own commemorative poems for Sacco and Vanzetti anticipate the utopian pessimism of his review and serve as useful case studies in political/epochal elegy. Indebted, it would seem, to Friedrich Schiller’s elegiac “Der Spaziergang,” Rexroth’s “Climbing Milestone Mountain, August 22, 1937” presents itself, in its first lines, as an accidental elegy—an occasional poem that doesn’t, at first, fully recognize its occasion:

For a month now, wandering over the Sierras,
A poem had been gathering in my mind,

⁵⁴ Rexroth, “Kenneth Patchen,” 97.

⁵⁵ Rexroth, “Kenneth Patchen,” 96-97.

⁵⁶ Rexroth, “Kenneth Patchen,” 97.

Details of significance and rhythm,
The way poems do, but still lacking a focus.
Last night I remember the date and it all
Began to grow together and take on purpose.⁵⁷

By the end of the poem, however, Rexroth has aligned his sense of recent history against the watershed moment of the anarchists' executions: "I told Marie all about Boston ... [h]ow America was forever a different place /Afterwards for many."⁵⁸ Unlike his essay on Patchen, which presents the date of Sacco and Vanzetti's deaths as a point of no return, here it is a "milestone," an injustice over which to feel grief and outrage and against which to measure the vast "pattern" of human progress. The elegy's apostrophic final lines are unabashedly, even cornily hopeful: "Some day [sic] mountains will be named after you and Sacco. / They will be here and your name with them."⁵⁹ In his seminal study of the English elegy, Peter Sacks leans on Freud's theory of the "work of mourning" to flesh out a substitutive, consolatory economy of the elegy wherein signs (the named mountains) and tropes (the mountains themselves) serve as compensatory replacements for deceased loved ones. On Sacks's account, healthy mourning "requires a withdrawal of affection from the lost object and a subsequent reattachment of affection to some substitute for that object" and "[c]onsolation thus depends on a trope that remains at an essential remove from what it replaces."⁶⁰ While the compensatory object, for Sacks, is always aesthetic, the elegies I look at obviate the very distinction (between art and life; between poems and persons) that would make such a substitution possible. The refrain in Rexroth's elegiac commemoration of the twelfth anniversary of Sacco and Vanzetti's execution ("August 22, 1939") troubles these

⁵⁷ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 151.

⁵⁸ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 151.

⁵⁹ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 152.

⁶⁰ Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1985), 6.

divisions forcefully: “What is it all for, this poetry, / This bundle of accomplishment / Put together with so much pain?”⁶¹ For Rexroth, a poem cannot serve as adequate substitute for “the corpse in the basement,” even though “August 22, 1939” tempts us into thinking such a substitution possible by creating a visual equivalence between word and flesh—between the figurative “bundle of accomplishment” and the “sheeted figure” Rexroth recalls seeing through an undertaker’s window as a youth.⁶² Rexroth’s elegy, like so many elegies of this era, is an extension of the writer’s (or reader’s) political commitments and practices rather than a distraction from, or compensation for, his/her disappointments. Its inflammatory and self-admonishing final lines, which urge us to reflect on the way we live now, speak to the surprising contemporaneity of the genre: “What are we doing at the turn of our years, / Writers and readers of the liberal weeklies?”⁶³

Like Rexroth, Muriel Rukeyser uses the elegy as a means of feeling out the parameters of the present. Most famous for her 1938 long poem, “The Book of the Dead,” which unites documentary evidence with elegiac lyricism in order to bring to light the tragic deaths of countless miners from silicosis in West Virginia, Rukeyser published a series of rarely discussed elegies across three volumes of verse between 1939 and 1949: *A Turning Wind* (1939), *Beast in View* (1944), and *The Green Wave* (1948). Her sense of these elegies as a series—a coherent project with discrete but interconnected parts—is confirmed by her decision to publish all ten poems in a 1949 volume called, simply, *Elegies*, and by her subsequent insistence on maintaining this grouping in her 1951 *Selected Poems*.⁶⁴ That a poet, especially one as politically astute as Rukeyser, might turn to the elegy during a time of mass

⁶¹ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 159.

⁶² Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 161.

⁶³ Rexroth, *Complete Poems*, 162.

⁶⁴ Muriel Rukeyser, *The Collected Poems of Muriel Rukeyser*, eds. Janet E. Kaufman and Anne F. Herzog (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005), xxvii.

death and public grief—"the first century of world wars," as she puts it in "Poem"—is not especially surprising.⁶⁵ What does strike one as unusual, however, is how little these poems resemble traditional elegies. In the absence of generic markers (references to a clearly delineated object of mourning, dates marking particular occasions of loss, and even, in some instances, any obvious evocation of a grieving subject) we get only vestiges of an expressive lyric self, fragmented and deformed by unmentioned and unmentionable historical pressures reminiscent of Auden's "terrible presences" and impersonal "powers."⁶⁶

Nearly all of the poems in the series attempt to name, and in so doing to better grasp, their moment. Throughout we find countless references to the "age" or era of the poems' composition. In the third elegy, Rukeyser writes of "memorable ghosts / scraps of an age whose choice is seen / to lie between evils."⁶⁷ Elsewhere, she registers the inauguration of a troublingly uncertain epoch: "[t]he age of the masked and alone begins, / we look for sinister states, a loss shall learning suffer / before the circle of this sun be done."⁶⁸ She further fleshes out her sense of this era as still-unfolding sea change dramatically punctuated by tragic events around the globe: "Madrid, Shanghai, / Vienna, Barcelona, all cities of contagion, / issue survivors from the surf of the age."⁶⁹ The second elegy in the series, "Age of Magicians," evokes an apocalyptic, disorienting time when "baroque night advances ... maps strain loose and are lost, [and] the flash-flood breaks."⁷⁰ A time of "the march-step" and "the long cannon," of "children [who] grow in authority," the authoritarian "age of magicians" consigns the poet-prophet to the margins, where he "covers

⁶⁵ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 430.

⁶⁶ These quotations are from Auden's "Where Do They Come From? Those Whom We So Much Dread?" (originally titled "The Crisis") and "In Memory of Ernst Toller" (W. H. Auden, *Another Time* [New York: Random House, 1940], 38, 97).

⁶⁷ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 305.

⁶⁸ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 307.

⁶⁹ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 310.

⁷⁰ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 302.

his face against the wall, / weeps, fights to think again, to plan to start / the dragon, the ecliptic, and the heart.”⁷¹

The alignment of the somatic and the celestial in that final assemblage recalls the speaker’s prophecy in the final stanza of the previous elegy, “Rotten Lake,” where what Rukeyser calls a “private rising”—a phrase that evokes both the rising of the sun at dawn and the quickening of the pulse as a body lurches into action—initiates the turn of a “beaten season” into another, as-yet undefined future:

These prophecies
may all come true,

out of the beaten season. I look in Rotten Lake
wait for the flame reflection, seeing only
the free beast flickering black along my side
animal of my need,

and I cry I want! I want! rising among the world
to gain my converted wish, the amazing desire
that keeps me alive, though the face be still, be still,
the slow dilated heart know nothing but lack,
now I begin again the private rising,
the ride to survival of that consuming bird
beating, up from dead lakes, ascents of fire.⁷²

Rukeyser draws, here and elsewhere, on an elegiac tradition of figurative resurrection (the deceased who is permitted to live on eternally within the poem). The phoenix imagery, with its links to the speaker’s own anomalous desires, re-works resurrection tropes, making them not only mythological but also animalistic. The spontaneous expression of individual creativity and corporeal desire that Rukeyser associates with “the free beast flickering ... along [her] side” chimes with the personalist imaginaries discussed earlier, in which the embodied present-time of the small, anarchist cell is the primary focus. Finally, the poem’s

⁷¹ Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 302.

⁷² Rukeyser, *Collected Poems*, 301.

synching up of human vitals to the movements of the cosmos—its evocation of corpses and courses—demonstrates the elegy’s potential to speak beyond the personal to radical social formations and theories of history.

Like Rukeyser’s “Rotten Lake,” Kenneth Patchen’s “Laments for the Makers of Songs,” which appeared in his 1949 collection of poems, *Red Wine and Yellow Hair*, incorporates animal imagery, but its mythic backdrop is more explicitly Promethean. I quote it here in full:

Now the singers leave the darkened garden.
The rash and the holy are still, without light.
Hands, now slack as rags—they once held love.
Their instruments fall, and they rot on the ground.

Fools of God, they go.
The flowery tree is dead.
The cry of the bitter snow and
The giggling of pimps in a hangman’s bed
Are the only songs I know.

The sun goes down on the reddening tide.
Chains rattle on a bloody rock ...
This is the cross
which man has made;
And this, the wheel ... and the murder, the hunger
the fear, and the pain
which man has molded
To the loss of his spirit, his reason, and his world.

The beasts are loose, inside. Our killdom’s crime—
Man’s will be done.
As he was in the beginning,
So shall he end, in slime.

O what is there to sing!
Man has conquered everything.
Hate stares out of every face.
The final victory is near—
And the baaing of the doomed as they toe
Their righteous marks in a butchers’ race
Is the only sound I hear.⁷³

⁷³ Patchen, *Collected*, 394-95.

A surrealist and satirical retelling of Genesis that aligns the fallen state of the Left with the fallen state of humanity, the poem's very first word—now—invites us to read it as both allegory of the present and civilizational lament. Lines like “Man has conquered everything” and “Man's will be done” express anxiety about humanity's usurpation of God's place. We can hear echoes of Greif's “crisis of man” discourse here, as the poem ponders what humanity is, asks where it went wrong, and urgently speculates about how a world so conspicuously out of joint might be repaired. On the other hand, it also makes recourse to the language of class in its turn to figures of sheep-for-the-slaughter and its foregrounding of the word “maker,” a Medieval term for poet that also, in the context of Patchen's working-class oeuvre, conjures associations of physical labor. The figure of the poet as worker, then, serves as synecdoche for a broader political imaginary according to which the creative class and the proletariat might serve as potential inaugurators of social change. Of course, “Laments for the Makers” conveys nothing so straightforward as a consistent social analysis or political program. But in splitting the difference between class-consciousness and the universalist language of species, as well as between small- and large-scale analyses of history and revolutionary upheaval, Patchen condenses many of the conversations discussed above into a short, elegiac lyric that offers several angles of vision on radical politics at midcentury.

Patchen's evocation of the end of the decade as postlapsarian exile—a time of retrenchment and retreat—is presaged in Jackson Mac Low's elegy “Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decoram,” which appeared in the spring 1947 issue of the British anarchist periodical *Now* amidst an ongoing debate about the role of the poet in society and the relationship between politics and verse. Published a little over a year after Allied victory, and in the wake of the profound ethical questions raised by the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Mac Low's poem is at once a nod to the anti-war verse of an earlier generation

(Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori" being the most obvious reference), an assessment of the mood in the U.S., particularly among those on the literary Left, and a meditation on poetic form and tone. It opens by mimicking a melancholic, Eliotic style and then, in its second stanza, another voice emphatically interjects and *rejects* a version of elegy that adheres too strongly to the New Critical paradigm of ironic detachment:

Now that the dead and dying are foreclosed
on, their effects, such as they are, disposed
of to the highest bidder, and each name,
duly recorded, forgotten, with its fame
(such as it was) intact, that is to say,—
forgotten—

No! Not this tone! Can I not pay
some tribute to these deaths, some human feeling
such as they deserve, without concealing
nature beneath ambiguous irony?⁷⁴

While the opening stanzas of "Post Victoriam ..." seem to position it as an elegy for the lives lost during WWII, taken as a whole, the poem reflects elegiacally on the conditions under which it was written. Contemporary realities like the bureaucratization of labor and the complicity of the mainstream Left with the U.S. war effort shape the poem's struggle to find a voice in the fading light of the militant '30s. More than mere historical backdrop, these conditions are felt in the poem's very rhythms. Its interruptions and halting repetitions ("Now that each dead, each dying, is dying, dead") help to convey the aesthetic impasse that the poem documents, at which neither high modernism's impersonality nor the more direct rhetoric of much 1930s movement poetry can fully accommodate the particular crises of the poem's postwar moment. The former lacks the requisite "feeling" to mourn "the pain of

⁷⁴ Jackson Mac Low, "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decoram," *Now* 7 (1947): 37-38.

human deaths [and] curse / the public vampires riding on their hearse.”⁷⁵ The emotional power of the latter, Mac Low seems to worry, has begun to wane.

In an attempt to get beyond this impasse, Mac Low suggests that private mourning might be an antidote to a collective, public voice that risks complicity in the celebration of a victory viewed as dubious by many on the Left: “Now that each dead, each dying, is dying, dead, / and public alchemists above his head / turn blood to fluid assets, bones to bonds, / and flesh and breath—to fame and empty sounds / (each public voice exuding from its face / and trickling into every private place, / like bird-lime bidding all into State / till freed into anarchic private crates)” (Mac Low, 38). But this elegy also registers the perils of writing in a “private” idiom, not least among them obscurity and quietism. “[P]rivate mourning,” the poem warns, “keeps a public silence / and private tears [can] mean public acquiescence.”⁷⁶

The poem’s penultimate stanza expresses acutely the frustrations of finding and speaking effectively to one’s proper audience (frustrations that Goodman also documents in “Advance-Guard Writing”):

We who by addiction and by choice
address the public in our private voice
can, if we reach, but little hope to please
ears that have only heard the public wheeze:
our honesty is queer, our anger mad;
we’re sentimental when we dare be sad;
our work shows we’re neurotic, and our play—
—shows we’re neurotic: who’ll hear what we say?⁷⁷

Poetry that wears its commitments on its sleeve has, these lines suggest, lost its audience. It has come to seem like a “mannered pose,” a mere remnant of an earlier moment in the history of the Left in the U.S., the cultural forms and social formations of which have either

⁷⁵ Mac Low, “Post Victorian,” 38.

⁷⁶ Mac Low, “Post Victorian,” 38.

⁷⁷ Mac Low, “Post Victorian,” 39.

lost something of their original militancy or been directly co-opted by a “public” against which they were originally embattled. The final stanza, however, alludes to the ways in which this impasse might ultimately be productive:

When taste is formed on corporation prose
The candid protest seems a mannered pose:
by private anger, cloth'd in “outworn” styles
provokes in private readers public smiles.⁷⁸

A poem that began with death and dispossession—with an acknowledgment of the difficulty and, perhaps, the failure to mourn properly—ends with a defiant sneer. Our speaker and his ilk have, it seems, reappropriated slurs like “queer” and “neurotic” and repossessed the outmoded poetic styles of an earlier generation in the face of the public’s willful misunderstanding. Most important among the “outworn” genres the poem defiantly resurrects is, of course, the elegy, figured here as a kind of historical drag the poet dons in order to effectively express his outrage. Further, Mac Low’s characterization of himself and his fellow poets as isolated (“who’ll hear what we say?”) invites us to rethink privacy’s associations with political quietism and disengagement. Here, privacy means something closer to the exilic insularity of the 1940s coterie. By expanding the range of the elegy to include new tropes and contradictory tonal registers, Mac Low, Patchen, Rukeyser, and others make recourse to the genre to express the enthusiasms and disappointments that structured the life of small, marginalized groups, and the large-scale revolutionary hopes that sustained them.

⁷⁸ Mac Low, “Post Victoriam,” 39.

TWO

MIXED FEELINGS: THE ELEGIAC IMPASSE IN AUDEN'S "NEW YEAR LETTER"

All genuine poetry is in a sense the formation of private spheres out of a public chaos.

—W. H. Auden and C. Day Lewis¹

i. ELEGY AND IDEOLOGY

Where chapter 1 established some of the terms for understanding how the thematic scope and tonal range of the elegy were expanded by poets on the Left in the 1940s, this chapter brings one of the twentieth century's most influential poets into the orbit of the (largely) lesser-known figures discussed in the previous one, and elaborates on the rhetorical and political uses to which the genre was put during this period. I am aware of the risks a critic runs in making the boundaries of a poetic mode too porous, its scope too capacious. I don't want to suggest that *any* poem that is melancholy in mood or macabre in subject matter is therefore an elegy, but I do want to offer an account of the genre's flexibility within certain limits. My argument is not—as I hope my examples in the previous chapter began to make clear—imposed from above, but rather arrived at inductively. In other words, I take the concrete particulars of a range of exemplary poems—the images, metaphors, motifs, and so on that are drawn from older elegiac traditions and remixed to speak to the social and material conditions of the poets' contemporary world—as license for the liberality with which I treat the modern political elegy as a category.

As we saw, Muriel Rukeyser's contributions to the mode disarticulate loss from recuperation, grief from consolation, deferring any sense of closure or resolution by

¹ Auden, W. H. and C. Day Lewis, "Preface" to *Oxford Poetry 1927*, published in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose and Travel Books in Prose and Verse*, Vol. 1, ed. Edward Mendelson (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4.

dispersing these typically twinned gestures across a suite of abstract, fragmented lyrics. In her hands, elegies mimic the free-floating sorrow and anxiety of a world out of joint in ways previously unimagined. Kenneth Patchen, for his part, cross-breeds lament, invective, and jeremiad. His elegiac poems denounce injustice in a voice at once grief-stricken and strident. And Kenneth Rexroth's similarly weaponized elegies return the genre to its classical roots in choral lament. Reviving elegy's origins in collective mourning, Rexroth's elegiac verse fuses public outcry and intimate epiphany and is often structured around a set of references to historical and contemporary collective struggles, as well as to their gains and losses. W. H. Auden serves as a particularly compelling case study in the uses of elegiac experimentation precisely because he was so thoroughly steeped in the long history of the mode and so virtuosic in his recuperation and revision of many of its tropes. Unlike the poets discussed in chapter 1, however, we tend to take for granted that Auden was an elegist, and in doing so, risk overlooking some of the more inventive ways in which his poems stretch generic boundaries, and the other (non-Anglo) European traditions on which they draw.

In *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, Jahan Ramazani ranks Auden among a pantheon of the twentieth century's "major" elegists, referring to Auden's contributions to the genre as "astonishing interfusions with the dead" characterized by "appreciative imitation and identification."² While Ramazani devotes most of his interpretive attention to three of Auden's most canonical lyrics—"In Memory of W. B. Yeats," "In Memory of Ernst Toller," and "In Memory of Sigmund Freud"—he also gestures at the interconnections among these elegies and other poems from the same period in his career that do not conform to conventions of the English elegy quite as obviously as the three that

² Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 177.

appear in *Another Time*. For my purposes, the most interesting para-elegy Ramazani invokes is Auden's "New Year Letter" (1940), a long, epistolary poem that, on Ramazani's account, "recasts the relation between aesthetic microcosm and social macrocosm ... representing art not as 'midwife to society' but as a more private and 'ideal order' that shows 'mankind / An order it has yet to find.'" ³ The "privileged community" for which Auden longs in "New Year Letter"—"That real republic which must be / The State all politicians claim, / Even the worst, to be their aim"—is realized, according to Ramazani, in the "symbolic interfusion" of living poet and deceased master in his canonical elegies. This aesthetic communion of living and dead in turn "enables Auden to invert aesthetically the violent degeneration of social order and community—a political process that [he] felt powerless to arrest."⁴

While Ramazani's readings are convincing, and the link he makes between the elegies in *Another Time* and "New Year Letter" suggestive, in what follows I offer a slightly broader and perhaps more troubled account of Auden's "privileged communities" and their links to elegy. Ramazani's implicit claim that Auden's vision of community is fully realized early in 1939, yet somehow embryonic once again by the year's end, poses not only chronological problem, but a theoretical one as well. On Ramazani's his account, the "symbolic interfusion" of living and dead within the circumscribed bounds of the aesthetic object seems to be the only (or at least the most) viable form of community that Auden imagines. But "New Year Letter" gives us a different sense of what community meant for Auden. The "privileged communities" to which he refers in the long poem are not confined to the rarefied realm of the aesthetic (though they often cohere around the production and consumption of art). Rather than read Auden's short elegies for specific people as

³ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 181.

⁴ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelsohn (New York: Vintage International, 1991), 221. Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning*, 181.

realizations of the community for which the poet merely longs in “New Year Letter,” I aim to show that Auden was as deeply invested in thinking through the politics of actually-existing communities (friends gathered around a table to share poems or listen to music; strangers brought together in an urban bar by the vicissitudes of work and war; loose networks of writers linked by letters and little magazines) as he was in the virtual commingling of two minds (living author’s and dead subject’s) within the space of the poem.

Begun on New Year’s Eve, 1939, and written and revised over the course of the next several months, “New Year Letter” is framed as an epistle to Auden’s friend, Elizabeth Mayer. Traditionally, new year letters narrate one’s personal milestones and noteworthy experiences to friends and family. Although Auden frames his poem as just such an intimate address, we soon begin to see that it’s a political poem by other means.⁵ Its subject matter is varied and includes the biographical (Auden’s own poetic heritage, personified in the poem as a ghostly tribunal that judges his efforts), the philosophical (art’s relationship to the world; the powers and perils of modernity), and the political (social and economic relations under capitalism; anti-statist prefigurative politics).

Its three parts conform to a rhetorical structure similar to that of the essays by Dwight Macdonald, Andrea Caffe, and Paul Goodman discussed in the previous chapter—essays that cast a long glance back into the past, attempt to take stock of the present, and then prescribe the social structures and affective compartments necessary for an alternative future beyond the capitalist (or, for that matter, communist) state. But where these political

⁵ Auden is drawing on a rich history of (mainly eighteenth-century) epistolary verse, much of which is generically hybridized in precisely these ways. Alexander Pope’s “Essay on Man,” for example, was a touchstone for Auden. For more on this eighteenth-century heritage, see William C. Dowling, *The Epistolary Moment: The Poetics of the Eighteenth-Century Verse Epistle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) and Bill Overton, *The Eighteenth-Century British Verse Epistle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

thinkers invoke such futures with equal parts temerity and uncertainty, verve and skepticism, Auden's sense of what is to come feels considerably more tenuous.

After completing more than half of "New Year Letter," he wrote to its dedicatee, Elizabeth Mayer "Your poem creeps along but versified metaphysical argument is very difficult," a symptom perhaps of Auden's reticence to be boldly prescriptive or to make a claim of any kind upon the future.⁶ Edward Mendelson situates this reticence in relation to some of Auden's earlier poetic attempts "to follow an accurate diagnosis with a reckless prescription for a cure":

In 1932 [Auden] had abandoned an untitled alliterative poem in cantos, based loosely on Langland and Dante, at the point where its structural logic required him to compose a third canto portraying the Communist paradise to follow the capitalist hell and revolutionary purgatory of the first two. In 1938 he had completed a verse commentary to his sonnet sequence "In Time of War" with a prayer in which "the voice of Man" asks the forces of the will to build "a human justice," the work of "the just." Like the just who exchange their messages in "September 1, 1939," these unportrayable figures of political fantasy were called into being by the rhetoric of poetic endings, and by 1940 Auden was no longer willing to entrust them with the future. In "New Year Letter," therefore, he vacillated repeatedly between an analysis of the past and the urgent question of what to do in the present, but stopped short of answering his question.⁷

To more fully flesh out the connection between Auden's epistolary poem and his elegies—and in order to read "New Year Letter" *as an elegy*—this chapter begins by providing some context and literary historical background for thinking through the relationship between social formations and poetic form. I consider Auden's complex and often paradoxical answers to questions about what community is and how it is constituted. Looking mainly at his prose (letters, essays, lectures) from the late 1930s through the late 1940s, I argue that Auden put his faith in small-scale communities as bulwarks against the social alienation and

⁶ Edward Mendelson, *Later Auden* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 103.

⁷ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 103, emphasis mine.

economic stratification endemic to global capitalism in the mid-twentieth century in much the same way that his anarchist and anti-Stalinist contemporaries had.

While many scholars have discussed Auden's influence on U.S literature and culture during the decades after his arrival in New York in January 1939, the extent to which Auden's work was in dialogue with midcentury trends in American anarchist thought is rarely if ever mentioned.⁸ Perhaps because Auden's life and work tend to be divided into two distinct phases, with his emigration to the U.S. and (roughly) simultaneous repudiation of Communism overlapping at the pivot point, the American Auden has come to be seen as the a-political and, eventually, the Christian Auden.⁹ Stan Smith refers to these narratives of Auden's life and career as "moral fables" that, depending on which side one is on, illustrate either the poet's endorsement of bourgeois values and betrayal of the working class *or* the inevitable and justifiable disavowal of the impractical ideals of one's youth.¹⁰ Auden himself was well-aware of the enduring appeal of these kinds of political parables. As the devil—who cavorts rakishly through Part II of "New Year Letter"—puts it, with a wink: "Students must / Sow their wild oats at times or bust. / Such things have happened in the lives / of all the best Conservatives."¹¹ In his concise and canny satire of the "end of ideology" (*avant la lettre*), Auden has the Prince of Lies endorse a stock narrative that (much like the devil himself) is

⁸ For more on Auden in the U.S. and, in particular, his influence on postwar American poetry, see Piotr Gwiazda's *James Merrill and W. H. Auden: Homosexuality and Poetic Influence* (2007), Aidan Wasley's *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene* (2011), Charles Miller's *Auden: An American Friendship* (1989). For an excellent study of the intersections of Auden's and Hannah Arendt's thought, see Susannah Young-Ah Gottlieb's *Regions of Sorrow: Anxiety and Messianism in Hannah Arendt and W. H. Auden*.

⁹ See, for instance, Edward Mendelson's comprehensive two-volume study, *Early Auden and Later Auden*. One notable exception to the two-stage treatment is Randall Jarrell's work on Auden. While interested in tracking the phases of Auden's development, his accounts tend to be more multifaceted. In "Freud to Paul: The Stages of Auden's Ideology," for instance, Jarrell identifies three stages of Auden: 1.) the mythological 2.) the secular 3.) the theological. (*Partisan Review* 12, Fall 1945). In re: politics, Auden coins the term "a-political" in *The Prolific and the Devourer* (1939), his unfinished book of fragments and aphorisms inspired by William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and Carl Jung's archetypal categories.

¹⁰ Stan Smith, *W. H. Auden* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 1.

¹¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 219.

eminently alluring, but ultimately deceptive. Auden's aim at the end of Part II (and, indeed, throughout) "New Year Letter" is to expose these fables as fictions that tell only a partial story. I mean partial here in two senses. One, these stories tend to be biased and moralizing—typically wielded as judgment, as they were by Auden's detractors who saw him as a traitor to the Left. And, more problematically still, they are the incomplete "either-ors," "mongrel halves," and "moral asymmetric souls" to which Auden disparagingly refers a few lines after his young utopian's encounter with Satan.¹² According to these kinds of fables, one is *either* a member of the Communist Party writing explicitly political poetry *or* a turncoat. *Either* a mature proponent of liberal reform *or* a "Simon-pure Utopian" out of touch with ugly political realities.¹³ Goaded by the devil as much as by the poetic impulse itself, one of the tasks that Auden sets up for himself in "New Year Letter" is to "synthesize" these "half-truths."¹⁴ Among the uses of poetry, then, is "the gift of double focus" it gives to those who write it and, by extension, those who read it. Though it might appear "dull / [a]nd utterly impractical" at first glance, the "hocus-pocus" of poetic language—when applied to the world beyond the poem—offers an alternative to the kinds of dogmatism that Auden, and other members of the anti-Stalinist Left, had come to see as detrimental to political progress.¹⁵

One of the central questions of Parts I and II of "New Year Letter," then, is how poetry draws on and how it differs from other kinds of knowledge and other modes of discourse. If the last lines of Part II offer something like an answer to this question, then that answer seems to involve poetry's ability to hold opposites in suspension, to describe the

¹² Auden, *Collected Poems*, 220.

¹³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 219.

¹⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 220.

¹⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 220.

nature of uncertainty without ever resolving it, to make negative capability square with political efficacy. Yet “New Year Letter” also challenges any straightforward and trans-historically consistent relationship between politics and poetic form. The clear, didactic style of the long poem would seem to bespeak Auden’s desire to make a political intervention—to deliver a message “*En Claire*,” as he says, to a broad swath of listeners at a time of global turmoil.¹⁶ The clarity of the poem’s rhetoric is reinforced by its neoclassical form (rhyming octosyllabic, or Hudibrastic, couplets), the history of which invites us to read “New Year Letter” as part of a long tradition of political verse.¹⁷ And yet, by most biographical accounts, the poem marks the occasion of Auden’s turn *away* from his earlier political commitments. Likely the result of the poem’s evocation of Christian imagery in its final stanzas and the fact that it was written not long before Auden’s return to the church, this critical trend nonetheless speaks to the larger, perhaps intractable problem of the politics of form.

An early review of *The Double Man* (the book in which “New Year Letter” first appeared) further complicates this problem. Though its author, Raymond Winkler, *does* see “New Year Letter” as a political poem, he sees it as stylistically and by extension politically impoverished. For Winkler, “New Year Letter” is *too* clear, its ideas too available, to be a good political poem, which should be difficult, and ambiguous, and imagistic in the modernist sense. Winkler writes: “Robbed of the concrete situation to serve as an agent for precipitating his ideas, Mr. Auden has to rely on personification to give them body, and metre and rhyme to give them sinew—and inversion of the usual practice of good verse (Mr. Auden’s own practice in the best of the 1930 ‘Poems’), where the idea crystallizes the imagery and modulates the rhythm; and the effect is to hang a curtain between author and

¹⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 207.

¹⁷ Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, eds., *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 539.

reader.”¹⁸ That Winkler condemns “New Year Letter” as mere propaganda and extols Auden’s *engagée* poems from the 1930s for their residual modernist aesthetic—their hard, Poundian images, their “concrete situations” that act as “agents” for ideas (in the manner of T. S. Eliot’s “objective correlative”), and their semantic difficulty, which denies the casual or uninitiated reader access to their meaning—should strike us as a rather counterintuitive take on politically committed style (not least because of the reactionary politics of Winkler’s models of “good verse”).

What these contradictions help make visible is just how intractable the links between aesthetics and politics become when we try to extrapolate beyond individual poems and specific contexts. Is the best literary conduit for politics a clear didactic style that foregrounds its message? Or can the encounter with strange and estranging verbal patterns—and the attendant process of retraining the mind to make sense of them—be inherently political? One might just as easily, it seems, be an Adornian (who views avant-garde difficulty as having an implicit politics) as a Lukacsian (who might prefer the propagandistic lucidity and accessibility of “New Year Letter”).¹⁹ In lieu of a politics of poetic form (although, as we shall see, Auden’s chosen form is by no means irrelevant to the poem’s aims), “New Year Letter” makes available something closer to a politics of poetic tone. Occupying a generic category somewhere between elegy and essayistic epistle, it describes the end of ideology without reinscribing it. It captures, in other words, an historical

¹⁸ Raymond Winkler, “Mr. Auden’s Weltanschauung,” in *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, ed. John Haffenden (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 324. Originally published in *Scrutiny* 10, October 1941, 206-11.

¹⁹ For more literary historical—as opposed to Marxian formalist—discussions of the occluded (Leftist) politics of Modernism, see Al Filreis’s *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, the Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (1994) and *Counter-revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (2008). These monographs account for the radical political foment out of which high Modernist literature emerged, and the increasingly conservative contexts and methods of postwar literary reception, within which and through which the story of modernism’s radical origins has been largely redacted.

mood (of disillusionment and mourning) while at the same time imagining ways beyond it.²⁰

How elegy equips Auden (and, in turn, his readers) to make an historical impasse felt without treating it as woefully irremediable will, I hope, become clear by the end of the chapter.

One stanza in particular from Part II of “New Year Letter” helps us to understand why so many readers have seen this poem as part of a post-political turn in Auden’s career.

It begins:

We hoped; we waited for the day
The State would wither clean away,
Expecting the Millennium
The theory promised us would come:
It didn’t. Specialists must try
To detail all the reasons why;
Meanwhile at least the layman knows
That none are lost so soon as those
Who overlook their crooked nose²¹

The caesuras in the first and fifth lines dramatize the jarring contrast between expectation and outcome, and the sense of disappointment and remorse when practice veers from theory. The most emphatic intonational stress is placed on the second syllable of both lines (“We hoped”; “It didn’t”), which metrically reinforces a paradigmatic historical arc that begins with fervent revolutionary optimism and ends with a disgruntled, misanthropic whimper. This was an observable structure of feeling among many on the Left in the wake of the Moscow Trials and the Nazi-Soviet Pact, and “New Year Letter” offers a history of this particularly disillusioning experience of the present. The example of William Wordsworth (who appears several stanzas earlier as a “liberal fellow-traveller [who] ran /

²⁰ In his article “The Voice of Exile: Auden in 1940,” Samuel Hynes observes that “Auden’s recurrent theme [in ‘New Year Letter’] is that man has come to the end of an epoch. The period that has ended he calls by various names: it is the end of the Renaissance, the end of the Protestant epoch, the end of liberal capitalist democracy. What these have in common is that they all acted to separate men from each other . . . The results were the atomization of society, the disintegration of tradition, the loss of community.” *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (Winter 1982): 39.

²¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 218-19.

With Sans-culotte and Jacobin”) helps clarify Auden’s point. The concrete details of time and place are different, but the basic structure is the same: the poet’s initial enthusiasm for the ideals that inspired the French Revolution is disavowed in the midst of the Terror and gives way, farther down the line, to a renewed conservatism signaled by the twin figures of “the Established Church” and “the Squire’s paternalistic hand.”²² Lest Auden’s contemporaries miss the implicit parallel, he elaborates: “Like [Wordsworth’s], our lives have been coeval / With a political upheaval, / Like him, we had the luck to see / A rare discontinuity, / Old Russia suddenly mutate / Into a proletarian state, / The odd phenomenon, the strange / Event of qualitative change.”²³ What Auden hopes to forestall by citing Wordsworth’s bad example is not political disappointment, exactly, but the reactionary backlash that tends to come in its wake. He’s not telling us to be a-political—he’s warning us not to let our disillusionment curdle into counter-revolutionary politics.

But “New Year Letter” doesn’t just diagnose the temptation to become resigned and reactionary in response to dashed political hopes; it attempts to counteract such a response by presenting possible, if ephemeral, alternatives.²⁴ Auden devotes the end of the stanza quoted above to two related questions: how to account for the underlying causes of this historical pattern’s eternal return and how to break the impasse that it creates. These questions reappear in various forms throughout “New Year Letter”—emerging from and intersecting with a range of historical examples, fictional personae, and dramatic encounters and contributing to the interrogatory and speculative mood of the poem.

²² Auden, *Collected Poems*, 215-16.

²³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 216.

²⁴ That Auden casts Satan as the voice of political reaction reveals precisely how tempting—and dangerous—he found it. Auden’s Satan tell his interlocutor: “Induce men to associate / Truth with a lie, then demonstrate / The lie and they will, in Truth’s name, / Treat babe and bath-water the same” (*Collected* 215). In other words, if we falsely associate a debased instantiation of political ideals with the ideals themselves—and the temptation to do so can be strong—then we’ll relinquish our hopes (however worthy).

There is, it's worth noting, some truth to the abovementioned end-of-ideology narrative as it applies to Auden's life. He *did* grow increasingly ambivalent about politics in the late 1930s, eventually questioning his faith in both Popular Front commitment and liberal reform, vowing, in the spring of 1939, "Never, *never* again ... [to] speak at a political meeting," and eventually returning to the church by the following autumn.²⁵ But to reduce Auden's growing interest in the Christian faith of his youth, and his increased skepticism about political action, to a mere substitution of divine authority (God's grace) for a secular one (party politics) is to miss much of the nuance of his writing from this period. It is also to overlook the poet's interest in Leftist alternatives to the Communist party and the Soviet State—alternatives that blended secular social imaginaries with Auden's newly recovered interest in theology.

As we shall see, Auden's scattered meditations on the meaning of collectivity share much in common (in both content and tone) with the conversations among Left-leaning poets, activists, and thinkers discussed in chapter 1. And a large part of what they share is an elegiac perspective on modernity and a growing concern that older paradigms for understanding and changing the world had been vitiated. As Samuel Hynes notes, "[b]y 1939 it seemed clear to [Auden], as it did to many other Europeans, that the crisis they were facing was not simply another ward but the failure of an ideology. *If* fascism existed, and dominated Europe, *if* another world war was coming, then the liberal western conception of man must be wrong in fundamental ways—more than wrong, *dead*."²⁶ If neither the liberal democratic nor the bureaucratic collectivist state were tenable models for living rightly—and if neither precluded fascism from metastasizing in their midst—the double task of the political poet

²⁵ Humphrey Carpenter, *W. H. Auden: A Biography* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 256.

²⁶ Samuel Hynes, "The Voice of Exile: Auden in 1940," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (Winter 1982): 34.

was to commemorate the “death” of worn out ideologies and social configurations without renouncing political commitment tout court.

This is precisely what Auden attempts in “New Year Letter,” which takes a distinctly dialectical approach to moral and political choice in the present, as well as to its poetic vantage on the past. While Auden repeatedly denies art’s ability to have an impact on the world of politics (both within “New Year Letter” and in other writing from this period of his career), he also allows for the possibility that his elegiac verse epistle—his “verbal contraption”—might enable dialectical thinking and, in turn, right living beyond the poem’s parameters. If poetry has a use, then, it is in some sense a prefigurative one: “An algebraic formula, / An abstract model of events / Derived from dead experience, / And each life must itself decide / To what and how it be applied.”²⁷ Just as the music to which Auden and his friends listened in Elizabeth Mayer’s cottage arranged their “minds [into] a *civitas* of sound,” so too a poem might, on Auden’s account, “show[] mankind / An order it has yet to find”; it might, in other words, prefigure a “true *Gestalt*” in which “all desires / Find each in each what each requires.”²⁸ The Marxian overtones of that last line challenge another, opposing assertion he makes in the same stanza: that “Art is not life and cannot be / a midwife to society.”²⁹

To buttress my reading of “New Year Letter” as an elegy in the key of the epochal, I draw on Theodore Ziolkowski’s study of the classical German elegy since the late eighteenth century, which positions Friedrich Schiller’s “Der Spaziergang” (originally titled “Elegie” and often translated as either “The Walk” or “The Mountainclimb”) as locus classicus of a genre

²⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201. The phrase “verbal contraption” comes from Auden’s essay “Making, Knowing and Judging” in *The Dyer’s Hand*.

²⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 200-1.

²⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201.

we might call civilizational elegy. Ziolkowski's virtuosic reading of the poem in the monograph's first chapter undergirds the larger architecture of his argument about the genre's development throughout the next two centuries. His comprehensive literary history helps me to position "Der Spaziergang" as an important precursor to and model for "New Year Letter," the tone and scope of which shuttle between the broad view of public discourse and the intimacy and modesty of occasional poetry. Woven throughout "New Year Letter" are references to islands and mountains that position Auden's contemporary lament in relation to the Greek and Latin pastoral traditions out of which elegy first emerged and the German tradition of civilizational elegy that began with Schiller's melancholy hike.

The island appears throughout Auden's corpus as a metaphor for insular social worlds. His 1936 collection *On this Island*, as well as parts of *Letters from Iceland*, invoke the "limited hope[s]" of failed utopias and isolated outposts.³⁰ Then there are the figurative islands of the self-exiled American Auden: the urban idylls that recall the Virgilian pastoral tradition in order to depict the lost pasts and imagined futures of unlikely communities thrown together by historical shipwreck. (*The Age of Anxiety* is, perhaps, the best example of this.) Auden's mountains, meanwhile, allow the poet an Archimedean vantage from which to view the epic sweep of history that has shaped the present, which is his primary aim in Parts II and III of "New Year Letter." As the British poet Kathleen Raine astutely notes in a 1941 review of *Another Time*: "[I]t is through [Auden's] landscape that he understands the man who inhabits it."³¹ And yet if Auden's landscapes often serve, as Raine suggests, as quasi-Romanic extensions of the human, they also set the stage for jarring encounters with absolute alterity. As climates and ecosystems inhospitable to human life—nature at its most

³⁰ W. H. Auden, "Journey to Iceland: A Letter to Christopher Isherwood, Esq.," in Auden and Louis MacNeice's *Letters to Iceland* (London: Faber and Faber, 1937), 23.

³¹ Kathleen Raine, "Untitled Review" in Selected Notices, *Horizon* Vol. 3, No. 13 (January 1941): 65.

inhuman(e)—they accommodate human consciousness uneasily at best. A closer look at the nonhuman surround in Auden’s poems helps place what critics like Randall Jarrell have identified as the poet’s muddled humanism in conversation with the anti-humanist impulse in his work from this period. It helps stage, in other words, the dialectical relationship between social atomization and community, loneliness and solidarity, so crucial to what I call Auden’s elegiac poetics of impasse.

I mean impasse here in several, interconnected senses: the figurative (an impassable stretch or crossroads reached on the poet’s allegorical trek), the historical (an epochal shift or turning point, the future beyond which feels precarious and uncertain), and tonal (the difficulty of finding a poetic voice or mode commensurate with the historical impasse the poet senses only partially and incompletely). The extent to which “New Year Letter” might be read as an “elegy containing history” depends upon the rhetorical and metrical balancing act by which these metaphorical layers are held in suspension.

In her 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant defines impasse as a time of suspension during which we reckon with the loss of past models and means of fulfillment, and with the perceived absence of any viable alternatives. As a project, *Cruel Optimism* is deeply ambivalent (as its title suggests) about its own historical moment (the early twenty-first century)—a moment when capitalism feels at once ubiquitous (in its global reach and in its logic’s infiltration of even the most seemingly private spaces and intimate rituals) and fragile (in the wake of a succession of post-war crises, the most recent being the 2007-2008 crash of the financialized consumer credit economy). While capitalism’s omnipresence gives Berlant’s account of the twenty-first century a somewhat leaden tint, the potential for new rhythms of living and resisting effervesces just beneath its surface. Berlant captures the ambivalence of the impasse in her characterization of it as “a stretch of time in which one

moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic, such that the activity of living demands both a wandering absorptive awareness and a hypervigilance that collects material that might help to clarify things.”³² Impasse is thus both *the present* and a way of *being present* (i.e. “hypervigilant”). And in helping to clarify the contours of our contemporary reality, the kind of wandering that happens in the impasse also “coordinate[s] the standard melodramatic crises with those processes that have not yet found their genre or event.”³³ Even as we feel caught in the impasse, the phenomenological “activity of living” that takes place there creates the potential for alternatives to neoliberalism’s global hegemony—alternatives that are notably unspectacular, provisional, intimate, and mundane.

Berlant does a convincing—indeed, moving—job of aligning our post-crisis impasse with the currents of global capitalism and its others since 1945. But if impasse is a useful term to describe the simultaneously stultifying and energizing space created by “the fraying relation between post-Second World War state/economic practices and certain postwar fantasies of the good life endemic to liberal, social democratic, or relatively wealthy regions,” it works just as effectively to account for the moment just *before* the post-war turn.³⁴ As I discussed at some length in the previous chapter, the 1940s, both pre- and post-war, were marked by uncertainty for the Left (though, of course, not just for the Left). We saw writers use the space of the elegy to adjust their feelings and expectations to the realities of their lived experience, to struggle toward a more total vision of their historical moment’s terrain, and to sketch out (however provisionally) ways of locating utopia in the heart of the

³² Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

³³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.

³⁴ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 15.

present.³⁵ “[W]e discover in the impasse,” Berlant notes, “a rhythm that people can enter into while they’re dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to this world.”³⁶ If the impasse has a “rhythm” (which, by definition, has an established formal structure), it is also flexible, provisional, and improvisatory. Indeed, we find a similar tension between metrical rigidity and rhetorical fluidity at work in “New Year Letter.” We also encounter a productive push-and-pull among the various genres (elegy, verse epistle, jeremiad) that jockey for dominance throughout Auden’s long poem.

Which brings me to the question of impasse and genre. For Berlant, twenty-first-century feelings find their form not in those older realist modes “whose conventions . . . mark archaic expectations about having and building a life,” but in hybrid genres like the “situation tragedy,” the episodic, processual nature of which more accurately captures the precarity and anxiety of our moment.³⁷ Genres of impasse are, Berlant contends, genres of “the stretched-out present,” of “the emerging event,” and of the experience of improvisation and affective adjustment one makes in the face of uncertainty.³⁸ Their unresolvedness links up nicely with my account of the sometimes-resigned, sometimes-resistant rhythms of midcentury Left elegies, which leads me to wonder whether for Berlant *all* older genres (and elegy is nothing if not a very old genre) are as outmoded and unhelpful as realism and melodrama are. Given my project’s investment in the malleability of genre, it should come as no surprise that I want to push against Berlant’s “waning of genre” narrative by considering the ways in which a poetic mode like elegy both marks a relation to older traditions and past

³⁵ Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem*, trans. Barbara Harshav (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12-13, 14.

³⁶ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

³⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6.

³⁸ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 6-7.

historical conditions *and* remains open to improvisation. Genre, in other words, helps us perceive patterns as much as ruptures. It has the potential to make felt the powers and perils of historical analogy and *longue durée* style (economic and social) history. By making visible both newness and continuity, older genres challenge the aesthetic novelty of something like Berlant's situation tragedy. (After all, we can only establish the parameters of situation tragedy if we first understand tragedy's tropes.) As I hope to show by situating Auden's poetry firmly within its moment and at the same time making a bid for its contemporary relevance, his elegies help reframe what feels like a jarringly exceptional moment, contextualizing capitalism's twenty-first-century impasse as part of a longer historical arc.

ii. AUDEN'S OCCASIONAL ELEGIES

If "New Year Letter" embodies something of the generic hybridity and flexibility that Berlant calls for in *Cruel Optimism*, the three elegies in *Another Time* serve as coordinates that help us track Auden's growing interest in modifying the genre in the years after his arrival in America. The first, and most widely discussed elegy in the book is "In Memory of W. B. Yeats," which contains what might be the most frequently quoted line in Auden's corpus: "Poetry makes nothing happen." If this line has come to serve as something like a synecdochal stand-in for a whole discourse on the relationship between poetry and politics, these discussions in turn tend to obscure the poem's status as an elegy. This is a poem, in other words, with two histories. It has been discussed, on one hand, as a modern elegy that recycles and revises key tropes of the genre and, on the other, as a statement about politically committed literature. These angles of scholarly reception have tended to be mutually exclusive. The isolation and elevation of that single line ("Poetry makes nothing happen") often eclipses the larger generic questions that complicate it, just as readings that situate the

poem within a long elegiac tradition tend to give short shrift to the histories of political struggle that serve as an important backdrop.

As a way out of this impasse, I want to consider, briefly, how the descriptive lines that follow this oft-quoted declarative statement contribute to the elegiac poetics and politics of this particular lyric, and how they set the stage for Auden's poems to come:

For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
In the valley of its making where executives
Would never want to tamper, flows on south
From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs
Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.³⁹

Stan Smith has suggested that that final line's "strange, dehumanizing metonymy, insisting on the act of speech while simultaneously detaching it from any human hinterland in a speaking subject, catches the paradox of ... [the lyric's] double historicity. A poem can be read at any time, and, in reading, it enters into a precise historical moment, the moment of the reader quite distinct from that of the originating author."⁴⁰ This formulation extends Ramazani's argument about the logic of elegy into the future tense. More than a fusion of dead subject and living author ("The words of a dead man [that] / Are modified in the guts of the living"), the poem might also facilitate other "way[s] of living" yet to come. Art's status as "a fait accompli"—a fact that seems, at times, to occasion lament in "New Year Letter"—also allows it to function as "equipment for living," in the Burkean sense: "And each life must itself decide / To what and how it be applied."⁴¹ This sense of poetry as a kind of blueprint or paradigm is echoed in a review of "New Year Letter" by Charles Williams, whose own *Descent of the Dove* is among the poem's major influences (especially its final

³⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 248.

⁴⁰ Smith, *W. H. Auden*, 4.

⁴¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201.

strophes). “[The poem’s] concern,” Williams writes, “is with the building of the Just City, but ‘its architecture is its own’ . . . It is, after its own manner, a pattern of the Way; that [it] dialectically includes both sides of the Way only shows that it is dealing with a road and not a room.”⁴² Just as the Yeats elegy might be read as a blueprint for “New Year Letter,” both texts offer a theory of poetry as, among other things, “pattern of the Way” to a better world.

William’s contention that Auden’s “Way” is more akin to a road than a room picks up on the significance of the trek and its links to German elegy. The landscape through which we (along with the river of poetry) move on our “way” through the Yeats elegy anticipates the allegorical terrain of “New Year Letter.” In other words, it conflates features of a landscape with human concerns and social configurations, providing, perhaps, a clue to Auden’s interest in poetry as a way of reshaping social patterns. In the first three stanzas alone, we encounter a particularly striking constellation of metaphoric and imagistic clusters in which landscape is anthropomorphized and humanity is reified into a non-human surround. Auden’s language often makes it difficult to tell, at first glance, which (anthropomorphization or reification) is happening—and to pry apart that which is being described from the concrete images and ethereal processes used to describe it becomes that much more challenging. This interfusion of subject and object, vehicle and tenor, is captured most startlingly in the idiomatic phrase “dead of winter”—a clichéd description that appears in the poem’s first line and confounds the literal and the figurative right out of the gate. We know from the title that the poem is an elegy, the subject of which is death (specifically, the death of William Butler Yeats). But, in a curious inversion, Auden makes “the dead” (which,

⁴² Charles Williams, “Untitled Review,” in *W. H. Auden: The Critical Heritage*, 321-22. Originally published in the *Dublin Review* (July 1941): 99-101. In a note to “New Year Letter” in *The Double Man*, Auden explicitly acknowledges his debt to Williams’s *Descent* as “the source of many ideas in the poem” (*Double Man* 153, note 1600).

in the phrase “dead of winter,” remains suspended between noun and adjective) function figuratively in his elegy, as a vehicle for describing a season and, by extension, a collective mood. Death is more typically the metaphorical tenor of traditional elegies: the experience of loss that the poet obscures beneath a more or less elaborate figurative screen, often woven from the language of the seasons (as in the “myrtles brown” and berries plucked before their “season due” in Milton’s “Lycidas”). By bringing loss to the surface of his elegy by way of a subtle linguistic trick, Auden invites us to question its status. Is it a singular, private experience—one at least partially remediable through recourse to poetry and to nature? Or is it a collective condition—one that requires more than the elegy’s substitutive economy to be worked through?

A closer look at the other figurative clusters in the first three stanzas helps us to see how metaphor works to bind figurations of mourning to various social configurations: “the dead of winter”; “the mercury sank in the mouth of the dying day”; “the peasant river was untempted by the fashionable quays”; “the provinces of his body revolted”; “the current of his feeling failed.” In a prime example of Ramazani’s elegiac “interfusion” of dead writer and living poet, the peasant culture that the Irish nationalist Yeats glorified shades subtly into a vision of proletarian resistance to bourgeois yearning more at home among Auden’s 1930s cohort. The cycles of revolt, temptation, and failure to which Auden refers help us to read the “valley of [poetry’s] making” that appears later in the poem as more than a pastoral idyll. The fact that “executives would never want to tamper” with this natural space suggests not only that poetry is superfluous to the countervailing “flows” of capital (and thus insignificant to its agents), but that its peaceful valley might also, despite appearances, be forbidding terrain to those unwelcome there. Auden’s arcadian topography—much like that of Virgil’s *Eclogues*—thus encodes a story about the encroachment of power and the pleasures of

resistance, allowing something like a politics of retreat to emerge between the lines. The river of poetry that rejuvenates the poem's landscape, hastening the elegiac cycle of decomposition and resurrection (of "grief" and "surviv[al]"), parallels the various transfigurations in Part I, through which the poet becomes, in death, something more than himself: "it was his last afternoon as himself"; "he became his admirers"; "The words of a dead man / Are modified in the guts of the living."⁴³ Material fluidity and mutability act as indices for mobility of a more explicitly historical sort. In other words, movement toward some future ("a road and not a room")—movement made possible only through the transmutation of the matter of the past—is poetry's *raison d'être*. The abstracted pedagogical scene with which the elegy ends (and in which Yeats is directed to "persuade," "make," "heal," and "teach" us) reaffirms this. Here, the construction of poetry's "Just City" becomes inseparable from the instruction its future readers might receive from it.

"In Memory of Ernst Toller" helps align Auden with the more avowedly minor, marginalized communities of Leftist writers and thinkers I attend to in chapter 1, who found in Toller—a German Jewish radical and political prisoner who eventually emigrated to the U.S., where he committed suicide in 1939—a model and martyr for political commitment. Numerous articles devoted to Toller's life and death appeared in *Man!*, Marcus Graham's Bay Area anarchist journal, and some of his poems were also reprinted in its pages. The opening stanza of the elegy stages for readers the sort of impasse that will become crucial to "New Year Letter" by acknowledging the absence of the very voice (Toller's) most appropriate for commemorating the death of a politically engaged exile living in an adopted country: "The shining neutral summer *has no voice* / To judge America, or ask how a man

⁴³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 247.

dies.”⁴⁴ These lines might be said to be something of a tautology—an elegiac knot that binds subject to object, mourner to mourned, so closely as to make them nearly impossible to disentangle. Toller himself is invoked only negatively, as the absent voice could have, were it still alive to speak, performed the dual tasks of the Left elegist: judgment and philosophical inquiry, consolation and critique. Since Toller cannot elegize himself from beyond the grave, Auden takes up the task, mining his own, parallel experience as a Leftist expatriate poet embarking on a new life in the U.S. in order to inquire how, and more importantly *why*, Toller died. The how (Toller’s suicide by hanging) is alluded to elliptically later in the elegy, which lists “our hand” among the various agents and instruments that, under the guidance of “powers we pretend to understand,” might deal us the final, mortal blow.

More subtly still, the poem’s final stanza issues a macabre reminder of these powers’ influence: “It is their [these powers] to-morrow *hangs* over the earth of the living.”⁴⁵ While the “how” of Toller’s death is intentionally obscured here—emerging only as a seemingly unconscious descriptive tic—the bulk of the short lyric is spent speculating about why the German poet took his own life. On the one hand, the elegy locates the source of Toller’s suicidal urge in his own psyche, which might, Auden speculates, have housed repressed memories of childhood trauma: “O did the child see something horrid in the woodshed / Long ago?”⁴⁶ And while the unconscious is one of the “powers we pretend to understand” (powers that “arrange our loves” and “direct at the end / The enemy bullet, the sickness, or even our hand”), Auden locates such deterministic pressures externally as well, in the social and economic conditions through which a subject is interpolated: in the spread of Fascism in

⁴⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 249.

⁴⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 250, emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 249. These lines are also an allusion to Stella Gibbons’s 1932 novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*.

Europe, in “towns like Munich,” in “the big and friendly death outside.”⁴⁷ But the poem ultimately complicates any easy division between interior and exterior. Take, for instance, these lines: “Or had the Europe which took refuge in your head // Already been too injured to get well? / O for how long, like the swallows in that other cell, / Had the bright little longings been flying in to tell // About the big and friendly death outside, / Where people do not occupy or hide; / No towns like Munich; no need to write?”⁴⁸ The enclosed “cell” of Toller’s psyche calls to mind a coherent, monadic self; however, the actual prison cells in which Toller spent years of his life, and to which Auden alludes here, undermine any certainty about the self’s imperviousness to its social surround. Inversely, that those conditions are described in terms more suited to medical and psychoanalytical discourses (a Europe that is “injured” and ill) further muddies Auden’s philosophical waters. Toller’s body is at once imprisoned and a prison. Likewise, the set of historical conditions that characterized Europe circa 1939 is both the milieu from which Toller sought refuge and, in the figurative terms of Auden’s poem, itself a refugee that infiltrates the borders of Toller’s psyche.

As these slippages suggest, Auden’s elegy for Toller asks not only “how a man dies,” but what a man (or woman) *is*, framing as elegy a lyric meditation on human subjectivity.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 249.

⁴⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 249.

⁴⁹ Edward Mendelson has noted that the concept of the person became a crucial part of Auden’s “moral vocabulary” just after he arrived in the United States in 1939, right around the time of Toller’s death and this elegy’s composition.⁴⁹ The poem deftly encapsulates the set of theories and debates that Mark Greif, in a recent study, refers to as “crisis of man discourse.” During the years between 1935 and 1975, Greif argues, man became “the figure everyone insisted must be addressed, recognized, helped, rescued, made the center” (Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man: Thought and Fiction in America, 1933-1973* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015], 8). Charting an intellectual history of Enlightenment humanism’s American afterlives, he locates the emergence of these discourses in the intellectual antagonism between a pragmatist experimentalism according to which social experiences and historical pressures shape human nature, and a belief in humanity’s essential core, the permanence of which is demonstrated by the continued relevance of a canon of cultural artifacts that speak, so the argument goes, to a timeless, universal human condition. In the wake of economic collapse at home and against the backdrop of Fascism’s rise abroad, we find the locus classicus of “crisis of man” thinking in the philosophical face-off between secular, scientific accounts of human malleability—

The closest Auden comes in this short lyric to an answer to the second question is his assertion that “existence is believing / We know for whom we mourn and who is grieving.” This modest claim, rendered somewhat anti-climactic by its placement after a coordinating conjunction (“but existence is believing...”), locates subjectivity in a belief that looks rather like false consciousness given the previous lines’ assertion that, in fact, we don’t “arrange our loves,” our lives, or our deaths. The poem ends with what will remain open questions for Auden—questions he will take up again in “New Year Letter” and after: Is humanity the simple, brute fact of our determination (whether by structural or divine forces that impinge upon us from outside or by biological urges that control us from within)? Or is humanity what we make of this condition? Is it the humaneness we cultivate when we come to know, or mourn, or find solace in another person?

“In Memory of Sigmund Freud” narrows down the question of what constitutes (universal, transhistorical) human being to a more historically specific query. In this poem, in other words, Auden turns in this poem from a meditation on what it means to be alive to a consideration of the way we live now—a turn that is exemplary of the uses to which he puts the elegy both within and beyond *Another Time*. The poem’s central concern (beyond mourning) seems to be how to define and demarcate the present, as I suggested in chapter 1. The ninth stanza returns us to the instructional scene with which “In Memory of W. B. Yeats” ends. Figuring “the Present” as a patient undergoing analysis, Freud appears as pseudo-poet who directs “the unhappy Present to recite the Past / like a poetry lesson till sooner / or later it falter[s] at the line where // long ago the accusations had begun, / and

expounded by John Dewey and his followers—and an insistence by public intellectuals such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Robert Maynard Hutchins on the permanence of human nature as the only possible ground upon which to establish a global community or “world civilization” (30). The battles between free will and determinism, moral progress and original sin, ethico-political conscience and divine grace, that are only alluded to in the Toller elegy figure prominently in “New Year Letter.”

suddenly [knows] by whom it had been judged.”⁵⁰ Only after the present passes through this psycho-poetic crucible is it “able to approach the Future as a friend.”⁵¹ The psychoanalytic work of mourning, which is also the work of elegy, is extended beyond personal loss and private healing. It takes the shape of a broader vision of the future and of the kinds of sociality that future might contain.

The three elegies in *Another Time* are grouped, along with three other lyrics (“Spain 1937”; “September 1, 1939”; and “Epithalamian”), under the economical heading “Occasional Poems.” Anticipating Paul Goodman’s 1951 essay (discussed in the previous chapter) on the role of occasional verse in “solv[ing] the crisis of [social] alienation,” Auden’s use of specific events, dates, and addressees as spurs to his poetry marks his transition from a gnomic poetics of private symbol and mythic landscape to a more demotic, if still erudite, public voice.⁵² Auden’s articulation of the political stakes of poetry in a 1939 *Partisan Review* essay called “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats” even seems to prefigure Goodman’s language in “Advance-Guard Writing”: “[poems] express a sustained protest against the social atomisation caused by industrialism, and both in their ideas and their language a constant struggle to overcome it.”⁵³ Of course, elsewhere in the same essay, Auden emphatically *denies* art’s ability to gain much ground in such a struggle: “Art is the product of history, not a cause. Unlike some other products, technical inventions for example, it does not re-enter history as an effective agent, so that the question whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal . . . the honest truth, gentlemen, is that, if not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of

⁵⁰ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 274.

⁵¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 274.

⁵² Paul Goodman, “Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950,” *The Kenyon Review* 13, No. 3 (Summer 1951): 375.

⁵³ W. H. Auden, “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Vol. II*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 7.

man would be material unchanged.”⁵⁴ In what follows, I marshal evidence that further complicates and contradicts (as I hope my brief glosses of the major elegies have begun to do) this seemingly unequivocal declaration of art’s autonomy from the currents of history.

iii. MIXED FEELINGS

While the charges leveled against Auden’s early verse—to obscure, too private—become less applicable to much of the poetry published after 1940, *Another Time* and “New Year Letter” open themselves up to criticism of a different sort, the tenor of which is captured in Stephen Spender’s remark on the appearance of the former: “If I am bombed I hope he will write a few Sapphics about me.” Spender’s quip highlights the incompatibility of Auden’s chosen form (the occasional lyric) and his subject matter (a world in turmoil). C. D. Blanton makes a similar point in his chapter on Auden in *Epic Negation*: “The need for elegy [in *Another Time*] mixes uneasily with the need for political declaration, paradoxically building the effect of a public voice on the peculiarly desperate universalism of the displaced person.”⁵⁵ Like Spender, Blanton locates the source of Auden’s tonal incongruity in the uneasy contact between private, intimate modes of address and the “epic scale” of the poems’ backdrop, as well as in the rhetorical slippages between elegiac lyricism and “political declaration.” Blanton contends that the “persistent tonal incongruity, between events transpiring on an epic scale and the ultimately slight lyrics with which Auden consistently met them” marks *Another Time* as “both his transitional volume and his most characteristic.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Auden, “The Public v. Yeats,” 7.

⁵⁵ C. D. Blanton, *Epic Negation: The Dialectical Poetics of Late Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 190.

⁵⁶ Blanton, *Epic Negation*, 191.

The pithy riff on Heraclitus with which Randall Jarrell begins his 1941 essay, “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry,” helps clarify the seeming paradox of a volume that is both transitional and characteristic: “We never step twice into the same Auden.”⁵⁷ Incongruity, inconsistency, “mixedness,” are part and parcel of Auden’s post-1930s aesthetic, in other words. But rather than read (as Spender, Jarrell, and to some extent Blanton do) the tonal slipperiness of Auden’s “Occasional Poems” as a refusal or a failure to fully account for the very real violence taking place abroad (from which Auden found himself sheltered in his new life in New York), we might just as easily make a bid for incongruity and uncertainty as the most appropriate means of capturing the historical moment during which these poems were written. Though Jarrell and Blanton are right to suggest that tonal incongruity is a defining feature of the elegies in *Another Time*, neither Jarrell’s charge of solipsistic navel gazing nor Blanton’s characterization of the productive frisson between political declaration and elegiac meditation (between manifest lyric and latent epic) fully account for what’s going on in these poems. Rather than positioning elegiac lyricism as one half of the tonal coin, as Blanton does, I wish to think through the ways in which elegy can be seen as synonymous with tonal incongruity and in looking more closely at moments and contexts in which to write elegiacally is already to express mixed feelings.

One such historical moment and geopolitical context was—as I hope I’ve already begun to show—the U.S. and U.K in the 1940s. But the tonal incongruity of the elegy has a long history, and in order to bring that history more fully into view, I want to look beyond the English canon to Germany. Given the time Auden spent in this country, his knowledge of the language, and his fondness for the German Romantics, he was likely at least

⁵⁷ Randall Jarrell, “Changes of Attitude and Rhetoric in Auden’s Poetry,” *The Southern Review* 7 (January 1941), 326.

somewhat aware of the history of the German elegy.

In his study of what he calls the “classical German elegy,” Theodore Ziolkowski marks 1795 as the *annus mirabilis* of the genre. This is the year that Schiller wrote “Der Spaziergang” and “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” and Goethe published his “Roman Elegies.” The latter two were “decisive in determining the expectations of the age regarding the elegy as a literary form and as a mode of experience.”⁵⁸ These works helped to resolve, at least temporarily, the question of how—by what criteria—to determine a poem’s status as elegy. As Ziolkowski notes, until the late eighteenth century, “the elegy had no fixed criteria, of either form or subject matter” and definitions of the genre tended (and still tend) to favor one over the other.⁵⁹ Elegies were either poems written in a particular metrical structure (elegiac distichs), regardless of subject matter; *or* poems about the death of a loved one or a more generally melancholy or tragic situation, regardless of form. In initiating a shift toward a more phenomenological and psychological understanding of elegy, Goethe and Schiller circumvented this form/content divide. In Ziolkowski’s words, “Roman Elegies” and “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” took us “from a conception of genre as form and content ... to a conception of genre as mood, from genre as a literary kind to genre as a mode of sensation.”⁶⁰

Other emergent theories of aesthetic experience—from Moses Mendelssohn’s account of pity to Edmund Burke’s enquiry into the nature of sublimity—contributed to the eventual association of mixed sensations with elegiac verse. Burke’s idea that the most powerful aesthetic and affective experiences evoke a “mixed [rather than a uniform] sense of pleasure” is most clearly linked to the economy of elegy in the following excerpt from his

⁵⁸ Theodore Ziolkowski, *The Classical German Elegy, 1795-1950* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 55.

⁵⁹ Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy*, 66.

⁶⁰ Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy*, 76-77.

Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of the Sublime and the Beautiful: “[all pleasure] is capable of being mixed with a mode of uneasiness, that is, when an idea of its object is excited in the mind with *the idea at the same time of having irretrievably lost it.*”⁶¹ Not only is pleasure *capable of* being mixed with fear or wistfulness or melancholia, for many writing in Burke’s orbit and in his wake, this mixture *must* exist in order for a poem to be categorized as an elegy. In a 1762 essay, German philosopher Thomas Abbt defines elegies as “the sensually perfect description of our mixed sensations.”⁶² This mixedness, for Abbt and for others, arises from a number of scenarios: the pain of personal loss made bearable by enduring love, distressing memories recalled during a moment of comparative ease or tranquility, the celebration of the virtues of the past rendered melancholic in contrast to present civilizational decline. The last of these is of particular importance to Schiller (and, as we shall see, to Auden) because it widens the scope of elegy’s concerns to include reflections on the condition of humankind without sacrificing the emotional punch we get from more intimate accounts of bereavement.⁶³

Schiller’s “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry” gives us a better sense of what this scaled up version of elegy looks like and the broader (ontological or moral as opposed to personal) sense of loss—the loss of a way of being as opposed to the loss of a specific person—that serves as its occasion. What Schiller calls “sentimental poetry” arises within a newly modern condition in which “nature had disappeared from our humanity, and we

⁶¹ Quoted in Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy*, 77, emphasis mine.

⁶² Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy*, 78.

⁶³ In an annotation to Abbt’s essay on the elegy (reproduced for the third volume of *Fragmente über die neuere Deutsche Litteratur*), Johann Gottfried Herder disputes the possibility of widening of elegy’s scope to include more general speculations on the state of humanity. For Herder, elegiac emotions are aroused by specific and intimate scenarios only (Ziolkowski 79). I want to suggest, however, that “personal emotion” and “general reflection” (terms Ziolkowski uses in his gloss of Herder’s argument) are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

reencounter it in its genuineness only outside of humanity in the inanimate world.”⁶⁴ What humanity in the modern age has gained in freedom from necessity it has lost in unity with nature. Hence, for Schiller, “in [natural or naïve objects] we forever see what eludes us, something we must struggle for and can hope to approach in an endless progress, even though we never attain it.”⁶⁵ Such sentimental encounters with unattainable simplicity and harmony produce in us feelings of pleasure “visibly mixed with a certain melancholy.”⁶⁶ This mixed response to a relationship to nature no longer available to us takes shape in the often frustrated longing we encounter in elegies, which Schiller includes among his three genres of sentimental poetry (the other two being idyll and satire). In a footnote to the second installment of his essay in *Die Horen*, Schiller defines sentimental poetry generally as that which “refers actual conditions ... to ideas, and [in turn] applies ideas to actuality.”⁶⁷

The encounters between experience and ideas (or ideals) that sentimental poems stage unfold, according to Schiller, in one of three ways: as a “*contradiction* [between ideals and] actual conditions,” a “*correspondence* [between the real and] the ideal, which is the preferred attitude of mind,” or some combination of the two.⁶⁸ Schiller further schematizes these three structural conditions into three distinct modes of feeling that attend them: “In the first case, [the poetic relationship] is satisfied by the force of the inner conflict, by *energetic movement*; in the second, it is satisfied by *harmony* of the inner life, by *dynamic calm*; in the third, conflict *alternates* with harmony, calm alternates with motion. This triadic state of feeling

⁶⁴ Friedrich Schiller, “On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry,” *Essays: Friedrich Schiller* (The German Library No. 17), eds. Walter Hinderer and Daniel O. Dahlstrom (New York: Continuum, 1993), 194.

⁶⁵ Schiller, “Naïve and Sentimental,” 181.

⁶⁶ Schiller, “Naïve and Sentimental,” 182.

⁶⁷ Cyrus Hamlin, “The Philosophy of Poetic Form: Hölderlin’s Theory of Poetry and the Classical German Elegy,” in *The Solid Letter: Readings of Friedrich Hölderlin*, ed. Aris Fioretos (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 298.

⁶⁸ Hamlin, “Philosophy,” 298.

gives rise to three different modes of poetry ... *satire, idyll, [and] elegy.*"⁶⁹ Here we find elegy defined not only in terms of the mixed feelings (serenity and discord) it indexes, but also as a poetic mode situated at an historical impasse of sorts. The elegy is positioned somewhere between satire and idyll—between a poetic world in which we are estranged from our surroundings and one in which we are inseparable from them—because part of the elegist's task, for Schiller, involves sorting out his relationship to the late-eighteenth-century present.

Part and parcel of this present is the evolution from necessity to freedom hastened by modernity and at once celebrated and vigorously debated by Enlightenment philosophers. Recast a century and a half later by Frankfurt School theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer as "the dialectic of enlightenment," this condition—like the condition of elegy—is a fundamentally mixed one. For Schiller, our feelings of deep uncertainty about this historical and ontological situation get expressed in the tonal and modal variation of the elegy.

One key figure for this situation in the German tradition popularized by Schiller is the meditative hike up the side of a mountain he describes in "Der Spaziergang." The manner in which human figure and natural surround interact in the poem becomes an index for our relative contentment or discomfort with the conditions of our historical moment. Ziolkowski thus refers to the poem's "temporalization of space": "as the poet moves along in a virtual trance and gazes down at the landscape, he translates into a historical sequence the countryside, farms, villages, towns, and cities successively exposed to his view ... The meditation [inspired by these vistas] turns out to be a well-organized essay on the rise and fall of Western civilization."⁷⁰ But we might just as easily note the ways in which "Der

⁶⁹ Hamlin, "Philosophy," 298.

⁷⁰ Ziolkowski, *Classical German Elegy*, 3.

Spaziergang” spatializes time; or, as in his schematic account of sentimental poetry, concretizes the poet’s stance vis-à-vis history in the physical comportment of a body on the move.

Friedrich Hölderlin’s theory of tonal modulation—which, as scholar Cyrus Hamlin has noted, developed out of Schiller’s earlier account of the relationship between poetic form and feeling—lends further nuance to an understanding of elegies as repositories of mixed emotions (and, more specifically, mixed emotions about larger historical conditions). Where Schiller suggests that an elegiac sensibility arises out of an unresolved or shifting relationship between “correspondence” and “conflict”—between ideals that accord with reality and those that highlight its insufficiency, Hölderlin gives a more detailed description of the modes of feeling—the moods or tones—associated with elegiac alternation. Although Hölderlin does not link tonal variation to elegiac poetry, specifically, Hamlin’s essay “The Philosophy of Poetic Form: Hölderlin’s Theory of Poetry and the Classical German Elegy” teases out an implicit connection between theory and genre. Hamlin relies upon a single, representative poem (“Menons Klagen um Diotima” [“Meno’s Lament for Diotima”])—a structurally complex elegy—to model Hölderlin’s theory in action. He glosses Hölderlin’s theory—original sketched out across a series of fragmentary essays from 1800—as follows:

[Tonal modulation] seeks to define and control a dynamic process of thought and experience, which the language of the poem is intended to embody through a sequence of tones which move through stages of development, reversal, and retrospective self-reflection. The central hermeneutical task of the elegy is to communicate this process of thought to the reader, as the *Wirkung* (“effect”) of the poem, through the complex metaphorical dynamics of its poetic form ... [“Menons Klagen um Diotima”] turns out not to commemorate only the loss of the beloved, as indicated by the symbolic names of the title, but in fact to articulate the poetic process through which such lamentation takes place as a quest journey of the isolated self in its attempt to reflect upon its situation and to comprehend it within the tenets of what the German Idealists called *Selbstbewußtsein* (“self-

consciousness”).⁷¹

This characterization of Hölderlin’s elegy as self-reflexive is, as we will see, crucial to understanding Auden’s uses of elegy during a disorienting time. Like Schiller’s elegiac analysis of the currents of history, Hölderlin’s philosophical fragments take loss as the occasion for testing the contours of the self and its historical and physical surround. The solitary quest as metaphor for collective condition echoes Schiller’s walk in “Der Spaziergang” and anticipates Auden’s peripatetic verse in ways that will become clearer once we return to “New Year Letter.”

Schiller’s definition of elegy as a mode that negotiates between “contradiction” and “correspondence”—between structures of feeling that predominate when ideals don’t quite square with reality, and those that attend the imagined, idyllic futures toward which we strive—foreshadows the cruel optimism and utopian pessimism of the twentieth-century elegies discussed in this dissertation. I want to make a bid, then, for what I’m calling the politics of poetic tone. Auden’s work, in particular, helps reorient scholarly attention toward nuances of tone, a feature of poetic language that has tended to take a back seat to indeterminacy, impersonality, and opacity in discussions of the relationship between poetry and political struggle.

Sianne Ngai’s chapter on tone in *Ugly Feelings* is especially helpful in the bid it makes for the usefulness of tone in analyses of literature and ideology. In this opening chapter of the monograph, Ngai provides a short history of aesthetic theories of tone, beginning with I. A. Richards’ definition of the term, in *Practical Criticism*, as the attitude or stance of a poem’s speaker toward her audience. William Empson’s characterization of “mood” expands Richards’ somewhat limited definition to include any relationship between “any supposed

⁷¹ Hamlin, “Philosophy,” 293.

‘me’” implied by the poem (not just the speaker) and any suggested others who may or may not be implied listeners within the poem’s dramatic situation.⁷² What Ngai takes issue with in the theories of Richards, Empson, and their New Critical inheritors is their “de-emotionalizing” tendency, made most glaringly apparent by Richards’ separation of “tone” from “feeling” in *Practical Criticism*’s anatomy of the four types of literary meaning.⁷³ “[T]he general strangeness of this evasion [of feeling in theoretical accounts of tone] ... comes to the fore,” Ngai suggests “when one considers how entirely appropriate emotive or affective qualities seem, as compressed assessments of complex ‘situations,’ for indicating the *total* web of relations sought after in each of these redefinitions.”⁷⁴ Brian Massumi and Lawrence Grossberg (who differentiate emotion’s boundedness within a subject from affect’s free-floating atmospherics) help Ngai account for tone’s totality-character—its instrumental role in brokering a relationship between word and world. As she puts it, “[t]here is a sense in which tone resembles the concept of collective mood frequently invoked by historians (‘Cold War paranoia’ and so forth), but poses the additional difficulty of aesthetic immanence, of being something that seems ‘attached’ to an artwork.”⁷⁵ Martin Heidegger’s definition of “moods as ‘attunements’ (*Stimmungen*) that arise from and shape or modulate the totality of Being-in-the-world, disclosing the ‘situatedness’ (*Befindlichkeit*) that enables things to *matter* in determinate ways” gets Ngai, and us, closer to a theory of tone that is public and collective, and one that treats an artwork’s affective resonance as “a totality within an equally holistic matrix of social relations.”⁷⁶

⁷² Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2005), 42-43.

⁷³ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 41.

⁷⁴ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 42.

⁷⁵ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 43.

⁷⁶ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 42-43.

For all the murkiness of terms like tone and mood, I want to suggest that they might be especially well-suited to thinking about the relationship between literary artifacts and social histories. Poets and theorists have tended to treat literary form as the thing that either homologizes historical conditions and ideologies and can thus be said to be symptomatic of them; or, in a more utopian register, as that which has the power to intervene in and dismantle ossified institutions and structures of thought. But form for these writers tends to be structural, typographical—it describes what is there, on the page, but not what anyone feels about it. Paul de Man’s essay “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism” complicates any easy division between form and tone, helping to elucidate precisely how and why the two are inextricable. The essay endorses the New Critical idea that “literature is an autonomous activity of the mind, a distinctive way of being in the world to be understood in terms of its own purposes and intentions.”⁷⁷ But it also attacks New Critical arguments about literature’s “objective” status by emphasizing the role of intentionality in both its production and consumption. For de Man, intentionality is not specifically biographical or historical but, as he says, “structural”:

Literary “form” is the result of the dialectical interplay between the prefigurative structure of the foreknowledge and the intent at totality of the interpretive process. This dialectic is difficult to grasp ... The completed form never exists as a concrete aspect of the work that could coincide with a sensorial or semantic dimension of the language. It is constituted in the mind of the interpreter as the work discloses itself in response to this questioning. But this dialogue between work and interpreter is endless.⁷⁸

Form, like tone, then, is relational. And like Ngai’s attempt to re-emotionalize otherwise compelling New Critical accounts of tone, de Man makes available a less rigid definition of form as that which takes shape in the encounter between audience and text.

⁷⁷ Paul de Man, “Form and Intent in the American New Criticism,” in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 21.

⁷⁸ De Man, “Form and Intent,” 31-32.

Hölderlin's theory of tonal modulation—which Ngai does not include among her mostly English-language sources—highlights both the correlation and the discontinuity between the autonomous work of art and its matrix of emotional effects, getting us closer to an answer to the difficult question of where to locate tone. (Is it immanent to the artwork or part of the experience of its reception?) Hölderlin's account of tone relies upon distinctions among three tonal registers that apply to the content of a poem: the naïve, the heroic, and the idealistic. Put simply, naïve poems are mimetic, idealistic poems are speculative, and heroic poems express a tension between what is and what ought to be.⁷⁹ Subtending these three poetic orientations toward the world are three formal layers of the verbal object itself (and our encounter with it): *Grundton* (“ground tone” or “basic tone/mood”), which Hölderlin associates with the musical, non-semantic texture of poetry; *Kunstcharakter* (“artistic character”) or *Sprache* (“language”); and *Wirkung* (“effect”).⁸⁰ These intersecting vectors of artistic meaning and feeling became a way for Hölderlin to demonstrate—in however abstract and abstruse a lexicon—the dynamism of poetic tone and the mixed feelings verbal objects often elicit. Tone emerges, for Hölderlin, in the interstices between a poem's language, its rhythmic texture, and its overall “effect.” Often, this effect is produced by a friction between and among different tonal registers. While it would be difficult to map Hölderlin's theoretical scheme precisely onto any actual poem (after all, theories of aesthetic judgement can only model abstractly and at a distance what works of literature do both more concretely and more ineffably), its highly schematic structure does mitigate “the perceived threat of a ‘soft’ impressionism which has always haunted feeling's role in any analytic endeavor.”⁸¹ It also helps us visualize the conceptual toggle between “collective mood”

⁷⁹ Hamlin, “Philosophy,” 296.

⁸⁰ Hamlin, “Philosophy,” 300.

⁸¹ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 42.

(feelings that exist out there, in the world) and “aesthetic immanence” (feelings intrinsic to the work of art itself) that Ngai associates with questions of tone and that lies at the heart of Auden’s “New Year Letter.” Like Schiller’s tripartite scheme (satire-pastoral-elegy), Hölderlin’s helps us align tone with a poem’s affective stance toward—its reflection and refraction of—the world in which it is situated.

But since poems are situated in many different worlds—from the context of their production to the varied scenes of their reception—tone is to some extent historically constituted and thus unstable. As “the dialectic of objective and subjective feeling that our aesthetic encounters inevitably produce,” tone might best be described as “an effect of historically situated reading.”⁸² Tone is an effect, in other words, of the contact between a relatively stable set of generic techniques preserved in and as the poem and the associations and experiences different (and differently historically situated) readers bring to their encounters with it. A closer look at the sinuous, often dialectical movements of “New Year Letter” will, I hope, make a convincing case for Auden as inheritor of these late-eighteenth-century aesthetic theories of tone *and* as precursor to contemporary theories of affect’s role in political life. Positioning Auden thus also allows me to read “New Year Letter”—a poem that seems, at first (and perhaps even second) glance, a far cry from the major elegies of the English canon—as an historical elegy in the key of “Der Spaziergang.” It enfolds into the basic structure of the classical German elegy (and its hierarchy of tonal variations) the dramas and structures of feeling of Auden’s own moment—in particular, the alternating senses of despair and consolation felt by one representative writer grappling with his political heritage.

⁸² Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 30. Anthony Reed, “The Erotics of Mourning in Recent Experimental Black Poetry,” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 47:1 (Spring 2017), 30.

iv. THE JANUS OF A JOKE: AUDEN'S POLITICS OF POETIC TONE

In a note to “New Year Letter” that appears in *The Double Man*, Auden defines poetry as “the clear expression of mixed feelings.”⁸³ One of the sources and the vehicles for such mixed feelings is, of course, the tonal discrepancies noted by both Auden’s contemporaries (Spender) and recent critics of his verse (Blanton). Spender subtly condemned the slightness and lightness of the poems in *Another Time* which, in his view, offered insufficient commentary on the realities of their own time. In “New Year Letter,” Auden seems to have internalized this critique and amplified the very tensions that provoked it. Its tonal ambiguity—an ambiguity, I want to suggest, of which Auden is highly conscious—exists at several levels or layers. One concerns the speaker’s stance toward his auditors within the dramatic situation of the poem. Auden refers dismissively to the casual yet confident voice of his own poems as “the preacher’s loose immodest tone,” confessing that he ought to “disown” it even as he acknowledges its allure.⁸⁴

Part of “New Year Letter’s” tonal tension concerns its competing but ultimately complementary aims: intimate gesture and public outcry. Is Auden speaking to us as preacher, as orator, or as intimate? Is the poem itself meant to be read as a letter, an elegy, a mock epic, a jeremiad, or a philosophical essay? We begin to see how tightly tone and genre (or mode) are interwoven, a point on which Auden elaborates in the following lines, which conclude the poem’s first section:

May such heart and intelligence
As huddle now in conference
Whenever an impasse occurs
Use the Good Offices of verse;
May an Accord be reached, and may
This *aide-mémoire* on what they say,
This private minute for a friend,

⁸³ Mendelson, *Later Auden*, 103.

⁸⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 204.

Be the dispatch that I intend;
Although addressed to a Whitehall,
Be under Flying Seal to all
Who wish to read it anywhere,
And, if they open it, *En Clair*.⁸⁵

The mixed metaphorical registers of this passage present in miniature the poem's larger goal of achieving what Auden calls, elsewhere in the poem, "double focus"—a synthesis between private and public, feeling and reason.⁸⁶ The manner in which such syntheses are described in these lines is especially striking. Emotion and intellect unite in "conference," with the medium itself (verse) figured as a bureaucratic department within which such an "accord" might be reached. Auden's extended metaphor—in which the operations of government bureaucracy and international diplomacy are yoked to poetic inspiration and composition—helps position his verse epistle as an unofficial telegram on the current state of the world, and poetry more generally as an alternative to state-sanctioned rhetoric that helps illuminate ("*En Clair*") the truths that those in power would obfuscate.

Cutting against these ambitious, public, universal aims is the long poem's occasional, epistolary frame—its existence as "private" communiqué, mere "minute for a friend." But this tension is also part and parcel of "New Year Letter's" double focus. In other words, the poem might be *more* effective as public statement *because of* its modesty and its concern for the welfare of a specific individual, known to and loved by the poet. Auden's dedicatory verse to *The Orators* conveys a similar paradox more straightforwardly: "Private faces in public places / Are wiser and nicer / Than public faces in private places."⁸⁷ And a passage from Part II of "New Year Letter" reinforces this seemingly counterintuitive stance. In the wake of political disappointment and despair, Auden tells us that "none are lost so soon as

⁸⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 206-207.

⁸⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 220.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Carpenter, *Auden: A Biography*, 291.

those / Who overlook their crooked nose” and that “they grow small who imitate / The mannerisms of the great, / Afraid to be themselves, or ask / What acts are proper to their task.”⁸⁸ Auden was preoccupied, during his early years in the U.S., with the question of what acts—in a time of crisis—were proper to the task of being a poet.⁸⁹ Further, the fact that the poem is characterized as having been dashed off in a “minute” (though it was actually drafted and revised over the course of several months) anticipates Auden’s elaboration, later in the poem, on what it means to relinquish allegiance to larger collectives (the state, for one) in order to become a “patriot of the Now.” These lines help position “New Year Letter” as a survey of poetic and political histories, the ultimate, twinned goals of which are to condemn injustice and to justify poetry in an age of global crisis. That Auden’s “Letter” is both a revolutionary dispatch proclaimed *en clair* from a mountaintop, and an intimate missive penned in the privacy of the poet’s flat allows it to avoid the pitfalls (arrogance, self-deception) of those who would try to speak for all.

Not only is “New Year Letter” tonally ambiguous at the level of voice (and, by extension, its awareness of audience), it also repeatedly comments on the struggle to capture the mood of its moment—the “total web of relations” that exist between the formal and rhetorical architecture of a literary artifact and the collective affective atmosphere that surrounds it. This type of tonal ambiguity is established early on in an extended metaphor

⁸⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 219.

⁸⁹ In response to queries about whether he would return to England, Auden wrote to E. R. Dodds in late winter 1940 (while he was composing “New Year Letter”): “I am neither a politician nor a novelist, reportage is not my business. If I come back, as far as I can see the chances are I should have much the same life as I do here, i.e. reading, writing and teaching” (Carpenter 290). The following year, he wrote to Stephen Spender with a similar justification: “It is impossible for me to know whether it is reason or just cowardice that makes me think I shouldn’t be of much military effectiveness. All I can do, therefore, is to be willing to do anything when and if the Government ask me ... As a writer and a pedagogue the problem is different, for the intellectual warfare goes on always & everywhere” (293). For more on Auden’s feelings about and justification of remaining in America during wartime, as well as the censure he faced by friends and fellow poets who remained in England, see Carpenter 282-94.

that likens the contemporary world to a bloody crime scene: “The situation of our time / Surrounds us like a baffling crime. / There lies the body half-undressed / We all had reason to detest, / And all are suspects and involved / Until the mystery is solved / And under lock and key the cause / That makes a nonsense of our laws.”⁹⁰ This feels like an apt, and aptly dire, description of a world at war, the maimed body in the parlor metonymically reminding readers of the mass carnage happening at a distance (for Auden’s American readers, at least). But even as the fact of death is brought home (quite literally), it’s also made safe, domestic, even slightly comedic. The metaphor goes on for too long, eventually reading like an Agatha Christie parody (“O Who is trying to shield Whom? / Who left the hairpin in the room?”), the exaggerated kitsch of which tempers the gravitas of lines that come just after, extending the metaphor further still, but broadening it again to encompass, with greater seriousness, “the situation of the time”:

Yet our equipment all the time
Extends the area of the crime
Until the guilt is everywhere,
And more and more we are aware,
However miserable may be
Our parish of immediacy,
How small it is, how, far beyond,
Ubiquitous within the bond
Of one impoverishing sky,
Vast spiritual disorders lie.⁹¹

The machinery of modern warfare and the will-to-progress that has driven its development over the course of the century has expanded violence and depravity to a global scale. And a thought (There’s so much more to the world beyond our own, individual suffering!) that might have offered consolation at another moment in history now only compounds our pain. Humanity is bound together by its misery, united under an “impoverishing” sky rather

⁹⁰ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 205.

⁹¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 205.

than a recuperative one. Looking beyond our “parish of immediacy” won’t help minimize our woes by putting them in perspective; it will only contextualize them within a larger vista of shared suffering. The poem’s stichic structure (its rhyming octosyllabic couplets) further reinforces—thanks to the form’s long history and its rise to popularity in the eighteenth century—the witty, satirical tone of the mock epic and the compromised intimacy of the verse epistle. It is, according to Paul Fussell, a structure we tend to associate with “social commentary or depictions of social or ethical action.”⁹² But the semi-strophic texture of “New Year Letter”—organized as it is into loose stanzas of varying length—creates a tension at the level of form between public oration and those “dense and closely circumscribed moments of emotion or argument” expressed in comparatively compact strophes.⁹³

If tragicomedy seems the most fitting genre for such a bleak situation, we might recall Schiller’s definition of elegiac poetry as that which alternates between a satiric and an idyllic vision of the world. Elegiac poetry, in other words, recognizes both the contradictions between what the material realities of the world are and what they could be—and makes those contradictions felt—while at the same time acknowledging those actually-existing utopias within which reality and ideals converge. Acknowledging how small and insignificant we are emphasizes, in the passage quoted above, the global scale of suffering and political disappointment (“New Year Letter” was written in the wake of the Republicans’ defeat in Spain and the Hitler-Stalin pact).

Yet the trope of smallness also serves, elsewhere in the long poem, as a jumping off point for imagining other, more modest ways of living. In one of the handful of moments

⁹² Paul Fussell, *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 1979), 110.

⁹³ Fussell, *Poetic Meter*, 110.

when Auden steps out from his argument to capture the scene of writing (alone, in his apartment, looking out over the nocturnal revelry of Manhattan), he describes himself as “a tiny object” looking out at a “dark horizon of immediacies.”⁹⁴ But Auden slips back into his argument almost imperceptibly and we realize that the flickering lights of the nocturnal cityscape—the “immediacies” that seemed so concrete in the fifth line of the stanza—are in fact ideological: they are the various “calls to conscience” among which the poet must choose.⁹⁵ We’re suddenly back inside a metaphor that is in turn nested within a longer meditation on political commitment. The unparalleled deftness with which Auden moves among metaphorical layers and tonal registers becomes especially evident when, in describing the political choice he must make, he refers to himself as a “particle [that] must not yield / To particles who claim the field, / Nor trust the demagogue who raves, / A quantum speaking for the waves, / Nor worship blindly the ornate / *Grandezza* of the Sovereign State.”⁹⁶ Recalling the “tiny object” from a few lines before, the particle metaphor resolves the ontological confusion of those earlier lines (Are we talking about the city or are we talking about ideas?) by rendering ideology inseparable from matter through the fiat of figurative language. It also—in its return to smallness—anticipates the alternative to the “Sovereign State” that Auden gives us in the next lines: “Whatever wickedness we do / Need not be, orators, for you; / We can at least serve other ends, / Can love the *polis* of our friends / And pray that loyalty may come / To serve mankind’s *imperium*.”⁹⁷ This turn to a prefigurative politics of the contingent, to forms of friendship that might become models for future cities and states, imagines humankind’s “imperium” as something other than absolute

⁹⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 224.

⁹⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 224.

⁹⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 224.

⁹⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 224.

dominion over nature. It refigures loyalty and patriotism as solidarity rather than as blind commitment to the reproduction of forms of life (under bureaucratic socialism as much as under capitalism) untenable to human flourishing. It returns politics to a more human scale.

I will have more to say about Auden's elegiac-utopian vision in the next (and final) section of this chapter, but first I want to look at a moment when Auden is especially explicit and self-reflexive about questions of tone in "New Year Letter." While the following lines seem to suggest that tone is the feature of language that best registers the temperature of the times, finding the right tone, Auden owns, can be tricky:

Though language may be useless, for
No words men write can stop the war
Or measure up to the relief
Of its immeasurable grief,
Yet truth, like love and sleep, resents
Approaches that are too intense,
And often when the searcher stood
Before the Oracle, it would
Ignore his grown-up earnestness
But not the child of his distress,
For through the Janus of a joke
The candid psychopompos spoke.
May such heart and intelligence
As huddle now in conference
Whenever an impasse occurs
Use the Good Offices of verse.⁹⁸

The most fitting tone, at least for moments that might be characterized as impasses, is a mixed one, Janus-faced in its uncertainty. For Auden, candor is conveyed more effectively through a comedic mask (or masque), and cleverness and formal virtuosity become more than mere screens.

The position of Auden's meditation on tone within the poem's larger architecture is also significant. It concludes Part I and immediately precedes the following stanza, in which

⁹⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 206.

Auden's contemporary moment (December 31, 1939; the end of the '30s) is figured as impassable terrain—a “rough mountain track” up which its occupants “scrambl[e]” without a clear sense of direction or purpose:

To-night a scrambling decade ends,
And strangers, enemies and friends
Stand once more puzzled underneath
The signpost on the barren heath
Where the rough mountain track divides
To silent valleys on all sides,
Endeavoring to decipher what
Is written on it but cannot,
Nor guess in what direction lies
The overhanging precipice.
Through the pitch-darkness can be heard
Occasionally a muttered word,
And intense in the mountain frost
The heavy breathing of the lost;
Far down below them whence they came
Still flickers feebly a red flame,
A tiny glow in the great void
Where an existence was destroyed;
And now and then a nature turns
To look where her whole system burns
And with a last defiant groan
Shudders her future into stone.⁹⁹

This allegorical depiction of the historical present as a crossroads without the benefit of legible signage mirrors the trouble with signs (of a different sort) Auden has in the previous stanza. Auden's metaphorical mountaineers must decide between two forking paths without the aid of a map or a signpost (this directionlessness might refer to the weakening of Communist ideology by its inseparability from a totalitarian state and the attendant uncertainty about the future of the Left). Auden's poet, in the previous stanza, is tasked with capturing (and, perhaps, finding a way out of) this precarious scenario. He must find a way

⁹⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 207.

to face (and perhaps advance), Janus-like, in both directions. He does so, provisionally at least, through the “Good Offices of verse.”

This depiction of an impasse that is at once historical, linguistic, and affective—as a condition that requires us to calibrate our feelings and expectations, as well as the language we use to describe such feelings—returns us once again to the German elegiac tradition. Rough mountain tracks and forking paths abound in this archive and are often similarly linked to problems of rhetoric and tone—of finding the right words for an as-yet unnamed historical mood. In “Meno’s Lament for Diotima,” the Hölderlin elegy that Hamlin and Ziolkowski analyze as an exemplar of the poet’s theory of tonal modulation, allusions to a wandering path recur intermittently. In Schiller’s “Der Spaziergang,” the metaphor of a circuitous or errant trek structures the poem’s very symmetry. In both instances, the metaphor “signifies, in ways that can only be intuited from the movement of the poem itself as a dialectic of thought, precisely what the sequence of modulating tones is intended to achieve through its eccentric path from the initial going out until the final prospect of return.”¹⁰⁰ In other words, these perambulatory metaphors become a way for the poems to self-reflexively comment on their own varied tonality and, especially in the case of Schiller’s elegy, on the historical conditions that have inspired such unresolved feelings.

Although the word “impasse” does not reappear in the next, long stanza of “New Year Letter,” the discomfiting sense of being caught or stymied by something that forces us to reroute our path or adjust our expectations continues to permeate the poem. But confronting an impasse, Auden suggests, need only stymie those who refuse to adapt: those “patriots of an old idea, / No longer sovereign this year . . . [who, u]nwilling to adjust belief, / Go mad in a fantastic grief.” In yet another nod to elegy’s tropes, the failure to imagine

¹⁰⁰ Hamlin, “Philosophy,” 309.

ways beyond an historical impasse is likened to the failure to mourn properly: “Like SARAH WHITEHEAD, the Bank Nun” who, “pacing Threadneedle Street in tears ... watched one door for twenty years, / Expecting, what she dared not doubt, / Her hanged embezzler to walk out.”¹⁰¹ But the fruitless melancholia indexed by the anxious, spectral pacing Sarah Whitehead’s ghost is only one possible response to the exhaustion of political ideals. What Auden offers up instead of disillusionment, quietism, and impotence is what I want to call a utopian politics of the felt present. Instead of waiting in vain for the resurrection of an old, beloved hope, “New Year Letter” transforms purposeless pacing into different “rhythms of survival”—into productive if uncertain ways of “testing” out other, more modest modes of sociability and collectivity within Communism’s impasse.¹⁰²

v. PATRIOTS OF THE NOW

So how, precisely, does “New Year Letter” bend the generic conventions of elegy toward the utopian? And how does its elegiac utopianism avoid the pitfalls of other visions of human progress? How, in other words, does it imagine a way out of the that “interval between crisis and response” that Auden and, later, Berlant refer to as an impasse? I want to suggest that, ultimately, the poem endorses a vision of social transformation that is situated in the ongoing experience of a sensed present—a “Now” that is at once sensorial and historical, individual and collective. But before fleshing out my answer to these questions, I want to look at a few key passages from Parts I and III of “New Year Letter” and some paratextual documents that help contextualize that answer. The latent (and perhaps, in some instances, blatant) anarchist streak in these excerpts invites us to reconsider the “end of

¹⁰¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 208.

¹⁰² Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 11, 28.

[Leftist] ideology” narrative as it applies to this stage of Auden’s career. The following lines, for instance, *seem* to reiterate Auden’s statement about art’s political impotence in “The Public v. the Late Mr. William Butler Yeats,” but upon closer examination, they allow me to read against the grain of Auden’s categorical disavowal of political poetry:

Art in intention is mimesis
But, realized, the resemblance ceases;
Art is not life and cannot be
A midwife to society,
For art is a fait accompli.
What they should do, or how or when
Life-order comes to living men
It cannot say, for it presents
Already lived experience
Through a convention that creates
Autonomous completed states.¹⁰³

Auden tells his reader in no uncertain terms that art “cannot be / A midwife to society,” which would seem to contradict Charles Williams’s claim that the poem offers us “a pattern of the Way” toward a just society.¹⁰⁴ But the sinuous unfolding of the poem—its stichic/strophic structure—enables the subtle, almost imperceptible alterations to, and alternations of, what appear at first glance to be emphatically undialectical positions (“Art is not life,” for instance). Over the course of the poem’s lengthy stanzas and even lengthier sections, ideas and statements evolve in response to new contexts and counterevidence. And by the end of this stanza, we encounter a definition of art as “algebraic formula” and “abstract model”—a flexible paradigm “derived from past experiments” but open to interpretation by those who would use it in the future. The next stanza is even more dramatically dialectical in its account of the seeming distinction between the “[s]oiled, shabby, egotistic lives” of artists and the Apollonian “order” of their artworks. The stanza

¹⁰³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201.

¹⁰⁴ Williams, “Untitled Review,” 322.

begins by sensationalizing the distance between artists' reputations and their lived realities:

“What if all the pedants say of you / As personalities be true?”¹⁰⁵ The eventual turn or synthesis by which art and life reach an accord happens by way of a virtuosic extended metaphor that is worth quoting in full:

If poverty or ugliness
Ill-health or social unsuccess
Hunted you [i.e. artists] out of life to play
At living in another way;
Yet the live quarry all the same
Were changed to huntsman in the game,
And the wild furies of the past,
Tracked to their origins at last,
Trapped in a medium's artifice,
To charity, delight, increase.
Now large, magnificent, and calm,
Your changeless presences disarm
The sullen generations, still
The fright and fidget of the will,
And to the growing and the weak
Your final transformations speak,
Saying to dreaming “I am deed,”
To striving “Courage. I succeed,”
To mourning “I remain. Forgive,”
And to becoming “I am. Live.”¹⁰⁶

The lucid, casual voice of “New Year Letter” (that “loose tone” to which Auden refers elsewhere in the poem) belies the figurative density of lines like these, which resist paraphrase even as they point to material, social, and affective conditions held in common by the poem's audience: from birth (“becoming”) to the personal and political aspirations that structure our lives (“dreaming”; “striving”), and finally, to death (“mourning”). The elegiac tropes of resurrection and transfiguration recall many moments in the Yeats elegy (not least its final turn to pedagogy). They are revived most powerfully, however, in the

¹⁰⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201.

¹⁰⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 201-202.

inversion by which artists—depicted earlier in the stanza as prey to the material conditions of history—become the “huntmen” who track these once elusive and threatening realities back to their “origins.” Artists become, in essence, analysts of the past, much like the other “great masters,” Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, who appear elsewhere in the poem as precursors. If this turn in the stanza allows poetry to become a tool for historical analysis that grants humans agency over the “powers we pretend to understand,” but by which we mostly “are lived” (in the Toller elegy), it also repositions art as, not the antithesis of life but, rather, a means of “living in another way.”

A passage from the first draft of “New Year Letter,” written in the spring of 1940 and heavily revised before its publication in *The Double Man*, helps contextualize my reading of “autonomous completed states” as social configurations as much as aesthetic conditions:

Louder than all the others roar
The governments that run the war
[word illegible] claiming each to be
The *patrios* of civility
For which no man will question why
It's sweet and decorous to die.
I hear them; no, it is not they
Whom all but traitors will obey.
'England', 'La France', 'Das Reich', their words
Are like the names of extinct birds
Or peasant-women's quaint old charms
For bringing lovers to their arms,
Which would be only pretty, save
That they bring thousands to their grave.
For maudlin stupid Mr Chips
Owns several heavy battleships,
Ridiculous young Lohengrin
Has camps to put his audience in.
Cher Monsieur Prudhomme aime la gloire
Et l'amour-propre et le pouvoir
And the plain proletarian lie
Is held up in position by
Noble police and the ornate
Grandezza of the Russian State.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Carpenter, *Auden: A Biography*, 308.

Here and throughout the final version of “New Year Letter,” Auden emphatically rejects the inauspicious affiliation of the nation state, revealing the “grave” reality behind the seductive charm of nationalistic rhetoric and cultural myth. In its place, he offers a different kind of fellowship: a patriotism without a country, an “ideal order” of “local understanding,” a “*civitas* of sound / Where nothing but assent [is] found,” a “polis of our friends.”¹⁰⁸ These scattered evocations of small enclaves and exiled intimates who resist encroachment by the state look a great deal like those invoked by contributors to *Partisan Review*, *Now*, and other Leftist magazines of the time in order to make a bid for the prefigurative political work of the small cohort.

Auden’s prose from this period lends further support to my interpretation of “autonomous completed states” as social phenomena in “New Year Letter,” as well as to the larger argument about Auden’s latent anarchism that this reading indexes. That critics tend to place Auden firmly within the bounds of what Peter Nicholls has called “hegemonic Modernism” is by now well documented, and is evidenced by monograph titles like *The Auden Generation* and *The Age of Auden*.¹⁰⁹ That there is an attendant “hegemonic literary Leftism” into which Auden gets shunted thanks to his proximity to the British Communist Party is less often acknowledged or interrogated.¹¹⁰ “New Year Letter,” it seems to me, expresses a politics closer to the modest scale and relentless “negativism” of Dwight Macdonald’s libertarian anarchism than to the doctrinaire Marxism of his Communist Party comrades. And the numerous essays and letters Auden wrote while drafting “New Year

¹⁰⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 200, 224.

¹⁰⁹ Peter Nichols, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 167. I am referring here to Samuel Hynes’s *The Auden Generation* and Aidan Wasley’s *The Age of Auden: Postwar Poetry and the American Scene*.

¹¹⁰ Though Auden never officially joined the Communist Party (unlike some other members of the “MacSpaunday” group), he often referred to his “conversion” to communism in the early 1930s. See Carpenter, *Auden: A Biography*, 147-153. The other members of “MacSpaunday” are Louis MacNeice, Stephen Spender, and Cecil Day-Lewis.

Letter” similarly capture the difficulty and uncertainty of collective life and the persistent allure of isolation that cuts against the grain of party politics.

The following passage from a review essay published in *The New Republic* in January of 1940 is exemplary:

I welcome the atomization of society and I look forward to a socialism based on it, to the day when the disintegration of tradition will be as final and universal for the masses as it is already for the artist, because it will be only when they fully realize their ‘aloneness’ and accept it, that men will be able to achieve a real unity through a common recognition of their diversity, and only when they are conscious that *all* symbols are symbols and not life, that they will be able to use them properly to live and communicate with each other.¹¹¹

An unacknowledged prose gloss on a line from “New Year Letter” (“Aloneness is man’s real condition”), this passage exemplifies Auden’s negative dialectics. The only possible community is one based on atomization. Art *can* have truck in the world but only when it recognizes that it can’t and relinquishes all desire to do so. Auden made similar claims in a commencement address delivered to Smith College’s graduating class of 1940 (published in the *Collected Prose* as “Romantic or Free?”): “There can be no democracy unless each of us accepts the fact that in the last analysis we live our lives alone. Alone we choose, alone we are responsible.”¹¹² And in a letter to E. R. Dodds dated January 16, 1940, he notes that America is the ideal environment in which to reflect on the relationship between isolation and democracy because the alienation that conditions modern existence, alienation that is “obscured” in Europe by its “dying but still vigorous past,” is made palpable by the scale and comparative youth of the United States.¹¹³ It is a place in which one can “live deliberately

¹¹¹ W. H. Auden, “Tradition and Value,” in *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose Vol. II* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 53.

¹¹² W. H. Auden, “Romantic or Free?,” *Prose II*, 70.

¹¹³ Kathleen Bell, ed., “A Change of Heart: Six Letters from Auden to Professor and Mrs. E. R. Dodds, Written at the Beginning of World War II,” in *“The Map of All My Youth”: Early Works, Friends and Influences*, eds. Katherine Bucknell and Nicholas Jenkins (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 109.

without roots” in order, ostensibly, to better diagnose one’s alienation.¹¹⁴ Auden sketches out a five-part diagnosis of sorts in the middle of the letter. Devoted mostly to outlining what “The Machine” (presumably capitalism) has destroyed (community; the concept of the neighbor; the possibility of an active life that is more than a means of income), the final point on the list signals a characteristic turn: “The Machine by its communications and by making all history available to the present, though the impersonal traditional community is gone, *has increased the possibility of the personal relationship to include both the absent and the dead.*”¹¹⁵ Again and again throughout “New Year Letter,” Auden reminds us that instrumental reason, unmitigated by feeling and empathy, has led to the rapacious social reproduction of a mode of life indifferent (and even hostile) to the individuals caught in its gears. But he also warns us that an “ordre du coeur” devoid of reason and intellect is similarly vulnerable to malignancy.¹¹⁶ Just as any collective vision must be attentive to the private needs of individuals, feeling and reason cannot exist without one another in Auden’s vision of the “Just City.”

Not only does Auden’s letter to Dodds echo his other formulations about community’s relationship to isolation, it adds to them a curiously elegiac note that helps contextualize the connections I am drawing (and that other critics before me have drawn, however differently) between the art of raising the dead and the act of living otherwise. According to Auden’s dialectics of enlightenment, modern civilization has distanced us irrevocably from any original community of or with nature. And while there is a tragic component to this alienated condition, there is hope in the fact that we might learn from the past, given the proper perspective, which we now have, thanks to the very forces that have

¹¹⁴ Bell, “Change of Heart,” 111.

¹¹⁵ Bell, “Change of Heart,” 110, emphasis mine.

¹¹⁶ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 212.

alienated us in the first place. The fact that “all history [has become newly] available to the present” as a result of the advances of modernity (presumably, Auden is referring here to the development of the study of history and, perhaps, of literary genre) means that Auden’s “now” is not devoid of optimism. It means, in other words, that for Auden, the way out of the impasse might be located squarely within it.

The social configurations that take shape within Auden’s “now-time” appear sporadically throughout “New Year Letter,” which is to say, they aren’t a telos toward which the poem moves over the course of its three sections. Structured similarly to classical German elegies like “Der Spaziergang,” as well as the philisophico-political essays discussed in the previous chapter, the third section of “New Year Letter” oscillates between mediations on human civilization and richly described physical locations: “Whenever I begin to think / About the human creature we / Must nurse to sense and decency, / An English area comes to mind, / I see the nature of my kind / As a locality I love.”¹¹⁷ Auden’s “temporalization of space” (to return to Ziolkowski’s description of the mechanics of Schiller’s elegy) takes us from the moment “Man faulted into consciousness” to the “fully alienated land” of the mid-twentieth century.¹¹⁸ In the wake of such a virtuosic survey of civilizational progress and moral decline, the closing lines feel anti-climactic, at odds (tonally) with the epic sweep of what came before. While scholars have made much of the poem’s penultimate stanza—the one in which Auden lets his Christianity show by apostrophizing theological figures and abstractions (“O Unicorn”; “O Dove”; “O Voice”)—I want to place greater emphasis on the final stanza, which begins with a direct address to its recipient and a self-elegiac gesture: “Dear friend Elizabeth, dear friend / These days have brought me, may

¹¹⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 227.

¹¹⁸ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 229.

the end / I bring to the grave's dead-line be / More worthy of your sympathy than the beginning."¹¹⁹ By returning us to the poem's occasional, epistolary frame, these lines affirm human affection (as opposed, or in addition, to divine grace) as that which "illuminates" an often bleak existence.¹²⁰ This reference to love's illumination pointedly recalls the "tiny object" stanza from earlier in the poem, in which the scribbling poet scans the night for ideological "flares of desperation" that might serve as moral guides in a time of uncertainty.¹²¹ Instead of a chiliastic horizon of human emancipation—a melodramatic resolution or catharsis—we get a minor, fleeting, barely-registered experience of solidarity and consolation that is part of a constellation of other minor, fleeting, barely-registered experiences.

As Samuel Hynes has noted, for Auden, "it is another kind of community—momentary, imperfect, but *real*—that must replace the lost traditional community of place and class and nation."¹²² The role of art in the cohesion of community is, as I have already intimated, an important through line in "New Year Letter." And though critics like Raymond Winkler accused the poem of being too abstract, Auden clearly prefers to show us (by way of concrete examples) rather than tell us (by way of impersonal categorical distinctions) what his ideal community looks like. In order to do so, he addresses the poem's intended recipient, Elizabeth Mayer, directly—acknowledging their intimacy as occasion for writing a letter that then, in turn, serves to reinforce that intimacy. He also makes recourse to moving descriptions of the Long Island home Mayer opened to artists and exiles like Auden.

¹¹⁹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 242.

¹²⁰ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 242-243. For more on Auden's Christianity, see Arthur Kirsch's *Auden and Christianity* and Stephen J. Schuler's *The Augustinian Theology of W. H. Auden*.

¹²¹ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 228.

¹²² Hynes, "Voice of Exile," 50.

Combining apostrophe and description, the following passage locates a community's cohesion within a shared aesthetic experience:

Warm in your house, Elizabeth,
A week ago at the same hour
I felt the unexpected power
That drove our ragged egos in
From the dead-ends of greed and sin
To sit down at the wedding feast,
Put shining garments on the least,
Arranged us so that each and all,
The erotic and the logical,
Each felt the *placement* to be such
That he was honoured overmuch,
And SCHUBERT sang and MOZART played
And GLUCK and food and friendship made
Our privileged community
That real republic which must be
The State all politicians claim,
Even the worst, to be their aim.¹²³

The italicization of placement is Auden's, and it speaks to the value he places—for all his abstract philosophizing—on the physical embodiment of communities in real time.

While much of Auden's work can seem pessimistic about the human condition, he tempers his apocalyptic (and, if we're lucky, regenerative) prophecies with depictions of those "spots of time" we inhabit intensely if only briefly, and often in the company of others. *The Age of Anxiety* itself is set, like his earlier poem "September 1, 1939," in a Manhattan dive, and tells the tale of four lonely strangers who come together for one night during wartime. Through conversation—rendered in ornate Anglo-Saxon-inspired syllabics—they attempt to reconcile their private hopes and fears with the situation of their time by journeying through the "Seven Ages" and "Seven Stages" of man. The poem's four (notably flat) characters also serve as representations of Jungian categories that make up an individual (thought, feeling, intuition, sensation), with the poem as a whole serving as

¹²³ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 220-221.

allegory for the individual's quest for psychic and sensorial cohesion. The structure of both poems invites us to consider the relationship between the collective and the individual as well as between the epoch one occupies and the "private minute for a friend."¹²⁴ Auden makes a similar distinction between the historical present (one's age) and a more limited understanding of the temporal moment one inhabits in "New Year Letter":

Now in that other world I stand
Of fully alienated land
An earth made common by the means
Of hunger, money, and machines,
Where each determined nature must
Regard that nature as a trust
That, being chosen, he must choose,
Determined to become of use;
For we are conscripts to our age
Simply by being born; we wage
The war we are, and may not die
With POLYCARP'S despairing cry,
Desert or become ill: but how
To be the patriots of the Now?¹²⁵

Using a martial metaphor that echoes the transformation, in "Spain 1937," of "our hours of friendship into a people's army," Auden distinguishes between the "age" to which we are conscripted simply by virtue of being alive, and the moment in time (the capital-N "Now") that we consciously occupy and attempt to shape. The shift from the passivity of the "conscript" to the conscious agency of the "patriot" is echoed in the double meaning of "determined." In line 5, it modifies the noun "nature" and suggests that human nature is unconsciously shaped by historical and material pressures over which we have no control. In line 8, on the other hand, it denotes precisely the opposite: individual will or determination. This shift is crucial to this chapter's reading of "New Year Letter" as utopian elegy—or,

¹²⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 207.

¹²⁵ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 229.

perhaps more fittingly, utopian *meta*-elegy that both documents an historical and tonal/generic impasse *and* attempts to imagine a way beyond it, however limited.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ For a compelling discussion of the limited, contingent, and modest utopian imaginaries that exist as a counter-strain within British Romanticism, see Anahid Nersessian's *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment*. Appropriately, she quotes Auden in her introduction.

THREE
ELEGY IN AN AGE OF POETRYLESSNESS: JACK SPICER'S LAMENTS
FOR THE MAKERS

O sad joy, made of mourning and anoy!

—Edmund Spenser (1591)¹

Give me your tone therefore O death, that I may accord with it

—Walt Whitman (1860)²

Shit-eaters are almost universally in favor of shit-eating.
A Comment on the Future of American Poetry.

—Jack Spicer (1961)³

i. SOME VERSIONS OF ELEGY

“The poets tell us of an age of unalloyed felicity.”⁴ Thus begins the first of Auden’s “Two *Don Quixote* Lyrics.” Written toward the end of 1963 and titled “The Golden Age,” the short poem is an eclogue of sorts written with Spain’s Ur-idealist in mind. “The Golden Age” commences with three orderly stanzas, each composed of two rhyming octosyllabic couplets in sing-song iambic tetrameter. The orderliness of Auden’s lines reflects the natural and social harmony of the age he evokes: a time “[w]hen summer lasted all the year,” when “[t]here was no pain or sickness,” “no famine or calamity,” when humans lived in perfect accord with nature, and love between and among people endured just like the “perpetual greenery” of endless summer. But the poem soon makes clear that its speaker is looking back on this idyllic time from a very different age, indeed: one of “Greif, unbelief, / Lies,

¹ Edmund Spenser, “The Ruines of Time,” *The Complete Poetical Works*, ed. R. E. Neil Dodge (Boston & New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1908; New York: Bartleby.com, 2010), <http://www.bartleby.com/153/19.html>.

² Walt Whitman, “Scented Herbage of My Breast,” *Leaves of Grass: The “Death-Bed” Edition* (New York: The Modern Library, 1993), 145.

³ Jack Spicer Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC MSS 2004/209, Box 15, Folder 1.

⁴ W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelsohn (New York, NY: Vintage International, 1991), 719.

sighs, / Lust, mistrust, / Guile, bile.” The clipped, jagged, metrically various lines reinforce the turn from harmony to dissonance, from mutual aid to mutually assured destruction. The elegiac character of this stanza is easy enough to perceive even at a quick glance. It begins:

O but alas!
Then it came to pass
The Enchanters came
Cold and old,
Making day gray
And the age of gold
Passed away,
For *men fell*
Under their spell,
Were *doomed to gloom.*
Joy fled,
There came instead
*Grief...*⁵

These first ten lines employ the language of personal bereavement to tell a story epochal in scale (the passing of an age). In this way, they help us to see the links between utopian hopes and elegiac sensibilities. The arc of the whole poem is also elegiac in ways that should feel familiar in light of previous chapters. The alternation between ideality and actuality that occurs over the course of the first four stanzas, for instance, recalls Schiller’s anatomy of sentimental poetry and his definition of elegies as poems fundamentally undecided about whether and how reality can be made to square with ideals.

But the final stanza of “The Golden Age” adds another dimension to the utopian elegy, one I’ve not yet discussed at length in this study: scorn. Auden ends the poem by returning to the rhyming octosyllabics of the first stanzas, but the addition of more emphatic caesurae and abundant internal rhymes imbues the poem’s concluding lines with the youthful insolence and menacing obstreperousness of a cracked nursery rhyme:

It shall not be! Enchanters, flee! I challenge you to battle me!
Your powers I with scorn defy, your spells shall never rattle me.

⁵ Auden, *Collected*, 720, emphasis mine.

Don Quixote de la Mancha is coming to attend to you,
To smash you into smithereens and put a final end to you.⁶

The idle and comically ineffectual peregrinations of Don Quixote are transformed here into a more immediate and pointed threat: part fairy tale monster that “attends to” naughty children while they sleep, part armed dissident poised to “smash” the state “into smithereens.” The second “*Don Quixote* Lyric,” “Recitative by Death,” gives the “final end” the last word—spoken in the measured, objective tones of a practiced politician:

Ladies and gentleman, you have made most remarkable
Progress, and progress, I agree, is a boon;
You have built more automobiles than are parkable,
Crashed the sound-barrier, and may very soon
Be setting up juke-boxes on the Moon:
But I beg to remind you that, despite all that,
I, Death, still am and will always be Cosmocrat.⁷

When Death announces that “Westchester matron and Bowery bum” will meet the same fate in the end—that worldly measures of value (“[l]iberal views”; “credit-rating”; “social ambition”) “[c]ut no ice” with the grim reaper—we are invited to situate Auden’s poem in relation to a common elegiac argument, one perhaps most famously advanced in Thomas Gray’s 1751 “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard.”

In his now-canonical reading of Gray’s elegy in *Some Versions of Pastoral*, William Empson discusses some uses of elegy that run counter to those I explore in this dissertation. On Empson’s account, elegies like Gray’s figure death as democratic equalizer, reminding us of the impermanence of worldly hierarchies and institutions and, in some instances, evoking visions of postmortem peace and justice. While Empson concedes that Gray’s poem laments the social stratifications endemic to eighteenth-century England, he ultimately charges the elegy with naturalizing the very conditions of oppression and material privation it seeks to

⁶ Auden, *Collected*, 720.

⁷ Auden, *Collected*, 720-21.

expose. In other words, any outrage readers might experience at the ossified social structures to which Gray's poem alludes is undermined by a brand of pastoral elegy that suggests that the existence of social injustice is a predetermined and thus unalterable fact.⁸ Auden—whether consciously or not—riffs on Empson's characterization of Gray's elegy as “an odd case of poetry with latent political ideas” by making Death sound as slick and self-conscious about his rhetoric as a candidate delivering a stump speech (“Liberal my views upon religion and race,” he assures us).⁹ By making the latent ideas of Gray's poem manifest—and manifestly unctuous—Auden highlights the odd perversity of finding consolation for social inequality in death's impartiality. “Recitative by Death” presents Death—and, by extension, the strain of political elegy that seeks to pacify and console rather than arouse and incite—as precisely the sort of oily “Enchanter” that the quixotic poet of “The Golden Age” intends to “smash to smithereens.”

Auden's poem urges us instead to resist being comforted by the knowledge that death doesn't discriminate, and invites us to locate elegy's politics (and politics more generally) outside of genteel speeches and progressive party platforms. Precisely where, and in reaction to what, a dissident elegiac politics might congeal is the broader topic of this dissertation. Precisely where, and in reaction to what, it coheres *for Jack Spicer*—a cantankerous, Left-sympathizing poet of the Bay Area's mid-twentieth-century literary renaissance—is the subject of this chapter.

Another of Gray's lyrics—written a year after his elegy's publication—anticipates (by two centuries) some of the predominant structures of feeling of Spicer's midcentury moment. “Stanzas to Mr. Bentley: A Fragment,” composed in honor of the artist who

⁸ William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1968), 3-6.

⁹ Empson, *Versions*, 4.

provided illustrations for a volume of Gray's verse, express (elegiacally, one might say) their author's sense that he was living in an age of poetry's waning authority:

But not to one in this benighted age
Is that diviner inspiration giv'n,
That burns in Shakspeare's [sic] or in Milton's page,
The pomp and prodigality of heav'n.

As when conspiring in the diamond's blaze,
The meaner gems that singly charm the sight,
Together dart their intermingled rays,
And dazzle with a luxury of light.

Enough for me, if to some feeling breast
My lines a secret sympathy 'impart;'
As their pleasing influence 'flows confest,'
A sigh of soft reflection 'heaves the heart.'¹⁰

When Gray contrasts the “local symmetry” and “genuine flame” of poetry’s “sister-art” (i.e. Bentley’s drawings) to his own “transitory thought[s]” and “tardy rhymes,” he’s not simply being hyperbolically self-deprecating to better praise his collaborator. He is also, and more importantly, expressing a sense of his own generational belatedness. The “benighted” eighteenth century has produced no prophetic Miltons or prolific Shakespeares—the era of “Great Poets” is over and Gray’s “Stanzas to Mr. Bentley” is, in a sense, an elegy for its demise.

It offers, in its final two stanzas, a curious form of consolation. In place of the “pomp and prodigality” of isolated geniuses—those rare “diamonds” that shine brighter than their peers—Gray finds solace in poetry’s minor beauties and gestures at coterie relations as possible salve for the perceived impoverishment of poetry in the wider world. The “meaner gems” (those lesser poetic lights that glimmer at the margins of literary history)

¹⁰ Thomas Gray, *The Poems of Thomas Gray, with Critical Notes, a Life of the Author, and an Essay on his Poetry by the Rev. John Mitford* (London: White, Cochrane, and Co., 1814), 196-97. The phrases in quotation marks in the last three lines were supplied by an editor as the corner of the only surviving manuscript copy was torn off.

manage only to “charm” when taken “singly.” And while it’s not entirely clear whether they “conspire[]” *with* the “diamond’s blaze” or against it, the language of marginality, secrecy, and sedition that permeates the poem suggests that these smaller, humbler gems “intermingle[]” in order to outshine, rather than to offset, the diamond’s rare beauty. In the likely event that such an aesthetic coup never comes to pass, Gray’s final stanza offers another, humbler vision of what will suffice—what will be just “*enough*” to sustain his practice—in an age of poetry’s perceived decline: the “secret sympathy” of a few intimates who feel the power of language deeply.

This reading risks retrospectively projecting the preoccupations of poets in the mid-twentieth century onto a piece of mid-eighteenth-century verse. However, the transhistorical echoes of Gray’s poems reverberate even more loudly when we take into account the early publication history of his “Elegy.” As Helen Deutsch has noted:

[By i]nking the Latin phrase [Virgil’s ‘*Sunt Lachrymae rerum, et mentem mortalia tangunt.*’ Or, ‘there are tears in the nature of things and mortal affairs touch the mind.’] on the English print copy [of the “Elegy”], Gray affirms its universality while rehearsing his own particular suspension between two modes of authorship. The first was epitomized by his initial aristocratic mode of manuscript circulation among friends (he enclosed the first completed version in a letter to Horace Walpole), the second by his reluctant decision to publish the *Elegy* when that circulation went far beyond its intended gentlemanly coterie.¹¹

Though Gray’s “gentlemanly coterie” was, as Deutsch points out, aristocratic rather than populist or countercultural, a similar notion of the poem as occasion rather than artifact and a similar reluctance to circulate his verse beyond his local milieu are central to Jack Spicer’s poetics.

¹¹ Helen Deutsch, “Elegies in Country Churchyards: The Prospect Poem in and Around the Eighteenth Century,” *The Oxford Handbook of the Elegy*, ed. Karen Weisman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 188.

The intertextual links among Gray’s “Stanzas,” his “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard,” and Auden’s “Two *Don Quixote* Lyrics” help me to map the central concerns of Spicer’s poetry: coterie, belatedness, scorn. These concerns, I argue, get refracted through the prism of elegy. Like Auden’s Man of La Mancha, Spicer embodied multiple personae: the utopian pacifist who valorized love and community, the nostalgic Medievalist who longed to return to a bygone era, and the cantankerous troublemaker who persistently severed bonds of love and friendship, foreclosing the very utopian possibilities he claimed to revere.¹² In chapter 2, I offered a reading of Auden—a major poet—through the lens of an anarchist, personalist politics of the minor. That lens will seem less counterintuitive in a chapter about Spicer. Where Auden’s anarchism remains latent (within his own writing as well as in much of the scholarship devoted to his work), Spicer was explicit about his investment in the poetics and politics of small-scale communities. He wrote poems for and about a small circle of intimates and was deeply wary of allowing his slim books to be circulated outside the Bay Area.

As a result of this coterie-oriented poetic practice, “community” has become something of a critical paradigm for understanding Spicer’s work. The pioneering scholarship of Michael Davidson and Maria Damon inaugurated a trend of contextual reading that repositioned Spicer as a major figure within a marginalized scene. But Spicer

¹² As Kevin Killian and Lewis Ellingham point out in their biography of the poet: “There were two Jack Spicer’s or so it seemed. One opposed to the national image of American success, despised bourgeois nationalism; the other embraced a mythic America rooted in crassness and arrogance. One Spicer spoke admiringly of Eugene Debs and John L. Lewis—resourceful men of courage grown from very local U.S. soils, men who attempted to take the best from European traditions to forge a robust labor movement that was American in flavor. But another Spicer enjoyed with colloquial bumptiousness the national populism represented by such a figure as Huey P. Long of Louisiana, who ruled his state by a formula familiar in the fascist governments of the time. On one hand Spicer claimed Blackfoot Indian ancestry, claimed to be related to Mary Baker Eddy, claimed his father was a Wobbly, called himself an anarchist, was always outspoken, even prideful about his homosexuality in a period when this was dangerous; yet his contempt for ‘liberalism’ was profound.” (*Poet, Be Like God: Jack Spicer and the San Francisco Renaissance* [Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1998], xii.)

managed, as both critics have pointed out, to be both deeply committed to the small literary community of which he was a founding member *and* resistant to it—notoriously cantankerous, difficult, and perpetually preoccupied (paranoid even) with feelings of isolation.¹³ In an essay called “My Vocabulary Did This to Me,” Spicer’s friend and fellow poet Robin Blaser recalls his “negativity within [his] community,” the “black magic” he used to “charge the community up” and which, at its darkest, sometimes took the form of “misogyny, anti-semitic remarks, [and] blasphemy.”¹⁴ According to Blaser, who was a member of the original Berkeley Renaissance cohort that came together in the mid-1940s, “the small, specialized community was not what [Spicer] wanted.”¹⁵

Spicer’s opening remarks at a 1949 symposium on “The Poet and Poetry” register his anxiety about poetry’s audience: “Here we are holding a ghostly symposium—five poets holding forth on their peculiar problems. One will say magic; one will say God; one will say form. When my turn comes I can only ask an embarrassing question—‘Why is nobody here? Who is listening to us?’”¹⁶ A line from the first short poem in Spicer’s sequence “Thing Language” reframes this last question as a statement: “No one listens to poetry.”¹⁷ But neither these remarks nor the line from “Thing Language” suggests that Spicer dismissed community outright. If we take into account the line break that divides the second and final

¹³ See Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetry and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). In particular, see his chapter on Spicer, “‘The City Redefined’: Community and Dialogue in Jack Spicer,” 150-71. See also Maria Damon, *The Dark End of the Street: Margins in American Vanguard Poetry* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Damon, like Davidson, devotes a chapter to Spicer in context: “Dirty Jokes and Angels: Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan Writing the Gay Community,” 142-201.

¹⁴ Robin Blaser, “My Vocabulary Did This to Me,” *The Fire: Collected Essays of Robin Blaser*, ed. Miriam Nichols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 259. This essay was first delivered as a talk at the Jack Spicer Conference at New College of California in June of 1986. It takes its title from the last phrase Spicer purportedly uttered

¹⁵ Blaser, “Vocabulary,” 259.

¹⁶ Spicer, *House*, 229.

¹⁷ Jack Spicer, *My Vocabulary Did This to Me: The Collected Poetry of Jack Spicer*, eds. Peter Gizzi and Kevin Killian (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 373.

iteration of the sentence (“No / One listens to poetry.”), we might read it as an affirmation, if a reluctant one, of the importance of poetry within small, specialized communities. What Spicer rejected, it seems, was not community itself but the equation of collective life with unity, consensus, and the erasure of difference. What he gives us instead is what scholar Daniel Katz has called an “oxymoronic conceptualization of communal political agency”—a vision of collectivity shot through with anger, resentment, sadness, and scorn.¹⁸

Spicer’s brand of antagonism was both internecine and intergenerational. And his attempt to shore up a small audience of interlocutors against a perceived tide of cultural indifference and literary decline took the form of the coterie poem—a mode that, while always somewhat elegiac in Spicer’s hands, became decidedly melancholic toward the end of his career. Espousing a politics and a poetics of ephemerality, Spicer’s elegies from this period position themselves as disposable tools for the cultural and historical analysis of their contemporary moment—a moment in which American poetry’s uncertain heritage and equally uncertain future were being registered by poets and scholars alike.

Over the course of Spicer’s first decade in Berkeley (1946 to 1957), his writing evolved from short, autonomous lyrics to a poetic process that deconstructs and reconfigures elements of various traditions (the elegy central among them) across longer, book-length “serial poems,” mirroring Auden’s earlier transition from the elegies in *Another Time* to his more elusively elegiac “New Year Letter.”¹⁹ Like “New Year Letter,” Spicer’s elegiac sequences from the late 1950s and early 1960s recycle and revise some of the genre’s conventions in key ways. And like Auden’s “The Golden Age,” they occupy a counter-

¹⁸ Daniel Katz, *The Poetry of Jack Spicer* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 91.

¹⁹ “Serial poem” was Spicer’s own, somewhat tongue-in-cheek term for his own poetic practice: something between a long poem and a linked, book-length sequence. For a more in-depth discussion of this practice and the theory behind it, see Spicer’s “Vancouver Lecture 2: The Serial Poem and *The Holy Grail*,” originally delivered in 1965 and published in *The House that Jack Built: The Collected Lectures of Jack Spicer*, 49-96.

tradition that eschews Gray's brand of otherworldly consolation in favor of more immediate "challenge[s] to dominance written under the sign of lamentation."²⁰ They emerge from and complicate the poetic and political imaginaries available to him, harkening back to Walt Whitman's coded gestures at elegy's links to homosocial coterie and to the plainspoken sentimentalism of Kenneth Rexroth and co.'s political verse from the 1930s and 1940s. Finding both sources seductive but ultimately inadequate, Spicer surveys and cajoles his contemporaries—admonishing friends for selling out or giving up, ridiculing (with the faintest hint of compassion) the neo-Romanticism of Allen Ginsberg and the Beats, and presciently looking ahead to a poetic future he would never know. Within this sociopoetic context, Spicer not only reinvigorates elegy's mixed feelings, he embraces as well its unambiguously *ugly* ones, complicating any easy or reassuring understanding of the genre's politics.

ii. "THE GOLDEN AGE" V. "THIS BENIGHTED AGE"

James E. B. Breslin has referred to the "special sense of generational discontinuity" felt among young poets in the 1950s and early 1960s.²¹ For them, modernism had become a fixed and stable institution. William Carlos Williams denounced T. S. Eliot for "giving the poem back to the academics" in his 1951 *Autobiography*, a commentary on Eliot's midcentury reception more than on the high modernist moment of *The Waste Land's* publication.²² In a 1958 lecture on "The Present State of Poetry," Delmore Schwartz employed a vivid

²⁰ Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 180-181.

²¹ James E. B. Breslin, *From Modern to Contemporary: American Poetry, 1945-1965* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 9.

²² Quoted in Breslin, *Modern*, 14-15.

metaphor for the midcentury domestication of an older avant-garde: “what was once a battlefield has become a peaceful public park on a pleasant summer Sunday afternoon.”²³

The “poetrylessness” of this chapter’s title, then, is not meant to indicate that good poetry wasn’t being written during this period, but that it was being written in the absence of any stable sense of a usable tradition (modernist or otherwise) and under the often stultifying effects of New Critical hegemony. It is meant to capture poets’ struggles to find a middle way between mere imitation and full-throttle rejection of their modernist predecessors. It is also a nod to Matthew Arnold’s even bulkier neologism, “unpoetrylessness,” which he assigned to his era—the mid-nineteenth century—in a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough. For Arnold, “the modern situation in its true *blankness* and *barrenness*, and *unpoetrylessness*” is bereft of “just that very thing which now Europe most desires, —criticism.”²⁴ Without the “quickenings and sustaining” atmosphere created by the lively exchange of ideas—without, in other words, the production and circulation of good criticism—imaginative literature suffers.²⁵ As we shall see, Arnold becomes a touchstone for Spicer by the early 1960s.

It would be difficult to argue that the mid-twentieth-century United States experienced a comparable waning of criticism. In fact, beginning with the publication of Cleanth Brooks’s and R. P. Warren’s textbook *Understanding Poetry* (1938), the New Critics set in motion a sea change in the study of English. The rise of the New Criticism

was christened in 1941 by John Crowe Ransom’s little book *The New Criticism*; was provided with a systematic theoretical foundation in 1942 by René Wellek and Austin Warren in their influential handbook for graduate study, *The Theory of Literature*; reached its apogee of critical application at the time of Cleanth Brooks’s

²³ Delmore Schwartz, “The Present State of Poetry,” *American Poetry at Mid-Century* (Washington D.C.: 1958).

²⁴ Matthew Arnold, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold to Arthur Hugh Clough*, ed. Howard Foster Lowry (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 126. The second quotation is from Arnold’s “The Function of Criticism at the Present Time,” in *Selected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frederick L. Mulhauser (New York: Rinehart and Co., 1958), 138.

²⁵ Arnold, “Function,” 143.

The Well Wrought Urn in 1947; and maintained its position in the teaching of literature through the 1950s.²⁶

But this particular current of ideas came with its own set of challenges for poets.²⁷ As Breslin notes, “[i]n the ten years following the Second World War, literary modernism, like an aging evangelical religion, had rigidified into orthodoxy. In fact, with the publication of the widely used second edition of *Understanding Poetry* (1950), modernism had been codified into a textbook.”²⁸ Commenting on modernism’s rigidification in a letter to the editor of *Poetry*, Louise Bogan pronounced that modernist poems, however revolutionary they may have been in their own time, had become as “FIXED AND FINISHED” as well-wrought urns by the middle of the twentieth century. “They will never,” she laments, “*surprise* anyone again.”²⁹

By 1965, the year of Spicer’s death, the New Critical standards of professionalization (the integration of English studies; the cordoning off of the study of literature from other departments; the emphasis on aesthetic autonomy) became harder to maintain in the face of an increasingly politicized populace both within and outside the academy. In his essay “Poetry in 1965,” Kenneth Rexroth pronounced the demise of a “reactionary generation” of critics and poets that had been systematically stripping modernism of its politics for the last two decades:

[T]he old official Academia—the organization led by John Crowe Ransom and Allen Tate—trundles along in its own peculiar trough, turning out little reactionaries, all as alike as the faces on a sheet of stamps. I suppose that the most significant development of the last few years is that the Reactionary Generation has at last become totally infertile ... Instead of the literary Alexandrianism and political obscurantism characteristic of American academic verse for so many years, today most English departments seem to have accepted their limitations. They turn out what might be called ‘white-collar verse.’ Presumably, as automation renders even

²⁶ M. H. Abrams, “The Transformation of English Studies: 1930-1995,” in *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, eds. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 126.

²⁷ Catherine Gallagher, “The History of Literary Criticism,” *American Academic Culture in Transformation*, eds. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

²⁸ Breslin, *Modern*, xiv.

²⁹ Quoted in Breslin, *Modern*, 11.

the engineers redundant, the qualifications for bureaucrats and technocrats in the last quarter of the twentieth century will include the ability to write harmlessly complicated domestic verse, its ambiguities carefully calculated by slide rule. Already the output is illimitable.³⁰

If the influence of the New Critics had begun to wane among the literati of the mid-1960s, another wave of codification and domestication was, according to Rexroth, rising in its wake: “We have evolved surefire formulas for alienation. We not only have a rigorously organized academy of outcasts with uniforms and passwords, but the outcasts have entered the most respectable academies.”³¹ The bohemians of the late 1940s and 1950s were now becoming “professors just like everybody else, . . . busy teaching the daughters of small-town used-car dealers in college in the Bible Belt . . . how to make like Van Gogh, Rimbaud, and Artaud in one semester one hour a week.”³² Though Rexroth reluctantly owns that some exceptional poetry was being written in the years between 1955 and 1965 (he includes Adrienne Rich, Thom Gunn, and Gary Snyder among a short list of promising younger poets), he characterizes this period as a “plateau,” a time “[b]etween commotions” when, despite the steady outpouring of verse, few poems truly startle one into attention: “If you sit down and try to keep track [of all the verse now being published], the steady diet of mediocrity so dulls your responses that, when something good does come along, you are likely to miss it.”³³

Spicer’s sense of this poetic climate makes itself felt in his struggle to locate a useable poetic past. In a letter to Robin Blaser describing *After Lorca*—Spicer’s 1957 book of loose translations of Federico García Lorca’s lyrics interspersed with letters to the dead poet—he writes: “What I am trying to do is establish a *tradition*.”³⁴ Spicer’s writing and the traditions it

³⁰ Kenneth Rexroth, “Poetry in 1965,” *The Alternative Society: Essays from the Other World* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), 40.

³¹ Rexroth, “Poetry in 1965,” 40.

³² Rexroth, “Poetry in 1965,” 40.

³³ Rexroth, “Poetry in 1965,” 40-41.

³⁴ Jack Spicer, “Letters to Robin Blaser,” *Line*, 9 (1987): 48.

makes visible elude New Critical paradigms of interpretation. His training in linguistics and philology, his fascination with the deep time of poetic genre and the sociopoetics of epistolary verse, further distances him from the ahistorical and depoliticized reading practices popular at midcentury. He is explicit about his rejection of New Critical methods in an epistolary poem from 1957 that is often seen as marking the turning point between his early verse and his mature poems:

It was not my anger or my frustration that got in the way of my [past] poetry but the fact that I viewed each anger and each frustration as unique—something to be converted into poetry as one would exchange foreign money. I learned this from the English Department (and from the English Department of the spirit—that great quagmire that lurks at the bottom of all of us) and it ruined ten years of my poetry.³⁵

If we take Spicer at his word here, he would seem to fit quite neatly into the story that Breslin and others have told about postmodern poets’ “antiformalist revolt” against the New Critical establishment of the 1940s and 1950s.³⁶

I want to suggest, however, that Spicer complicates this story somewhat. Instead of simply negating New Critical doxa (giving us antiformalism in place of formalism), Spicer troubles it through a lexical process of dilation, dialogue, and paradox. The decidedly unprogrammatically titled third section of his 1960 book *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* is titled “A Textbook of Poetry.” And the “personal heresy” of the New Critics becomes, in Spicer’s parlance, “the big lie of the personal.” Understood within the context of Spicer’s poem (one of the letters to Lorca in *After Lorca*), however, the “big lie” sounds more like a true lie:

Dear Lorca,

Loneliness is necessary for pure poetry. When someone intrudes into the poet’s life (and any sudden personal contact, whether in the bed or in the heart, is an intrusion) he loses his balance for a moment, slips into being who he is, uses his poetry as one would use money or sympathy. The person who writes the poetry emerges,

³⁵ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 163.

³⁶ Breslin, *Modern*, xiv.

tentatively, like a hermit crab from a conch shell. The poet, for that instant, ceases to be a dead man ...

... That instant, I said. It may last for a minute, a night, or a month, but, this I promise you, García Lorca, the loneliness returns. The poet encysts the intruder. The objects come back to their own places, silent and unsmiling. I again begin to write you a letter on the sound of a poem. And this immediate thing, this personal adventure, will not have been transferred into the poem like the waves and the birds were, will, at best, show in the lovely pattern of cracks in some poem where autobiography shattered but did not quite destroy the surface. And the encysted emotion will itself become an object, to be transferred at last into poetry like the waves and the birds.

And I will again become your special comrade.³⁷

This incredible letter maintains a level of ambiguity characteristic of much of Spicer's verse.

Its subject, Spicer tells us, was originally supposed to be "the sound of a poem." But "the personal" intrudes and derails what would presumably have been a disinterested exegesis or aesthetic treatise. The poet's meddlesome emotions ultimately harden into a self-contained object of the sort Brooks and Warren might approve. Or so Spicer *says*. He also says that "Nothing matters except the big lie of the personal—the lie in which these objects do not believe."³⁸ In other words, emotion might be a lie, but that lie is crucial to our existence. Or is it? When we consider the wider rhetorical context of this sentence, its meaning shifts yet again. We see that the magnitude of "the personal" is conditional—it only *seems* to matter more than anything during those instants when we're under its spell.

The status of this Lorca letter *as letter* further magnifies the ambiguity of its message. By its very nature it is embedded in the social matrix that New Critical readings tend to obscure. But it is also a letter to a dead poet, which keeps it in the realm of fiction. It is a letter without a real audience (except for us). Its last line ("And I will again become your special comrade.") seems to give "the personal" the advantage in the end—a final

³⁷ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 150.

³⁸ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 150, emphasis mine.

transformation that counterbalances emotion's ossification in the previous lines. We know, from other poems and from his lectures, that being a dead man (or at least *channeling* dead men) is a necessary condition for Spicer. But so, it seems, is human connection.

In addition to his experiments in impersonality, Spicer's preoccupation with audience in *After Lorca* and throughout his oeuvre also places him in dialogue with contemporary critical trends. The New Critics insisted on the distinctness of speaker and poet. If the speaker, unlike the real poet, is part of the fabric of the poem's fiction then, in order to maintain critical symmetry, the intended audience must also be contained within the self-enclosed world of the lyric. In *The Verbal Icon*, W. K. Wimsatt remarks that "[t]he actual reader of a poem is something like a reader over another reader's shoulder; he reads through the dramatic reader, the person to whom the full tone of the poem is addressed in the fictional situation. This is the truth behind that often-quoted statement by J. S. Mill that 'Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.'"³⁹ Spicer was also interested in the ways in which speaker and poet diverge, but that division was, for him, much messier and less decisive than the theories put forward by the New Critics. His theory of poetry as dictation (the poet acting as amanuensis for ghostly and alien transmissions) is in some ways an eccentric variant of New Critical ideas about impersonality, but his investment in epistolary verse and direct address complicates any neat division between word and world. His 1957 sequence *Admonitions*, for instance, positions its wider audience as eavesdroppers in Wimsatt's sense. However, Spicer's intended audience in this book is made up of real people—friends and acquaintances that Spicer mentions by name—and thus can never be fully contained within the echo chamber of the poem.

³⁹ W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), xv.

Many of the midcentury theories of poetic tone mentioned in chapter 2 locate it precisely in the hazy realm between speaker and audience—a realm made hazier still by Spicer’s sleights of hand. His relationship to his small audience of contemporaries was always ambivalent—central to his coterie poetics, but always on the verge of evaporating, due either to the vicissitudes of life or to Spicer’s antagonism. The ephemerality of social relations (and the awareness of death that always underwrites it) was, for Spicer, linked to the ephemerality of poetic objects. These links are made visible throughout his corpus by means of various rhetorical strategies: homology, metaphor, paradox. He makes the connection clearest, perhaps, when he tells us that poems “cannot live alone any more than we can.”⁴⁰ The abiding sense that ephemerality is both a desirable state of affairs and one about which we ought to feel ambivalent, perhaps even dismayed, lies at the heart of much of Spicer’s verse. And the hesitant, hyper-self-reflexive, often contradictory gestures and ephemeral textures of his elegiac writing contribute in important ways to their tone.

The subject of poetic tone has been mentioned, if only in passing, in several studies of Spicer’s work. Michael Davidson, in his chapter on the Bay Area poets of the 1940s, defines the elegiac “not [as] a genre so much as a tone.”⁴¹ Likewise, in a reading of one of Spicer’s early series, Maria Damon identifies its prevailing tone “[a]s one of uneasiness and scorn.”⁴² And yet, despite these passing allusions to tone’s importance in Spicer’s oeuvre, the term has not become a keyword in Spicer studies—unlike, for instance, the equally slippery “serial form” or “poetics of the outside,” these being marginally less imprecise, perhaps, because we have recourse to Spicer’s own accounts (in lectures and, in some instances, within his poems) of what these concepts meant to him. As we shall see in the following

⁴⁰ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 163.

⁴¹ Davidson, *San Francisco Renaissance*, 37.

⁴² Damon, *Dark End of the Street*, 165.

sections, the mixed, often paradoxical tones (elegiac humor, utopian cynicism, scornful affection) of Spicer's poetry are a response, in part, to his counterintuitive search for useable traditions (both poetic and political) despite his own resistance to the kind of transhistorical durability upon which tradition is founded.

iii. "RIVAL, HONEY, FRIEND"

When they dug up Pompeii the poems were gone,
flower-like and fragile in the stone,
giving nothing to the stone,
honey alloyed to the stone,
making nothing sweet.

—George Stanley, "Pompeii," (1957-1960)⁴³

In his epistolary poem "Dear Robin"—published in *Admonitions* and addressed to friend and fellow poet Robin Blaser—Spicer outlines *in nuce* his poetics of seriality. Disavowing the short lyrics published before *After Lorca* as solipsistic and futile—"one night stands[,] filled (the best of them) with their own emotions, but pointing nowhere, as meaningless as sex in a Turkish bath"—Spicer goes on to formulate a theory of poetic composition that moves beyond the single poem toward the less bounded form (and format) of the book-length "serial poem."⁴⁴ Curiously, only two projects from the first ten years of Spicer's career escape his scorn: "All my stuff from the past (except the *Elegies* and *Troilus*) looks foul to me."⁴⁵ I want to focus on why Spicer's "Imaginary Elegies," a suite of lyrics begun in 1948, remains important to Spicer, even after his embrace of serial form. Daniel Katz characterizes serial poems as "a looser, more flexible structure capable of giving

⁴³ George Stanley, *A Tall, Serious Girl: Selected Poems: 1957-2000*, eds. Kevin Davies and Larry Fagin (Jamestown, RI: Qua Books, 2003), 3.

⁴⁴ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 163.

⁴⁵ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 163.

amplitude to effects of echo, repetition, digression, and return.”⁴⁶ Chris Nealon has helpfully defined them as sequences in which “...no single lyric [is] meant to bear the weight of poetic force because each poem [is] part of a serially realized—and perhaps unrealizable—poetic ‘whole,’ with no author.”⁴⁷

Louise Fradenburg’s discussion of the relationship between the literature of mourning and Chaucerian indeterminacy provides a clue to how elegy and seriality intermingle in Spicer’s work: “when one gives full critical measure to the difficulties of the textual borderline in Chaucer’s poetry, one feels the force of Derrida’s insistence on the arrogance of attributes of ‘unfinishedness’—implying, as they do, that some texts are finished, that there are ever absolute boundaries between texts and other texts, reading subjects, and surrounding cultural structures.”⁴⁸ The essay to which Fradenburg refers here is Derrida’s “Living On: Border Lines,” the aim of which is “to question the invocation of death as the limit to end all limits,” and to gesture at the interpenetration of living and dead.⁴⁹ Though “Living On” wouldn’t be published in English until 1977, well after Spicer’s death, it touches on questions of translation, mourning, and the susceptibility of texts to intrusion that preoccupied Spicer throughout his career. Even the essay’s format is Spicerian. Derrida divides the main body of the text from a running footnote. Suppressed beneath a bounding line and intended to aid in the translation of Derrida’s essay, these explanatory

⁴⁶ Katz, *Poetry of Jack Spicer*, 20.

⁴⁷ Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 32. Joseph Conte sees Spicer as practicing a more “finite serial form” than the kind practiced by Robert Duncan, Paul Blackburn, and Robert Creeley. Spicer’s compositional practice, on Conte’s account, is bounded by the “limiting presence of the book” (Conte, *Unending Design*, 106).

⁴⁸ Louise O. Fradenburg, “Voice Memorial: Loss and Reparation in Chaucer’s Poetry,” *Exemplaria*, vol. 2, no. 1 (March 1990): 178. For an interesting take on Spicer’s Medievalism, see David Hadbawnik, “Time Mechanics: The Modern Geoffrey Chaucer and the Medieval Jack Spicer,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (2013): 270-283. For more on Spicer and deconstruction, see Daniel Katz’s brief but provocative discussion of the dialogue between Spicer’s 1960 “Plato’s Marmalade” (a chapter in his *Fake Novel about the Life of Arthur Rimbaud*) and Derrida’s “Plato’s Pharmacy.” See also Colin Christopher Stuart and John Scoggan, “Orientation of the Parasols: Saussure, Derrida, and Spicer,” *boundary 2*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Fall 1977): 191-257.

⁴⁹ Fradenburg, “Voice,” 178.

notes instead multiply the conceptual problems of translation. Spicer's *Homage to Creeley*, the first series in his longer book *The Heads of the Town Up to the Aether*, mobilizes a similar division and transmission between the poems and the ghostly "Explanatory Notes" printed in lighter ink beneath them.

A proto-serial poem begun before Spicer had devised a name for, and developed a consistent practice of, serial composition, his "Imaginary Elegies" riff slyly on the conventions of elegiac verse. Their very first lines overturn the elegiac conceit of poetry as preservation fantasy; as, in other words, a medium that—unlike love, friendship, flesh, etc.—endures.⁵⁰ The "Imaginary Elegies" actively interrogate and overturn the idea that, in the absence of a mortal loved one, we might be consoled by the reassuring presence of an immortal text. Instead of the "living record of...memory" in Shakespeare's Sonnet 54, or the "black lines" that keep the speaker's beloved "green" in Sonnet 63, Spicer gives us "Poetry [that], almost blind like a camera / Is alive in sight for only a second."⁵¹ The poet's preference, Spicer suggests, is not "the continuous Platonic pattern" but "[t]he temporary" which, Spicer tells us, "tempts poetry."⁵²

In the following passage, a fleeting and, we might infer, sexually charged encounter between the poet and an attractive, anonymous youth serves as analogy for, and instance of, the lure of the temporary:

When I praise the sun or any bronze god derived from it
Don't think I wouldn't rather praise the very tall blond boy
Who ate all of my potato-chips at the Red Lizard.
It's just that I won't see him when I open my eyes
And I will see the sun.
Things like the sun are always there when the eyes are open
Insistent as breath.

⁵⁰ I take the term "preservation fantasy" from Aaron Kunin's terrific essay on Shakespeare's sonnets, "Shakespeare's Preservation Fantasy," *PMLA*, Vol. 124, No. 1 (Jan. 2009), pp. 92-106.

⁵¹ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 26.

⁵² Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 26-27.

One can only worship
These cold eternal for their support of
What is absolutely temporary.
But not so sweet.⁵³

By the end of the first “Imaginary Elegy,” the voices of the dead conjured by Spicer’s “[c]old poetry” “sound[] blond and tall,” imbued with the warmth of particularity. The flirtatious exchange, the longing glance, the blond boy at a specific bar on a particular night—the fleetingness of the encounter—is the true source of poetry for Spicer. And the extent to which the “Elegies” resort to talking about the sun or the moon or the Platonic ideal of a beloved is only as a means of conjuring the particular social occasion or context that inspired the poem in the first place. The “Imaginary Elegies” thus contain a kernel of the more sustained and rigorous poetics of personal address that Spicer will develop in *After Lorca*, *Admonitions*, and beyond.

Spicer’s repurposing of W. B. Yeats’s praise for philosopher George Berkeley (“All the philosophy one needs is in Berkeley”) as an epigraph to “Imaginary Elegies” further reinforces the link between the poems’ evocation of poetic ephemerality and the dynamics of coterie. The in-joke humor of this sleight-of-hand re-contextualization of a proper name wittily highlights the centrality of the poet’s locale, and the coterie networks that flourished within it, to his creative and intellectual practice. And since the energy generated in the apartments, seminar rooms, and bars of Berkeley and San Francisco’s North Beach could not, for Spicer at least, be separated from the persistent sense of its being always-about-to-end or always-already-over, an insouciantly elegiac tone comes to characterize much of Spicer’s work from this time.

⁵³ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 26.

“Berkeley in Time of Plague” and “A Postscript to the Berkeley Renaissance,” short lyrics written at around the same time as “Imaginary Elegies,” evoke losses not utterly irrevocable, but wistful, at times painful, all the same. In “Berkeley in Time of Plague,” the speaker (a collective “we”) addresses us from a time after plague has come and gone and “taken [its victims]” to an otherworldly place—a kind of ghost Berkeley in the sky—from which poetry might still be written and transmitted. The shift from lament in the first stanza (“Plague took us and the land from under us, / Rose like a boil, enclosing us within.”) to something like a cautious celebration of the generative power of transformation in the last (“Plague took us, laughed and reportioned us, / Swelled us to dizzy, unaccustomed size. / We died prodigiously; it hurt awhile / But left a certain quiet in our eyes”) feels more like an embrace of the ephemerality of social relations—an embrace, perhaps, of death—than a fist raised, raging against it.⁵⁴

“A Postscript to the Berkeley Renaissance” relies on the alternating repetition of the question “What have I lost?” and the statement “I was a singer once.”⁵⁵ Written after his return to California after a brief tenure at the University of Minnesota, it laments the loss of his youthful idyll (the early years of his friendships with Duncan and Blaser) even as it demystifies—through its insistent queries about the object of loss—that moment in his poetic career. The poem manages to feel nostalgic while advocating a project of disenchantment (at times covertly, by the end explicitly). Put differently, Spicer the skeptic relies on a combination of irony (“My tongue is sharpened on the iron’s edge.”) and bleak realism (“Canaries need no trees. They have their cage.”) to cut through the poem’s sentimental trappings to the difficult message at its core. The sadness here has less to do

⁵⁴ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 5.

⁵⁵ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 45. For an enlightening discussion of the history of elegiac questioning, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy*, 21-24.

with the loss of a once vibrant utopia than with its sublunary disappointments. Its title, which cleverly collapses poetic form and poetic format by conceiving of the elegy in print-cultural terms (as a postscript), reinforces a reading of the poem as anti-nostalgic. It asks us to recognize the material conditions and mundane interactions that subtend any literary community.

These dynamics become the subject of Spicer's 1957 book, *Admonitions*. "For Hal," in particular, encapsulates Spicer's uniquely embattled and elegiac stance toward sociability:

For Hal

Youth
Is no excuse for such things
Responsibilities
Weigh like strawberries
On a shortcake.
Go
To the root of the matter
Get laid
Have a friend
Do anything
But be a free fucking agent.
No one
Has lots of them
Lays or friends or anything
That can make a little light in all that darkness.
There is a cigarette you can hold for a minute
In your weak mouth
And then the light goes out,
Rival, honey, friend,
And then you stub it out.⁵⁶

Written for a young initiate of the kind that formed the small circle around Spicer during this period, the poet links mortality to poetic ephemerality (poem as lit cigarette), and both of those things to coterie (having a few friends or lays), as well as to something like political autonomy ("free fucking agent"). The poem's depiction of the affective vectors between and

⁵⁶ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 167.

among individuals—the complicated emotions that can strain and warp any sense of connection or solidarity—crystallizes in its penultimate line, in which the “Hal” of the title is addressed as, simultaneously, “[r]ival, honey, [and] friend.” This set of terms of endearment—in which agonism sits comfortably next to sexual desire and platonic affection—suggests that the version of sociability that Spicer gives us in his poems is, often, a contradictory one. That Spicer leaves ambiguous the rhetorical pivot of this admonition (“Do anything / But be a free fucking agent.”) is telling. Here, poetic form, in the form of line breaks, and tone are mutually constitutive and interdependent. Breaking the line as he does, after “Do anything,” enforces a pause that acts like a comma, making the meaning of the lines something like: “Do anything *so long as you are, or act as,* a free fucking agent.” However, the fact that there is no actual comma allows for an alternative gloss of the lines as: “Do anything *except* be a free fucking agent”—only connect.

Similarly, Spicer’s homophonic riff on Emerson’s “Concord Hymn” in his 1960 series “Homage to Creeley” (Spicer spells it “Conquered Him”) playfully inverts the non-geographical connotations of “concord” (unity, collectivity, consensus) and elevates the pun to the level of sociopolitical commentary, deftly suggesting that encrypted within any reference to or instance of community formation is a competing sense of antagonism.⁵⁷ This strain of individualism—the persistent and often insouciant urge to “be a free fucking agent”—invites a reading of Spicer’s work against the grain of more unequivocally utopian understandings of postwar communities and their aesthetic practices. As he puts it, more straightforwardly, in “A Textbook of Poetry”: “We are all alone and we do not need poetry to tell us how alone we are.”⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 252.

⁵⁸ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 311.

“For Hal” issues a challenge to what Spicer felt was an easy, uncritical acceptance community. “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce” similarly interrogates the affirmative, democratic politics of queer promiscuity espoused by contemporaries like Allen Ginsberg. The vision of “manly,” “adhesive” love in Whitman’s *Calamus* poems was a touchstone for Ginsberg throughout his career, a key node in a queer poetic tradition that celebrates (and sees as deeply interconnected) mystical experience, sexual ecstasy, and masculine camaraderie as potent forms of political intervention. Written during Spicer’s brief stint on the East Coast in the mid-1950s (1955-56), “Some Notes on Whitman for Allen Joyce” registers his sense that the promise of Whitman’s vision has been revoked. It begins:

He was reaching for a world I can still remember. Sweet and painful. It is a world without magic and without god. His ocean is different from my ocean, his moon is different from my moon, his love (oh, God the loss) is different from my love. In his world roads go somewhere and you walk with someone whose hand you can hold. I remember. In my world roads only go up and down and you are lucky if you can hold on to the road or even know that it is there.⁵⁹

By subtly conflating actual geographic locations with the utopian possibilities one comes to associate with them, Spicer maps out (quite literally) his reluctant divergence from a Whitmanian ideal of love between and among men. The steep inclines of San Francisco are more difficult to traverse than the more modest gradients of Long Island, just as Spicer’s nuanced and often paradoxical vision of coterie is decidedly tougher to sustain than the adhesiveness that happens instantly, easily, as if by fiat in Whitman. Spicer’s 1947 poem “An Arcadia for Dick Brown,” written for the recently released conscientious objector and Berkeley transplant of its title, similarly figures the Bay Area as an earthly paradise even as it mocks those, like Brown perhaps, who would view it as such.

⁵⁹ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 55.

The wistfulness of the first paragraph of “Some Notes” escalates to frustration and anger by the sixth, and the final three strophes reveal that Whitman’s inability to understand cruelty renders his vision untenable for Spicer. By characterizing *Calamus* as nothing more than “a fairy story,” Spicer acidly equates Whitman’s homosexuality, and by extension his own and Joyce’s, with naive fantasy. But Spicer’s relationship to negative affect is more nuanced than his reliance upon homophobic slurs would suggest. The diagnostic rhetorical structure of “Some Notes” is transformed, in the final paragraph, into a prescriptive one. Up until this point, the poem can be read as a critique of Whitman’s blindness to the often ugly realities of collective life. Cruelty exists, Spicer reiterates, and yet Whitman ignores it. By the end of the poem, though, Spicer seems to posit that cruelty *ought* to exist—that it is a catalyst for the forms of sociability and creative exchange that Spicer found especially energizing if (or perhaps because) ultimately unsustainable. By addressing the poem’s dedicatee (Spicer’s lover, Allen Joyce) directly for the first time at the same moment he most fully channels the cruelty he’d been merely pointing to in the rest of the poem, Spicer enacts community’s reliance upon the “black magic” of negative affect. Anger, scorn, and disappointment paradoxically allow Spicer to finally reach out to and make contact with Joyce. The ambiguity of the possessive pronoun in the last sentence (“That is what I think about your damned Calamus.”) reinforces this turn, since it could refer either to Whitman’s *Calamus* (he apostrophizes Whitman elsewhere in the poem) or to Joyce’s (assuming that the poem was inspired in part by Spicer’s desire to disabuse his youthful lover of his naïve affection for Whitman). In place of the celebratory tonal register of so many of Whitman’s lines, Spicer gives us a reluctant admission that cruelty is a necessary, if counterintuitive, mode of relationality.

Spicer's "Three Marxist Essays" (1962) articulate a similarly recalcitrant politics via punning, contradiction, and other forms of rhetorical slipperiness. The "Essays" are actually a series of three prose poems titled "Homosexuality and Marxism," "The Jets and Marxism," and "The Jets and Homosexuality." In the first, he writes:

Homosexuality is essentially being alone. Which is a fight against the capitalist bosses who do not want us to be alone. Alone we are dangerous. Our dissatisfaction could ruin America. Our love could ruin the universe if we let it.⁶⁰

Here, Spicer alludes to the radical political potential of dissatisfaction and solitude as opposed to solidarity. And the pun that ends the series relies upon the unlikely fusion of campy humor and despair, frivolity and futility, to capture the sense that certain political horizons must be remapped in the wake of, among other things, the disappointments of the Soviet experiment and the lost Leftism of American liberalism:

Once in the golden dawn of homosexuality there was a philosopher who gave the formula for a new society—"from each, according to his ability, to each according to his need."

This formula appears in the New Testament—the parable of the fig tree—and elsewhere.

To continue the argument is fruitless.⁶¹

Reading the rhetorical moves and tonal modes of Spicer's poems in relation to biographical facts about his political life deepens our understanding of his rhetorical ambivalence. In a letter to Blaser, Spicer's friend Jim Herndon describes the poet's playfully contrarian role at student-run political meetings on the Berkeley campus in the late 1940s:

The appearance of Jack at pompous, highly-organized student politics meetings at VFW hall at Berkeley; only students representing organizations could speak and vote—Jack's appearance causing an uproar among both Wallacites and Socialists etc., big argument about his credentials and Jack announced he represented the "Committee for Anarchist Unity"—an organization which he then admitted

⁶⁰ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 328.

⁶¹ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 328.

consisted only of himself, since there could “By definition be no unity among more than one anarchist.”⁶²

Spicer carried the antagonism toward orthodoxy of any stripe and the delight in verbal sparring displayed here into his involvement with the Mattachine Society, an early gay rights organization founded in Los Angeles in 1950 by a small group of gay men who were also, crucially, either members of or sympathetic to the Communist Party. Though the character and objectives of the Mattachine would change dramatically over the next several years, its organizational structure—which stressed secrecy and anonymity among local, clandestine cells and promoted a kind of Leftist grassroots solidarity—has interesting formal links to Spicer’s compositional practices, namely his interest in seriality (each poem within a book being linked to, yet semi-autonomous from, the next).

In a recent essay called “Spicer and the Mattachine,” scholar and poet Kevin Killian successfully documents Spicer’s rarely discussed political life—the relationship between the poet’s nascent Communism and his gay rights activism, and his insistence, against other, more conservative members of the Mattachine Society’s Bay Area chapters, on the existence and preservation of a gay counterculture. Spicer began attending meetings of the local chapter of the Mattachine before the May 1953 convention, which initiated significant changes in the character and objectives of the organization. As John D’Emilio notes in *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, after the May convention—which was aimed at restructuring the Mattachine as an “aboveground organization”—“accommodation to social norms replaced the affirmation of a distinctive gay identity, collective effort gave way to individual action, and confidence in the ability of gay men and lesbians to interpret their own

⁶² Jim Herndon, “Letter to Robin Blaser,” *The Collected Books of Jack Spicer*, ed. Robin Blaser (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 376.

experience yielded to the wisdom of experts.”⁶³ Further, its founding members’ emphasis on collective, militant action yielded, under the direction of the newly elected leadership, to a more moderate, assimilationist attitude toward heteronormative social conventions. Spicer’s “rejection of the [post-May convention Mattachine] foundation’s stiff-necked liberalism,” Killian suggests, “was eventually to lead . . . to his involvement in *J* (1959) and *Open Space* (1964), the poetry and art journals he later helped to found.”⁶⁴ On Killian’s account, the origin of Spicer’s staunchly localist approach to poetry and print culture was a response to one of the central debates among members of the Mattachine: whether or not the goal of the organization, and of gays and lesbians more generally, ought to be integration into the wider society or a firmer embrace of difference through the continued cultivation of a rich subculture. In the face of the Mattachine’s move toward integration, Spicer distanced himself further and more firmly away from the trappings of conventional literary success, allowing us to read a book like *Lament for the Makers*—the subject of this chapter’s next section— as much more than a petty jab at a close friend.

iv. LAMENT FOR THE MAKERS AND THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN POETRY

Concerning the Future of American Poetry II:
My grandmother always told me
that when you get in a fight with a dog turd
you only get shit on your fingers.

—Jack Spicer⁶⁵

⁶³ John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 81.

⁶⁴ Kevin Killian, “Spicer and the Mattachine,” *After Spicer: Critical Essays*, ed. John Emil Vincent (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2011), 22.

⁶⁵ Jack Spicer Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, BANC MSS 2004/209, Box 15, Folder 1.

[R]evengers are, in a sense, elegists *manqués*.

—Peter Sacks⁶⁶

Spicer's two scatological comments on "the future of American poetry" (one quoted above, the other this chapter's third epigraph) appear in the margins of his "Dover Beach" notebooks—the notebooks in which he drafted the first of the dense, elliptical poems that make up his short 1961 sequence, *Lament for the Makers*. The volume is a scathing critique of his friends' (namely, Robert Duncan's) move away from what Spicer came increasingly to view as the true source of poetry: the subtle magic of coterie relations.

The "makers" of Kenneth Patchen's 1949 poem—discussed in chapter 1—seem to refer to humankind in general (*homo laborans*) and to the "makers of songs" (i.e. poets) in particular. Auden's 1961 poem, "The Maker," deploys the same double meaning:

Unmarried, near-sighted, rather deaf,
This anonymous dwarf,
Legendary ancestor
Of Gunsmiths to His Majesty
And other bespoke houses:—
Every museum visitor knows him.

Excluded by his cave
From weather and events, he measures
Days by the job done, and at night
Dreams of the Perfect Object, war to him
A scarcity of bronze, the fall of princes
A change of customer [...]

[...] His love, embodied in each useful wonder,
Cant's save them in our world from insult,
But may avenge it: beware, then, maladroit,
Thumb-sucking children of all ages,
Lest on your mangled bodies the court verdict
Be Death by Misadventure.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Sacks, *English Elegy*, 65.

⁶⁷ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 737-738.

Auden's "maker" is a sad, hunched holdout from another era. Holed up in his cave, he evokes Cro-Magnon man without giving any definitive indication that he belongs firmly within the stone age. The poem's temporal ambiguity allows this "maker" to stand in for the modern poet as well: stubbornly anachronistic, cloistered "from weather and events," obsessive and dreamy and increasingly obsolete. The poem's last stanza (quoted above) pivots between two opposing visions of poetry: as "Perfect Object" embalmed and impervious to any changes in the "weather" and as the weapon we're invited to compare it to within the poem's extended mixed metaphor.

Spicer's *Lament for the Makers* also weaponizes poetry and attempts to "avenge" it through the art of insult. The five interconnected poems in Spicer's book rely on the interplay between allusion and obfuscation. No sooner is a reference made than it is effaced, a move that gets modeled in the first lines of the first poem, "Dover Beach": "Tabula rasa / A clean table / On which is set food / Fairies have never eaten. / Fairies, I mean, in the ancient sense / Who invite you to dinner."⁶⁸ The image of a tablet or slate wiped clean of any traces of what has already been written upon it—whether taken literally as the blank page of the poet's notebook or as a metaphor for the mind—is immediately placed not only within a domestic scene, but one that is sexualized. Spicer tells us that "fairies" in this poem are fairies "in the ancient sense" (as opposed, we can infer, to the contemporary sense—as a derogatory term for gay men), but the last line's reference to the sort of dinner party that might have been thrown by some of Spicer's intimates, allows us to hold both meanings in suspension.

The table (be it a kitchen table around which friends gathered to discuss poetry or a seminar table over which collaborations and critique were hashed out during his "Magic

⁶⁸ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 317.

Workshop”) was, for Spicer, always also an Arthurian round table of poetic adepts and initiates. But the dismissiveness, nastiness even, embedded in Spicer’s invocation of fairies who throw dinner parties establishes one context for understanding this elusive volume: the bourgeois lifestyles some of Spicer’s friends had cultivated and the poetic notoriety that allowed them to do so. Spicer’s keen and often paranoid sense of betrayal by the friends and fellow poets most certainly motivated *Lament for the Makers* (lest we mistake the object of his scorn, Spicer duplicates the acknowledgments from Duncan’s 1960 book *The Opening of the Field* as part of his own front matter). And while his vitriol undeniably permeates it, I want to suggest that Spicer’s signature sneer—his caustic humor that unambiguously pits “us” (poets who know what “true” poetry is) against “them” (sellouts, career academics, most members of the middle class, the list could go on)—is more than series of coded jabs at friends and contemporaries.

Even as its publication further compromised Spicer’s relationships with Duncan and Blaser, *Lament* holds up (optimistically, naively even) coterie relations, be they collaborative and accommodating or cutting and cruel, against the rising tide of Cold War homogeneity and the institutionalization of the avant-garde. This book, and in particular its opening poem, refract coterie dynamics through a series of intertexts and historical references, figuring social life as deeply relevant to debates about tradition (and the individual talent), endurance, and ephemerality. A ghostly retinue of figures from the English canon lurks within its pages: William Dunbar, Alexander Pope, William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, and D. H. Lawrence. Though it is difficult to trace something like a straightforward or consistent evaluation of poetic authority or fame in “Dover Beach,” the opening poem in the sequence, we get the sense that Spicer’s allegiance lies with poets whose work resists easy assimilation into standard English curricula. Spicer’s vision of William Wordsworth as a poet

who has been co-opted by academics and, as result, has taken his place on English syllabi materializes in six short lines toward the middle of the poem: “Words- / worth / Nods / He heap good / Gray poet / English department in his skull.”⁶⁹ Wordsworth is figured as both a poet whose work is taught by a series of grim, “gray” academics long after his death, *and* an eager student who learns by rote (“Nods ... English department in his skull”) rather than by the free play of thought and imagination. Spicer views him—and other poets who earn his censure—as at least partially responsible for the posthumous uses to which his poetry is put.

Spicer’s reproach of Wordsworth is gentle in comparison to the moniker he reserves for those poets who sully the true work of poetry with the trappings of success (book contracts, prizes, and tenured teaching gigs). Among the fame-mongering “whores” who trade their talents for extrinsic, material rewards are Duncan, Ezra Pound, Dante, and Virgil. Even Dante’s Beatrice fails to escape Spicer’s condemnation, as her words to Virgil from Canto II of the *Inferno* (“O anima cortese Mantovana”) are described as “A whore’s answer to a whore.”⁷⁰ At first glance this reads as further evidence of Spicer’s misogyny. Since Beatrice was not herself a poet (like the others who earn the label “whore” in “Dover Beach”), the only thing that would inspire such a charge is the fact that she is a female love object and muse. But in entreating Virgil to come to her aid, she addresses him not only as a “noble Mantuan spirit” but, crucially, as one “whose fame still endures in the world, and will endure as long as time endures.” This line from Dante, which Spicer does not quote, provides something of a key to “Dover Beach” and to Spicer’s embrace of ephemerality more broadly. If fame is the thing (or one of the things) that saps poetry of its value, and if

⁶⁹ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 318.

⁷⁰ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 317.

fame is what allows a poet's work and memory to endure, then, according to Spicer's logic, the poet must position him- or herself firmly on the side of that which is fleeting.

I do not want to suggest that Spicer's preferred alternative was to cordon off poetry from petty worldly concerns. It was not, and indeed part of what I am arguing is precisely the opposite: that he was deeply skeptical and at times (as in *Lament*) profoundly dismissive of career poets and of the institutional and economic engines by which poetry is produced and circulated and that this skepticism became part and parcel of the poetry itself. "DIY" long before purists started wearing the adjectival acronym as a badge of honor, one of his *Admonitions* (to himself, titled "For Jack") begins: "Tell everyone to have guts / Do it yourself."⁷¹ The poet's injunction promotes the sort of grassroots endeavors that rely on participation and cooperation *and* reveals a deep cynicism about the dynamics of collectivity. It is both a directive to poets to take the means of production into their own hands and a hymn to individual autonomy. In light of this, the title of the sequence seems all the more relevant. In Spicer's view, true "makers," unalienated from their poetic labor, were a dying breed.

Because "Dover Beach" moves so quickly and because each moment relies on the next to fully understand it, I will quote a passage from roughly the middle of the poem—just before the lines about Wordsworth that I quoted above—in its entirety before discussing it:

The sharp
Im
 age
A new aesthetic
Each place firmly tied to its place
Eaches to each. Doesn't
Reach much
And the owl's bones
Are built in a nest with them. That's
A poem Pope would have been proud of

⁷¹ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 166.

One keeps unmentionable
 What one ascends to the real with
 The lie
 The cock in another person's mouth
 The real defined out of nothing. Asking
 Shadows. Is pop. Pope
 To the worms that bury them. Limit-
 Less does it.
 Damn it all, Robert Duncan, there is only one bordello.
 A pillow. But one only whores toward what causes poetry
 Their voices high
 Their pricks stiff
 As they meet us.
 And this is rhetoric. The warning mine
 Not theirs.⁷²

The line “Limit- / Less does it” is characteristic of Spicer’s slipperiness, his refusal—despite the indignation, irony, and grief that make up the poem’s peculiar tonal texture—to be programmatic about what makes for good poetry and to be polemical about what, precisely, an alternative to the various bordellos (universities, commercial presses) in which a poet might whore her- or himself out looks like. If we privilege the unit of the sentence in our reading of these lines, then what “does it” (i.e., makes for good or true poetry) is that which is vast, expansive, without limits—one thinks of the *big*, often bombastic poetry of Duncan or Charles Olson. But Spicer’s strategic line break leaves “Less does it” as its own line, the aphoristic boldness (“Less is more”) of which directly contradicts the meaning of the sentence in its entirety, and echoes Spicer assertion, in the second letter to Lorca, that “[a] really perfect poem has an infinitely small vocabulary.”⁷³

The “new aesthetic” that is defined by “sharp / im / age[s]” and clipped lines that render words/phonemes themselves object-like evokes the Imagism of Pound and H. D. Pound’s appearance later in the poem (“Whore Pound / Wondered Homer.”), as well as the

⁷² Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 318.

⁷³ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 122.

echo of “make it new” in the line, helps to corroborate a reading of the particular “aesthetic” to which Spicer refers as one devised and executed by some of his modernist predecessors. The next lines emphasize the minimalism and particularity of the Imagist aesthetic, but they also gesture at: “Each place firmly tied to its place / Eaches to each.” If we read these lines as espousing more of a Spicerian localism than a Poundian precision, it they can be seen to enact the very emergence of literary styles or movements that the poem itself thematizes. In other words, the “ebbs and flows” of literary history that get figured in the second half of the poem as shifting oceanic tides and as the ghostly patterns and scattered sentences they leave as traces in the sand are modeled in this earlier moment of transition.

The assertion that this aesthetic “doesn’t reach much” could be a way of saying that it fails to push beyond its own narrow parameters into the social world. The line might also be read, with a little more flexibility, as a commentary on this aesthetic’s inability to affect people (“doesn’t reach *many*”)—though this might not square with some of Spicer’s discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies. The lines “And the sea changes / Despite the poet it is next to” situates coterie within the ebb and flow of literary history. Where Arnold’s poem conveys a deepening sense of the transience of human life amidst the flux of modernity, Spicer’s figures aesthetic inheritance as an always-incomplete process of erasure and revision. Thus, Spicer repurposes the lament and the elegy, bringing these modes to bear on questions of literary institutions and the aesthetics that are defined within and against them.

The “Postscript” to *Lament* takes the form of an apocryphal story—rendered as a dialogue within a dialogue—about D. H. Lawrence’s widow:

“Then Frieda [Lawrence] told us an incredible story. Someone who wanted Lawrence—and Frieda named the possessive admirer—wanted him in death as well as in life. Frieda’s house was invaded and Lawrence’s ashes were stolen.

‘You can believe,’ said Frieda, ‘I had a hard time getting them back [...]’⁷⁴

When she eventually does get them back, she “fixes” them: “I had the ashes mixed with a lot of sand and concrete. Now they are in a huge concrete slab. It weighs over a ton.’ She laughed heartily. ‘A dozen men could not lift it.’”⁷⁵ This is how the book ends. Though Spicer provides no frame for this curious “Postscript”—no real clues as to how to read it—it seems to offer a vision of literary genealogy as coterie gossip. Frieda has told her tale to some anonymous “we,” one of whom presumably told Spicer, who is now relaying the story to us. This is history. The postscript’s connections to elegy are also telling: it revels in the comedy, the absurdity even, of the desire for preservation and endurance.

v. “THE AFTERLIFE OF THE POEM”

Spicer’s comments in a 1965 lecture at UC Berkeley offer yet another perspective on his interest in ephemerality and his minimalist politics. While the topic of this lecture, “Poetry and Politics,” was certainly well calibrated to the tense political climate of the moment, Spicer’s message must have come as something of a shock to his audience. He begins his remarks on a dire note: “Well, when you talk about poetry and politics, it gets pretty desperate,” and despite an audience member’s attempt to tease some semblance of hopefulness out of Spicer’s defeatist account of the poet’s role in society (“The fact that you say you hope [that Mayakovsky has had an effect on the young people of Russia and the U.S.] proves that you have not given up hope that the poets do have a great influence.”), Spicer repeatedly insists that he “do[es]n’t really think that a poet can have any effect whatsoever on society.”⁷⁶ While Spicer refutes grandiose claims for poetry’s political

⁷⁴ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 322.

⁷⁵ Spicer, *Vocabulary*, 322.

⁷⁶ Gizzi, *House that Jack Built*, 162.

efficacy—from Shelley’s definition of poets as “unacknowledged legislators of the world” to Ginsberg’s politics and poetics of universal love—his cautionary remarks obscure a more modest account of the effects that poetry can have on, if not “the world” more broadly, than at least on the narrowly circumscribed world of a local community.

“[E]very poet has to create actively his own community,” Spicer asserts toward the end of the lecture, “but you need an artificial thing like [a little magazine] to do it.”⁷⁷

Community existed for Spicer on the page as much as in the world (“A magazine is a society,” he remarked in the same talk), and it was also, crucially, an ephemeral configuration:⁷⁸

The whole thing that the average younger poet thinks of is I want something in a magazine which is going to last. The idea of making things last is something which just has to be conquered. The idea of Open Space was that these things would not last. They wouldn’t be given past the East Bay.⁷⁹

Ephemerality is desirable for Spicer because whether a poem or a magazine endures or not depends at least in part on the endurance of the historical conditions that make the poem or the magazine (or the friendship or the coterie) possible and necessary in the first place. If poems, magazines, and coteries act as “counterenclosures” against things as they are, then an embrace of transience might reveal a more hopeful than resigned, a more cautiously utopian than nihilistic attitude about things as they might someday be.⁸⁰ This gesture is captured in Spicer’s assertion, in his second letter to Lorca, that “[a] poet is a time mechanic not an embalmer,” and more recently in contemporary poet Rob Halpern’s: “I hope these poems don’t persist. Or rather, I hope the conditions that make them readable do not.”⁸¹

⁷⁷ Gizzi, *House that Jack Built*, 167.

⁷⁸ Gizzi, *House that Jack Built*, 157.

⁷⁹ Gizzi, *House that Jack Built*, 166.

⁸⁰ I borrow the term “counterenclosure” from Chris Nealon’s *The Matter of Capital*, 110.

⁸¹ Rob Halpern, *Disaster Suites* (Palm Press, 2009).

CODA

Sometimes I think that there is no poetry written without the intervention of the dead.

—Alice Notley (2016)¹

Spicer—and, to some extent, Auden and the generation of '40s elegists—helps prepare us for the ways in which contemporary elegies accommodate a wider range of affects and a greater formal and thematic diversity. For all their variability, though, the basic rhythms of loss and consolation—whatever the nature of the former (personal, ideological) and no matter the source and status of the latter (complete, ongoing)—remain at the heart of the poems I identify as elegies. Many terrific twenty-first-century elegies have been written in a more personal register (recent books by Rusty Morrison, C. D. Wright, Mary Jo Bang, Peter Gizzi, and Denise Riley come to mind). These poems mourn the loss of loved ones by inhabiting (in various ways) lyric's contradictions and elisions.

The scaled-up elegies in this dissertation, on the other hand, grapple with losses less easily named. This is not to say that in losing a person, one doesn't suffer a metaphysical loss that resists categorization and consolation. Or that personal losses don't open themselves up to poetic meditations on broader social and political phenomena (they most certainly do in "Lycidas," for instance). But, as I hope I've shown, the ratio of public to private shifts dramatically in the Left elegies I look at here. These poems help us see what happens to the genre when the losses one suffers are ideological or historical: a defunct model of the good life or a social movement from the past, for instance. They also track what happens when the scale of that which is or might be lost—the very ground that sustains human life—is so

¹ Alice Notley, "Between the Living and the Dead: An Interview with Alice Notley," Shoshana Olidort, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, December 25, 2016.

vast as to make its loss unfathomable. In the case of the former, elegy intersects with the jeremiad, the coterie poem, and the political essay. In the latter, with ecological apocalypse.

If the midcentury poets discussed in this dissertation felt stranded—shipwrecked with their small, despairing cadres and forced to imagine new forms of sociability and solidarity—a longer historical view reveals that they were less isolated than they may have thought. A tradition of militant poetry has gained traction in the last decade, much of which attempts to theorize the geologico-historical interval in which we are situated, drawing on and interrogating new epochal paradigms like the Anthropocene and the Capitocene and, occasionally, making explicit reference to the archive with which this project engages. Juliana Spahr and Joshua Clover, for instance, have dubbed our precarious moment “the misanthropocene,” mixing (in a distinctly Spicerian way) affection with contempt, solidarity with pessimism. Anne Boyer characterizes it as “the throbbing age of names and naming” in her poem “Invocation of the Epic Called Oakland,” which superimposes ephemeral trends (coterie name dropping), durable traditions (the epic), and the temporalities of political struggle.

These poets also draw on the work of political theorists like Radhika Desai and Gopal Balakrishnan, who examine the geopolitical and economic causes of “the long downturn” and characterize our moment as both crisis and impasse, a pivotal time when U.S. hegemony in the world economy is faltering and when a range of possible alternatives to the neoliberal status quo hovers on the not-so-distant horizon. Desai’s and Balakrishnan’s historical materialist analyses of imperialism touch on the affective contours of the twenty-first century as well. While Balakrishnan ends his 2009 article, “Speculations on the Stationary State,” with a rather “pessimistic verdict on civilization’s *longue durée*,” the conclusion of Desai’s 2013 book is more hopeful in its tentative framing of alternatives to

global capitalism.² Comparing the second decade of the twenty-first century to the postwar era with the bulk of this dissertation is concerned, she writes:

The present multipolar moment contains more hopeful possibilities than even the end of the Second World War. Then the inordinate power that war gave the United States set the world on a long detour from the sort of international world of multilateral economic governance which contemporaries had looked forward to, and which Keynes's original proposals had sought to realize. When the 2008 financial crisis ended that detour, history finally caught up with Keynes's far-sighted vision. That vision was of a world in which the economic roles of states have legitimacy and are reinforced by the institutions of international economic governance. Such a relegitimization of states' economic roles is necessary before they can be oriented toward popular interests and even socialism.³

Desai acknowledges that such a large-scale restructuring of the global economy hinges upon on-the-ground resistance, citing uprisings around the world from Arab Spring to the Occupy protests as evidence of how a global network of solidarity coheres out of various, smaller-scale struggles: "The full realization of [these] possibilities ... depends on popular mobilizations that are organized to take and use state power, motivated to exercise it in the interests of the broadest possible constituencies, and informed by an analysis of the problems and possibilities of the current momentous historical conjuncture."⁴

With Balakrishnan's pessimistic impasse in mind, many contemporary poets are writing poems of loss that also express individual and collective senses of *being lost* within the "new kind of 'worldlessness' and drift" to which Balakrishnan refers.⁵ Juliana Spahr's *That Winter the Wolf Came* and Danez Smith's *Black Movie*, both published in 2015, track

² Gopal Balakrishnan, "Speculations on the Stationary State," *New Left Review* 59 (Sept./Oct. 2009), 7. A further elaboration on the pessimism referred to above: "We are entering into a period of inconclusive struggles between a weakened capitalism and dispersed agencies of opposition, within delegitimated and insolvent political orders. The end of history could be thought to begin when no project of global scope is left standing, and a new kind of 'worldlessness' and drift begins ... In the absence of organized political projects to build new forms of autonomous life, the ongoing crisis will be stalked by ecological fatalities that will not be evaded by faltering growth" (26).

³ Radhika Desai, *Geopolitical Economy: After US hegemony, Globalization and Empire* (London: Pluto Press, 2013), 275.

⁴ Desai, *Geopolitical Economy*, 276.

⁵ Balakrishnan, "Speculations," 26.

mourning's motions through the twenty-first century. They shuttle between Spicerian pessimism and Shelleyan hope and, to the extent that they offer solace, they locate it in the tenuous social formations of grassroots movements and in the ephemeral rhythms of daily life.

In "Transitory, Momentary," the long prose poem that opens *That Winter the Wolf Came*, Spahr subtly channels Milton ("The police know, as they move through the park *yet one more time*") in her description of an Occupy camp's destruction, inviting us to see the strategic repetitions she deploys as part of a long tradition of elegiac refrain.⁶ The densest and most prismatic of these repetitions involves a series of fleeting glimpses of a public scene: a group of friends and strangers singing along to a contemporary pop song at a bar—a brief respite from the ongoing Occupy demonstrations with which they've been involved. The refrain of the song (never reproduced, only alluded to) in turn becomes the subject of Spahr's scattered meditations, themselves a refrain throughout her poem, on the "minor losses" suffered by song's speaker and the more incalculable losses we've suffered as a species:

The refrain is the moment when the Singer makes it clear that they understand something about what is being lost. It was obvious they had lost their country, it being taken over by bankers and all. They had clearly been rejected. Loved too much and gotten too little back in return, many times. But none of this matters, it was obvious, in comparison to what is now being lost for that night even though the song is about a minor loss, about the loss

⁶ Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came* (Oakland, CA: Commune Editions, 2015), 14, emphasis mine. For a discussion of the origins and uses of elegiac refrain, see Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, 23-26: "Often, elegies are presented as being repetitions in themselves. For example, even the lament within Theocritus's 'First Idyl,' the poem commonly regarded as initiating the genre, has, we are told, been sung by Thyrsis on earlier occasions. And Thyrsis's song contains within itself a refrain whose most frequent variant is 'Begin, Muses, begin again the pastoral song.' We observed earlier how each loss recapitulates a prior loss. And we spoke of the elegy's reenactment of an 'entry' into a preexisting language and code. These are only partial reasons for the repetitious character of so many elegies and for the way so many seem to 'begin again' or to commence with a 'yet once more.' Repetition creates a sense of continuity, of an unbroken pattern such as one may oppose to the extreme discontinuity of death." Sacks's ultimately optimistic interpretation of elegiac repetition finds counterexamples in many a poem of grief. In the fifth section of Spenser's "Daphnaida," for instance, the melancholic shepherd Alcyon offers a litany of all the earthly objects he's come to hate in the absence of his beloved.

of tongue on clit or cock, the singer seemed to understand something about the other things that are lost [...] It might be that only through the minor we can feel enormity. It might be that there is nothing to epiphany if it does not hind at the moment of sweaty relation larger than the intimate. For what is epiphanic song if it doesn't spill out and over the many that are pulled from intimacies by oil's circulations?⁷

By establishing a sense of continuity between past and present, poetry and popular music, minor and major loss, Spahr makes tradition speak—or sing—to the exigencies of the present.

When Spahr refers to “the refrain,” she might mean the specific refrain of the unnamed pop song or the art of refrain in general. This lexical ambiguity is maintained in her use of the pronoun “they,” which is both a gender-neutral way of referring to a specific singer and a means of indexing a condition or experience shared among a group of people. Keeping the poem suspended between the singular and the collective, Spahr invites us to “feel enormity” through the minor, to use our “transitory, momentary triumph[s]” and intimacies to understand and to resist the forces (institutional, economic, environmental) that arrange our lives and loves. “[E]xperienc[ing] the tongue in meaningful conversation,” building a barricade at an Occupy camp, singing along to a pop song among strangers and friends—for Spahr, these fleeting experiences form a bulwark of optimism against the sense that “life ... is only circulations.”⁸

Spahr's anti-capitalist politics take shape in *That Winter* as a record of the poet's lived experience. The book is theoretical, too, but in a way that is always enmeshed in the messiness of the social. It allows poetic forms and political theories to remain provisional. It tests their limits rather than shoring them up. “What I have to offer here is nothing

⁷ Spahr, *That Winter*, 15-16.

⁸ Spahr, *That Winter*, 16.

revolutionary,” Spahr tells us on the book’s first page, before invoking the grassroots movements out of which her poems were written.

Her interest in contradiction, plurality, and experiment is made even more explicit in “Brent Crude,” throughout which she repeatedly mentions “a poem about oil extraction in iambic pentameter” that she intended to, but never did, write. “Brent Crude,” as its title suggests, is itself a poem about (among other things) oil extraction—albeit a prosy, free verse one. By preserving the ghostly outline of a jettisoned form within the massy, chatty prose block that supplants it, Spahr makes the seams of poetic composition visible and, in turn, lets in the light of epiphanic vision. She carves out another productively negative space later in “Brent Crude”:

I do not want to say the children are the future. Ok? But that is just the beginning of what I do not want to say. I do not want to imply that my body is involuntary at these moments. I do not want to suggest an insurrectionary body. I do not want to use the word occupy. I am trying to figure something out. Something I do not yet understand about my physical body, my real financial, medical, and social needs.

Spahr’s interrogatory, essayistic affirmation of the negative makes room for previously unimagined political paradigms and poetic forms. “Brent Crude’s” litany of refusal (“I do not want”) echoes a more affirmative moment in “Transitory, Momentary”:

...In this time, the time of the oil wars, there are many reasons that singers give for being so lost. Often they are lost because of love. Sometimes they are lost because of drugs. Sometimes they have lost their country and in their heart it feels as if they have lost something big. And then sometimes they are lost just because they are in Bakersfield. Really though they are lost because in this time song holds loss. And this time is a time of loss.

These two passages act as a kind of call and response. One strains to understand a contemporary structure of feeling by multiplying its various, intersecting causes (“Sometimes ... sometimes ...”). The other feels out an appropriate reaction to the abiding sense of loss that, for Spahr, defines “our time.”

Danez Smith's *Black Movie* is a lyric meditation on the intersections of race, culture, sexuality, and loss. It explores the ways in which "the condition of black life is one of mourning," even as it interrogates and defies the structures (poetic, cultural, social) that undergird it.⁹ The book intervenes in two genres from which black experience has been marginalized and excluded and within which it has been pigeonholed and stereotyped: lyric (and, more specifically, elegiac) poetry and Hollywood film. Smith's poems flicker through a counterfactual history of black film and black mourning that, for all its sadness, is also comedic and, at times, even triumphant. "Boyz n the Hood 2," "Lion King in the Hood," "Sleeping Beauty in the Hood," and a "Film on Black Joy"—these movies don't exist so Smith invents them for us. "Politics of Elegy" (a lyric meditation on the uses and abuses of elegy) and "Short Film" (a sequence of eight anti-elegies for young black men and women killed by police) explicitly mine the elegiac canon for images and conventions to which the experience of a young queer person of color in the twenty-first century might be retrofitted.

The volume begins in the realm of the undead. "Sleeping Beauty in the Hood," whose protagonist has been renamed Jamal, "won't wake up" despite the best attempts of his suitors. Smith's poem reminds us of the violence that underwrites the sugarcoated Disney story: the violence of the original fairy tale, the backdrop of the Civil Rights struggle in 1959 (the year the animated film was released), and the enduring histories of violence against racially and sexually marginalized groups in the U.S. "This ain't no kid flick," Smith warns, "There is no magic here":

The fairies get killed too. The kingdom has no king.
All the red in this carton is painted with blood:
the apples, the velvet robes, Jamal's cold mouth.¹⁰

⁹ This phrase comes from the title of an essay by Claudia Rankine that appeared in the June 22, 2015 (online) issue of *The New York Times Magazine*.

¹⁰ Danez Smith, *Black Movie* (Minneapolis: Button Poetry / Exploding Pinecone Press, 2015), 3.

“Secret Garden in the Hood” tells the story of “what happens to dead kids when the dirt does its work”:

Jonathan, 17, is a blue azalea
sitting in Mary’s office.
She waters him every other day.

Devon, 15, sits on the corner
dressed in baby’s breath.
His new arms bloom & toes
tangle in cigarette butts.

Kevin, 19, doesn’t hang
out far from his headstone.
He is the greenest grass
in the graveyard that reads
like an attendance sheet.¹¹

The poem’s final portrait is of “Chucky, 20,” who “made it / to his brother’s funeral / [and] laid himself across the casket.”¹² The line breaks in this stanza perform a kind of bait-and-switch: we’re led to believe that Chucky, unlike the others who came before, has “made it” out of the poem alive. Even with the entire stanza in view, Chucky’s status remains elusive (alive or dead? human or non-human?). But, once we’ve processed the scene, our hopes are painfully, powerfully dashed. Though the poem begins by reinforcing death’s transformative beauty, its final stanza’s deflationary ruse forcefully undermines this elegiac logic.

“scene: portrait of black boy with flowers,” which immediately follows “Secret Garden,” critiques the economy of elegy even more explicitly. The black boy in this poem, unlike Chucky, is neither in nor on a casket. In “scene,” nature does not supplant the vanished human body. The two complement each other. Here is the poem in full:

scene: portrait of black boy with flowers

& he is not in a casket

¹¹ Smith, *Black Movie*, 7.

¹² Smith, *Black Movie*, 8.

nor do I say roses all around him
& mean a low blood tide

he does not return to dirt

the stem does not bloom
from concrete

he does not bring flowers
to his best friend's wake

nor does he give them
to a woman who will
grieve him one day

the boy is in his aunt's garden
& the world does not matter

his lungs are full
of a green, full scent

pollen dusts his skin
gold as he grows

Embodiment and sensory experience defiantly take the place of reincarnation as the elegiac horizon of hope.

The book's virtuosic last poem, "Dinosaurs in the Hood," is a gleefully apocalyptic fantasia in which formerly extinct creatures return to threaten the extinction of our species. Smith sets the scene with the brash enthusiasm of a Hollywood producer: "Let's make a movie called *Dinosaurs in the Hood*. / *Jurassic Park* meets *Friday* meets *The Pursuit of Happiness*." This will not be, Smith assures us, a vehicle for Will Smith or the Wayans brothers. "Don't let Tarantino direct this," he warns. These Hollywood figures come to stand for, respectively, black masculinity that marginalizes women, black humor at the expense of other ethnic groups, and the directorial vision of white men who simultaneously fetishize and whitewash black experience: "I don't want any racist shit / about Asian People or overused Latino stereotypes ... I don't want some cheesy ... buddy-cop film" with a

black girl sidekick. What Smith *does* want are “grandmas on the front porch taking out / raptors with guns they hid in walls & under mattresses . . . I want Cecily Tyson to make / a speech, maybe 2. I want Viola Davis to save the city in the last / scene with a black fist afro pick through the last dinosaur’s long, / cold-blood neck.”¹³ Blackness alone doesn’t determine this “tenuous we”—it is also female and radical, overlooked and obscured despite its star power.

In “Dinosaurs in the Hood,” as in *Jurassic Park*, humankind’s promethean aspirations wreak havoc on the world. These aspirations also, ironically, lie at the heart of elegy. In *this* elegy, though, the T-Rex doesn’t come back as a flower, and we’re invited to wonder whether Smith is issuing a warning about the dangers inherent in any desire—poetic or otherwise—to restore what’s been lost. Smith’s “Politics of Elegy” is similarly ambivalent about the stakes of raising the dead: “I say their [dead friends] names & nothing / happens or: I say their names / & a fire starts everywhere or: I say / their names & their names sprout / wings. raise your hands if you think / I’m a messenger. now this time / if you think I’m a tomb raider. / look around. there are no wrong answers.”¹⁴

The last stanzas of “Dinosaurs in the Hood” are a litany of all the things the film *cannot* be (“a black movie”; a “metaphor for black people and extinction”; a film “about a long history of having a long history with hurt”). Smith seems to want to get the heavy-handed symbolism out of the way while still giving it its due (he *does* name these interpretive lenses and exegetic conclusions in the poem after all, even if it’s only to dismiss them). This list is followed by another, more poignant repetition that shades into incantation: “No bullets in the heroes. & no one kills the black boy. & no one kills the black boy. & no one

¹³ Smith, *Black Movie*, 39.

¹⁴ Smith, *Black Movie*, 32-33.

kills the black boy.”¹⁵ There was “no magic” in “Sleeping Beauty in the Hood,” but Smith holds out hope for some here. Like Spahr, who reiterates again and again what she does *not* want her poem to say, Smith coaxes hope from an unremittingly negative rhetorical space.

The final, moving lines of “Dinosaurs” transcend (without erasing) the long history of hurt that forms its subtext:

the only reason I want to make it is for that first scene anyway:

little black boy on the bus with a toy dinosaur,
his eyes wise & endless

his dreams possible, pulsing, & right there.¹⁶

Spahr doesn’t want to say that “the children are the future” and neither does Smith, exactly, but both poets find consolation in what is small, and “pulsing, & *right there*.” In the “dense sensual activity of ... belonging to the now.”¹⁷ In embodied experience and collective life. In vulnerability and proneness. At the same time, they resist cancelling out the conditions of mourning that make these forms of consolation desirable and necessary. Smith’s and Spahr’s contemporary political elegies displace and disperse the ground of tradition from which they draw. They document an omnipresent sense of loss in the Anthropocene while imagining other ways to be alive within it. They “kn[o]w it [is] never enough but / hope[] to improve a little by living.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Smith, *Black Movie*, 40.

¹⁶ Smith, *Black Movie*, 40.

¹⁷ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 261.

¹⁸ Auden, “In Memory of Sigmund Freud,” *Collected Poems*, 273.

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