

Seeking the True Contrary:
The Politics of Form and Experience in American Modernism, 1913-1950

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Abstract

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This dissertation reconstructs the tradition of “democratic modernism” in the United States from its origins in the fertile avant-garde circles of the early 1910s through the maturation of American modernism as a cultural institution in the 1920s, the subsequent challenge to its authority by the radical social movements of the 1930s, and culminating in the ideological battles and profound geopolitical shift during and after World War II. It focuses on the overlapping intellectual careers of four literary figures – William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Burke, Archibald MacLeish, and Charles Olson – against the background of a wider cohort that included Marianne Moore, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, F. O. Matthiessen, Melvin Tolson, Ruth Benedict, Edward Dahlberg, Dwight Macdonald, and Allen Ginsberg. The dissertation argues that debates over form and experience, strongly influenced by the writings of Ezra Pound and John Dewey, defined these central figures’ efforts to conceptualize a democratic subject grounded in aesthetic experience. For the democratic modernists, the poetic subject became a metaphor for a fully realized democratic subject, and “poetry” came to symbolize more than just verse but also a heightened aesthetic orientation towards society that could serve as the basis for cultural reform and, for a time, revolutionary transformation.

In reconstructing democratic modernism as a tradition, this dissertation aims to rethink the origins of the postwar counterculture as the political and philosophical heir of radical democracy in the interwar period. As the counterculture emerged in the shadow of the Cold War, leading figures such as Olson and Ginsberg helped shift the political ideals of the 1930s left

towards aesthetic practice, preserving a cultural space for radical democracy between official anti-Communism and the aesthetic autonomy professed by intellectual elites. It concludes that the “true contrary” that Olson urged his fellow poets and artists in the late 1940s to seek through aesthetic practice had been there before him and continues to be a relevant stance within American society. This tradition proposes that through an active and critical inquiry into the conditions of one’s experience and the values that make them up, any person through receptivity, imagination, and poetic speech, broadly construed, can mediate the seeming oppositions in our society, creating new forms of understanding, ritual, and symbolic experience.

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For Papa, who taught me to appreciate,

the fences and outhouses
built of barrel-staves
and parts of boxes, all,
if I am fortunate,
smeared a bluish green
that properly weathered
pleases me best
of all colors.

—WCW, “Pastoral” (1917)

Introduction

In the Winter 1946 issue of *Partisan Review*, the premier modernist literary journal in the United States at the time, there appeared at the back of the issue a peculiar short essay by Charles Olson entitled “This is Yeats Speaking.” Compared to many of *Partisan Review*’s contributors, Olson was largely unknown outside of a few intellectual circles in New York and Washington, D.C. and the small community of Herman Melville scholars. During the war, he had written propaganda for the Office of War Information and served in the 1944 campaign of Franklin D. Roosevelt before leaving politics to dedicate himself to poetry, which he had only recently begun to write.¹

In the essay, Olson assumed the voice of the late Irish poet William Butler Yeats speaking from the seventh sphere of Dante’s *Paradiso* about his friend Ezra Pound, who was then being held on charges of treason for radio broadcasts that he had made for the Mussolini government. Olson/Yeats offers a lucid defense of Pound, not so much apologizing for his actions as urging the distinguished community of writers in the *Partisan Review*, many of whom had known Pound for decades, to try him in their own aesthetic court of appeals: “There is a court you leave silent—history present, the issue the larger concerns of authority than a state.” The “authority” at stake for Olson was the poet’s authority within the “world of whiggery,” that is modernity defined by science, capitalism, and liberal democracy. Pound’s generation of modernists had opposed this world in their dedication to aesthetic formalism, the belief that the work of art constitutes a sacred *telos* set against “a leveling, rancorous, rational time.”

In retrospect, the real richness of Olson’s essay, however, concerns not so much Pound’s predicament as the opening his situation provided onto the politics of the immediate postwar moment. The specific audience that the essay addressed was Olson’s own generation of younger

writers emerging from the war. “You are the antithetical men, and your time is forward, the conflict is more declared,” Olson/Yeats urges them, “it is [for] you to hold the mirror up to authority, behind our respect for which lay a disrespect for democracy as we were acquainted with it.” Olson clearly offered the essay as a literary call to arms, taking Pound’s fate as a cautionary example, but to what purpose? The key phrase is one that reflected Olson’s deep familiarity with Yeats’s occult writings inspired by William Blake: “true contrary.” He argued that almost no one understood “the contraries which are now engaged. William Blake observed that oppositions do not make true contraries.” “Now” referred to the tense uncertainty of the international order in early 1946, with fascism defeated but the American and Soviet systems uneasily arrayed against each other on ideological and potentially military grounds: “It is a civil war in which you are locked.” The possibility of resolution for Olson lay in realizing that the polarized world was not rigidly opposed but rather a dynamic continuum between positions, “true contraries” as Blake had theorized. Olson’s antithetical men would seek true contrary rather than merely “oppose and go forward” as Yeats and Pound had done.²

The importance for us of this peculiar essay, drawing on occult theories to interpret geopolitical questions, derives in part from Olson’s subsequent career. Over the next decade, he would become a leading theorist and practitioner of postwar American poetry, first through his direct engagement with Pound and his American counterpart William Carlos Williams, and then as director of Black Mountain College, working in concert with the poets Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Allen Ginsberg and others to forge networks of aesthetic affiliation. Olson’s call for a generation of “antithetical men” was realized perhaps far beyond what he could have imagined. Donald Allen’s influential anthology of postwar poetry, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, records the creative ferment among a number of affiliated groups and scenes, located primarily in New York and San Francisco, but drawing poets from all corners of the country. Along with

visual artists and folk and jazz musicians, these poets were central to the development of a vibrant, broad-based counterculture that grew up in the shadow of the Cold War. This counterculture was characterized by its independence from Cold War influence on both cultural institutions and the military-scientific bureaucracy that dominated American universities during this period. It also provided a bohemian space for experimental living and the creative transformation of values, which despite oppressions that remained within the counterculture allowed for the application of critical intelligence to questions of racism, feminism, and queer liberation. Indeed, the counterculture as it developed in the 1950s became fertile soil culturally for the politics of the New Left that emerged in the early 1960s.³

Olson's essay is also important because it reveals a crucial political dimension to the origins of the counterculture that gets obscured in popular narratives focused on Dionysian rejection of a Cold War "politics of responsibility" – antinomian escape in the atomic age. In the essay, Olson/Yeats argues that to seek true contraries instead of oppositions, "you must take strength by embracing the criticism of your enemy." In a moment of ideological polarity, Olson hoped to listen to both sides while rejecting their mutual rigidity. On the American side, he had seen in his time as a propagandist the shift from the radical-democratic internationalism that had inspired the formation of the Office of War Information, enshrined in Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, to corporate liberal propaganda that promoted the "Fifth Freedom" of private enterprise as the United States rose to postwar dominance internationally. On the Soviet side, Olson resisted what he saw as the Stalinist corruption of the original revolutionary promise of Leninism, which the populist solidarity of the Spanish Civil War had renewed in his view. Olson belonged to the historical bloc of the Popular Front, which had brought together industrial unionists, anti-fascists, and independent leftist intellectuals in support of the war even as they pressured New Deal Democrats to lay the foundation for American social democracy. This

movement would encounter brutal repression in the reactionary climate of the late 1940s to be sure, but Olson's proposal to shift the political ideals of the movement towards aesthetic practice preserved a cultural space for radical democracy between official anti-Communism and the aesthetic autonomy professed by intellectual elites in universities and modernist journals like *Partisan Review*.⁴

If Olson's essay pointed forward to the cultural work to be done in the turbulent ideological atmosphere of postwar America, it also registered the tradition from which he hoped to draw. Olson/Yeats says, "It is the use, the use you make of us," referring to major modernist figures such as Pound, Eliot, Yeats, and Joyce. But I will argue that "the use" Olson's antithetical men were to make – the form of their mediations – was also inflected by another tradition that had run in dialectical relation to the cosmopolitan modernism developed in London and Paris by these writers. This tradition, which I call "democratic modernism," was like its counterpart only a generation old, having its origins in the first wave of avant-garde art and literature produced in America during the 1910s. Lacking a self-conscious publicist of Pound's energy and organizational talent, democratic modernism consisted more of a set of practices and questions than a coherent aesthetic ideology. In its most basic form, it was the reception and adaptation of the formal and philosophical innovations of European modernism in the context of American political and philosophical traditions. Three American traditions in particular were important: democratic republicanism, which had its political origins in the early nineteenth century but had taken a specifically cultural form among certain progressive intellectuals in the first two decades of the twentieth century; liberal internationalism, which only emerged after 1900 but found an influential proponent in Woodrow Wilson as a democratic alternative to European geopolitics; and philosophical pragmatism, which reflected the influence of the other two traditions in its development, especially in the widely influential writings of John Dewey as a public intellectual.⁵

This dissertation reconstructs the tradition of democratic modernism from its origins in the fertile avant-garde movements of the early 1910s through the maturation of modernism as a cultural institution in the 1920s and the subsequent challenge to its authority by radical social movements in the 1930s. Its development culminated in the ideological battles and profound geopolitical shift that took place during and after World War II. In order to capture a period of this length with such variant political and social conditions, I have focused on the intellectual careers of four literary figures whose writing and creative practices overlapped, at times directly intersecting, who grappled with the same texts, movements, intellectual questions, and political circumstances so as to constitute a tradition that is coherent in retrospect even if it was not named as such at the time.

These four figures – William Carlos Williams, Kenneth Burke, Archibald MacLeish, and Charles Olson – all shared multiple creative and professional interests, whether as poets, critics, theorists, cultural historians, or propagandists, although each of them is remembered today primarily for one main role: Williams as a poet, Burke as a literary theorist, MacLeish as a government official, and Olson as poet and teacher. These figures constitute the foreground of what I conceive as a richly populated cultural space that included writers and intellectuals of no less importance, whose work provides invaluable context for their work: Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Randolph Bourne, Malcolm Cowley, Edmund Wilson, F. O. Matthiessen, Melvin Tolson, Orson Welles, Ruth Benedict, Edward Dahlberg, Dwight Macdonald, and Robert Creeley. All of these intellectuals were arguably part of the history of democratic modernism and are deserving of the same in-depth focus as I give my primary subjects. Given the scope of this project and its long periodicity though, I have chosen to focus on these four so as to give priority to a diachronic understanding of their intellectual development in response to dramatic shifts in

historical events. The principle of selection was that these figures were the most vocal proponents of democratic modernism and defined its central questions in their own work.

Two other figures, however, loom especially large in this tradition and in a sense define its polarities, or to use Olson's term, its contraries. The first was Ezra Pound, who because of his virulent anti-Semitism and Fascist allegiances has long occupied a controversial place in the history of modernism. Pound weaves through the entirety of my narrative, from his early undergraduate encounter with Williams at the University of Pennsylvania in 1903 to Olson's visits to him in his confinement at St. Elizabeth's Hospital after the Second World War. If T. S. Eliot was arguably the more influential figure in Anglo-American modernism more broadly, Pound was a greater catalyst for the democratic modernists due to his editorial and organizational genius, his restless formal experimentation, and his tortured relationship with his native country. Pound was both an intellectual foil and a crucial influence for three of my subjects (not as much for Burke), and by his often negative example helped them to sharpen their understanding of modernism in democratic terms. The second pole of this tradition was John Dewey, the preeminent American intellectual for the first half of the twentieth century and a seminal modern philosopher of democracy. While none of my subjects worked directly with Dewey, his pragmatist theory of experience, especially in its interwar aesthetic incarnation, provided the philosophical grounding for their alternative conception of modernist poetics. For Williams in terms of perception as for Burke in terms of values, their engagement with Dewey's ideas was fundamental to their development and set the terms for Olson's postwar writings.⁶

The contrary of Pound and Dewey also points towards a theoretical contrary that is at the heart of the intellectual history of this tradition: form and experience. In a 1949 lecture, the literary historian F. O. Matthiessen argued that the decades following the First World War saw a "revolution in criticism" oriented around careful attention to form, which itself had followed the

self-conscious exploration of form that was a defining characteristic of modernism across the arts, not least in painting and poetry which dominated modernist debates among the American avant-garde. As Matthiessen saw it, formalism ran the risk of withdrawing into a “closed garden,” aloof from political and social questions. Ironically, the rise of formalism occurred during a period of almost unparalleled political and social upheaval across the world, with the failed peace of World War I contributing to the economic crisis of liberal capitalism during the Great Depression, and ideological mobilizations, whether fascism, communism, or social democracy, that vied to replace that system. Throughout this period, pure formalism came under criticism from intellectuals in the political realm. For democratic modernists like Matthiessen, an orientation towards “reality,” defined as experience in the pragmatist sense, served to ground formalism without losing its insights into aesthetic complexity or valuation. In Matthiessen’s famous dictum, later adopted by Olson, “form was inseparable from content.” For each of my subjects, the dynamic contrary of form and experience oriented their work in response to the key political events of their time: for Williams, the labor unrest of the 1910s; for Burke the revolutionary potential of the Depression crisis; for MacLeish the anti-fascist cause; and for Olson the aftermath of total war symbolized by Hiroshima and Buchenwald.⁷

Another central issue for the democratic modernists was the importance of subjectivity for the democratic reform of society. Within the context of early twentieth-century America, this issue had emerged from debates about personality among cultural critics in New York, the Young Intellectuals, who strived to articulate how to integrate a liberated expressive self in relation to a community and a wider society. But the deeper roots of this debate lay in Dewey’s educational theories and his earliest Neo-Hegelian attempts to understand the expressive individual in relation to the articulations of the social totality. Concerns about Dewey’s acquiescence to military intervention in World War I, and its implications for his theories of instrumental reason,

led both he and his critics to reassess his account of subjectivity in light of the aesthetic ideas of the Young Intellectuals as well as the emerging field of cultural anthropology. The result was the “aesthetic turn” in Deweyan pragmatism first broached in *Experience and Nature* (1925) and fully realized in *Art as Experience* (1934). For the democratic modernists, especially Williams and Burke, the poetic subject became a metaphor for a fully realized democratic subject, and “poetry” came to symbolize more than just verse but also a heightened aesthetic orientation towards society that could serve as the basis for cultural reform, or in Burke’s case, a new revolutionary totality. MacLeish in turn adapted Burke’s theory of revolutionary symbolism for the political speech and propaganda of anti-fascism. An implicit internationalism that had been a strand in Williams and Dewey’s aesthetic pragmatism became central to MacLeish’s propaganda, although he lost the integrity of the subject in his account, making his idealistic visions vulnerable to ideological cooptation by the wartime state. In his turn to poetry after the war, Olson undertook the recovery of this subject with a particular emphasis on the body in space.

In a project of obvious interdisciplinary scope, it is important to state my own orientation. My training is in intellectual and cultural history and my primary emphasis lies there, especially in the literatures that I engage. One broad corrective that I have intended with this project is to draw connections between figures often treated as *sui generis* and their intellectual contexts. The literatures on Williams, Burke, and Olson are extensive but to a large degree treat them in isolation or in relation to only one other thinker or artist. Due to the extent and complexity of their work, these writers are all certainly worthy of such close scrutiny, but as a result they have been comparatively neglected in the cultural history of American intellectuals.⁸

In reconstructing the history of democratic modernism, I also hope to bridge different eras that have been treated synchronically more than diachronically over a longer stretch: the Progressive Era, the radical Thirties, and the postwar period. At the risk of attenuation and loss

of depth in a particular decade, I have thought it important to connect these different eras to stress the continuity and adaptation of a particular tradition of democratic aesthetics despite the dramatic political and social changes between these periods. In this respect, my narrative attempts to further the still sparse literature on the history of American modernism, which by its very “provinciality,” to borrow David Hollinger’s term, generatively distinguished itself from European modernist thought based on the unique circumstances of American political development. There are two important corollaries to this history of American modernism. The first is the institutional context of little magazines, radical journals, magazine journalism as well as the wartime state and universities that charts the social geography of intellectual and creative production, and the relative engagement of intellectuals. The second is what I believe to be a much larger project that deserves further attention: the intellectual history of Anglo-American formalism as a transatlantic movement, and its tension with aesthetic pragmatism as a contrary tradition.⁹

Besides intellectual history, I hope that this dissertation can provide further insight into the history of the American left in the interwar period and its continuities after the war. Because of a generation of scholarship that either reified Cold War ideological categories or reargued the political debates of the 1930s, I would argue that the cause of radical democracy, what John Dewey called the “third camp” position between Communism and the New Deal, has been relegated to the status of a less impassioned and even irrelevant bystander within more consequential debates. I place the cause of radical democracy in America in the context of recent interest in rethinking the Spanish Civil War not merely as a dress rehearsal for world war but also as a world-historical opening that, even if not fully realized, provided intimations of a meaningful radical-democratic internationalism that carried over into the postwar period. This alternative vision of American internationalism, less explicitly ideological than the dominant Cold War

incarnation, is a frame to consider the connection between American radicals in the counterculture and black internationalism and decolonization movements.¹⁰

With regards to methodology, I approach each of my subjects from a biographical perspective, which is not offered as explanatory on a psychological or sociological basis but rather is a means to establish the social and intellectual context of their work – their education, their institutional affiliations, their professed aspirations, and especially, their responses to particular historical events and shifts – for example, mobilization during World War I, the deepening economic crisis of the Depression, the Spanish Civil War, or the liberation of concentration camps. The emphasis of my textual analysis is on what I consider to be major texts in the intellectual development of a subject, but I also make frequent use of shorter essays and correspondence to illuminate his thinking about a particular political situation or theoretical question. Although this project is based in the discipline of history, I believe strongly that close reading should be in the tool kit of every historian, and that a great deal can be accomplished by careful descriptive analysis that establishes argument and attends to contextual details.¹¹

Obviously, for aesthetic texts of greater formal complexity, description is necessary but not sufficient. Here I draw upon insights that are immanent to the tradition under analysis, in particular the social formalism of F. O. Matthiessen read through the lens of Raymond Williams's Marxist criticism. Matthiessen argued that, "an artist's use of language is the most sensitive index to cultural history, since a man can articulate only what he is, and what he has been made by the society of which he is a willing or unwilling part." The key point that I derive from Matthiessen's formalism is that an artist or thinker does not merely reflect his social and political context, but illuminates it subjectively through the formal mediations of his work. That work is also importantly embedded within particular institutional contexts and stylistic debates, but my primary focus will be on responses to historical events and political questions, and how my

subjects actively proposed formalistic solutions to political questions. Another key aspect of this tradition that is relevant to my method is the question of rhetoric, specifically an author addressing a particular audience or situation with his work, and the means he chooses to engage that audience. The inverse of this is the process of reading, specifically how differing interpretations of the same text reveal both philosophical and contextual differences.¹²

In my own efforts to recover and outline the tradition of the democratic modernists, I have tried to suggest that the “true contrary” that Olson urged his fellow poets and artists to seek through aesthetic practice had been there before him and continues to be a relevant stance within American society. This tradition proposes that through an active and critical inquiry into the conditions of one’s experience and the values that make them up, any person through receptivity, imagination, and poetic speech, broadly construed, can mediate the seeming oppositions in our society, creating new forms of understanding, ritual, and symbolic experience. Although several of my figures hoped that this tradition could establish a dominant position in society, my own position is perhaps closer to Kenneth Burke’s sense of counter-statement: “Heresies and orthodoxies will always be changing places, but whatever the minority view happens to be at any given time, one must consider it as ‘counter.’” Sensitive responsiveness to experience and the possibilities it creates for poetic speech will perhaps inevitably run contrary to prevailing structures and their ideologies, but making the case for a humane society in vital imaginative terms is essential work always to be done.¹³

Chapter 1 – The Poetics of Experience

In the late spring of 1917 soon after the United States entered the First World War, William Carlos Williams, a young doctor in Rutherford, N.J. known by a few friends at home and a few abroad to write poems in his off hours, began a daily writing exercise. At idle moments during his day, often not until he returned to his home office weary from delivering babies or treating sudden fevers, he would scribble prose poems, “leaving behind on my desk, often past midnight, the sheets to be filed away later.” His exercises had been inspired by two serialized texts he was then reading in the modernist journal *The Little Review*: the French poet Arthur Rimbaud’s 1873 *Illuminations* and installments of the expatriate Irish author James Joyce’s novel-in-progress, *Ulysses*. As he told it, Williams’s purpose was to record details of his day: a particular color of sky silhouetting a landscape by the side of the road; momentary feelings of desire for a patient or passer-by; or a vivid anecdote he had heard about murder or depredation in his town. He was particularly interested in the fragmented form these impressions took in his imagination many hours later, and the form of his prose poems reflected this: their dissonant juxtaposition of words and images captured the impressions as he found them in his tired consciousness.¹

After a year of this daily practice, he culled and collected the scraps of paper into a “bulky manuscript” that a small Boston publisher published in 1920 as *Kora in Hell: Improvisations*. At the request of his friend Ezra Pound, Williams composed a prologue to this volume to give, as he wrote, “some hint by which the reader of good will might come at my intention.” The “hint” he gave was hardly understated though. Rather it was a brash declaration of purpose, defiantly challenging European predominance in the cosmopolitan literary avant-garde. Daily immersion in his local environment that his practice afforded him seems to have emboldened Williams to argue that the American avant-garde, which had emerged suddenly in New York in the early years of

the war, could offer an alternative aesthetic orientation based on the democratic possibilities of perception and imagination.²

To illustrate his ideas about perception and imagination, Williams opened the prologue with a peculiar series of anecdotes, paratactically joined without comment. After relating several stories about his mother's "great intensity of perception," Williams recounted Marcel Duchamp's R. Mutt escapade, when the artist submitted a urinal purchased at a hardware store to a New York exhibition as "a representative piece of American sculpture." He then concluded with an admiring appraisal of outsider art and naïve paintings – queer products that "might be housed to good effect in some unpretentious exhibition chamber across the city from the Metropolitan Museum of Art." What these examples all share is the creative vibrancy that comes when the human imagination takes possession and transforms the objects of its immediate environment, whether by the force of a "hangdog mood," dexterous conceptual play, or an original, untutored sensibility. But there was also an implicit leveling in Williams's comparison, between Duchamp – who at the moment he wrote was the most celebrated émigré artist in New York – and humbler, unheralded artists, or in the case of Mrs. Williams, merely a "creature of great imagination." All three instances depicted the power of the imaginative faculty, which had formed the basis of his own daily practice.³

Significantly these examples also shared a context: the environment of the United States and the New World more broadly. Later in the prologue, Williams quoted a letter from Pound chiding him for his cultural nationalism. Pound argued, "God knows I have to work hard enough to escape, not *propagande*, but getting centered in *propagande*. And America? What the h-ll do you a blooming foreigner know about the place[?] Your *père* only penetrated the edge, and you've never been west of Upper Darby." As political nationalism consumed Europe in 1918, Pound considered it absurd and reckless that a first-generation American like Williams would stake a

nationalist position on a country so manifestly lacking in high culture, as Pound saw it. But Williams was not interested in drawing upon the extant high culture in America – genteel and often derivative of European forms such as it was. Rather he saw transformative potential in its very *lack* of cultural development: “The raw beauty of ignorance that lies like an opal mist over the west coast of the Atlantic, beginning at the Grand Banks and extending into the recesses of our brains.” Williams further argued in the prologue that this transformative potential lay in three factors: the fecund natural environment of America; the universal power of imagination in its people responding to that environment; and the experimental techniques of modernism finding a new liberating form in a democratic context.

The “Prologue to *Kora in Hell*,” published as a manifesto in the April 1919 issue of *The Little Review*, marked an important juncture in Williams’s intellectual development as a poet and critic. Because he had pursued a medical career in New York and Rutherford instead of expatriating to Europe as his college friends Pound and Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) had done in 1908, his poetic practice became intertwined with his professional ideals of service and duty as well as the daily experience of working with people at all levels of society. As the result of both personal disillusionment and his exposure through Pound to the nascent New York avant-garde in poetry and painting, Williams developed an idiosyncratic blend of democratic idealism and radical modernist experimentation, most notably in his 1917 volume of poetry *Al Que Quiere*, that aligned his work with the cultural Americanist project articulated by the Young Intellectual critics Van Wyck Brooks and Randolph Bourne, within the larger ambit of John Dewey’s experimental naturalism. Between 1918 and 1925, Williams became a vocal proponent for a democratic modernism rooted in the raw potential of American cultural production, in contrast to the institutions of high modernism beginning to take shape in Paris under Pound’s aegis. Even as his aesthetic radicalism increasingly came up for criticism in the 1920s American literary scene, the

poems of *Spring and All* and the historical criticism of *In the American Grain* provided a coherent aesthetic program that proved to be influential to a younger generation of poets and critics in the 1930s and beyond.

“Yours in exile, Williams”

William Carlos Williams was born on September 17, 1883 in Rutherford, New Jersey, then a small farming community between the Passaic River and the Meadowlands. Lying seventeen miles due west of New York City, the town came steadily within the commuter orbit of the metropolis during Williams’s childhood, growing from 2300 residents in the 1880 census to 7000 residents by 1910, when Williams returned home to establish his medical practice. In 1883, Williams’s parents were recent immigrants to the United States, although each by very different paths. His father, William George Williams, hailed from Birmingham, England, but had emigrated with his perpatetic mother to the West Indies in 1856 after the death of his father. When she eventually settled in Brooklyn in 1882, her son joined her with his new wife, Raquel Helena Hoheb. Hoheb had met William G. Williams in Puerto Rico, where he spent a number of years in his unsettled youth and she had been raised by parents of Basque and Sephardic Jewish descent. At the time of the future poet’s birth, his family had only just settled in Rutherford, which the elder Williams used as a home base for his frequent business trips as an advertising manager for Florida Water, a popular cologne marketed to the Caribbean.⁴

The poet’s family, which also included his younger brother Ed, was tight-knit judging from the tone of frequent letters that Bill (as he was familiarly known) sent home from college. After attending the prestigious Horace Mann School in Manhattan on scholarship, Williams matriculated at the University of Pennsylvania in the fall of 1902, at first to study dentistry and eventually general medicine. The portrait of the young Williams that emerges in these letters

shows a conscientious young man who aimed to fulfill his parents' expectations for him while still enjoying a lively (if chaste) social life. After a visit to a settlement house in the "slums of Philadelphia," Bill reported to his mother the lesson he derived from the visit: "One thing I am convinced more and more is true and that is this: the only way to be truly happy is to make others happy. When you realize that and take advantage of that fact, everything is made perfect." In another letter, Bill sought to reassure his mother about the family's future, envisioning "me a successful man and Ed also each with a simple loving wife who will love you and be your little daughter." The strain of his parents' expectations showed at times though, especially in response to his mother's moody, self-pitying temperament, which Williams worked hard to assuage: "Mama, give me credit for just a little judgment. . . . First, I never did and never will do a premeditated bad deed in my life. Also that I never have had and never will have anything but the purest and highest and best thoughts about you and Papa."⁵

As Williams neared graduation in 1906, his idealistic faith reached a crescendo in a series of letters in which he counseled his melancholy brother through an emotional crisis: "Don't reason from feelings or rather don't reason at all. What's the use? For the only thing that's worthwhile is truth and that doesn't need reasoning about. What it does need though is faith. Yes faith." For Williams, this faith was not expressly identified with any particular religion but rather conceived in Romantic terms as Truth and Beauty, which he thought should issue in good works: "If our works are not divine, if they are not truth in stone, wood or iron, they are nothing." By the time of his graduation from Penn in May 1906, Williams was determined to make his mark in the world as a doctor, not for wealth or fame but rather for the greater good. As he wrote to his mother, "I want to do all I have to do well, and to be left alone to look on people and help them without being myself known."⁶

Throughout his time at Penn, however, cultural activities, in particular poetry, competed with and complemented his ideals of service and good works. In his second year at college, Williams met Ezra Pound, an eccentric yet ambitious student of Romance philology whose passion for literature inspired the earnest medical student to continue writing poetry, which he had privately done while at Horace Mann. Bill wrote excitedly to his mother of his new friend with whom he would have long talks on subjects “that I love yet have no time to study and which he is making a life work of.” Pound left Penn soon after for academic reasons, but the two young men stayed in touch, which led to Williams encountering Pound’s bohemian circle. On a memorable visit to a party at an observatory, Williams made the acquaintance of Hilda Doolittle, later the poet H.D., who was Pound’s free-spirited love interest at the time. Released from the starchy atmosphere of dormitories and social mixers, Bill found himself exultant and at ease with Pound’s artistic crowd. As he described to Ed, “the day was perfect, the girls had on short skirts to their ankles I mean, and sweaters and no hats and most of the fellows left their hats behind also.” After a long walk in the woods with Hilda and the others, “I got home at twelve covered with mud, a little glory and oceans of a fine comfortable happy feeling inside of me somewhere.”⁷⁷

What had been extracurricular activities during college, however, came increasingly to preoccupy Williams after he began his medical residency at the French Hospital in the rough Hell’s Kitchen district of New York City. Only six months removed from his expansive expressions of idealistic faith to his brother, Williams’s tone became much edgier and more weary than any of his college letters: “College life is so one-sided, so out of all proportion to the rest of the world . . . Everything is different on the outside and opinions one has formed before are absolutely *shattered*” [italics added]. Hilda commented to Williams that his letters to her “sounded so sort of sad and smelled of ether.” Yet despite the long hours and tough environs around the French Hospital, Williams began to speak about his burning ambition, centered on a long poem

inspired by the English Romantic poet, John Keats. In reply to Ed's concerns, he asserted that, "I am not even remotely cynical. The truth is I am troubled with dreams, dreams that merely to mention is too daring, yet I'll tell you that any man can do anything he will if he persists in daring to follow his dreams." With a Keatsian conviction more forceful than articulate, Williams argued to Ed that, "what is beauty by the way but only truth. Beauty is nothing but truth in all its magnificent detail." By contrast, during this time Williams rarely mentioned details of his medical occupation in his letters, shifting his idealism to the aesthetic sphere.⁸

Williams's poetic ambitions did not come entirely from nowhere. His mother had spent several years before her marriage studying painting in Paris, an experience which she cast in a golden light in her memory. Likewise, Williams's father was an avid reader of Romantic and Victorian poetry, pointedly engaging the bohemian exuberance of Pound during one visit to their Rutherford home. Pound himself offered generous encouragement to his doctor friend after he expatriated to Europe in 1908 in pursuit of literary success, which he quickly found in the London salons of leading literary figures Ford Madox Ford and William Butler Yeats. As Williams began to feel more embattled yet stubborn in pursuit of his art, his connection to Pound's (and later H.D.'s) success in London fortified his sense of purpose. "As for the eyes of the too ruthless public," Pound advised him in 1908, "Damn their eyes. No art ever grew by looking into the eyes of the public [,] woe be unto your art."⁹

During his residency, Williams also began to immerse himself in the cultural life that New York offered. He made regular visits to the Metropolitan Museum and outings to see dance and chamber music, often in the company of a young singer whom he had become enamored of named Charlotte Herman. On one such evening, he saw the dancer Isadora Duncan perform what he described to Ed as "the most chaste, the most perfect, most absolutely inspiring exhibition I have ever seen." Williams went further, however, and connected Duncan's

performance with both his own creative emergence and hope for an American renaissance in culture: “Best of all she is an American, one of our own people and I tell you I felt doubly strengthened in my desire and my determination to accomplish my part in our wonderful picture.” In the same letter, he included a sonnet dedicated to Duncan: “I saw, dear countrymaid, how soon shall spring/ from this our native land great loveliness.” Thus, even as he received the latest news about the London avant-garde from Pound, Williams conceived of his blossoming aesthetic idealism in the genteel and nationalist terms then current in New York.¹⁰

In 1909, however, Williams’s outlook was shaken by personal and professional disillusionment, spurring a visceral reaction against his idealism. Williams had hoped to establish a lucrative private practice in New York out of his residencies, but these plans went awry when Williams refused to go along with fraudulent insurance claims being made by his supervisors at the Child’s Hospital. Called before the hospital’s Board of Governors, Williams would not verify false claims with his signature, and after several weeks of pressure from colleagues, resigned his position. In one of the few letters from his father kept by Williams in his correspondence, “Pop” counseled Bill to hold strong in his position of open, honest fairness: “Truth and Right must prevail.” In the view of both father and son, Bill walked away from the incident with a moral victory – but also without a job in the city. Without savings or immediate job prospects, he was forced to move home to Rutherford to reconsider his professional future.¹¹

At the same time, an indifferent reception to his first published poems soured his creative ambitions for a time. Soon after his return to Rutherford, Williams self-published his first book of poems in the form of a 22-page pamphlet. The only official review that the book received was encouraging – but also penned by a friend of his father in the local Rutherford newspaper. The more dispiriting responses, however, came from his two poetic mentors: his father merely corrected the pamphlet’s abundant typographical errors and returned it to his son with no further

comment; while Ezra Pound wrote from London: “Individual, original it is not. Great art it is not. Poetic it is – but there are innumerable poetic volumes poured out here in Gomorrah.” But despite this frank criticism, he also offered his old friend encouragement using the analogy of scientific progress: “If I should publish a medical treatise explaining that arnica was good for bruises (or cuts or whatever it is) it would show that I had found out certain medical facts but it would not be of great value to the science of medicine. You are out of touch – that’s all.” Far from the vibrant developments in art and poetry that Pound had discovered in London, Williams was merely replicating tired conventions, in his view. With sufficient exposure to the vanguard of the new poetry, Pound suggested that his real work as a poet lay in the future.¹²

The final blow to Williams’s youthful idealism came in his courtship of Charlotte Herman. Despite Williams’s professions of love for the singer, she chose to date his quiet, studious architect brother instead, sending Bill into a rage. The resulting rift marked a definitive break in the close relationship between the brothers, but Bill also exacted a strange and almost perverse kind of revenge on Charlotte. After brooding for three days, he proposed to her eighteen-year-old younger sister, whom he barely knew. The impressionable Floss, despite her initial shock, agreed to a secret engagement with Bill while he spent a year abroad in Germany, and they would eventually marry. While Charlotte and Ed’s relationship did not last a year, out of these curious circumstances Williams made his first commitment to a marriage that, in setting definite limits on his desire, defined his poetic themes and practice for the rest of his life.¹³

In lieu of professional prospects, Williams decided to dedicate a year to further medical study in Germany, a reward from his father for his integrity in the Child’s affair. His experiences abroad only seemed to confirm his incipient cultural nationalism. In an acerbic travelogue to his family from Leipzig, Williams unfavorably compared the German people to the culture at home: “I do not admire the types I have seen so far and I do not think the people are gifted as a nation

with inspiration. . . . They are thinkers and I may on this account like them better later but oh they lack spontaneity or something akin to innocence or joyousness.” Williams also sensed a brooding belligerence in the atmosphere there: “This country is worn out. It is hedged in by enemies you can feel it in your bones. . . . How do they hope to overcome this fear? By faith in the ultimate brotherhood of man which will break down all barriers and countries? No but by an army to crush and kill.” In his reactions, Williams seemed to anticipate Wilsonian ideals, contrasting German militarism to a liberal internationalism based on universal brotherhood and open borders. But like Wilson, he also conceived of this internationalism in Americanist terms, with the rising power offering a fresh perspective on age-old conflicts in Europe.¹⁴

Williams also began to conceive of the possibilities that American art could achieve because of its very lack of established forms. In his view, the German people had “the spontaneity of a freight train” which led to aesthetic ideals that were necessary and worthwhile, but largely “of the theoretically correct variety.” Although Williams partook of classical music in Leipzig, and studied playwriting there, he does not seem to have been exposed to the modernist vortex taking place in Munich at that time. He did visit Pound in London, attending Yeats’s lectures on the Celtic Twilight period, but he found the scene there to be “fatiguing in the extreme” and criticized his friend for the pretenses that he had taken on. His main writing project during his time abroad was also revealingly nationalistic: a play about Columbus on the eve of his voyage to the New World. Williams would not visit Europe again until 1924, and his accumulated negative impressions deepened the exceptionalism that he attached to American culture, and seemingly shaped his later response to European modernism.¹⁵

Upon his return to America in May 1910, Williams returned to Rutherford and, wanting for better opportunities, set up a local practice in an office out of his parent’s house. Nurtured by their frequent if turbulent correspondence while he was away, he and Floss maintained their

engagement until they were married in December 1912. Outwardly, Williams appeared to be accepting the pragmatic realities and commitments of his family and profession after his grand poetic ambitions a few years before. But his inward understanding, if not an outright rejection of his new life, reflected a complex process of accommodation that crucially shaped his emerging poetic practice.

The primary confidante for his aesthetic ambition during this period was Viola Baxter, a friend of Pound whom Williams had briefly dated while at the French Hospital. Throughout his engagement with Floss, Williams continued to cultivate emotional intimacies with other women, including Baxter. Soon after his return to Rutherford, he writes to Baxter, “you are the crown for a strange brow; I grow and grow stranger – yet we are separated. Yours in exile, Williams.” In their correspondence over the next two years, Baxter provided an outlet for the subversive bohemian persona that Williams had cultivated while in Europe. Yet his frank remarks to her revealed the process of accommodation he was then undergoing.¹⁶

At first, Williams clearly chafed against the more limited horizons in Rutherford. He wrote Viola that, “It was a breath of the city streets to hear from you. I once pined for the country but my blood is freezing here. Nothing but the intellectually unborn from after breakfast till after supper.” This discomfort clashed with his sense of filial and professional duty: “Do not say I am crazy for any reason; it is the impossibility of being what I must be which is so trying; it is peculiar to want and to hate the same object with equal fervor.” His intimacy with the independent Baxter, which they solely maintained through their letters, clearly left the door open for a freer relation to desire: “What am I? I am to a man what you are to a woman – one might say an auto glove inverted, the inside, skin-side, outside.” But after nearly a year of correspondence, Williams lapsed into silence with Baxter, for which she demanded an explanation. He replied, “Certainly I will never be anything but truthful to myself and certainly to

be truthful I dearly love a lady near me at home but also do I feel deeply toward you and toward other ladies both now in Europe. . . . For the practical conduct of the affairs of life . . . I am forced to confine my resources of passion.” Despite his reservations about life in Rutherford, Williams’s sense of duty and growing attachment to Floss led him to accept the commitment he had made to her and his parents.¹⁷

Yet Williams did not simply reject his previous passions but rather sublimated them into a new approach to this commitment. As he explained to Baxter, Williams understood his choice in Platonic terms related to Eros: “Behold me as a man who has ceased approaching ‘earthly semblances’ and gone on to wooing heavenly realities of soul and not of face for this reason.” Rather than indulging his desire for women as a part of his aesthetic calling, as one might in the bohemian worlds of Paris, London, or New York, Williams preferred to use this desire as a creative force within the confines of conventional morality of Rutherford: “I am not a virtuoso, I am not a good-fellow, I am never happy in any possession [,] I only wish to see myself creating those around me and within me into a beautiful reality.” From this perspective, his poetry over the next six years took on an increasingly naturalistic cast, as Williams paradoxically sought an ideal of beauty and truth in the representation of natural energies. Beginning with sexual desire, his approach broadened to encompass his awareness of natural phenomena in his daily life and immersion in the realities of life and death through he witnessed as a family doctor in Rutherford.¹⁸

When he married Florence Herman on December 12, 1912, his private practice still quite fledgling but nearly two years old, William Carlos Williams in a basic sense fulfilled the expectations his parents had had for him, and which he sought to fulfill in his years at Penn: he was becoming a successful man with a simple loving wife. Despite flirtations with the bohemian life of his artistic confidantes, it was no longer for him “a question of personalities, but of quick

hard work – I am working for a living.” Nevertheless, this hard work included his poetry, and he benefited from his connection to Pound’s cosmopolitan network of writers and editors, who were both formally experimental and politically radical. For personal and perhaps temperamental reasons, Williams had chosen to remain on the margins. With characteristic generosity, Pound seemed to sense this, remarking to Williams in 1913, “You may get something slogging away by yourself that you would miss in the Vortex – and that we miss.” Indeed, over time Williams made his self-enforced localism into a virtue and eventually the basis of his distinctive poetics, which fused the experimentation of vanguard modernism with aspirations for the democratic reform of culture within a local community.

The filthy Passaic

1913 proved to be a watershed year for the emerging American avant-garde as it would be for Williams. It is widely agreed that the International Exhibition of Modern Art – more famously known as the Armory Show – which opened for a month in February 1913, brought the European avant-garde in painting and sculpture to the attention of a wider public, creating a sensation for casual museum-goers as well as established newspaper and academic critics. The exhibition also inspired radical aesthetic experimentation among the artists and writers of the New York scene. The small coterie of artists and writers around Alfred Stieglitz’s ‘291’ Gallery had been aware of developments in post-Impressionist art from their visits to the salon of Gertrude and Leo Stein in Paris. But the Armory Show provided an opportunity for the Stieglitz circle to challenge more openly the staid conventions of American criticism, leading to a flurry of manifestos, gallery shows, and little magazines over the next five years – what has been called the “First American Avant-garde.” The other major event of 1913 for the Greenwich Village bohemians was the Paterson Strike Pageant, organized by John Reed in collaboration with the

wealthy patron Mabel Luhan Dodge and Bill Haywood's anarcho-syndicalist union, the I.W.W. Although it marked only a brief moment of unity between the cultural left and mobilized industrial workers, the Pageant presented on June 7, 1913 at Madison Square Garden foregrounded political questions that had begun to unsettle and challenge the aestheticism that had prevailed among cultural elites over the previous decade.¹⁹

Although there is no definitive evidence that Williams attended either event, his affiliation with the Stieglitz Circle makes it very likely that he was aware of and involved in debates surrounding the two events. Previous scholarship has emphasized the stylistic influence of modernist painting on Williams's poetry after 1913, but has neglected in my view his interest in the political implications of avant-garde practices. At the time of the Armory Show and Paterson Pageant, Williams was at work on another long poem that announced his initiation into a self-consciously modernist poetics. First published with the assistance of Ezra Pound in the March 13, 1914 issue of *The Egoist*, "The Wanderer: A Rococo Study" has been described somewhat reductively as when "Keats was submerged" in Williams's poetics "in order that Whitman's presence might surface," viz. a populist embrace of free verse and naturalism in place of his previous use of Romantic prosody, diction, and idealist metaphysics. Re-contextualized amid the politics of 1913, however, "The Wanderer" is the crucial starting point for a set of themes that would preoccupy Williams for his entire career, culminating in *Paterson*, his major long poem of the late 1940s. Rather than claiming his place as the Bard of a national literature, Williams asked in "The Wanderer" what it was to be a bard even as he asserted the necessity of poetic practice rooted in the experience of a particular locality.²⁰

"The Wanderer" recounts in seven parts the initiation of the narrator into a life of wandering by a mythical "old queen" who is "Forgiveless, unreconcilable!/That high wanderer of the byways/Walking imperious in beggary." In the first section of the poem, "Advent," he

receives an intimation of her presence in the form of a crow flying above the treetops, showing him the horizon. His first definite sighting of her, however, comes as he crosses a ferry “with the great towers of Manhattan before me.” The allusion to Whitman’s “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry” is obvious, but the remainder of the stanza – and indeed the next several sections of the poem – gently parodies the self-importance of the narrator’s Whitmanian sincerity. He wearies himself with questions as he crosses the ferry, foremost among these “How shall I be a mirror to this modernity?” But just at this moment, “Suddenly I saw her!,” first in the water pulling a barge and then in the form of a gull zipping away. Throughout the poem, whenever the narrator addresses himself ponderously, the high wanderer responds with sudden, dynamic action to shock him to his senses. In this instance, both he and his mind (itself a telling formulation) take flight as grey gulls to follow her across the river.²¹

In the next section, “Clarity,” the narrator makes effusive declarations of what the vision of the wanderer means, recalling Williams’s exuberant idealism as a young man: “‘I am given,’ cried I, ‘now I know it!/I know now all my time is forespent!/For me one face is all the world!/For I have seen her at last, this day,/In whom age in age is united.’” The narrator in his mind thinks that he has glimpsed the godhead: “She is attiring herself before me—/Taking shape before me for worship”, leading him to exult “I will take my peace in her henceforth!” The old queen’s reply to his yearning for transcendence is swift and painful however: “It was then she struck—from behind,/In mid air, as with the edge of a great wing.” At this moment, the narrator is dropped into a bustling urban crowd on Broadway, the street full of “empty men with shell-thin bodies” and expressionless faces. Despite his initial shock at the grime and odors of the sweaty street scene, he continues to profess his willingness to be the poet-priest of her religion: “Marvelous old queen,/Grant me power to catch something of this day’s/Air and sun into your service!/That these toilers after peace and after pleasure/May turn to you, worshippers at all

hours.” But her response is loud laughing disdain until she finally silences him and leads him away; the most important lessons of his initiation have only begun.

The next section, “Paterson—The Strike,” incorporated the Paterson Strike into the ritual trials of the young wanderer-to-be, as Williams offered an alternative mediation of the event to Reed’s Pageant. Initiated by Local 502 of the I.W.W. against the textile mills of Paterson, the city adjacent to Rutherford, the Paterson Strike began in February 1913 when 25,000 workers, comprised mostly of recent immigrants, walked out against 300 mills. Despite the attempts of the Greenwich Village radicals to publicize the violent tactics employed by local police and factory owners, the strike finally collapsed in July 1913 without any concessions to the workers. Many striking workers and their families lost their livelihoods and the I.W.W. lost a good deal of credibility. But the mills themselves were also crippled economically such that the textile industry in Paterson never fully recovered. The figurative portrayal that Williams offered of the strike – an event that would have been familiar as a *cause célèbre* to his cosmopolitan readers in *The Egoist* – seems to reflect more the pessimistic aftermath of its failure rather than the optimistic solidarity that Reed et al. strove for in the Pageant. Indeed, Williams’s professed fear of the brooding violence of the proletarian crowds lended a conservative overtone to his representation even as it formed the basis for a new political orientation for his poetry.²²

In the poem, the Paterson Strike is the first bitter lesson for the young initiate that he should not seek after transcendent beauty in his poetry, but rather experience the frightening reality of the hungry strikers. The old queen sends the narrator “shivering/Out into the deserted streets of Paterson” at dawn, where he finds “Nowhere/The subtle! Everywhere the electric!” A bread line of workers stands before a teashop, and he senses that they are “Dominated by one idea,” which he cannot ascertain, “something/That carried them as they are always wanting to be carried.” In his naïve desire to be their bard, he has failed to speak to them, yet they remain

united in their brooding that he fears cannot “be anything but brutality.” A tense battle ensues that excites and frightens the young poet, as the crowd is portrayed in a series of grotesques: “Faces all knotted up like burls on oaks,/Grasping, fox-snouted, thick-lipped,/Sagging breasts and protruding stomachs,/Rasping voices, filthy habits with hands.” Finally the electricity of the crowd consumes him, both appalled and exhilarated: “Ugly, venomous, gigantic!/Tossing me as a great father his helpless/Infant till it shriek with ecstasy.” Upon his return to the old queen, chastened by his experience, he is ready to listen to her teaching.

The final sections of the poem depict the ritual transformation of the narrator as he accepts his calling to replace the old queen in her wandering. After the violence of the strike battle, she wings him aloft to the natural splendor of the Jersey mountains, a place of safety and regeneration: “Look child, look open-mouth!/The patch of road between the steep bramble banks;/The tree in the wind, the white house there, the sky!/Speak to men of these concerning me!” But when he erupts again into rhapsodic declarations – “Waken! my people, to the boughs green/With ripening fruit within you!” – she points out to him the toil and struggle of farmers working under a punishing sun, and his shouts remain unheard, “a seed in the wind.”

After a glimpse of this natural vista, she returns him to what she sees as his proper environs: in the shadow of the great towers of Manhattan in the marshlands surrounding Rutherford: “the little creeks, the mallows/That I picked as a boy, the Hackensack/So quiet that seemed so broad formerly.” Having exposed him to bustling city streets, the violent conflicts of an industrial town, and an illusory pastoral scene, the old queen returns him to the locality that he knows intimately from childhood and to which he has returned to make his life. In the process of reconciling himself to Rutherford, Williams accepted the town, its citizens, and its natural environs as the “middle ground,” to borrow the cultural historian Leo Marx’s classic formulation, between these other landscapes, from which he attempted to make sense of his political moment.

In his return to the local in search of the potential for community that a small town might offer, however, Williams retreated from the tough political questions raised by the resistance of industrial workers in the face of repression. The chastened bard was a humble bard, defining his role in local and particularist terms.²³

At the end of his novitiate, the old queen gives him a vision of his future if he follows the path of poetic wanderer: “And she—‘Behold yourself old!/Sustained in strength, wielding might in gript surges!/Not bodying the sun in weak leaps/But holding way over rockish men/With fern-free fingers on their little crags,/Their hollows, the new Atlas, to bear them/For pride and for mockery!’” After many tests, the old queen finally allows the young poet to glimpse himself expansively as a version of the Whitmanian bard, the allegorical figure of Atlas bearing the weight of the world, infused with the might of nature. But she also reveals the long road of continual work that this life will require. She leads him “right past the houses/Of my friends down the hill to the river/As on any usual day, any errand.” Here she immerses him in “the filthy Passaic,” who is her old friend. The river begins to enter the poet’s heart, at first “cool and limpid,” but then it leaps forward: “Muddy, then black and shrunken/Till I felt the utter depth of its rottenness/The vile breadth of its degradation.” The price of his baptism and initiation is to move beyond idealizing the world, instead experiencing it in the fullness of its decay, its stench, and its violence as much as its beauty. Her last command is to “Be mostly silent,” suggesting that an awareness of one’s surroundings must precede putting that experience into words. Poetic speech requires silent attention and vigilant immersion before it can achieve its form in the poem.

My townspeople

In the heyday of little magazines, a poem like “The Wanderer” was typically published twice: on its own in a journal and then later collected into a volume of poems. Such was the case

with “The Wanderer,” but its publication history is also revealing of the shift in Williams’s poetics after 1913. Although written and published chronologically first, “The Wanderer” appeared as the final poem in a separate section in his next book of poems *Al Que Quiere*, published in 1917 by the Four Seas Press, a small Boston publisher. A number of the 51 short and medium poems that make up the first section of the book had been published in journals between 1914 and 1916, but all of the poems were composed after “The Wanderer” and reflected Williams’s shift in poetic orientation after undergoing his figurative baptism in the “filthy Passaic.” In context of *Al Que Quiere*, the long poem serves as a foundation for the rest of the poems even as it is marked as distinct. Its subtitle as a “Rococo study” appropriately suggests the conscious change that Williams made from his early Romantic diction towards a leaner, less ornamented style under the influence of the New York avant-garde.²⁴

The literary avant-garde that Williams took part in emerged from the confluence of two incipient artistic movements in the early 1910s. The first were the painters and photographers surrounding Stieglitz’s ‘291’ Gallery – Marsden Hartley, Edward Steichen, John Marin, and Stieglitz himself – whose work was influenced by the post-Impressionist ferment in Paris and Munich, in particular Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Kandinsky, and the Fauves. Even before the Armory Show, their transatlantic journeys and publications had been importing European modernist influences to New York since 1908. After the outbreak of war, émigrés from Paris such as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Picabia provided a direct European influence on the New York scene, bringing the ironic and conceptual interventions of Futurism and Dada, which served to disrupt the solemnities of the Stieglitz Circle.²⁵

At the same moment, an experimental revolt against the genteel tradition in American poetry had begun through the efforts of two editors: Harriet Monroe in *Poetry* magazine, which she founded in Chicago in 1912; and the Boston Brahmin literary doyenne Amy Lowell in her

Imagist anthologies. Their revolt was organized around two principles believed to have broadly democratic implications. *Vers libre*, championed by Monroe at *Poetry*, built off the free-verse innovations that Whitman had pioneered in the nineteenth century, liberating the poet from formal prosody with its rules of rhyme and rhythm. Free of the constriction of “aristocratic” poetic forms, the practice of *vers libre* aspired to make poetic expression more widely available and responsive to colloquial speech. Likewise, Lowell became the leading American proponent of Imagism, a poetic technique first theorized by Pound that emphasized clear, concise imagery and diction as a corrective to the abstraction and verbal ornamentation in Victorian poetry. Pound moved on from Imagism as a movement after a brief enthusiasm, later heaping scorn on Lowell’s proprietary embrace of the technique, which he dubbed “Amygism.” Through Pound, Williams had been introduced to Monroe and Lowell and had published poems with both of them. While he recognized their influence as leading figures in the new American poetry, he led the way in proposing an alternative approach to the question of democracy and poetic form, inspired by artistic influences in New York.²⁶

Following his parodic depiction of the Whitmanian bard in “The Wanderer,” Williams addressed the importance of Whitman’s influence directly in a 1917 essay entitled “America, Whitman, and the Art of Poetry.” For the proponents of *vers libre*, Whitman stood as the fountainhead of their movement. More broadly, the debate over forging a uniquely American spirit in the arts embraced the Good Gray Poet, exemplified by the editors of the *Seven Arts* journal, who argued for adapting his expansive vision into “a critical Whitman” more attuned to the scientific temper of pragmatism.²⁷

In his essay, Williams made an analogous argument regarding form. While he admired the work that Whitman had done in breaking down conventional forms, he wondered what constructive work he had done: “Whitman aside from being the foremost analyst was above all a

colorist—a mood man. He destroyed the forms antiquity decreed him to take and use. He started again naked but built not very far.” Brokenness – poetry as the act of breaking old forms – was becoming increasingly important for Williams, but construction was equally crucial: “Have we broken down far enough? Are we ready to build?” Ultimately for Williams, free verse as a technique should not be an end in itself, but rather the starting point for the exploration of a new poetics, both formal and substantive:

And yet American verse of today must have a certain quality of freedom, must be “free verse” in a sense. It must be new verse, in a new conscious form. But even more than that it must be free in that it is free to include all temperaments, all phases of our environment, physical as well as spiritual, mental, and moral. It must be truly democratic, truly free for all—and yet it must be governed.

The governance of free verse in Williams’s view involved the conscious and critical discussion of poetic form, responsive to experiments in visual arts coming from Europe. But equally, it involved a reorientation of perception towards the widest array of temperaments, environments, and experiences that democratic society in America had to offer.

The poems in *Al Que Quiere* written after “The Wanderer” began this process of building a new conscious form. As Williams recounted in his autobiography, the collective, critical exploration of poetic form started at Grantwood, a rural artist colony in New Jersey centered around the ramshackle country home of Alfred and Gertrude Kreymborg, where a loose affiliation of painters and poets gathered on weekends. “On every possible occasion,” Williams recalled, “I went madly in my flivver to help with the magazine which had saved my life as a writer.” That magazine was *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse*, which between 1914 and 1916 served as the New York response to Monroe and Lowell, publishing early work by the poets Mina Loy, Maxwell Bodenheim, Marianne Moore, Wallace Stevens, Kreymborg, and Williams, in conversation with artists at Grantwood such as Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Afternoons at Grantwood were full of arguments about the implications of cubism for the structure of the

poem, in particular on the nature of the poetic line and treatment of the object in the poem. The abandonment of rhyme and rhythm as well as the clear, concise presentation of the image reflected the influence of *vers libre* and Imagism. But these were merely fundamentals towards constructing poems in the wake of Cezanne and cubism.²⁸

The poem “Woman Walking” in *Al Que Quiere* exhibits both the formal and thematic innovations that Williams had begun to make in free verse. The poem opens with a vivid tableau saturated with color:

An oblique cloud of purple smoke
across a milky silhouette
of house sides and tiny trees—
a little village—
that ends in a saw edge
of mist-covered trees
on a sheet of grey sky.

To the right, jutting in,
a dark crimson corner of roof,
To the left, half a tree:

Although the line breaks are relatively staid by his own later standards, Williams had begun to experiment with the rhetorical emphasis afforded by prepositional clauses set apart, each on their own line, details of the total description spliced and stacked one on the other. The motive force of punctuation is also highlighted by the line breaks – em dashes, periods, commas, and colons each propelling, pausing, or bringing to a stop the pace of description. As with Cezanne’s inquiry into the nature of perspective, color, or shading in representing Mont Sainte-Victoire or a bowl of oranges, Williams interrogated the very materials of grammar, syntax, and punctuation while allowing the object to be itself; the landscape does not point to anything else as symbol or narrative, but rather takes its place in the poet’s perception of the moment.²⁹

Into this static landscape, walks the titular figure of the poem, a farmer woman who delivers fresh eggs to the Williams’ household. With her entrance into the poet’s field of

experience, it becomes clear that her appearance was the occasion for the poem, in that she catalyzed his desire:

—what a blessing it is
to see you in the street again,
powerful woman,
coming with swinging haunches,
breasts straight forward,
supple shoulders, full arms
and strong, soft hands (I've felt them)
carrying the heavy basket.
I might well see you oftener!
And for a different reason
than the fresh eggs
you bring us so regularly.

Williams recorded a simple, everyday encounter on the street in sensual, erotically charged terms. Using concrete corporeal details, he juxtaposed aspects of her robust physical health (indeed she might be one of Whitman's "healthy perfect mothers") – "swinging haunches," "supple shoulders," "soft hands" which he had touched – with the fresh produce of her farm and regularity of her visits, which seemed to inspire the idle fantasy of an affair in his mind. In the structure of the poem, consummation of that desire is not the point, however, so much as awareness and celebration of the "blessing" of that desire itself – its entirely natural energy magnetizing the poet towards the woman even as he sublimates it into the poem itself. As Williams had written to Viola Baxter a few years before, the pull of desire towards beauty became for him a motive force for "creating those around me and within me into a beautiful reality."

Erotic desire is a central theme throughout *Al Que Quiere* – at times illicit or forbidden, sometimes troubled, but also conjugal and romantic. In "Canthara," the entire subject of the poem is an old black man, likely a patient of the poet, lost in a reverie from his youth of "six women, dancing/a set-dance, stark naked below/the skirts raised round/their breasts:" so that "his gestures against the/tiled wall of the dingy bath-room,/swished with ecstasy to/the familiar

music of/his old emotion.” A series of poems entitled “Love Song” conjure the emotions of young romantic love with concrete images of nature, for example: “Who shall hear of us/in the time to come?/Let him say there was/a burst of fragrance/from black branches.” The most provocative of Williams’s erotic sublimations is “The Ogre,” which describes the sexual tension between a doctor and his pre-pubescent patient: “Sweet child,/little girl with well shaped legs/you cannot touch the thoughts/I put over and under and around you/This fortunate for they would/burn you to an ash otherwise./Your petals would be quite curled up.” Within the sequence of poems, the subject-matter of “The Ogre” is startling in effect but also brutally honest about the subjective experience of this illicit desire, while still marking the moral limits of it (“These are my excuses”). Taken together, Williams found within himself and in those around him the expression of physical desire that united him to the coursing energy and charged field of nature.³⁰

The title of the collection points to the meaning of desire within Williams’s poetics, and by implication his politics. “Al que quiere,” from the Spanish, means “to him who wants it,” and the phrase can be interpreted in a doubled sense. On the one hand, there is an ironic commentary, born out in several poems in the collection, that poetry is often seen as superfluous to practical affairs – it is there only for him who wants it to seek it out. On the other hand, it is the guiding creative principle behind the act of poetry – the work of art comes “to him who wants it,” viz. he who desires the things of the world. In addition, the original title for the collection, about which Williams sought advice from Marianne Moore, was to include the parenthetical “(or the Pleasures of Democracy).” “Pleasures” again indicates the theme of desire, although with the additional sense of consummation. Given the pungent and at times disturbing depictions of life in Rutherford, one wonders whether this proposed title also had an ironic valence, where the pleasures were not always sweet. Whatever the range of experience

represented, the poems in *Al Que Quiere* offer an extended meditation on the importance of the poetic act within the democratic life of a small town.³¹

In several poems, Williams made it clear that he understood that his offer of services as town poet in addition to attending physician was considered superfluous by his neighbors. In the opening poem, “Sub Terra,” he asked, “Where shall I find you,/you my grotesque fellows/that I seek everywhere /to make up my band?/None, not one/with the earthy tastes I require.” These grotesque fellows are like “seven year locusts” and his search for them in the poem remains only prospective. Likewise in “Pastoral,” his idle, aesthetic appreciation of a back-alley scene, with “the fences and outhouses/built of barrel-staves/and parts of boxes, all,/if I am fortunate, smeared a bluish green,” is scarcely “of vast import to the nation.” On a more comic note, Williams compared himself to the Russian naturalist writer Mikhail Artsybashev in “Foreign”:
“Artsybashev is Russian./I am an American./Let us wonder, my townspeople,/if Artsybashev tends his own fires/as I do, gets himself cursed/for the baby’s failure to thrive.” To which, he concludes, “These are shining topics/my townspeople, but—/hardly of great moment.” Like other poems in the collection, Williams used this poem to raise the question of what role the poet should play in the life of his town, even as he confidently asserted his value.³²

This confidence comes through most clearly in “Gulls,” one of several poems in *Al Que Quiere* to address “my townspeople.” The poet reminds his fellow citizens that he could be doing better things: “My townspeople, beyond in the great world,/are many with whom it were far more/profitable for me to live than here with you.” But since he had decided to remain, they should listen up, “For you will not soon have another singer.” Williams then employed the extended metaphor of gulls “that sometimes rest upon our river in winter,” impervious to the storms that drive many to seek shelter. Shelter is figured in the poem as “one of our principal churches,” where “your own hymns” invoking some great protector are an outrage against “true

music.” Despite his offended sensibility, the poet wants to make peace with churchgoers, but also to remind them of the gulls who “moved seaward very quietly.” With a striking mix of the comic and the serene, Williams made his point that “true music” forged out of bearing the storms of experience opened new spaces outside the shelter of respectable religion. For him, art had begun to supersede religion in the life of a town like Rutherford, as the poet evoked the pungency of nature and hidden desires and crossed boundaries of class and respectability.³³

Throughout *Al Que Quiere*, Williams moved beyond his fear of the Paterson mob and began to particularize the experience of “our nonentities,” as he termed the lower classes invisible to “leading citizens.” At times, these classes are merely aestheticized, as when the poet pokes “into negro houses/with their gloom and smell!” in “Sub Terra; or watches the beauty of the terrible faces of “colored women/day workers—/old and experienced—/returning home at dusk/in cast off clothing/faces like/old Florentine oak.” But in the specificities of his portraiture, a picture of the total life of the town, which Williams’s work as a physician afforded him, begins to emerge. “Sympathetic Portrait of a Child” scrupulously describes the nervous but endearing physicality of “the murderer’s little daughter” as she wraps and unwraps her arms and “crushes her straw hat/about her eyes,” as the poet wonders, “Why has she chosen me/for the knife/that darts along her smile?” In his portrait of Robitza, a feisty old woman confined to her bed, Williams assumed her voice in a strident soliloquy: “Try to help me/if you want trouble/or leave me alone—/that ends trouble./The county physician/is a damned fool/and you/can go to hell!” Dyspeptic characters are often situated in dank-smelling places, such as the cellar party he passes in “a dark vinegar smelling place/from which trickles/the chuckle of/beginning laughter.” And indeed in “Smell,” his nose becomes the sign of his curiosity for earthy tastes in soil and people: “What tactless asses we are, you and I, boney nose,/...With what deep thirst/we quicken our desires/to that rank odor of a passing springtime.”³⁴

In the poems of *Al Que Quiere*, Williams proposed the naturalist poetics of smell and desire as a secular departure in history, liberated from the sheltered perspective of religion. The book's epigraph, an untranslated excerpt in Spanish by the Guatemalan author Rafael Arévalo Martínez, further establishes this theme in context of the New World. The quotation describes the rebirth of a person's spirit like a stunted bush ("un arbusto desmedrado") planted in new soil or a new land ("una tierra nueva"). This nourishing soil offers bliss, *la beatitud*, a Catholic term for a state of grace. But in the Arévalo quote, *la beatitud* is figured by natural conditions: leaves extending to the sun; roots encountering a decomposing corpse; and convalescents emerging into the spring sun. The concept of the New World had not yet fully emerged in Williams's thinking as it would over the next decade, but thematically he was starting to define his sense of the potential of America: secular, erotic, naturalistic, and prospective.³⁵

A longer poem at the core of *Al Que Quiere* entitled "History" works through this unburdening of history in Williams's typically concrete terms. The poet visits the Metropolitan Museum on a hot, dry summer "Sunday, day of worship !!!" Ironically, he has gone to worship not at church but at the temple of art, where his nose nonetheless irreverently seeks out corporeal traces amidst the treasures:

I come here to mingle faience dug
from the tombs, turquoise colored
necklaces and belched wind from the
stomach; delicately veined basins
of agate, cracked and discolored and
the stink of stale urine!

At length, the poet reflects upon the tomb of an Egyptian high priestess, who had her existence commemorated in a granite tomb to endure forever: "Granite over flesh: who will deny/its advantages?" By comparison, he sees his own death as water spilled on the ground, though "water will mount again into rose-leaves." Ultimately, he finds the priestess's sarcophagus to be

an arrogant attempt at self-glory, making flesh into stone in pursuit of immortality. He emerges into the dusk of a summer's night, and exults at life all around him, pulsing and transitory. The poem concludes: "The world is young, surely! Young/and colored like—a girl that has come upon/a lover! Will that do?" Accepting of the fleeting pleasures of mortality, the democratic poet supplanted the priestess through a new poetics oriented towards experience.³⁶

Despoiled castaways

U.S. entry into World War I in April 1917 galvanized Williams's poetic practice even as his medical duties proliferated due to a shortage of doctors and an influenza epidemic in Rutherford during the spring of 1918. Years later, he recalled his response to the upheavals of the time: "Damn it, the freshness, the newness of springtime which I had sensed among the others, a reawakening of letters, all that delight which in making a world to match the supremacies of the past could mean was being blotted out by war." In retrospect, spring assumed a double meaning for him: on the one hand, literally the rebirth of spring in the Passaic landscape and the exuberant effect on its inhabitants, which Williams savored every year at the end of winter; and on the other hand, the renaissance of American arts and letters that had flourished in New York against the background of the European War. In addition to providing a haven for influential artist-émigrés, American neutrality between 1914 and 1916 had sparked a debate among policymakers, intellectuals, and cultural critics about the role that the U.S. might play: practically in brokering "peace without victory" as well as theoretically in articulating an alternative vision of world order based upon democratic ideals. In cultural terms, the clearest statement of these aspirations came in the pages of the *Seven Arts* journal, where young protégés of the Stieglitz Circle, including Waldo Frank and Paul Rosenfeld, collaborated with established critics Randolph Bourne and Van Wyck Brooks.³⁷

In the issues published before American intervention in the war, the editorialists for *Seven Arts* articulated a two-fold cultural vision of American internationalism. Like many in Woodrow Wilson's progressive coalition during the 1916 election, they saw the neutrality of the United States as the basis for a new internationalism based on progressive democratic ideals. The anti-war critic Romain Rolland, a leading voice of liberal internationalism in France before the war, argued in the inaugural issue of the journal that the U.S. must "uphold the wavering torch" of internationalism now that Europe had been consumed by the catastrophic effects of nationalism. In an argument that echoed Bourne's vision for a "transnational America," Rolland saw the potential for America to lead the way towards a new harmonious democratic standard for the world because of its diverse immigrant population and relative lack of political and social hierarchies. Brooks and Frank were less sanguine than Rolland, placing the potential of American society in context of the cultural crisis that had troubled them in their pre-war essays. Brooks argued in "Towards a National Culture" that in the eyes of the world, Americanism had represented primarily industrial prowess and material wealth – practical achievement that lacked cultural development. Moreover, Brooks believed that this practical spirit had been corrosive of the spiritual needs of American people. But if the burgeoning energies of self-expression in the early 1910s could be critically directed, he believed, Americanism might yet serve as an ideal of democratic cultural renewal for the post-war world as Rolland hoped.³⁸

Williams made no mention of *Seven Arts* in his criticism, but his aesthetic argument in "Prologue to *Kora in Hell*" aligned with their cultural program. Using a debate with Pound as a pretext, Williams developed the nascent Americanist poetics of *Al Que Quiere* into a forceful statement to the modernist republic of letters in *The Little Review* that tempered the optimism of 1916, but still saw the possibility for cultural renewal through the universal potential of the imagination.

The impetus for the Prologue was a letter from Pound to Williams in November 1917. As he frequently did in their correspondence, Pound good-naturedly prodded Williams for a defensive reply he had made to being called an “American author” in one of Pound’s essays. Pound challenged Williams that “if you had any confidence in America you wouldn’t be so touchy about it,” and then proceeded to critique at length what “American-ness” in poetry consisted of. He mocked the attempts of Harriet Monroe, Edgar Lee Masters, and Carl Sandburg among others to base this on evocations of folk culture or geography. For Pound, nationalism should be gotten out of the arts, so that an artist like himself from America could stay at home without being drawn into propaganda or civic campaigns. In specifically racial terms, Pound told Williams that he should be thankful for the Spanish blood in him that muddied his mind against American nationalism, while Pound had to purge the “bacillus of the land in my blood” from three centuries of American ancestors. Instead of Americanism, he urged Williams to embrace literary cosmopolitanism, quoting the French literary critic Rémy de Gourmont: “If literary cosmopolitanism prevails and succeeds in extinguishing the blood hatred kindled among men by racial difference, I would see in that a victory for civilization and humanity as a whole.” Writing from London amid the privations of war, Pound made the case that literature should transcend the nationalism, even as he believed in racialism based on blood.³⁹

Williams did not reply to Pound’s letter directly but rather used it as the basis for his own vision of literary Americanism in the Prologue, based not on race or patriotism but rather the fecund potential of the imagination set down in the environment of the New World. If the atmosphere of wartime mobilization imparted an implacable tone to Williams’s outlook, his commitment to the cultural potential of America remained as strong as before the war. Pound accused Williams of the “naïve credulity of a Co. Clare emigrant,” but it was precisely from the perspective of a relative newcomer that he understood the potential of America.

Although Williams conspicuously named a number of modern artists and poets in the essay, he began it with an account of his eccentric, temperamental mother as an exemplary “creature of great imagination.” She approached the objects and people in her life with a great intensity of perception, often losing her bearings but always offering a rich perspective, uniquely expressed. In part, this capacity reflected her dispossession; as Williams argued, “she is a despoiled, molted castaway, but by this power she still breaks life between her fingers.” Indeed, “despoiled” was the word Brooks had used to describe the effects of the restless, unmoored individualism that had American culture to that point. While Williams does not gloss over the alienated position of his mother and those other dispossessed like her, he embraced the perspective that her dispossession provided. In never having assimilated to American culture in her thirty-five years in Rutherford, her unbridled perception might serve as a measure of the full potential of imagination. Likewise an émigré like Marcel Duchamp or an outsider artist who painted primitive cigar-box nudes offered a novelty of perception that expressed their idiosyncratic perspectives.⁴⁰

Using these examples to illustrate the value he placed on imaginative intensity, Williams answered Pound’s argument about cosmopolitanism, excerpting his letter at length in the essay. For Williams, to accept cosmopolitanism was to accept prevailing European literary standards, given the dominance and sophistication of European critics as well as the influence of American expatriates in London, such as Pound, H.D., and T.S. Eliot. In a series of anecdotes, Williams compared each of these writers critically to their counterparts in the American avant-garde, such as Marianne Moore, Al Kreymborg, Maxwell Bodenheim, and Mina Loy (herself an English émigré in New York). Contrary to H.D.’s “modern Hellenism” – his term for the value she placed on classical forms – Williams identified America figuratively with the richer ferment of the Greek colonies in Italy that were the basis of the “dispersive explosion” of Rome. Likewise

despite his admiration for Eliot and Pound's "exquisite" use of European poetic models, Williams mocked an English critic for describing their work as the only worthwhile American verse. At full throttle polemically, Williams asserted that the quintessential New World type was not Eliot's enervated J. Alfred Prufrock, but rather "Montezuma, or since he was stoned to death in a parley, Guatemozin who had the city of Mexico leveled over him before he was taken." The promise of American poetry lay not in the conformist efforts of Eliot and Pound, however skillful, but in an original response to the untamed power of the New World environment.

Williams distinguished his own vision of literary Americanism from Amy Lowell or Sandburg at a formal level, specifically in the poet's representation of the objective world. He satirized their appropriation of folk culture, whether Sandburg's "Negro cotton picker's song of the boll weevil," or Lowell's Adobe Indian lullaby, proposing instead the modernist act of imagination informed by Cubism and Futurism as the way forward. As he explained it, Williams used a Cubist constructivist process as the method for his improvisations. In his daily practice, he allowed the force of his emotions to break the accumulated perceptions of his daily routine while the "attenuated power" of the imagination then drew the "many broken things into a dance giving them thus a full being." Likewise, Williams described his poetic technique as a Futurist immersion in temporality: "The stream of things having composed itself into wiry strands that move in one fixed direction, the poet in desperation turns at right angles and cuts across the current with startling results to his hangdog mood." Ultimately, the core principle of Williams's poetics in the Prologue was to embrace "the authentic spirit of change," engaging the world in flux with the inventiveness of the imagination. If fully developed, this aesthetic orientation could liberate Americans from "atavistic religionists, science doing slavey service upon gas engines, [and] from a philosophy tangled in a miserable sort of dialect that means nothing."

The stakes for Williams in making the case for a radical liberation of aesthetic consciousness can perhaps be explained by the context of the war and the way his daily practice engaged his weighty responsibilities. As he had in *Al Que Quiere*, Williams again argued for a new departure in history figured by the raw potential of America. In a key passage, Williams described a young man who has an epiphany contemplating the adaptations of a fish to his pond environment, leading the young man to assert his defiance against “the parochial deductions of history.” In the next image, abruptly juxtaposed, Williams described “the birth of the imagination [as] like waking from a nightmare.” In its tone and spirit, the Prologue offered its own defiance of European civilization and the historical catastrophe then taking place. But this defiance also contained a bitter optimism. In this passage, Williams seemed to reply to Stephen Daedalus in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Williams was then reading. If history was a nightmare from which Daedalus was trying to wake, Williams argued that the birth of the imagination in a new environment could be a path to awakening.⁴¹

Pound only responded to the Prologue two years later when *Kora in Hell* was published. The delay lends poignancy to his reply, however, as Pound defended his good-faith efforts to support American poetry critically and editorially since 1913 even as he wondered “have I a country at all?” In the aftermath of war, the vibrant literary scene of London had dispersed and Pound wonders where he should go next, back to New York or shift towards Paris. In his point-by-point defense of his generous editorial work, Pound persuasively answered Williams’s polemical assertion that Pound was the best enemy that American poetry had. But he missed Williams’s larger substantive point about the potential of the imagination in the American context. Pound conceived of nation as a matter of blood, reiterating his point about the bacillus of the land:

There is a blood poison in America[.] You can idealize the place (easier now that Europe is so damned shaky) all you like but you haven't a drop of the cursed blood in you, and you don't need to fight the disease day and night; you never have had to. Eliot has it perhaps worse than I have, poor devil.

Williams argued that the deductions of history must be defied and that America, as a haven for despoiled castaways, offered the means to do that making use of the innovations of modernism. Despairing of his lost cadre of writers and artists, several killed in the war, Pound only had recourse to muttering about "mixed race, semitic goo" in the flood of limbs on Eighth Avenue; he himself saw no great promise in the New World. A few months after this letter, Pound left for Paris to begin the next phase of establishing international modernism on an institutional basis. Williams's own momentary sense of possibility for his democratic modernist vision would be cast in the shadow of Pound and Eliot's achievement there.⁴²

The eternal moment

Of the immediate post-WWI years, Williams famously commented in 1951, "These were the years just before the great catastrophe to our letters—the appearance of T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*." Writing after a generation of Eliot's dominant influence in Anglo-American poetry and criticism, Williams was understandably bitter about the shadow that Eliot's seminal 1922 poem had cast across the poetic landscape of the 1920s. In retrospect, Eliot had defined if not captured the civilizational pessimism of the generation that had lived through the war in Europe. But Williams's sense of catastrophe had less to do with the achievement of the poem itself than the authority that it helped to establish for a more traditional poetics, especially in the United States: "Our work staggered to a halt for a moment under the blast of Eliot's genius which gave the poem back to the academics. We did not know how to answer him." In the Prologue, Williams had identified Eliot's erudition as a rival to his own radical poetics of experience, a stance about

which he became ever more uncompromising after 1918. In one instance, Williams had severed ties with a good friend, the poet Wallace Gould, after they argued over Gould's use of Tennyson's style. But in saying that American modernists did not know how to answer Eliot, Williams undervalued his own prose/poetry manifesto *Spring and All*, written concurrently to *The Waste Land*, which offered an alternative vision of postwar regeneration.⁴³

After the war, a new generation of aspiring literary intellectuals, many scarcely out of their teens, arrived in Greenwich Village drawn from across the country by the literary and political ferment of the pre-war avant-garde. Now in his late thirties, Williams arranged to spend three days a week in the city attending at pediatric clinics so that he could drop in the studios of Stieglitz, Hartley, and Charles Demuth to discuss the latest innovations in art. He also read his new work at a few salons of the younger crowd, where he made the acquaintance of a Western roughneck aviator-turned-poet, Robert McAlmon. The laconic McAlmon struck a chord with Williams and together they decided to collaborate on a journal inspired by the now defunct *Others* expressly dedicated to fostering an American renaissance based on the localist poetics of experience that Williams had developed in *Al Que Quiere* and *Kora in Hell*.⁴⁴

In the first issue of *Contact*, published in 1921, Williams struck a less strident, more patient tone than in his previous manifesto. He acknowledged that America remained far behind the nations of Europe, particularly France, in producing an indigenous art that could be the equal of those other nations. In part, he argued that this was the result of prevailing social structures and cultural values. In France, "young men of daring and intelligence move into the arts as naturally as our brood moves through football into business." The purpose of *Contact* was to foster two different types of contact: connecting serious writers for an interchange of ideas so that "the ignorance which has made America an artistic desert be somewhat dissipated"; and awakening poets to the objects of their own locality as Williams had done in *Al Que Quiere*.⁴⁵

In explaining his idea of Contact, Williams also clarified his position on how the formal influences of European modernism might be utilized. Here, he took his inspiration from Joyce's *Ulysses*, which throughout the early Twenties Williams cited as a key influence on his work. Although Joyce drew upon classical texts in a similar fashion to Pound and Eliot, what distinguished his approach from their "academicism," in Williams's view, was Joyce's attention to the objective detail of modern Dublin. Joyce mediated the daily life of Dublin using both classical allusions such as *The Odyssey* and innovative experimental prose, combined into what Williams called his "disclosure": "[Joyce] has forced the reader into a new and special frame of mind favorable to the receipt of his disclosure." Contact was a process of translation, as the poet tried out Joyce's imaginative disclosures in his own context. Using one of his typically peculiar conceits, Williams compared the influence of European modernism to St. Francis of Assisi (perhaps a pun on France) preaching to the animals, which symbolized the United States. When the good saint turned his back, the monkey took up "the Bible to pretend to read from it while the lion roars and the ass brays." The work of Contact was to utilize the disclosures of the European avant-garde to work towards a common language of modernism, while still informed by local experience. In this conception of literary internationalism, the common language of art itself became "our St. Francis, we all meanwhile retaining our devotional character of Wolf, Sheep, and Bear." Thus, even as Williams admitted the cultural deficiency of the U.S., he remained hopeful that formal experimentation addressed to the experience of locality would bring the work of American writers into communion with the best work that Europe had to offer.⁴⁶

The optimism that *Contact* gave Williams of continuing the artistic renaissance of the previous decade proved to be short-lived, however. His co-editor McAlmon eloped suddenly in 1921 with a British shipping heiress, settling with his new wife in Paris. Making use of his wife's

fortune, he became an important player in the modernist literary world there, both as a confidante of Pound and Joyce and also as a publisher. His Contact Press would become an important early imprint as the Parisian literary modernists sought to establish a specialized distribution for their work, what Lawrence Rainey has called “an institutional counterspace” between aristocratic patronage and the mass reading public. As a result, the *Contact* journal was largely stillborn, publishing five issues in three years to scant attention, not even as much as the modest but celebrated run of *Others*. A dispirited Williams wrote to Pound in 1921 that he “had fallen in a bit among the piano-strings.” Weary of “trying to patch something out of the mess” of sick and broken patients, he wished that he were in Paris, which increasingly attracted the creative energies of American writers. But only a year later, he reported to Pound that after “much pain I have pulled one foot out of the primal ooze, or more properly, the suburban mud, and planted it on something which feels firm.” Having found this small patch of *terra firma*, Williams decided to wait on visiting his friends abroad until he had “two feet planted on something resistant.” However dispiriting he found his circumstances to be, Williams expressed growing confidence that he had found his own disclosure in Rutherford.⁴⁷

The product of this discovery proved to be the interpolated prose and poems that make up *Spring and All*. Based on its subject matter and publication date, it is easy to take *Spring and All* to be a direct response to *The Waste Land*. But in a series of letters from the summer of 1922 written six months before Williams read Eliot’s poem in *The Dial* magazine, Williams arranged with Pound to publish his new book of verse with Three Mountains Press in Paris. Based on this chronology, the opening poem in the collection should be read as a concurrent yet still independent reflection on the aftermath of world war. In this poem, Williams described the late winter landscape of the Meadowlands in terms that evoke an actual wasteland: “Beyond, the/waste of broad, muddy fields/brown with dried weeds, standing and fallen//patches of

standing water/the scattering of tall trees.” As “sluggish dazed spring approaches,” the flora of the landscape begins to emerge – “now the grass,” “the stiff curl of wildcarrot leaf” – one quickening object at a time. The dramatic climax of the poem comes in a moment of rebirth: “But now the stark dignity of/entrance – Still, the profound change//has come upon them: rooted they/grip down and begin to awaken.” Within Williams’s personal mythology, Kora had returned from Hell, a theme that the rest of the book elaborates.⁴⁸

The structure of *Spring and All*, as one critic has noted, combines the paratactic prose commentary of the Prologue with the modernist lyric poems of *Al Que Quiere*. The experience of reading the book alternates articulation of Williams’s poetics with poems that appearing suddenly, embedded in the prose, often illustrative of the point he has been making. In a statement later in the book, Williams explained his understanding of the different functions that prose and poetry serve – the “cleavage” between them as modes of writing: “Prose has to do with the fact of an emotion; poetry has to do with the dynamization of emotion into a separate form. This is the force of the imagination.” In his view, while prose should strive for clarity in the presentation of factual knowledge, whether emotions, ideas, or data, poetry involves the dynamic act of crystallizing experience into the new reality of form. Although the prose in *Spring and All* sometimes lacks clarity due to its own imaginative flights, the contrast with the poems in the text is nevertheless stark.⁴⁹

In this respect, Williams aimed to illustrate a central argument in the book: that the imagination, self-consciously acknowledged and developed, offered value to society beyond the “acquisitive understanding” of scientific intelligence. As he had previously in *Al Que Quiere* and *Kora in Hell*, Williams saw aesthetic experience as an alternative that superseded religious dogmatism and scientific positivism. Implicitly, he was making an historical argument about epistemology, that aesthetic modernism was a progression beyond instrumental reason. Due to

the disenchantment of the modern world, he argued, it had become necessary to re-invent the art as a reality in itself to replace the gods “to retain that which the older generations had without that effort.” Confronted with “the inevitable flux of the seeing eye” in trying to make sense of the world, the individual suffered a “crushing humiliation” without the aid of the imagination to give form and value to experience through the act of naming: “When we name it, life exists.” Although Williams’s use of philosophical concepts was far from systematic, the prose sections of *Spring and All* make a clear case for the aesthetic imagination as the basis for “the next great leap in intelligence.” Where science in his view had only accumulated a weighty inventory of static knowledge, poetic form dynamically arranged this knowledge to the benefit of science. Because of this, he urged a shift of emphasis in education, so that student would be made aware that the dead state of knowledge could be energized by the living current of the imagination, where indeed the mass of men already lived.⁵⁰

Williams combined his theory of the aesthetic imagination with the awakening of spring into the emblematic “artist figure of the farmer” in the third poem of *Spring and All*:

The farmer in deep thought
is pacing through the rain
among his blank fields, with
hands in pockets,
in his head
the harvest already planted.
A cold wind ruffles the water
among the browned weeds.
On all sides
the world rolls coldly away:
black orchards
darkened by the March clouds —
leaving room for thought.
Down past the brushwood
bristling by
the rainsluced wagonroad
looms the artist figure of
the farmer — composing
— antagonist

The farmer's environment, represented in the observed details of the poem – “black orchards,” “browned weeds,” “rainsluced wagonroads” – collected together the objects of a certain landscape at a particular climatic moment. The farmer/poet has directed his imagination to the exact moment at hand, weighing and assessing the material facts around him in his imagination. In earlier statement of temporality, Williams had identified the moment as central to his method: “to refine, to clarify, to intensify that eternal moment in which we alone live there is but a single force – the imagination.” For the farmer, the imagination is a practical calculating instrument by which to plant and reap a future harvest, but nonetheless he must evaluate and accept the facts of the moment as he finds them. Likewise, the poet writing in 1922 tried to imagine a future beyond the weary late-winter wasteland of his present, and with the force of his imagination could create faith in a more abundant futurity even as he was limited by present circumstance. By directing his “hangdog mood” against the stream of objects, he conferred value on that moment of experience.⁵¹

In choosing the quintessentially Jeffersonian figure of the farmer to represent the artist in his environment, Williams once again proposed a democratic alternative to the erudite modernism of Pound and Eliot. Indeed, Whitman receives a brief but important mention in the prose sections, when Williams argues that, “Whitman's proposals are of the same piece with the modern trend toward imaginative understanding of life. The largeness which he interprets as his identity with the least and the greatest about him, his ‘democracy’ represents the vigor of his imaginative life.” Yet rather than embrace Whitmanian democracy wholeheartedly, Williams pointed out the subjectivity in Whitman's expansive vision. He redirected imaginative potential away from the Bard as such to the capacity within every person for aesthetic experience and, by implication, aesthetic practice. In this regard, Williams compared the division between the culture of the “social classes” – who live on imaginative values in the absence of wealth and possessions

– and the “acquisitive PROGRESSIVE force” of “the merchant, hibernating, unmagnetized [who] tends to drop away into the isolate, inactive particles.” The poem that follows this message vividly portrays this quality of working-class imagination, describing the annual custom of young street toughs wearing “two horned lilac blossoms in their caps.” Mingling toughness and beauty, “They stand in the doorways/on the business streets with a sneer/on their faces//adorned with blossoms//Out of their sweet heads/dark kisses — rough faces.”⁵²

Although the poems of *Spring and All* are thick with experiential detail, as a collection they are less explicitly local than the conceit of the small-town poet that frames many of the poems in *Al Que Quiere*. Williams’s voice as the doctor-bard of Rutherford is less apparent as he strives for an objective and even representative quality that suggests grander ambitions. A recurrent theme in several poems is the depiction of technological modernity and mass culture: a yellow plaque of sunlight inflated by a pressure pump; rose petals edged in steel; roadside tableaux seen from the perspective of a passing motorcar; “banjo jazz with a nickelplated amplifier”; rapid transit on the IRT; the movie house as modern cathedral; and the eternal moment in a baseball game:

The crowd at the ball game
is moved uniformly

by a spirit of uselessness
which delights them –

all the exciting detail
of the chase

and the escape, the error
the flash of genius –

all to no end save beauty
the eternal –

In one sense, Williams was representing what would have been recognizable tropes of American modernity, even though such typical subjects ran counter to his previously rigorous localism. But

in another regard, Williams seemed to be making a broad-based appeal. With his faith in the dynamic and transformative force of poetic form addressed to the imagination of his readers, supported by the prose commentary of the book, Williams conceived of poetry not as the elite preserve of aesthetes but rather as a self-conscious imaginative representation of the experience of mass culture directed at the “social classes” as much as the discerning individual.⁵³

With his appeal to the eternal moment of perception and the faculty of imagination, Williams leveled the field of aesthetic production and appreciation, as he had done in the Prologue. Yet although he nodded at several points to characteristic American figures – the yeoman farmer, Whitman, and even humorously Woodrow Wilson and his advisers swimming to Europe “with their sinewy arms, like Ulysses” – Williams increasingly approached his aesthetics in universal terms. For him, Homer and Shakespeare did not exemplify venerable literary traditions so much as they demonstrated the power of the imagination directed at the stream of objects and language in their own time. As with Joyce’s disclosure in *Ulysses*, the disclosure in the poems of *Spring and All* was meant to contribute to a collective international effort to advance language and poetic form with the intention of reforming consciousness. Nonetheless, in polemically defining his poetics against those poets and critics he calls “the traditionalists of plagiarism,” with Eliot and the English literary establishment the clear target, Williams continued to align radical formal innovation with the democratic aspirations of the cultural left in the United States.

In theorizing the function of the imagination, Williams for the first time utilized the concept of personality, a key term for Bourne and the Young Intellectuals: “In the composition, the artist does exactly what every eye must do with life, fix the particular with the universality of his own personality.” The unresolved tension at the heart of his theories was also the unresolved tension within American internationalism: did America and the New World represent a particular

country with its own historical conditions and interests, or was it a figurative ideal, a new method of addressing the present moment, unmoored from history and tradition, that could be transported to any place? As he completed *Spring and All* in the fall of 1922, Williams began work on *In the American Grain*, a series of essays on the history of the New World that addressed this question.⁵⁴

Going to the ground

After much encouragement from Pound and McAlmon, Williams finally made arrangements to take a year-long writing sabbatical, which included a six-month journey Europe in the spring of 1924. For the first four months of his sabbatical, Williams took an apartment in New York City with his wife, conducting research in primary sources at New York Public Library for a cultural history of the New World that he had conceived while writing *Spring and All*. *In the American Grain* took part in a vogue in the early 1920s for cultural criticism through historical narrative, with two particular books that influenced it Paul Rosenfeld's *Port of New York* and D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature*. Williams's critique of the deforming effects of Puritan moralism on American culture also echoed the major cultural critics of the time, H. L. Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks. The novelty of Williams's cultural history lay in his hemispheric frame, beginning with Norse and Spanish exploration, as well as his attention to relatively neglected or unknown figures. His historical method also uniquely reflected his poetics: applying his imagination to primary documents to recognize "new contours suggested by old words so that new names were constituted."⁵⁵

A number of the essays that make up *In the American Grain* were written during his sabbatical in Europe, and as with all of his work of the previous decade, Williams defined his Americanist project in contrast to the modernist ferment in Europe. In a revealing digression at

the midpoint of the collection, Williams described his experience upon first arriving in Paris: “After my brutalizing battle of twenty years to hear myself above the boilermakers in and about New York,” he had expected to find relief among writers and artists whom he had long admired and collaborated with. He was heartened to find copies of *Spring and All*, albeit “looking somewhat dusty,” in the windows of the Shakespeare & Co. bookstore, and his connection to Pound, H.D., and McAlmon gave him entrée to the salons, studios, and parties of James Joyce, Constantin Brancusi, Gertrude Stein, and others. Pound’s American correspondent was accordingly fêted. Nevertheless, even “with his antennae fully extended, nothing came” of most of these encounters “save an awakened realization within myself of that resistant core of nature upon which I had so long been driven for support.” Acutely aware of his individual experience, solitary and embattled, at a distance from “old-world culture,” Williams sought recognition and intellectual engagement that he did not find perhaps because of his resistance.⁵⁶

Williams did find one fruitful intellectual dialogue while in Paris, however, that allowed him to express his “resistant core of nature.” At the insistence of a mutual friend, he visited the secluded study of Valéry Larbaud, a French novelist and translator who, like Williams, was at the time immersed in studying the political and cultural history of New World settlement. As Williams recounted their conversation, they had a spirited disagreement over *Magnalia Christi Americana* by the Puritan divine Cotton Mather, which is excerpted in its own chapter without comment in *In the American Grain*. For Larbaud, Mather’s account and theological explanation of the Salem witch trials was a vivid, distinctive literary artifact: “For our taste, it is perhaps a little grotesque, this explanation – but firm. There is vigor there – and by that, a beauty.” Williams could not countenance the aesthetic distance of Larbaud’s position, however, his speaking “of Mather as if he were some pearl.” While he admired the hard shell of the Puritans’ determination to survive in a harsh climate, Williams believed that the deformed character of their beliefs still

plagued American culture. “You do not know America,” he implored Larbaud. “There is a ‘puritanism’ – of which you hear, of course, but you have never felt it stinking all about you. . . . It is an atrocious thing, a kind of mermaid with a corpse for a tail.” In his view, Puritan moralism was in fact its opposite, “an immorality that IS America,” not based on a just conception of the world but rather a desolate one, abandoned by a radically transcendent God.⁵⁷

As expressed to Larbaud, Williams’s passionate intention in writing *In the American Grain* was “to drag this THING out by itself to annihilate it.” In stark terms, Williams explained to Larbaud the challenge for the American scholar:

Who are we? Degraded whites riding out our fears to market where everything is by accident and only one thing sure: the fatter we get the duller we grow; only a simpering disgust (like a chicken with a broken neck, that aims where it cannot aim, which a hog-plenty everywhere prevent from starving to death) reveals any contact with a possible freshness.

The phrase “degraded whites” is striking in two respects. It echoed the “despoiled, molted castaways” of the Prologue, clarifying Williams’s sense of the importance of imagination for cultural castaways like his mother and his poorer patients. It also bracketed Native and African-American cultures as distinct from a white democracy. As a chapter on slaves in *LAG* further demonstrated, Williams avoided virulently racist views even as he still operated within a racialist framework. The passage also suggested that the remedy for the degraded condition of white Americans was “contact,” both with the fecund natural surroundings of the New World and the diverse peoples that made it up. Rather than focusing only on the eternal moment for contact, as he had in *Spring and All*, Williams constructed a historical narrative that explained the degradation as well as showing exemplary figures who lived counter to puritanism. Americans, he argued, “recognize no ground as our own” and that this dislocation rested upon the unstudied character of our beginnings. Only through intelligent investigation of books and records of the early comers to the New World could Americans “proclaim a ground” on which to stand –

discovering a true morality, aligned also with beauty: “what has been morally, aesthetically worthwhile in America has rested upon peculiar and discoverable ground.”⁵⁸

In broad outline, the narrative of *In the American Grain* depicts the natural environment of the New World, as Columbus and the Spanish conquistadors found it, as fecund and wild, capable of driving men to ecstasy but also to madness if not encountered adaptively. Williams depicts Cortez’s destruction of Tenochtitlan, the royal city of Montezuma, as the conquistador driven mad by his lust to possess the fruits of Aztec civilization, whose ornamentation and architecture organically articulated the fecundity of the land even as it made place for ritual sacrifice in its “bloodstained chapels.” On their insatiable and ultimately doomed journeys, Cortez, like Columbus, Ponce de Leon, and DeSoto, were “possessed by beauty while they work that is all they know of it or of their own terrible hands; they do not fathom the forces which carry them.” In portraying their ecstatic surrender to the land and their desires, Williams is more sympathetic to the conquistadors than to the priggish settlers of New England. He depicts the Puritans, in their mortification of the flesh, as the hard seeds of “Tudor England’s lusty blossoming,” who by the negation of their desires were able to resist the savage attraction of the wilderness. However well suited for survival though, their worldview stifled the imaginative powers and appreciation of beauty in Anglo-American culture. In his telling, the Puritans also refused to acknowledge Native Americans even as noble adversaries, refusing to make contact with them, as French settlers had done, both socially and physically, in terms of touch. As they began to move west along the frontier, they brought with them the “atavism that thwarts and destroys”; in resisting their environment and the desires it could fulfill, American heirs to Puritan culture have been “bent into grotesque designs of violence and despair.”⁵⁹

For all of Williams’s cultural pessimism, however, he persists in imagining a present aesthetic practice that opens onto a future in which the repressed energies of American culture

have been liberated, channeling desire for landscape and touch into objects of beauty that establish a new morality. Throughout *In the American Grain*, he identifies minor figures, or “re-names” familiar ones, who successfully adapted to the fecund energies of the New World. Williams admires the composure of the French voyageur Champlain who, in the face of mutinous lieutenants, resisted the urge for depredation and violence of the conquistadors and kept up a standard of civility and leadership. Among Anglo-American settlers, he draws a contrast between two famous frontiersmen in national mythology. On the one hand, Daniel Boone struck out on his own into the Kentucky wilderness, where “filled with the wild beauty of the New World to overbrimming . . . he had what he desired, to bathe in, to explore always more deeply, to see, to feel, to touch.” On the other, George Washington retreated from his early years on the frontier to domestic life at Mount Vernon with “a profound spirit of resignation before life’s rich proposals which disarmed him.” Although not sharply critical of Washington or Benjamin Franklin, Williams’s instinct nevertheless is to question the received wisdom of national mythology, peculiarly reflected in his attempt to rehabilitate Aaron Burr as a subversive champion of liberty rather than an opportunistic demagogue. At his most polemical, Williams directly connects the repressive legacy of Puritan moralism with the acquisitive spirit that defines the American type for much of the rest of the world: “Imagine stopping money making. Our whole conception of reality would have to be altered. But to keep a just balance between business and another object is to spoil the intoxication, the illusion, the unity even.”⁶⁰

As Williams rises to a pitch in denouncing Mather, Larbaud asks him about the intention of his historical criticism, “Does this indicate . . . a new force in your country?” Williams demurs at this suggestion, saying that he is only seeking to “disentangle the obscurities that oppress me.” But he answers Larbaud’s question with an account of Père Sebastian Rasles, a Jesuit priest who lived among the Abenaki Indians along the Maine frontier in colonial New England, learning

from their culture while cross-pollinating his religion with theirs. Rasles's actions represent for Williams a truly moral life: "to be *positive*, to be peculiar, to be sure, generous, brave – TO MARRY, to *touch* . . . to create, to hybridize, to crosspollenize, – not to sterilize, to draw back, to fear, to dry up, to rot." If Rasles is a representative figure of a pluralist, corporeal, and hybrid approach to cultural regeneration, the question becomes how his example might be applied in the cultural crisis of the 1920s. Perhaps based on his experience treating the ethnic working class of Rutherford, Williams respected the traditional sociality of Catholicism, which the Jesuit priest in part symbolizes, against the austere individualism of Protestantism. The Catholic Church represents an appealing alternative, offering "us ALLEVIATION from the dullness, the lack of touch incident upon the steady withdrawal of our liberty." But intellectually and morally, in his view, Catholicism was "the equivalent of a blow to the head" that relieves its followers of responsibility.⁶¹

Williams concludes in *In the American Grain* that the more difficult but ultimately fruitful road to cultural regeneration is aesthetic and, by a difficult path, prospective. The key figural term here is "ground." In his historical research, Williams went seeking a ground from which to know his cultural surroundings to go with the literal ground under his feet in the poetics of the moment. The hardship that besets the emergence of the poet is lack of understanding of that ground, given the degraded aspect of his culture: "I speak of aesthetic satisfaction. This want, in America, can only be filled by knowledge, a poetic knowledge, of that ground."⁶²

Curiously, in his search for an aesthetic lineage, Williams again makes only passing reference to Whitman, and instead embraces Edgar Allan Poe as the emblematic precursor for the challenge of his own moment. Williams argues that Poe's "crazy reputation" in America as a fabulist of macabre tales excuses a meaningful engagement with his originality and "re-awakened genius of place." This originality did not involve merely the rejection of European literary

influences, but also sensitivity to his surroundings, however violent or grotesque, which gave his writing “a legitimate sense of solidity which goes back to the ground.” For Williams, Poe took the provincialism of antebellum America – “the hard, sardonic, truculent mass of the New World, hot, angry” – for his starting point and methodically represented it in all its manifestations. Given the atmosphere of cultural pessimism that pervades *In the American Grain*, it becomes clear that Williams admires Poe’s uncompromising commitment to the clarity of his vision in inhabiting his locality: “Either the New World must be mine as I will have it, or it is a worthless bog. There can be no concession. His [Poe’s] attack was *from the center out*.” The argument of *In the American Grain* answers Larbaud’s question, although indirectly, as to whether there is a new force in America. While Rasles’s acceptance of cultural hybridity and corporeality is the ideal of a “new morality,” the aesthetic work in Williams’s view has to begin by going to the ground under his feet to create a store of poetic knowledge to realize that ideal.⁶³

Marooned individual

In the American Grain was the first book of Williams that was released by a commercial publisher – Boni & Liveright in November 1925. His hopes that it would have at least a modest commercial success were disappointed by the relatively indifferent effort that his publisher made in advertising it. Nevertheless, the book registered critical notice among other modernist writers, suggesting its influence within the republic of letters if not with a wider readership.⁶⁴

Writing in *The Nation*, D. H. Lawrence gave *LAG* what was for him a rare positive review. Lawrence drew out the distinction that Williams had made between a local and a national literature. Lawrence understood well Williams’s embrace of the local, which he argued told rare but valuable vernacular story about “the great continent, its bitterness, its brackish quality, its vast glamor, its strange cruelty.” National literature, in contrast, proclaimed familiar tropes of

American mythology without investigating the specific soil under their feet. Lawrence believed that to be conscious of one's surroundings was "to bring a few American citizens into American consciousness," this few forming the nucleus of a new race in the future. In this respect, Lawrence read his own Nietzschean conception of a heroic vanguard into Williams's prospective vision. This true aristocracy, implicitly male, would bring about a real American consciousness through "sensitive tenderness and diamond-like resistance." At no point in *In the American Grain*, however, did Williams speak in terms of a vanguard or cultural aristocracy. However dire his sense of the cultural crisis among "degraded whites," he still retained his faith in the universal potential of the imagination if properly understood and developed. Likewise, the liberation of female desire from the constriction of Puritan moralism was a central preoccupation for him, while Lawrence mystified the feminine spirit of the continent as "the unravished local America," waiting to be taken by his heroic vanguard.⁶⁵

Reviewing the book in *The Dial*, Ezra Pound interpreted Williams in racial terms of their private correspondence – as an insightful outsider to American culture who lacked of the "arid curse of our nation" in his endocrines. Pound praised Williams for a temperament that prized reflective and examining habits, out of step with the dominant practical impulse in America. But for Pound, the virtue of reflectiveness also rendered Williams's criticism apolitical in its emphasis on cultural reform: "If he wants to do anything about what he sees, this desire for action does not rise until he has meditated in full and at leisure." Indeed by 1925, Williams was as pessimistic about America as Pound, but instead of "blood poison" he saw the problem to be cultural and therefore amenable to reform through artistic means. Yet as Pound justly pointed out, this method offered a difficult approach to reform, since it was based on "an odium against a condition of mind, not against overt acts or institutions."⁶⁶

Pound's sympathetic review encapsulated well Williams's position in the American literary landscape of the mid-1920s: widely admired for his technical and stylistic achievements but viewed even by friends as a restless and isolated critic. In 1926, Williams received the prestigious Dial Award, which recognized one American writer annually with a \$2000 prize to make up for the "discrepancy between his minimal requirements as a citizen in a commercial society and his earnings as an artist." The notice announcing the award in *The Dial* was written by Marianne Moore, Williams's friend and colleague from the *Others* group whose poetry he admired as much as any American writer. Moore had tried to turn down the request from her editors to write the notice, and her reluctance was reflected by her evasive praise of Williams's work. Previously, Moore had written an extensive review of *Kora in Hell*, which praised Williams's talent for the vernacular, his crisp diction, and his philosophical depth, even as she found the Prologue to be petulant. Likewise, she remained "unsubmissive to his pessimism" in *In the American Grain* while still appreciating its ornamentation of meaning and material. Summing up Williams's literary career to date, she argued that his achievement had been a "practical service" to American letters, literally the specific terms of the award. This service was not to the Reading Public, however, but "to the Imaginative Individual, to him who is in our world always called a Marooned Individual." The refined irony of Moore's review at once empathized with Williams's predicament while also suggesting that it was perhaps a matter of his own doing.⁶⁷

Perhaps Williams's harshest critic at the time, but one who attacked him as insufficiently radical, was the Baroness Elsa Von Freytag-Lovinghoven, a Dada poet living in Greenwich Village. In 1920, Williams had developed one of his intense intimacies with the Baroness, drawn to the extremity of her eccentric persona and the intensity of her aesthetic beliefs, but he broke their relationship after she propositioned him to "let her give him the flowering gift of syphilis, and let his inhibitions melt away, leaving only the flame of art." Soon after, the Baroness

submitted to *The Little Review* an excoriating critique in verse of *Kora in Hell*, entitled “Hamlet of the Wedding-Ring.” In the review, the Baroness accused Williams of being a hypocrite, revolting against his bourgeois suburban life without having the courage to leave it behind for real experience: “Husband *or* artist – W.C./Art no infirmary for emotion-starved – passion-crippled – soulinjured males – females.” While offering a tough, at times hilarious, perspective on Williams’s half-hearted dalliance with her, the Baroness grounded her aesthetic rebellion in a blend of Nietzschean creative nihilism and anti-democratic, anti-Semitic defense of traditional aristocratic privilege. “Democracy makes cripples conceited,” she asserted, “gives fools chances – helps weakling – lout – to place where does not belong.” Harping on Williams’s figure of “castaways,” she calls America “the Jew of the future,” full of the offspring of races uprooted from organic tradition.⁶⁸

Setting aside their manifest ugliness, the Baroness’s views do serve to bring into relief the peculiarity of Williams’s project. While he sought out the aesthetic revolt and restless formal innovation of modernism, he also attempted to direct its forward vector towards a new tradition, “a new morality,” founded in the universalist project of democracy – specifically American democracy historically unburdened by aristocratic hierarchies. He placed his faith in the imaginative potential of “despoiled, molted castaways,” those unassimilated, alienated members of American society, whether immigrants or outcasts. Yet his forceful rhetoric, which had been in step with the 1910s avant-garde and the tumultuous politics of that decade, came increasingly for his colleagues to seem like a process of “ceaseless new beginnings,” in the words of Marianne Moore; or as the Baroness caricatured him, a stray flea jumping in the circus of art. The 1926 Dial Award was in many ways a valedictory for this first phase of Williams’s career. Now in his mid-forties, he shifted to writing short stories and memoir, and began to collect his poetic efforts

scattered in journals and small-press editions for a volume of collected poems. The tremendous push of creative and polemical energy he had made over the previous decade subsided.

In 1934 in the preface to Williams's first collected volume, the poet Wallace Stevens, another friend from the *Others* group, explained the appeal of Williams's poetry for the new generation of the Thirties. Referring to the restlessly innovative aspect of Williams's aesthetic as "anti-poetic," Stevens remarked,

As a phase of a man's spirit, as a source of salvation, now, in the midst of a baffled generation, as one looks out the window at Rutherford or Passaic, or as one walks the streets of New York, the anti-poetic acquires an extraordinary potency, especially if one's nature possesses that side so attractive to the Furies.

Largely detached from the politics of the Thirties himself, Stevens admired the vital spirit of Williams's efforts, not to mention his virtuosic "manner," he questioned whether his political appeal was not another form of detachment: "He happens to be one who still dwells in an ivory tower, but who insists that life would be intolerable except for the fact that one has, from the top, such an exceptional view of the public dump and the advertising signs of Snider's Catsup, Ivory Soap and Chevrolet Cars."⁶⁹

By the intensity of his democratic aspirations for poetry, Williams had made himself a castaway – a Marooned Individual – in the eyes of many of his fellow modernists. But there remained the wider potential of his poetic method, immersed in and directed at local experience. Mina Loy, his most sensitive critic among his contemporaries, captured this method with elegant simplicity: "He is a doctor. He loves bare facts. He is also a poet, he must recreate everything to suit himself. How can he reconcile himself?" Her answer was that he reconciled himself through experience infused with the personality of the poet into poetic form: "he throws that bare fact onto paper in such a way that it becomes a part of Williams's own nature as well as the thing itself." As a new generation of formalists came of age in the Twenties and then grappled with the

crisis of the Thirties, Williams's method offered them an example of how experience might be realized as form.⁷⁰

Chapter 2 – From Symbolism to Revolutionary Symbolism

In the January 22, 1935 issue of the radical journal the *New Masses*, the editors published a “Call for an American Writers’ Congress,” undersigned by more than sixty leading American writers, to be held in New York City around May Day of that same year. Signatories of the call included officials and leading members of the Communist Party U.S.A., young proletarian writers from John Reed Clubs, and unaffiliated yet radicalized middle-class intellectuals who wished to ally their work with working-class movements. The editors of the *New Masses* endorsed the purposes of the Congress, which they saw counteracting “the new wave of race-hatred, the organized anti-Communist campaign, and the growth of Fascism, all of which can only be understood as part of the Administration’s war program.” Suspicion about the Roosevelt Administration’s motives in its response to the Great Depression reflected persistent criticism from radical intellectuals since 1930 of the flailing efforts of “the capitalist system” to save itself. At best, these intellectuals considered New Deal reforms to be a cautious attempt to preserve the vested interests of banks and powerful corporations with only minor concessions given to the economic struggles of workers and small farmers. This conservative streak was only exacerbated by the Democratic Party’s dependence on a reactionary, racist voting bloc of Southern Congressmen. At worst, radicals feared the fascist potential in Roosevelt’s charismatic leadership and the cartelism of the National Recovery Administration. As Edmund Wilson bluntly summed up Roosevelt’s First Inaugural, having described the militaristic trappings of the parade at length, “There is a suggestion, itself rather vague, of a possible dictatorship.”¹

The writers’ statement in the *New Masses* is frank about its revolutionary intent, a striking exercise of free speech from a post-Cold War perspective: “today hundreds of poets, novelists, dramatists, critics, short story writers and journalists recognize the necessity of personally helping

to accelerate the destruction of capitalism and the establishment of a workers' government." Yet their fervor was not misplaced. The winter of 1935 represented the political nadir of the early New Deal – or from another perspective, a moment ripe for the revolutionary transformation of American society. Whether this transformation would head left or right, however, had become a live, and fraught, option in the minds of the writers.

As the historian William Leuchtenberg observed about the period, "the revolutionary spirit burgeons not when conditions are at their worst but as they begin to improve." In strict economic terms, the bottom of the Depression had occurred in 1932, before the new administration's reforms during the Hundred Days had some ameliorating effect. By 1935, having weathered midterm elections with an enlarged Democratic majority to Congress, Roosevelt remained personally popular due in large part to his dynamic, optimistic presence on the radio and in the press. But the recovery that followed his initial raft of programs had begun to stall, with the economy still far worse off than 1929. National income for 1934 remained \$10 billion less than in 1931, which in turn was only half that of 1929, and many millions of workers were still unemployed. Moreover, it was unclear whether the administration had any more levers to use on the economy, at least within the ideological limits they had set for themselves.²

As a result, 1934 was dominated by what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. has called "the politics of upheaval": intense political pressure from both mobilized labor, in the form of general strikes, farmer-labor coalitions, and industrial union organizing; and also populist movements, as Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and Francis Townsend forged sizeable constituencies based on charismatic leadership and single-issue campaigns. With American capitalism seemingly never more fragile, and its ills never more apparent, the proposed Writers' Congress would offer American writers a chance to air the discontent and debates that had been roiling their numbers since 1930. In the words of their call, "A new Renaissance is upon the world; for each writer

there is the opportunity to proclaim both the new way of life and the revolutionary way to attain it.”³

In the event, the American Writers’ Congress opened on April 26, 1935 for a public session at the Mecca Temple in Manhattan, attended by 216 delegates, 150 fraternal delegates from other countries, and an audience of 4000 spectators; it would continue in closed sessions at the New School for Social Research over the next two days. One delegate, the novelist and critic Kenneth Burke, described the proceedings in *The Nation* as remarkable, and indeed unprecedented in American letters:

To those of us who had been taught to think of a literary renaissance as six men assembled in the back room of a saloon to discuss the need of a new magazine, it was a revolution in itself to behold four thousand people packing the pit, balcony, gallery, and stage of Mecca Temple to consider the problems of literature.

Burke’s choice of imagery was appropriate, as he had been a leading figure in the 1920s American modernist scene largely based in short-lived little magazines. His conversion to the revolutionary cause had been relatively late in coming among his peers, and a number of the more stalwart delegates, especially among the Communists, questioned the sincerity of his commitment, considering his ideas to represent a laggard bohemian aestheticism. In his account for *The Nation*, Burke did not hedge his enthusiasm for the rigorous debates that took place at the Congress, considering them a crucial test of each writer’s character and integrity in light of historic movements. He also praised “the vitality and organizational abilities of the Communist Party” in bringing the Congress together. Yet he was also clearly aware of their skepticism of him, gamely acknowledging that his own speech on the subject of propaganda had “called down upon him the wrath of the party’s most demonic orators.”⁴

In retrospect, both for participants in the Congress and for historians, Burke’s speech, “Revolutionary Symbolism in America,” stands as the most controversial and arguably the most

significant speech given at the event. By his own recollection, Burke wrote his speech “with a terrific desire to belong,” glad to find in the Congress a means to overcome the isolation and fear he felt as a writer during the Depression years. After a favorable reception to the speech from the audience, he was dismayed at being called out as a snob and petit-bourgeois apologist by two leading Communists, Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman. Burke had been clear in his speech about his petit-bourgeois perspective, but this had specifically been his point: that the revolutionary movement, in order to build the broadest possible coalition, should “enlist the allegiance of this class.” As a matter of propaganda, he suggested that writers adopt the unifying symbol of “the people” as opposed to “the worker” in order to strive towards a more inclusive coalition. Gold and Freeman objected that his proposal displaced the proletariat as the focus of propaganda, and they considered Burke’s position to be at best a reformist concession, if not a dangerous opening towards demagoguery and “Hitlerist” invocations of the *Volk*. Burke responded that the workers’ movement should claim “the people” as a symbol before the demagogues did, an argument that carries greater force if we remember that it was spoken at the high point of Huey Long’s popularity.⁵

Despite the harsh reception he received, Burke’s argument turned out to be prescient. Three months after the Congress, the Comintern announced a change in official Communist policy that endorsed a Popular Front against the rising fascist threat, adopting “the people” as its principal symbol. There is some question whether the American Writers’ Congress had in fact been called in anticipation of this shift, but whatever the case Burke’s position immediately ceased to be controversial ideologically. In this respect, Burke could be said to be “pointing toward the future” while “most of the Congress was pointing toward the past,” as one participant, Malcolm Cowley, later argued.⁶

Where one stands on the ultimate fate of the Popular Front, however, has shaped the interpretations of Burke's speech and more broadly his 1930s thought – what he called his “Thirtyminded” period. Daniel Aaron, an early chronicler of the 1930s Left, revived the purist position of the proletarians: that the Writers' Congress was the beginning of a dilution of radical purpose and cooptation by liberal New Dealers, with the “vagaries” of Burke's position more “strategic” than principled. With greater theoretical complexity, Fredric Jameson critically engaged what he called Burke's “symbolic turn” in formulating his own theory of ideological analysis. While Jameson admires Burke's theory of symbolic action, and attempts to restore its historical context, he reads Burke's postwar theories back onto his 1930s radicalism, ultimately doing a disservice to both periods. By reductively interpreting 1935 in light of 1945, and thus reading the *telos* of Cold War Americanism into the initial convictions of the Popular Front, Jameson loses the crucial contingency of the earlier position and the principled continuity of the later one. Conversely, the historian Michael Denning has done more than anyone to recover the full significance of the Popular Front as a cultural movement – what Denning terms the “Cultural Front” – from the ideological battles of the Cold War. For Denning, Burke was a major American socialist intellectual who, along with Sidney Hook, Max Eastman, and Louis Adamic, attempted to translate Marxism into the idiom of American political and philosophical traditions. Denning argues that Burke's “revolutionary symbolism,” like the Gramscian concept of hegemony, formulated culture as class struggle. But except for broad outlines of Burke's radical alignments within the Cultural Front, his analysis brushes over the specific content and historical development of Burkean symbolism.⁷

This chapter will resituate Burke's thought against the background of his development from a leading young critic – and apolitical aesthete – of 1920s American modernism into a idiosyncratic but committed theorist of radical democracy, arguing for the importance of

criticism, communication, and propaganda in making the case for a broad-based (small-c) communism. In that respect, Gold and Freeman were correct: Burke was more reformist than revolutionary in that he believed in force only as a last resort, and as the product of organized political pressure rather than violence. Jameson's criticism that Burke emphasized strategy at the expense of purpose in an effort to harmonize American society with liberal capitalism fails from the perspective of 1935 and the writings that led up to it. Burke's self-described book on communism, *Permanence and Change*, is subtitled *The Anatomy of Purpose*. Eschewing both Hegelian teleology and Marxian hermeneutics of suspicion, Burke made the case there for a post-foundationalist, pragmatist communicative politics attuned to the transformative possibilities of the "new Renaissance" that he saw within mid-1930s American society. Paradoxically, this politics had emerged from his withdrawal from the political engagement of the first American avant-garde and the Americanism of William Carlos Williams and others. Rather than the poetics of experience, Burke pursued "discovery in invention," his term for formalism influenced by French Symbolism and dedicated to Nietzschean transvaluation of values. The crisis of the Thirties challenged Burke to rethink his antinomian withdrawal, leading him to translate communism into his own ethical and communicative terms while arguing for the role of artists as propagandists of radical culture.

Flaubert of Weehawken

Born in 1897 in Pittsburgh to a lower middle-class Irish-American family, Kenneth Burke belonged to the fabled Lost Generation of American intellectuals. Malcolm Cowley, among Burke's closest friends, offered one of the first sustained reflections on the Lost Generation in *Exile's Return: A Narrative of Ideas*, written in the context of his own Depression-era radical political commitments. In defining the term, Cowley was aware of its already hackneyed usage:

“It was a boast at first, like telling what a hangover one had after a party to which someone else wasn’t invited. Afterwards it was used apologetically, it even became ridiculous.” Nevertheless, he saw some benefit in giving the term substantive sociological content to describe the generation of writers born in the late 1890s, whose experience of World War I had cleaved their early adulthood even as it defined it.⁸

In Cowley’s view, his generation was the first truly national, as opposed to regional, generation in the history of American letters. The process of national consolidation, both economic and social, that the historians Robert Wiebe and Alfred Chandler have described, facilitated the incorporation of middle-class intellectuals culturally, as they shared the increasingly common experience of both private and public university education, as well as attraction to hubs of the cultural professions in Chicago and New York. “Publishing,” Cowley argued, “like finance and theatre, was becoming centralized. Regional traditions were dying as capital consolidated itself; all regions were being transformed into a great unified market for motor cars and Ivory soap and ready-to-wear clothes.”⁹ Furthermore, their shared experience of WWI, either directly as soldiers or ambulance drivers or indirectly amidst the climate of mobilization and state repression at home, only further served to etch this generational sensibility into Cowley and his cohort.

Besides the structural changes of consolidation, Cowley also identified a crucial shift in his generation regarding the status of values: “The generation belonged to a period of confused transition from values already fixed to values that had to be created.” In their work for little magazines with names like *transition*, *Broom*, and *Secession*, “they were seceding from the old, and yet could adhere to nothing new; they groped their way toward another scheme of life, as yet undefined.” Cowley’s contemporary sense of this shift has been corroborated by intellectual and cultural historians, from the seminal accounts of Morton White and H. Stuart Hughes, to more recent works in the cultural “history of longing” by Jackson Lears and Jennifer Ratner-

Rosenhagen. In particular, Ratner-Rosenhagen's account of the American reception of Nietzsche establishes that for literary radicals of Cowley's generation, their reading of Nietzsche's anti-foundationalism catalyzed dissatisfaction with both traditional religious faith and scientific positivism. Yet beyond the purely deconstructive potential of Nietzsche's genealogy of morals, they also saw the regenerative possibility of moral autonomy in Nietzsche's iconic stance as philosopher-poet. Thus, creative production became for them the means to effect a "transvaluation of values" through artistic practice. As Ratner-Rosenhagen argues, although the enthusiasm of American literary radicals for Nietzsche as poet "bordered on the ecstatic, it was driven by a serious commitment to the notion that aesthetics and ethics are inseparable."¹⁰

For Cowley, this pursuit of self-created values began in the thriving literary crowd at Peabody High School in Pittsburgh, a group that in addition to Kenneth Burke included James Light and Susan Jenkins, who were later founding members of the vanguard theater troupe the Provincetown Players. Burke and Cowley had first met, Cowley later recalled, as three-years-olds, when Cowley's physician father attended on Burke's mother. But it was at Peabody during the early 1910s that they became close confidantes and fellow egoists. "I suppose we had all the normal aberrations of our age and type," he later recounted. "We were wholly self-centered, absorbed in our own personalities, and appalled by the thought that these would some day be obliterated." The two friends often spent their nights reading together at the Carnegie Library until it closed, walking home for several miles "conducting heavy-handed philosophical discussions, punctuated by shouts and fierce gesticulations." In a contrast of dispositions that Burke replicated in many of his close friendships, he played the intensely cerebral thinker to Cowley's steadier, social intelligence.¹¹

For Cowley and Burke's group at Peabody, self-conscious aspirations towards a literary vocation helped to alleviate what Cowley felt to be the oppressive moralism of late Victorian culture in a provincial city. He recalled in 1934 that,

We felt that the world was rigorously controlled by scientific laws of which we had no grasp, that our lives were directed by Puritan standards that were not our own, that society in general was terribly secure, unexciting, middle class, a vast impersonal reflection of the families from which we came. Society obeyed the impersonal law of progress.

One beacon of a more vigorous and modern artistic sensibility was *The Smart Set*, the magazine of urban sophisticates edited by self-professed Nietzschean scourges of the American middle-class, H. L. Mencken and James Huneker. Although Cowley grew tired of Mencken's cynicism within a few years, *The Smart Set* introduced him to a cosmopolitan reading list that included Wilde, Shaw, Ibsen, Lawrence, Wedekind, and Schnitzler, which he and Burke both read voraciously during their adolescence. Mencken also inspired their love of "paradox" as a characteristic mode of expression. Paradox, in turn, led to the theory of convolutions: "If it leads at one moment to reading Oscar Wilde because other high-school pupils have never heard of him, it leads at the next to disparaging Wilde because you admired him once and because First Convolution people still admire him. You have entered the Second Convolution." Ultimately, the ironic pivoting involved in their love of paradox came to seem "self-devouring," leading nowhere. Indeed, for Cowley the committed Marxist writing in the early 1930s, the theory of convolutions served as a useful metaphor for the limited perspective of youthful egoism.¹²

Although they remained frequent correspondents, Burke and Cowley parted ways when Burke's family relocated in 1915 to Weehawken, New Jersey, directly across the Hudson River from Manhattan. While Cowley disappointed his parents' hopes that he would attend a Swedenborgian college in rural Pennsylvania, earning a scholarship to Harvard instead, Burke embarked on an unusual and remarkable career as an autodidact intellectual. Despite his promise

as a scholar, Burke initially stayed out of college after his family's move, working sporadically for a bank while he read and wrote in all his spare time. As Cowley described it, "He wrote in the mornings – stories, poems, essays, fables, plays, all of them lopsided, brilliant, immature, full of characters that explained themselves in paradoxes. In the afternoon, after his mother cooked lunch for him, he wrote letters," which "except for the occasional game of tennis were his only social life." During this period, Burke immersed himself in nineteenth-century French and German literature, which became his first critical specialty.¹³

At the time, Burke dreamed of moving to France, but as Cowley observes with gentle irony, "France was then fighting a war." However, actual wartime France did not enter his imaginative calculations. Writing to Cowley at Harvard in September 1916, Burke seemed to hold onto the prewar idyll of a Parisian bohemian: "No, I shall not live in France. I shall go to France on a *visit*. . . . Then if I have a chance in France to get a job and thus prolong my visit, I shall take it. . . . As long as I can get money, I shall prolong my visit and when money ceases, my visit is over." Curiously, when the real opportunity to work in France as an ambulance driver presented itself with American entry into the war in April 1917, it was the adventure-seeking Cowley who took it while Burke remained at his parents' house in Weehawken, reading Flaubert and working on a novel, seemingly indifferent to voluntary enlistment or civic duty.¹⁴

With prodding from his father, who was otherwise supportive of his son's eccentric path, Burke enrolled at Ohio State University in Spring 1916 semester with James Light, his literary friend from Peabody High, and embraced the relative normality there: "My isolation in New York has given me a passion for the boorish and the healthy and the trivial which will never leave me." This passion proved to be fleeting, however, as Burke first returned to Weehawken and then enrolled at Columbia College for the Fall 1917 term. Burke only remained at Columbia for a semester, but it was there that he began to define himself as a young *révolté* against genteel poetic

conventions. His friend Matthew Josephson later recalled being struck by the presence of a new student at a meeting of the Boar's Head literary society who "spoke forth in a very different voice from the others." Burke subverted the prevailing idiom of "Grecian nymphs and mythical heroes or scraps of moonlight and fading roses," instead reading his own *vers libre* – "harsh unrhymed verses that described a dream carrying overtones of repressed and melancholy sexual desire" – evoking a strong censure from John Erskine, the faculty sponsor of the society.¹⁵

During his time in Weehawken, Burke had developed a keen interest in the Others Group, the experimental arts collective founded by the poets Alfred Kreymborg and Walter Arensberg, which had become the leading edge of the first American avant-garde by 1916. From his reading of the *Others* journal, Burke adopted both their commitment to *vers libre* and experimental verse forms as well as their provocative suggestions of sexuality. Writing to Cowley, Burke chided his childhood friend for rejecting *vers libre* out of hand: "To object to free verse because it is free verse is stupid and superficial, just as stupid and artificial as it would be to object to the other form . . . for a similar reason." Burke found it conducive to the form of his own thought and expression, rather than "stanza after stanza of 'Mary had a little lamb' rhythm." But *vers libre* likewise appealed to his desire to rankle the genteel taste of Erskine and the earnest young poetasters of Boar's Head.¹⁶

Burke's first publication anywhere was "Adam's Song, and Mine" in the March 1916 issue of *Others*. The poem appeared in two forms at the time: as *vers libre* in *Others*, and in a more traditional rhymed metrical verse form for *Sansculotte*, James Light's college literary magazine at Ohio State. As in most of Burke's poems from this period, "Adam's Song" portrays the amorous longings of springtime in relatively frank sexual terms. The difference between the two versions, however, offers a stark contrast in the expressive freedom Burke found in *vers libre*. With a sing-song cadence and little specificity of detail, the *Sansculotte* version ends, "I shall run and play with

you./We shall laugh and leap, we two;/Til my love has wakened you./Virgin!” By contrast, the looser form of the *Others* version opens up erotic suggestion, if not menace, and physical tactility in the manner of H.D.’s imagism: “Yes,/I am coming./I am coming to scramble with you/Through the angry bushes./I shall race with you over the wet sand,/And I shall bear with your innocence/Until/You feel how warm my breath is,—/Virgin!” Burke could also assume a poetic persona as the pursued, as with his evocation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* from another poem at the time: “Drive me foaming among the weird bare trees I cannot name,/Until I am as desperate as the daughter of the river god/In flight to save her womb from the seed of Apollo./Bewitch me!/Cast me back upon the rocks of Attica./Let me worship you as violently as the violet-weaving Lesbian could worship Aphrodite.” Contrary to Josephson’s recollection, Burke was not averse to classical tropes and imagery, but he used “Grecian nymphs” and “scraps of moonlight” to subversive effect, expressing Dionysian liberation along the abandon of extended Whitmanian lines.¹⁷

Burke’s poetic career, at least as his primary literary focus, was brief, lasting only until about 1920. His published output was not extensive, but the poems from this period show a consistent aesthetic allegiance not only to *vers libre* but also more specifically to French Symbolism. The Symbolist lineage, from Baudelaire in the 1850s to Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé, Laforgue, and Remy de Gourmont in the late nineteenth-century, exerted a profound influence on Anglo-American poetics beginning with Arthur Symons’s influential 1899 interpretation, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature*. The reception and adaptation of Symbolist poetics was multifarious among Anglo-American modernists, but its imprint on Burke’s poetry is unmistakable, both directly in his reading of Baudelaire and Laforgue, and indirectly through the influence of Yeats and Eliot.¹⁸

Three general characteristics of Symbolism are apparent in Burke's poetry, as corroborated by his letters and criticism. First, he exhibits openness to formal experimentation, whether that be breaking and remaking the poetic line, through *vers libre*, or the ironic recasting of conventional forms, as in his sonnet "The Monster." As his comment in defense of *vers libre* to Cowley suggests, Burke was not as ideological about formal experimentation as other members of the Others Group (William Carlos Williams perhaps most of all). Unlike those poets primarily influenced by Rimbaud and Mallarmé, the hermetic challenges of meaning affected by poetic indeterminacy and associative metaphor are secondary to an explicitly rhetorical style that emphasizes irony, tone, and narrative voice. Second, Burke continually explores the limits of moral virtue, as traditionally defined, reveling in scandalous and transgressive content. What can seem like adolescent prurience in his poems remained a central problematic in his criticism, as we will see, as he charted the dialectic of virtue and vice in modern literature.¹⁹

The third Symbolist characteristic of Burke's poetry was his use of concrete details to evoke the emotional state of the poet, what T. S. Eliot famously termed the "objective correlative." To quote Mallarmé from the 1886 Symbolist manifesto, "Symbolist poetry seeks to clothe the idea in a sensible form which, nevertheless, shall not be its final end and aim, but shall merely serve to express the idea which remains subjective." In "The Oftener Trinity," Burke subverts convention in describing love's vigorous arrival in the chill of autumn after it had failed in spring or summer:

But when the chill leaps up,
And the leaves, with a beautiful melancholy,
Get out their silks to die in,
Like great lifeless Vikings sent out upon the sea,
Majestic in their blazing, wealth-laden galleys;
Then I love—
Swimming in the moonlight
Racing in the cold

Gaining confidence in his use of tone, Burke eschews the more common form of springtime desire for the melancholy exuberance of early winter. Despite their imminent demise, the autumn leaves are “blazing,” “majestic,” and “wealth-laden,” and the chill leaps, as the narrator swims and races, ending with the final comment: “My love is the same thing/That swilled new cider and danced in the barn.” Cowley amiably critiqued his friend’s poetry as “moonstruck rhapsodies in free verse,” but the young Burke had clearly found a dynamic expressive form that suited his Symbolist aspirations.²⁰

In January 1918, the 20-year-old Burke decided that he had had enough of school; indeed that it was an obstacle to his proper education. After two years of venturing across the Hudson or down the West Side to visit the demimonde in Greenwich Village, he told his father that he would quit Columbia and take up his literary vocation in the Village. He related the news and his reasons to Cowley, who was then serving in the ambulance corps near the Western Front: “School is killing us, M.; I am astounded that *I* should be the one to give it up first. *You* are the usual pioneer in things of this sort; you know how I envied you your rushing off to France. . . . It is in the air evidently, for now *I* am rushing off to France.” With perhaps more self-awareness than he had shown previously, Burke meant an idealized France of the mind, not the catastrophic trenches where Cowley was reading his letter. His immediate plan was to “get a room in New York and begin my existence as a Flaubert.” For nourishment, he would have “Flaubert and Balzac—add a bit of bread and water and we have banquet enough to get gouty over.” The room he found was at 86 Greenwich Avenue with his Peabody friends James Light and Susan Jenkins in a sprawling seven-room apartment called the “Clemenceau Cottage,” which also served as the unofficial clubhouse for the recently founded Provincetown Players.²¹

Despite his seeming desire to withdraw from the world into a literary garret, Burke showed himself to be an astute observer of the wartime climate in New York in his letters to

Cowley. In a letter from May 1917, Burke began to question whether, given the events of the war, Paris remained the true cosmopolis of the world: “The more I watch the progress of things over there, the more I question my faith in Europe.” As we saw in the previous chapter with the editors of *Seven Arts*, Burke expressed concern over the persecution of peace advocates such as Romain Rolland and Bertrand Russell in Europe, and saw the potential of the United States to carry forth a new spirit of internationalism: “We are internationalists over here, internationalists who are overbearingly proud of our nationality.” Although broadly supportive of what he saw as Wilson’s sensible leadership, Burke wondered in the same letter whether the U.S. government was doing enough to avoid the “Prussianizing of America,” and whether their goal was truly to “make the world safe for democracy” or rather to prop up the capitalist powers of the Allies. Later that summer, he railed against the censors and heavy-handed propaganda in the newspapers, which seemed to be conspiring to eradicate the common sense of most of the population: “A paper like the *Sun* is simply unbearable, and one cannot glance at its editorial page without becoming apoplectic.” Despite his concerns, however, Burke considered himself a half-hearted socialist and chose to focus intently on his literary efforts instead. Josephson described him at Clemenceau Cottage living on “iron rations of oatmeal and milk twice a day,” working at “stories and essays he was very eager to publish before his funds gave out.”²²

Discovery in Invention

In several respects – with his commitment to bohemianism, his passion for nineteenth-century Continental literature, and his disillusionment from political activism – Burke began to live a life during the war that many writers and intellectuals of his generation took up upon returning from war. Before they were the Lost Generation, Cowley had dubbed his cohort of recent transplants to Greenwich Village “this youngest generation” to distinguish them from the

avant-garde artists and socialists who had established the Village as a bohemian hub in the years immediately preceding the war. In a 1921 essay, Cowley offered a nonchalant explanation of the new generation's "common habits of thought." The typical individual of his generation had tried on and abandoned "the enthusiasms of the generation that had preceded him." They did not necessarily reject or even dislike the movements popular among their predecessors. Yet one meets few among their cohort "who are either feminist, Freudian, or Communist." Counter to the avowed avant-gardism, both formal and political, of the older generation, he argued that, "the writers of this newest generation show respect, if not reverence, for the work of the past"; in the effort to construct a modern literary tradition, "their work calls for criticism, not prophecy." To this end, they held a shared interest in the refinement and elaboration of form, for which they particularly looked for influence in the French tradition of Flaubert, de Gourmont, Baudelaire, and Laforgue. The elaboration of form, paradoxically, reflected a desire for "simplification of the current life into something rich and strange," a statement by T. S. Eliot that Cowley approvingly quotes. In this essay, Cowley captured the fruitful indeterminacy of the immediate postwar period for the youngest writers in Greenwich Village – transplants from all corners of the U.S., many of them veterans of the war, who gathered together informally in taverns and studio parties to discuss how "to build a new world on the ruins which they have themselves created" – an ambiguous formulation that seems to conflate the revolutionary impetus of the avant-garde with the decimation of war.²³

In *Exile's Return*, with a decade of perspective and the context of his own return to activism, Cowley saw the schism in outlook between the two generations in even starker terms. He vividly recounts one night at a popular saloon when he became suddenly conscious of the difference between "they" and "we": "'They' wore funny clothes: it was the first thing that struck you about them." For women, this was a "Dutch bob, hat carried at the side, a smock of some

bright fabric (often embroidered Russian linen)” or for others, “tight-fitting tailored suits with Buster Brown collars,” a five-gallon hat, and riding boots. Men wore tweedy, unpressed suits with Windsor ties, and although “they did not let their hair grow over their collars, . . . they had a good deal more of it than was permitted by fashion.” The younger Villagers, on the other hand, “were accustomed to uniforms, and content to wear that of the American middle classes. We dressed inconspicuously, as well as we were able.” More importantly, their visual and sartorial differences were symbolic of a difference in motive. “They had been rebels: they wanted to change the world, be leaders in the fight for justice and art, help to create a society in which individuals could express themselves,” Cowley argues. “We’ were convinced that society could never be changed by an effort of the will,” because the world “consisted of fools and scoundrels ruled by fooled and scoundrels.” In this later account, Cowley delineates the ruins in specifically generational terms. As the youngest generation arrived in the Village from France or college, he recalls with evident regret, “we were content to build our own modest happiness in the wreck of ‘their’ lost illusions, a cottage in the ruins of a palace.”²⁴

The ideological stakes of this generational shift, in literary terms at least, is exemplified by the tension between Burke’s first published essay, “The Armour of Jules Laforgue,” and the journal that published it: *Contact*, William Carlos Williams and Robert McAlmon’s short-lived little magazine dedicated to developing American modernist literature on a localist basis. Appearing in *Contact* #4, Burke’s essay encapsulated the new vogue for French Symbolism, offering a nuanced defense of the reclusive aesthete as an antidote to the masculine posturing of what Burke calls “the heroic realist.” In the same issue, McAlmon directly challenged to point of mockery Burke’s praise of the aesthete, although one can just as much see McAlmon’s literary persona as the model for Burke’s heroic realist. In his own editorial comment, Williams arbitrated between the

two, trying to find a place within his *Contact* vision for Burke, whose intelligence and literary potential Williams was coming to admire.

Burke had first been introduced to Williams and *Contact* through Matthew Josephson. As Josephson related the story, he had encountered Williams while gathering material for feature articles in the *Newark Ledger* – “a country doctor who had the odd habit of writing poetry while waiting for the delivery of babies” made an excellent subject for a Sunday feature. Burke already knew Williams from his leading role in the Others Group and as a fan of *Al Que Quiere!*, so he welcomed the chance in January 1921 to pay him a visit with Josephson for a walk in the countryside. The “countryside” turned out to be the “the dun winter scenery and pungent stench of the Great Swamp of New Jersey,” where the two young Villagers tramped for hours with Williams and his protégé McAlmon among the industrial suburbs, dilapidated factories, and mountains of rubble around Paterson. Burke found the tough-guy pose of McAlmon to be as off-putting as Josephson’s overzealous pretensions were to Williams. But the two men enjoyed each other’s conversation enough to strike up a correspondence, a meeting of dissimilar temperaments whose mutual respect fostered a friendship that would last for over forty years.²⁵

When Burke and Josephson visited Paterson, Williams and McAlmon had just published, in mimeographed form, the first issue of *Contact*, in whose opening manifesto they explained what they meant by “contact.” In the effort to support experimental writing in the U.S., they offered their journal as a forum for “native artists” to congregate – “to make contact” – and in turn, to define through their work the variety of “our situations” in America. Yet their editorial policy involved a mild contradiction. While professing to remain open-minded to each artist’s vision, without any guiding theory, their principle of selection insisted that submissions involve direct perception of experience. *Contact*, they proposed, was “issued in the conviction that art which attains is *indigenous of experience and relations*, and that the artist works to express perceptions

rather than to attain standards of excellence” [emphasis added]. Thus, with their striking use of the word “indigenous,” they qualified who counted as a native artist: those artists whose work derived from the experience and relations of American culture.²⁶

In his strident rejection of European literary models and standards, Williams had remained ambiguous as to how he defined “American,” although he consistently implied an environmental rather than a racial criterion. In the *Contact* manifesto, he explicitly stated that while the journal “will be American, because we are of America,” the form that the work of “racial or international” artists takes would depend on each artist’s “contactual realizations.” Even though the experience of the artist should take place in America, reflecting “our situations,” the editors placed primary importance on “the degree of understanding about, and not situations themselves.” In other words, the form of the work as informed by the accumulated contacts and erudition of each writer would count for more than typically “American” content.

Without making explicit reference to his work, the connection that *Contact* made between creative expression and experience clearly aligned with John Dewey’s emergent ideas on art and experience, which Dewey was beginning to formulate in the immediate post-war period. In “Americanism and Localism,” an essay he published in *The Dial* magazine in June 1920, Dewey reflected upon the relation between the local and the national in public consciousness. Using local newspapers as an example, he contrasted the thick accounts of local events with the “thin and apologetic air” of generality in national stories. In order to reach a diverse and often transitory audience, Dewey argued, the rhetoric of national stories had to appeal to the “greatest common divisor,” which in his view necessarily resulted in the “crackling surface” that one saw in mass-circulation magazines. The vast geographical scope of the U.S., however, provided a space for a vital localism: “the wider the formal, the legal unity, the more intense becomes the local life.” Dewey believed that such localism should be the basis for the “literary career of our

country” because ultimately “we are discovering that locality is the only universal,” even as modern populations become evermore restless and transient. The *discovery* of locality, he concluded, “creates a new poetry” that explores one’s neighborhood, not just its characters and local color but more importantly its socio-historical forces.²⁷

Given that Williams was a frequent reader of and contributor to *The Dial*, it is not difficult to imagine that Dewey’s essay would have resonated deeply with his own ongoing project of localist poetics. *Contact*, founded only five months later, offered a literary organ for precisely the kind of decentralized cultural production that Dewey envisioned. Yet the editors proved to be prescient in their manifesto as well. Nowhere in his essay does Dewey mention his pragmatic theory of experience, but *Contact*’s commitment to art that was “indigenous of experience and relations” provided a loose yet useful formulation of what, almost a decade later, Dewey would describe with greater precision as the “denotative method” in *Experience and Nature*. At the risk of oversimplification, the denotative method of philosophical reflection, as Dewey defined it, asserts two key propositions relevant to *Contact*: first, that all inquiry begins with – and crucially, returns to – the unreflective fact of primary experience as an integral present; and second, that primary experience is not only objective, i.e. the *what* of experience, but also subjective and qualitative, the *how* of experience. Thus, the relations, values, and standards that the artist discovers in her “contactual” moment of perception are as much “reality” as the objects they find there.²⁸

Burke’s essay on Jules Laforgue, however, seems to run counter to *Contact*’s dedication to the poetics of experience. In the essay, Burke used his literary portrait of the Symbolist poet to indirectly comment on poetic speech in his own time. For him, Laforgue’s temperament was out of step with his times: “He was a distinctly lunar mentality pale in a world of smiting daylight.” Rather Laforgue’s sensibility was made for an earlier Romantic period, before the swooning emotions of Young Werther had become hackneyed, and when Baudelaire’s “two nostrils dilating

to everything” sufficed as a metaphysical stance. Keenly aware, however, that sincere expression of such Romantic sentiment would not adequately address his own time, Laforgue invented “his armor,” which consisted of the “simple expedient of a gesture” by which “he can say what he wants to say and at the same time apologize for it.” Burke had employed just such a gesture in his own Laforgean poetry. For example, in his *Artemis* poem, he pivoted from rhapsodizing with a final two-line comment: “Dewy, perplexing, wide-eyed moon,/The traffic mumbles that you are not Artemis.” His armor allowed the author to harbor and even to express his truly lunar mentality – “to deal with the eternal verities” – while making it clear rhetorically that he understood the danger of cliché if expressed unselfconsciously. The Laforgean gesture signaled a rejection of rhetorical excesses that were more posture than genuine emotion, while retaining a space for genuine metaphysical longing.²⁹

Burke’s analysis of Laforgue, which neatly summarized his own poetic output to that point, took an adolescent position to be sure, reminiscent of the theory of convolutions. But if Laforgue’s armor was a symbol for his own aesthetic stance, the final movement of his analysis revealed his adversary: “All the great publishing houses of the Occident can slobber out their glut of a *Stark Laying Bare of the Soul*, *A Powerful Drama of the Mighty City*, *A Narrative that Tears at the Fibers of Your Heart*.” Burke defined his emerging critical position against the heroic bluster of the realist novel, especially in its mass-produced pulp version. Curiously, Burke identified this publishing glut with democracy, positing Laforgue’s aestheticism as the antidote: “The inexorable democracy of the intellect can shout its dithyrambs to the L trains of *Vibrant With Life*. Laforgue has answered imperturbably: Oh fine linen! No one has sung of you.” Thus, in a position consistent with his criticism throughout the 1920s, Burke embraced the reclusiveness of the French Symbolist tradition as a refuge from vulgar democracy.

Playing to type, McAlmon offered his poem “Apotheosis to Extinction” in reply to Burke. Written in free verse with a stilted, scientific diction that recalls Mina Loy, the poem excoriates the Laforgian aesthete, opening: “He much admired LaForgue/And Remy de Gourmont./His admiration clung leachlike [sic] to him/Feeding upon his learned gestation/To reverence of exceeding avoirdupois.” McAlmon further savaged this erudite literary pedant, often with unfortunate choices of metaphor: “What atrocities his intellect/Committed with its eternal rapes of his/Emotional chastities.” Beyond brusque challenges to his adversary’s masculinity, McAlmon also distinguished his philosophical difference with the aesthete, who he said prized critical erudition over discovery: “Still he yielded no point to temperamental discovery,/But attempted by the intensification/Of his literary idolizations/To create for himself an *esthete* raison d’etre” [emphasis in original]. With characteristic swagger, McAlmon contrasted the aesthete to “others of more vigorous restlessness,/Malcontents of object-subjectivity,” whose openness to experience drove the Symbolist aspirant to extinction.³⁰

In a letter to Williams, Burke responded to McAlmon’s aspersions directly, taking issue with him on the question of “discovery.” In defense of his method, Burke offered a gloss on one of McAlmon’s lines, “For sensitivities have a suture that closes to discovery.” His response was to argue that sensitivities have a suture that close “in invention.” For Burke, discovery was not limited to the “wild shot in the dark” that one finds walking in industrial slums in search of reality. Rather he made the case that it could be located, as was the case with his own temperament, in the elaboration of a personal form: “the process of discovery is involved in those inexplicable accidents which occur when the artist focuses his feeling for the uncertain and yearning for the certain on one subject.” Even in the lamplight of his study, steeped in the exigencies of literary form, the author could achieve discovery to the same degree as those of

“vigorous restlessness.” The common thread, as Burke saw it, was openness to the fruitful accidents that came with facing uncertainty in experience.³¹

In the end, Williams seems to have incorporated Burke’s position into his understanding of contact. In the same issue, Williams goes beyond McAlmon’s sense of objective discovery to include textual and interpretative discovery: “we agree that the ‘artist is not limited to the range of his *immediate* contact with the objective world.” Rather the materials that he draws from are “the aggregate of all those experiences which have taken form in the imagination.” “Form” is the critical term here, and the basis of how Burke distinguished his approach from McAlmon’s. It could be argued that in his effort to make contact with other young modernist writers in America, Williams was willing to broaden his definition to include the textual as well as the objective. He needed all the help he could get as expatriates left for Europe in droves, so why quibble on principle? But Burke’s position challenged Williams to deepen his understanding of experience in a way that embraced, to borrow Dewey’s terms, not only the objective “what” of primary experience but also the qualitative “how” – the relations and standards that the individual artist discovers in his aggregated experience.³²

In contrast to Burke’s anarchistic armor against “the inexorable democracy of the intellect,” Williams’s cultural democratic ideals emerged out of this broader conception of contact. In his *Contact* essay, “Yours, O Youth,” Williams encouraged the younger generation to forge a native literature based upon experience rather than tradition. He warned them that in running off to London and Paris they risked losing their “native local contacts”; without sufficient ground to stand on in Europe, sophisticates of the continental literary scene would “play Wilson” with Americans. Although less prejudiced against foreign influences than a few years earlier, Williams continued to believe in the unique potential of the American environment, while also recognizing that the sustained, collective effort of contact was necessary to realize that

potential. “We are here under certain general conditions,” he argued, “run from them they remain the same. Together they form the only unity we possess. On this basis alone can we afford dispersion of effort, the modern individualistic dispersion.”³³

Like Dewey in his *Dial* essay, Williams employed the “legal unity” of the United States to give shape to Americanism as a universal principle – what David Hollinger has called the ideology of “cosmopolitan Americanism.” Even an avowed aesthete like Burke, resisting incorporation into any larger movement, played his part in Williams’s conception of culture. Through his critical mediation of European thought, in this view, Burke helped to achieve a cosmopolitan modernist culture not on the elite terms of the Parisian scene, but rather grounded in the experience of American locality. Furthermore, as Dewey suggested in his essay, this principle of democratic internationalism could be expanded indefinitely to encompass the entire world: “When we have a United States of the World,” he argued, “doubtless localism will receive its final release.” Dewey’s disillusionment with the failures of top-down Wilsonian internationalism during the post-war period led him to imagine his own vision of democratic internationalism, whether in the U.S. or worldwide, based on the capillary action of local cultures. Williams adopted the implications of this for building a progressive literary culture in the U.S. that went beyond modern individualistic “dispersion of effort” to a loose unity based upon art that was “indigenous of experience and relations.” Yet as much as Burke appreciated contact with Williams as a friend and interlocutor, he did not feel the need to locate cosmopolitan modernism within an Americanist framework. Like Cowley, he saw a break between Williams’s generation of modernists and his own. For Burke, formalism and the consolidation of the modern tradition became more important than experience, as his affiliations and criticism in the 1920s revealed.³⁴

Contact vs. Culture

Even as he questioned localism as an aesthetic ideology, Burke embraced it as a way of life after his marriage to Lily Batterham in 1920. Along with bohemian friends from the Village, the couple spent summers at remote rural retreats in Maine, upstate New York, and western North Carolina, where Batterham had been raised and acquired hardy skills for the outdoors. For Burke, these retreats were a welcome opportunity to work on his writing with quiet focus, dragging his typewriter up into the woods, as well as frugality, living mostly off berries, game, and local produce. Their rural life became permanent when Burke purchased seventy acres of land with a dilapidated house to fix up in Andover, New Jersey, fifty miles northwest of New York City. He moved there in 1922 with Lily and their two young daughters, and would remain for the last seventy years of his life. His correspondence with Williams is full of frequent attempts by one to visit the other, travelling by “flivver” for Sunday dinner and walks around Cranberry Lake. Like the Rutherford poet, he had a view of the modernist literary scene from a distance, although for Burke it was his study rather than contact with the local community that drove his work. Living off their truck garden and Lily’s knowledge of folkways, Burke was able to maintain enough financial independence to pursue an uncompromising if parsimonious life in letters, at the time a very tenuous profession in the U.S. for those who lacked wealth.³⁵

Throughout the Twenties, Burke’s primary source of income was as an assistant editor for *The Dial* magazine, whose offices were located in a brownstone on West 13th Street in Greenwich Village. On an editorial staff that numbered less than ten, Burke became a jack-of-all-trades: copy editing, answering correspondence, translating stories and poems from French and German, and even setting type, most notably for the first American publication of *The Waste Land* in November 1922. Apart from periodic fallings out with the publisher, the aristocratic and sometimes paranoid Scofield Thayer, Burke worked at and published in *The Dial* until it ceased

publication in July 1929. Judging from his critical views during this period, Burke agreed with the apolitical aestheticism and cosmopolitan modernism that defined *The Dial* as the most prestigious American arts journal in the 1920s – the elite counterpart of *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* in setting standards of modern urbanity for the American middle class.

The Thayer Era at *The Dial* began in 1920 following a contentious transition period at the end of the war. Founded in 1880, *The Dial* had been the premier literary journal in Chicago until newspaperman Martyn Johnson purchased and moved it to New York in 1916. Although not directly affiliated with the Transcendentalist *Dial* of Fuller and Emerson, editors at every stage of its history were conscious of this storied legacy of reformism and cultural vanguardism. In moving to New York, Johnson intended to shift its emphasis from literary culture to political activism, bringing in John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, and Randolph Bourne to make radical proposals for postwar reconstruction. Thayer, a textiles heir who had taken a bohemian turn at Harvard, provided financial support for the so-called Reconstruction *Dial* largely out of admiration for Bourne and his anti-war essays in the *Seven Arts*. In late 1918, however, Thayer withdrew his support, in part because Bourne had been forced out at the request of Dewey. Without Thayer's funds, Johnson soon faced bankruptcy and agreed to sell his shares to Thayer and James Sibley Watson, a surgeon and cultural patron. Re-launched in January 1920, Thayer and Watson entirely eliminated the activist element in the magazine, and instead focused on producing a scrupulously edited and beautifully designed journal that presented the best visual art and literature of transatlantic modernism. As the historian of *The Dial* aptly put it, they were self-appointed “philosophes of the new” working to consolidate the artistic revolution of the 1910s. Ironically, it was not the fiercely political Bourne in whose memory the magazine was dedicated, but rather Bourne the Nietzschean aesthete, denuded of even his malcontentedness.³⁶

In one of his first editorial comments for the magazine in July 1923, Kenneth Burke succinctly formulated the shift that *The Dial* had taken from radical politics and avant-gardism to classicism of the modern. Burke compared the ethos of artistic rebellion to the restless spirit of modern business: “each artist must discover some remote virgin territory much as the engineer discovers another oil pocket.” Writers like J. K. Huysmans or James Joyce exploited their particular creative vein and then moved on, leaving very little for others to build upon; in the modern era of Bergsonism, each artist had become his own inventor and entrepreneur. Such creative expenditure was ultimately wasteful, in Burke’s view, and he urged instead a kind of cultural conservation ethic, organizing the resources that were already at hand. The shift from avant-gardism to classicism would replace the restless pursuit of pure creativity with a “religion of minimal productiveness,” in which it was “more blessed to read a book than to write one.” If the prior generation of pre-war aesthetes had been romantic anti-capitalists, Burke now proposed what we might call classical anti-capitalism. In the modern era, he argued, the classical spirit, which typically glorified the powers that be, would instead be “inimical to the spirit of modern business.” Rather than mirroring the restless invention of modernity, the religion of minimal productiveness would do something “much more radical than Bolshevism” by withdrawing into “the catacombs” to take stock of what had already been created.³⁷

That same month, Burke also published “Chicago and Our National Gesture,” which expanded his theory of classicism to a thorough critique of cultural Americanism. The prospecting conceit from his editorial had implicitly referred to Van Wyck Brooks’s concept of “spiritual pioneering,” which Brooks proposed as a cultural alternative to the business ethos of unlimited economic expansion. In his essay, Burke drew the connection between Brooks’s concept and F. J. Turner’s frontier thesis, in particular the American exceptionalism that both theories shared. For Burke, invocations of “the pioneer spirit” as the basis for a uniquely

American cultural destiny were historically dubious, reifying “a passing phase of our national life as the evidence of a unique contribution which we shall offer as a completely ripe nation.”³⁸

Burke’s principal objection to the “pioneer spirit” was its effect on literature itself. He believed that it led to a set of “prescribed grimaces” that an American author (Robert McAlmon, for example) must assume – a national gesture of strength, whether a “broad stride” or “thump of the fist.” The pioneer gesture also came through in both the vatic tone of Whitman and his modern disciples and also “representative content”: “If you speak of the boats on the Ohio, you are being a representative American, whereas if you speak of the boats on the Seine you have evidently spent too much time in New York.” Burke argued that the next phase of American literary culture should dispense with this sort of nationalism and embrace its place within the European tradition. Rather than surreptitiously adopting European art forms, such as the realist novel, and filling them with “American” content, the focus should instead be on form and its effects, with the evolution of form being a shared cosmopolitan project like problems of modern industrialism. Taken together, Burke’s skeptical attitude towards both avant-gardism and cultural nationalism encapsulated Thayer’s vision for *The Dial*: an appreciation of formal excellence, modern and cosmopolitan, that moved away from the strident manifestos of the previous decade.

An important aspect of Burke’s classicism was an emphasis on form vs. spontaneity, as in his dispute with McAlmon. In a series of critical reviews, he made the same case about Williams’s poetry, but in the process showed the limitations of his conception of form. In a 1922 review of *Sour Grapes*, Burke distinguished his own emerging formalism as Culture against what he saw as Williams’s gifted yet naive spontaneity, Contact. While Burke admired the excellence of Williams’s results, he considered his poetics to be as common as mud: “The process is simply this: There is the eye, and there is the thing upon which that eye alights; while the relationship existing between the two is a poem.” In his view this approach has produced ten million

mediocre poets, with Williams – “the master of the glimpse” – being a “distinguished member of a miserable crew.” For Burke, the method of unmediated discovery characterized the Contact ideology: “I take Contact to mean: man without the syllogism, without the parade, without Spinoza’s Ethics, man with nothing but the thing and the feeling of that thing.” Burke contrasted Williams approach to “the thing” with, curiously enough, Kant, who he says constructed the categorical imperative despite “the bleakness of the phenomenon-noumenon distinction.” Kant’s intellectual rigor transcended a preoccupation with the thing for an appreciation of the contours of form. This analogy illustrated Burke’s position of Culture, for which the thing itself was less important “than the delicate and subtle instruments with which he studies it.” While the Contact writer showed little interest in form, the Culture writer recognized form, specifically form-as-idea, as paramount.³⁹

In his review of *Sour Grapes*, Burke singled out as an example of Contact “The Great Figure,” one of Williams’s seminal poems:

Among the rain
and lights
I saw the figure 5
in gold
on a red
firetruck
moving
tense
unheeded
to gong clangs
siren howls
and wheels rumbling
through the dark city.

This representation of a speeding fire truck passing in the rain was for him the perfect example of “the thing and the feeling of that thing.” If the criterion is form-as-idea, it is hard to disagree with Burke; the description does not point beyond itself nor does language or symbol occlude the objects of the poem. By using this criterion, however, Burke showed a deafness to the poem’s

striking formal attributes: the vertical arrangement of broken lines, which isolated single words such as “tense” and “unheeded,” to emphasize their materiality as words; the poem’s evocative sound, the “clangs,” “howls,” and “rumbling”; and most significantly, the Futurist temporality, viz. the poem’s Bergsonism.⁴⁰

Defining form in strictly intellectual terms, Burke missed the influence of Cubism and collage on Williams’s style. Burke argued that the objects of Williams’s poetry, although full of presence and emotional sensitivity, lacked ideas and ultimately form. Yet while Williams had absorbed the formal and symbolic innovations of Mallarmé, Rimbaud, and Joyce – not to mention Duchamp and Gris – Burke conceived of symbolism as Laforgue and De Gourmont had – logical, ironic, and philosophical. In his own emphasis on argument and his apparent deafness to Williams’s formal technique, Burke missed that aesthetic form itself could be “a philosophy,” which rather than transcending objects into a syllogism represented a poetics of experience. For the purposes of consolidating modernism, however, his misreading of Williams allowed him to distinguish his own emphasis on formalism.

Among his close friends in the “youngest generation,” Burke would soon be alone in his commitment to consolidating culture, as Cowley and Josephson joined the exodus to Paris in 1923, and returned to New York in full thrall of the Dada revolt. Burke seemed to relish his sparring criticism of their rebellion, however, as he sharpened his own position. In 1927, he reviewed *The American Caravan*, a yearbook of American literature edited by Brooks, Kreymborg, and Paul Rosenfeld, which brought together new work by 72 American writers whose “fresh racy attacks” presented “a great variety of national developments.” The sardonic title of Burke’s review, “But They Have Settled,” intimated his take on this latest collection of literary pioneers. For Burke, the collection demonstrated that “this whole caravan seems to have reached the end of travel.”⁴¹

In a passage that reflected an important shift in the terms of his analysis, Burke argues: “The *psychology of escape* – only a few years ago assiduously aired by our intellectuals in terms of nation and geography – has been pared down, after closer scrutiny or further experimentation, to the problem of the individual and his relationship to life as a whole” [italics added]. Here, Burke continued his critique of the pioneer ethos among both older literary nationalists and the younger expatriates who had restlessly migrated to Paris. But he critically analyzed the form of literary belief as an aspect of psychology, with “escape” as the symbol of this belief. “The hunger for new horizons,” he argued, should be recognized as merely one metaphor among others. If the choice of metaphor were relative, then he proposed “solidity” as an alternative to ceaseless novelty. And solidity by another name was “a philosophy,” or the development of a theoretical “attitude.” Yet by his use of the indefinite article, Burke suggested that such a philosophy was uncertain and subject to critical debate. “The problem of the individual and his relationship to life as a whole” began to emerge as a question of communication for Burke.

Burke’s inchoate efforts to define his own view of Culture against the avant-garde “psychology of escape” converged during the late 1920s with the aesthetic pragmatism implicit in Williams’s poetics and emergent in John Dewey’s post-war writings. The opening for Burke came from the distinction between a psychological and metaphysical basis for art that he derived from the psychological criticism of I. A. Richards. In a 1925 review of Richards’s *Principles of Literary Criticism*, Burke aligned himself with the English critic’s defense of art as not merely a symptom of social conditions, but related to society dialectically “as the predominant moral factor.” For Richards, Burke argued, the principal value of art was in the “production of attitudes” that will shape action; in this regard, aesthetic experience shapes the “unconscious system of moral values.” But Burke also noted a crucial distinction that he saw in Richards’s work, between art justified in metaphysical terms as Platonic Beauty versus a psychological consequentialism:

“Thus, we are left with all the buoyancy of belief . . . these rewards of Belief without specific reference or *thing believed*, which he contends may give us that feeling of certainty so badly needed in an age of doubt” [italics in original]. Burke criticized noumenal claims for Beauty in the work of art as superfluous, instead shifting his focus to the effect of the work of art on the audience, and by implication, the moral tenor of society as a whole. In this view, art remained a source of belief and certainty, fulfilling the function of religion and metaphysics, but without claims to absolute truth being made in its name.⁴²

By 1930, Burke had fully assumed a psychological and pragmatist basis for his criticism, setting the terms for his influential writings in the 1930s. In an extensive critical review of Dewey’s *The Quest for Certainty* in *The New Republic*, he explored more systematically the themes suggested in the Richards essay. His analysis considered two central aspects of Dewey’s argument: the answer to the problem of knowledge that pragmatism proposes; and the implications of that answer for the criticism of values. Burke summarized Dewey’s post-positivist critique of scientific knowledge as situated “not in *what* the universe is, but in *how* it works” [italics in original]. Showing a lucid understanding of Dewey’s position, Burke agreed with him that the quest for certainty in metaphysical thought was compensation for the painful contingencies of actual life. This quest had been transferred to the “spectator theory” of scientific knowledge, in which absolute Truth claimed priority to practical truths. This process of secularizing metaphysics had resulted in the ghost of metaphysics, its “vast intellectual legerdemain,” obscuring the pragmatic possibilities opened up by the scientific method. In this regard, Burke found Dewey’s “ideology of science” persuasive on the usefulness of scientific method for establishing non-metaphysical certainty: science had “succeeded in greatly increasing the actual certitude of living” through its production of useful knowledge.⁴³

For Burke, the more intriguing question in *The Quest for Certainty* was the application of Dewey's pragmatic method to the criticism of values. Summarizing his position on moral values as it had developed, Burke believed on the one hand that values should not be grounded in "antecedent Being" but rather tested against experience. On the other hand, traditional values should not be discarded just because they were derived from the past. Radical experimentation for its own sake, he believed, had no special claim to working. The problem that arose for him, however, was how to determine the success of a value? Where experimental science used measurement and mathematics, values had no clear standard for success, but only differing claims for what should be "the key value" to measure success. Burke's principal criticism of Dewey was that he offered only a nebulous term, "Intelligence," as the standard of the good. While finding this assertion agreeable because of its tolerance and "lack of authoritarianism," Burke believed that in a strict sense Dewey had left the question of the key value unanswered. For Burke, this question ultimately became a political one, specifically how could multiple individual claims to the good be settled if Intelligence is not taken to be an absolute: "We have done away with the unmoved mover; but do we have in its stead the self-judging judge?"

In his review of Dewey, Burke left the value question unresolved, setting the stage for the problems that would occupy his work over the next decade. Practically speaking, he was comfortable with the role that scientific criticism could play in the realm of values: "whether or not the scientific attitude could provide the grounding for a world of values, once values are given, it can certainly contribute to their better guidance." But ultimately, a better resolution to the question lay for him in the realm of communication generally, and aesthetics specifically. He concluded his analysis by arguing that, "the pragmatist is strongest when he is more like an artist than like the metaphysician." The artist should make his exhortation in terms that are already accepted; once these terms have been accepted, he can go beyond them. The culmination of

Burke's criticism in the 1920s thus pointed towards reintegrating the avant-garde into a political order in which the artist would play a key role if she engaged her audience on its established terms. The political and social unraveling of the 1930s, already underway at the time of the Dewey essay, further pushed Burke in that direction, shaping the theoretical position he would stake out in the revolutionary politics of the left.

Politics of antinomianism

“Do you know, Malcolm, that I sing from morning to night—with trench morale? That I first shiver, and then giggle, to learn that U.S. Steel earns the faithful exactly five cents a share in three months.” So Burke wrote to his oldest friend Malcolm Cowley in April 1931. At a time of catastrophic uncertainty for the country as a whole, crisis and change were mirrored in the lives of these two friends. A month before, Cowley had written to Burke from a bleak off-season hotel in the Connecticut Valley to tell him of his separation and soon-to-be divorce: “I’m in a hole; I’ve been in one for six weeks and I may be in one for the next six months. It isn’t merely the bust-up of one affair, and being in doubt about what’s going to happen next; it’s the fact that the whole scheme of life collapsed at the same time, that I’ve got to find a new one and find it for myself.” Likewise, Burke worried about his own precarious finances as a freelance writer in the deepening Depression, even as his own marriage was in trouble and soon to end as well. “How long will’t be,” he wrote, “until we start to nibble at corners of the estate—until this pathetic little Sir Walter Scott dream, so essential to my scheme of self-respect, begins to turn nightmare.”⁴⁴

The question of how to find a new life, and on what political terms to ground it, would become a point of contentious debate between Cowley and Burke over the next five years. Cowley in effect provided his answer in *Exile's Return*, as he realized that finding a new life for himself involved precisely the opposite approach, surrendering individuality as means and end to

collective purpose. In his influential formulation, he argued that the aesthetic individualism of the Twenties had to give way to proletarian solidarity and party discipline, “a sense of comradeship and participation in a historical process vastly bigger than the individual.” Indeed, some historians of 1930s radicalism have been critical of what they see as Cowley’s facile conflation of the personal and political, that his need for purpose led him to accept uncritically the Communist Party line. For Burke, the path out of aestheticism was not so clear cut or sudden, yet arguably produced a more thorough and durable response to “the nature of art under capitalism,” as he titled a 1934 essay. The starting point in addressing the issue was “the problem of the individual and his relationship to life as a whole,” as he had written in 1927. The question had occupied Burke his whole career but took on new urgency as he attempted to move beyond his “Sir Walter Scott dream” without surrendering moral autonomy.⁴⁵

Despite the dire climate for publishing in the early years of Depression, Burke found publication for his first two books: *Towards a Better Life*, his only novel, and a collection of essays on aesthetics, *Counter-Statement*. Although he had begun both works before the Crash of 1929, he completed significant portions of each in the early Thirties, and their overlapping concerns address, in different genres, what Burke later called his “crisis of orientation” during these years. At issue in both texts is the historical fate of the antinomian aesthete: what purpose does this antinomianism serve in modern American society, and how should it adapt to the circumstances of economic and political crisis? Considering his classical temperament, Burke’s solutions were unsurprisingly circumspect, especially given the radical alternatives proposed by his colleagues. But as sturdy as his defense of an aesthetic orientation was, a melancholy lack of resolution in both works points beyond the individual to the question of collective purpose that would become his focus over the course of the decade.⁴⁶

Towards a Better Life first appeared as a series of ten “Declamations,” which were published in *The Dial* beginning in 1928 and then, after its demise, in *Hound & Horn* and *Pagany*. The final version of the novel consists of 18 Declamations, the last eight of which Burke wrote in 1931 as his marriage was dissolving and he confronted economic uncertainty. Its publication history suggests that it should be read as a hybrid text that straddles the differing historical circumstances before and after the Crash. Its protagonist, John Neal, is portrayed from the beginning of the novel as a representative Greenwich Village bohemian:

The day was long since past when I drew mustaches on the pictures of pretty women, though I still warmed to find that a new generation had arisen to continue the tradition, to carry on the torch which we had handed down to them. When finding that people held the same views as I, I persuaded myself that I held them differently. And as for bravery: dead upon the fields of glory are millions who would have feared to wear a hat in inappropriate season, so I judged that brave warriors were dirt cheap as compared with untimid civilians.

Burke’s description places Neal quite precisely as a member of the prewar New York avant-garde, invoking the Duchampian gesture of “drawing mustaches” on the Mona Lisa, the “new generation” of aesthetes that followed the war, and the absurdity of glory in the aftermath of its carnage. But his solipsistic account of literary ambitions, amoral affairs, and disillusionment also makes his ethos characteristic of 1920s bohemians as a whole. When first introduced in 1928, the character might have been read as a satire on Burke’s milieu. But by 1931, Burke had come to see Neal as an alter ego for his own life as well, a scapegoat on which to load his sins, as he related to Cowley, and “burn away certain very uncomfortable parts of me.”⁴⁷

At one level, the title of *Towards a Better Life* seems to be ironic, drawn from the rivalry between Neal and his close friend, Anthony. Their rivalry is entirely one-sided though. The epistolary narrative consists of a series of bitter letters that Neal writes to Anthony but never sends, comparing his own misfortune and saturnine outlook to Anthony’s social successes, charisma, and idealism. In the Fourth Declamation, Neal relates his public criticism of Anthony’s

plan for a utopian commune, pointing out the implicit narcissism in the scheme: “You had come among us with postures that could easily be proved absurd. Your schemes for ‘human betterment,’ your exhortations ‘towards a better life,’ were matched by an equally obvious ineffectualness. . . . Under the guise of giving, you are receiving.” But Neal is unable to persuade Anthony’s admirers, and so he takes refuge in invective: “my vengeance lay in complaint.” Consumed by envy and self-pity, John Neal’s narrative trajectory hardly seems to be heading towards any kind of better life.⁴⁸

In moments of reflection that make up a considerable portion of Neal’s epistles, however, Burke showed his protagonist contemplating what a life of genuine purpose might look like compared to Anthony’s facile idealism. In the opening line of the novel, Neal echoes T. S. Eliot’s dictum of a simplified external life in the interest of internal complexity: “I had become convinced that, by the exercise of the intelligence, life could be made much simpler and art correspondingly complex; that any intensity of living could be subdued beneath the melancholy of letters.” This dictum encapsulates the novel’s formalism, as explained by Burke in the Preface. Begun as a realist novel, ultimately he rejected the impromptu, journalistic style – “that style so admirably fitted for giving the details of a murder swiftly over the phone and rushing them somehow into copy in time for the next edition of the news” – for a studied style based on six categories of Biblical rhetoric: lamentation, rejoicing, beseechment, admonition, saying, and invective. In his use of these “Biblical Characteristics,” Burke intended to recover for his secular protagonist the moral striving of an age of faith. Or put another way, he explored what constituted an ethical life when metaphysics had given way to the psychology of form. Taking Thomas Mann as his model, his intention was to use form to effect a Nietzschean transvaluation of values.⁴⁹

Reveling in paradoxes, Burke depicted a complicated moral landscape in the world of the novel. Neal seeks purpose in a series of romantic affairs, rising to the ardor of his momentary passions before slipping back into apathy or abandoning his lovers for no clear reason. He derives negative purpose from his oft-professed hatred of Anthony, yet also finds complacent peace of mind for several years as the respectable citizen of a small town. In the last of his epistles, he confesses to his absent friend, “Know me, Anthony, as a man whose purpose never wavered.” But given the evidence of the novel, if Neal’s purpose never wavered it is because he has ultimately accepted the fluctuations of his moral life as a dialectical process of reflection on the antinomian impulses of his actions. As Burke said of Mann’s method, “hypocondria [serves] as the impulse to discovery, and reason as the means of revising hypocondria’s first excessive statement of the discovery.” The form of the novel – Burke’s “discovery in invention” – charts the particular instances of this dialectical process.⁵⁰

For Burke, antinomianism like Neal’s became the key principle in guarding against the dangers of orthodoxy and the rigid certainty that it promises. He offered asides in several passages that can be read as thinly veiled critiques of doctrinaire radicals. At one point, Neal expresses regret that, “I have often left my position unavowed, aware that the self-appointed champions of difficult causes usually display few virtues beyond their devotion, and by their raw urgency will enlist further enmity for the things they advocate.” Likewise, at a high point of his own moral conviction, Neal’s confidence verges on authoritarianism: “True, there are frogs, young and incautious, which land betimes in the belly of a heron. The heron’s song is not their song. There are the sacrificed—there are those for whom the world was not created, but I am not one of them. For long I have hunted—and now I am feeding. *Perhaps* I am content” [italics added]. As these moments suggest, Burke seemed to fear nothing more than unreflective certainty: “Distrust is but the preparation for certainty—and when doubters have ceased to

doubt, in certainty they give no quarter.” In Neal’s case, the “perhaps” marks the dialectical motion back towards doubt.⁵¹

Ultimately, *Towards a Better Life* leaves “the problem of the individual in relation to life as a whole” deeply unresolved, other than to argue for the importance of malcontents for resisting orthodoxy. Neal concludes that in the history of the Church, “the wealth of antinomian enterprise” has been expended in seemingly excessive, troublesome, and unnecessary ways, but their gratuity has been “surpassed only by the same qualities among the orthodox.” In resisting the law (anti-nomos) and exploring spaces of transgression and immorality, the artist acts as a counterbalance to rigid moral certainties. In the book’s final moment, Burke left Neal (and as the text implies, Burke himself) “sitting in his room, in this inexorable city,” constructing for himself a story. “But,” the narrator concludes, “the sanction of no vast mythology was permitted him.” By 1931, the young aesthete who had retreated to his garret in Clemenceau Cottage and then to his study in Andover in pursuit of internal complexity had written himself into perhaps a solipsistic dead end.⁵²

Simultaneously to his novel, Burke completed *Counter-Statement*, which collected together critical essays he had written before 1930 and new essays that supplemented and built upon his earlier work. Like *Towards a Better Life*, *Counter-Statement* should be read as transitional text between Burke’s preoccupations in the mid-1920s and his response to the crisis of the early 1930s. *Counter-Statement* was a more explicitly political book as well, moving beyond the consuming solipsism of John Neal’s epistles to make the case for the moral and political significance of art’s antinomian function.

The lively preface to *Counter-Statement* crystallized a set of premises that Burke had been developing over the previous decade. Explaining the book’s title, he argued that each of his essays ran counter “to an opposite principle flourishing and triumphant today.” He offered his

views as a minority opinion that might eventually pass into the majority, in much the same way that heresies counter orthodoxies, but also dialectically influence and transform them over time. Burke also used antinomianism to structure his concept of a contentious, pluralistic body politic: “Art’s very accumulation (its discordant voices arising out of many systems) serves to undermine any one rigid scheme of living.” In his view, the pluralism of the political sphere had been further expanded “since psychology took the place of metaphysics as a foundation for aesthetic theory.” Building off of I. A. Richards, Burke argued that the communicative appeal of artist to audience had supplanted transcendental claims for Beauty in the work of art. Nevertheless, form still mattered, perhaps even more because of its intervention in the public sphere. Journalism might suffice for “the conveying of information about politics, burglaries, trade markets, new comets, and outraged husbands,” but literature had an important role to play in influencing the moral and imaginative life of society. Taking these premises together, his preface suggested that Burke had turned towards his political and social context from the melancholy isolation of the novel.⁵³

Although he drew upon familiar themes in his work, Burke also used the structure of the book and the new essays to comment upon and rethink previous positions. The book opens with three early essays on nineteenth-century European authors – Flaubert, Walter Pater, and Rémy de Gourmont – whom Burke frames as reclusive aesthetes, or “adepts of pure literature.” Without drawing explicit comparisons, Burke made their similarities clear as writers who, like John Neal, withdrew from the world into labyrinths of their own making in pursuit of pure formalism. His portrait of de Gourmont in particular suggests the author’s specific influence on Burke’s own approach to life and form. A disciple of Mallarmé, de Gourmont followed symbolism “on the road to intellectual anarchism,” using experimental writing to explore the individual as an end in himself. Having created for himself “the illusion of liberty,” de Gourmont performed transgressions on paper, whether of morality or common associative meanings. But the phrase is

loaded: his liberty was an illusion, his isolation from society always a relative one that could be disrupted by crisis, as it was for de Gourmont during WWI.⁵⁴

“The Status of Art,” a lucid survey of nineteenth-century aesthetic theory, continues this theme, as Burke historicized Symbolism and “pure art” more generally as a dialectical response to the utilitarian ethic of science. As he argued in a memorable passage,

Baudelaire courts poverty, lamentation, sullenness, a discipline of internal strife; his concerns are the concerns of an early Christian anchorite voluntarily placing himself in jeopardy—and what could be more “conservative” than this, what more unlike the young Californian with his benign circle of culture, progress, and prosperity, or his football conception of discipline?

Invoking the golden promise of California, Burke contrasted the aesthetic to the utilitarian, the literary mortifications of European authors to facile American progressivism. Burke did not leave this critique as an unresolved opposition though. Instead he showed the influence that the art of the “neglected minority” could have on society more broadly: “The role of opposition is by no means negligible in the shaping of society. The victory of one ‘principle’ in history is usually not the vanquishing, but the partial incorporation, of another.” To this point, he argued that while the artist might choose to focus on “pure” questions of style or technique, his work could still captivate a large audience and spark the political or social tinder of his historical moment.⁵⁵

A further shift that took place in Burke’s thought in *Counter-Statement* was the emphasis he placed on the psychology of the audience in response to the artist’s self-expression given form. In “Poetic Process,” an essay written the same year as his review of I. A. Richards, Burke constructed his aesthetic theory on the basis of a kind of physiological Kantianism. “Throughout the permutations of history,” he argued, “art has always appealed . . . to certain potentialities of appreciation which would seem to be inherent in the very germ-plasm of man, and which . . . we might call innate forms of the mind.” These innate formal categories – crescendo, contrast, balance, and disclosure to name a few – serves as the fundamentals for the author to craft his

appeal to an audience, clothed in the cultural and historical particulars of his time. The self-expression of the artist operates between two poles: spontaneity and decoration, or more simply, emotion and technique.⁵⁶

At one level, Burke replicated here his debate with Williams and McAlmon over the question of discovery: does it lie in spontaneous utterance or formal elaboration? But on another level, he transcended this binary, shifting the focus to the reception of the art. Expression and form were no longer ends in themselves, but rather means to evoke an emotional response in an audience, however popular or rarefied the work might be. To this end, Burke introduced a new concept, that of the symbol as a logical formulation, not in the Mallarméan associative sense but rather as a directly evocative formal element:

This symbol, I should say, attracts us by its power of formula, exactly as a theory of history or science. If we are meshed in some nodus of events and the nodus of emotions surrounding those events, and someone meets us with a diagnosis (simplification) of our partially conscious, partially unconscious situation, we are charmed by the sudden illumination which this formula throws upon our lives.

A key term in this passage is “situation,” which grounds the power of a symbol in the context and the audience – “the nodus of events and the nodus of emotions” – to which the appeal is made. While superior technique might transcend the concerns of its historical context and appeal to the taste of aesthetes in another era, the appeal of the symbol was specific to its present situation, and in that sense it was political. One example Burke gave of this was *Madame Bovary*: while later critics have appreciated the exquisite precision of the novel’s prose in Flaubert’s pursuit of *le mot juste*, during its own time the frank sexuality of the novel constituted its symbolic resonance, igniting the tinder of French bourgeois moralism.⁵⁷

Despite the emerging political implications of Burke’s thought, only one essay in *Counter-Statement* made a specific intervention into his contemporary political debates. In “Program,” Burke proposed “to trace the political and economic implications of an attitude which—so far as

our primary concerns go—is not political or economic at all.” His proposal was to subsidize an artistic class, akin to Coleridge’s clerisy, that would perform an antinomian function for American society. Showing his knowledge of debates over political economy in *The New Republic*, Burke argued that a principal cause of widespread unemployment was technological obsolescence, as workers are replaced by innovation. This condition was usually seen as a negative because of the cultural predominance of modern discipline and the work ethic. But Burke believed that it should be viewed instead as a fruitful possibility, such that technological unemployment could be made into technological leisure.⁵⁸

In his plan, this creative leisure would be paid for by redistributive taxation, creating a dole for artists whose task it would be to become efficient “in a ceaseless indwelling, a patient process of becoming expert in himself.” Burke used the term “efficiency” paradoxically because it was precisely an ethic of “inefficiency” that he hoped that artists would produce in society as a whole. This transvaluation of the work ethic into inefficiency would, on the one hand, make the antinomian values created by the artistic class available to the moral imagination of the wider society; and on the other, it would address the problem of overproduction that plagued the American economy in 1931. If the artist class could undermine the cultural principles of discipline and commercial ambition, the ills of overproduction would be remedied not by greater consumption, as Keynesians proposed, but by an alternative form of production subsidized by taxation on those who still desired to pursue the commercial ethic.

At a moment when radical proposals were proliferating in every journal, Burke’s program gained almost no traction among other left-wing intellectuals, who viewed it as utopian at best, and glib and irresponsible at worst. Writing in the *New Masses*, Joshua Kunitz blasted Burke’s plan in Marxian terms as “essentially an innocuous and petty nihilism; his negative aesthetic is the philosophy of the petit bourgeois gone mad.” Granville Hicks, a leading American Communist,

made only glancing parenthetical mention of “Program” in his *New Republic* review. The proposal led him to focus on Burke’s aestheticism, however, completely overlooking the political implications in his theory of the symbol. By contrast, Cowley praised “the significance of your central definition of form,” but of “Program,” he simply dismissed it as the “lamest part of your book.”⁵⁹

For many on the Left, “Program” stamped Burke’s reputation as an indolent bohemian, a reputation that would follow him until the 1935 Writer’s Congress. But whatever the political feasibility of his proposed dole, Burke’s essay showed a keen perception of the dangers of certainty that lurked in interwar political movements. Writing before the rise of Hitler, he offered the transvaluation of modern discipline as a purposely inefficient and democratic alternative to the coercive virtue of Fascism: “Let us reaffirm democracy (government by interference, by distrust) over against Fascism (regulation by a “benevolent” central authority).” As in his novel, Burke stressed the importance of doubt over ready certainty: “the corrective of a disintegrating art . . . which concerns itself with the problematical, the experimental, and thus by implication works corrosively upon those expansionistic certainties preparing the way for our social cataclysms.”⁶⁰

Translating communism

By the summer of 1932, Malcolm Cowley had found his way out of his personal crisis through the solidarity of the Communist Party. He wrote somewhat defensively to Burke that he was “not plunging blindly into anything,” but rather “feeling my way and trying to fit things into a system that will make it possible for me to define my own attitude toward the world and guess what’s coming next.” Still working from a pragmatist basis, Cowley hoped “to evolve a theory, a hypothesis, that will fit what I see happening—the events come first, then the hypothesis, which

in turn has to be tested by future events and revised in light of them.” But Cowley went further than justification, and also expressed deep concern about his friend’s pattern of behavior. In starkly confrontational terms, he questioned Burke’s path, emotional as well as ideological, and worried that despite his brilliance, he was headed to the same escapist refuges as John Neal in his novel. As an aside, Cowley also suggested, “Going on the wagon for a year would be a damned good step.”⁶¹

The reply came from Andover two days later. As forceful as Cowley had been in challenging Burke, he got the same push back in kind. Burke clearly took umbrage at the implicit and explicit proselytizing he was receiving from Cowley and other colleagues. To the pressure from them that he felt “to sign on the dotted line,” he replied:

I am not a joiner of societies, I am a literary man. I can only welcome Communism by converting it into my own vocabulary. I am, in the deepest sense, a translator. I go on translating, even if I must translate English into English. My book will have the communistic objectives, and the communist tenor, but the approach will be the approach that seems significant to me.

The book that he mentions resulted in *Permanence and Change*, upon which Burke had just begun to do wide-ranging research in linguistic theory, behavioral psychology, and cultural anthropology in order to broaden his aesthetic approach. His letter revealed that though he stood by the proposals in “my sinful Program,” he had begun to question whether bohemianism and antinomian cultural criticism were a sufficient response to the unrelenting crisis of the Depression. Moving beyond his perspective as a modernist writer and intellectual, Burke considered what the implications of “the poetic metaphor” might be for culture and society as a whole. In so doing, he took “Communism” to be not party affiliation or Leninist doctrine but rather a coherent purpose to be articulated – an ideal end-in-view, to borrow Dewey’s phrase – which the collapse of American capitalism had made plausible and even necessary for a peaceful return to economic stability.⁶²

Writing to Cowley a year later, the two friends still largely estranged from one another, Burke extrapolated from a comment made to him by Cowley that “we seem to speak 2 languages often.” He concurred, characterizing Cowley’s political speech in terms of the “prose-demands of contemporary social and political organization.” As with his *Counter-Statement* binary between information and form, Burke argued that “serious efforts” at reform had been confined to “the field of economic cunning” on the both the Left and Right, forgetting the “the wells of the imaginative are in the sphere of poetry and music.” Burke did not want to discard the prosaic for the poetic, but rather wanted to subject it to thorough symbolic criticism to clarify terminological disputes that mistook symbols of reference for objects of reference. The resulting body of secular criticism could then “properly equip a society against the misuse of its most *desirable* aspects, the *poetic* and *religious* aspects” [italics in original].⁶³

On one level, Burke proposed a criticism of the superstructure, although he refused that Marxian term in an effort to keep his own interpretation clear of terminological disputes. Yet on another, Burke also aligned his emerging theory with Eliot’s notions of Culture, with the crucial distinction that poetic aspects should be grounded in egalitarian ideals: “I believe that Eliot is right in everything except his *exile*, which is a very momentous thing to be wrong in.” Channeling for the first time his friend Williams’s Americanist ideology, he argued that Eliot “is able to begin too far along, with too many refinements—we must begin with rougher things.” But this requirement had its advantages, he concluded, “for I think these rougher things should never be neglected, as they so easily can be, once it has become cheap to hire servants to empty your bizbod for you.” Thus, prodded out of his bohemian position by both circumstances and his radicalized colleagues, Burke took up the challenge of how to achieve communist ends by radical democratic means conceived within the framework of national culture.

The first essay to broach Burke's new position was an article for *The Nation* in December 1933, "The Nature of Art Under Capitalism." Where in *Counter-Statement* Burke had reluctantly "pamphleteered," to use his phrase, here he stated that the "contemporary emphasis must be placed largely upon propaganda rather than 'pure' art." Propaganda as a "corrective" (as opposed to "acquiescent") form of literature had become necessary because of capitalism's corrosive effect on the integral connection of labor and ethics. In contrast to his previous defense of indolence and inefficiency, Burke here embraced the work ethic in explicitly Veblenian terms, arguing that even under conditions of exploitation, the exploited worker could take pride in the virtue of his effort. The psychological effects of virtue were not only compensatory but also channeled competitive biological impulses towards cooperative ends. This traditional integration of labor and ethics has been disrupted, however, by the predominance of the business ideal at the expense of industry. As long as "the business of America is business" and not industry, the profit motive would have a destructive effect on the material and moral lives of American workers.⁶⁴

During the current crisis, Burke argued that the work of propaganda art was to promote the cooperative work-patterns that capitalism had vitiated, helping to create rituals that appealed to the moral sensibility of workers. Although he was unvarnished in his criticism of business enterprise, Burke also criticized the Communist ideology of proletarian art, calling it a "cult of disaster" that was "questionable as propaganda, since it shows us so little of the qualities in mankind worth saving." He contrasted this to the effectiveness of "great popular comedians or handsome movie stars" who, although they encouraged acquiescence to present conditions, also appealed to the values of the broader public, something that propagandists should aspire to. Even as Burke began to step outside of bohemianism, however, his argument was tendentious at times and seemed to reflect his disputes with other radical intellectuals more than a thoroughly conceived program. Orienting himself within Veblen's tradition of industrial democracy, Burke

was beginning to find his method and terminology even as his diagnosis of the challenges remained simplistic.

Four months later, Burke offered a more systematic explanation of his “approach to communism” in a featured article for the *New Masses*. He divided his analysis into four approaches – rational, ethical, historical, and aesthetic – each one building upon the last. The rational approach provided a cogent historical narrative of American capitalism, and reasons for the present crisis. Burke argued that capitalism was “an expansionistic system par excellence,” which in the case of the “American system” benefited geographically from the space to expand into. With the closing of the frontier, the U.S. economy continued its expansion overseas, subsidizing the purchase of its goods by extending credit to foreign consumers, much as consumer credit domestically absorbed the mass production of goods at home. Again showing a strong grasp of contemporary political economy, Burke blamed the Depression crisis on two main factors: the collapse of foreign markets for American goods, and the resulting lack of purchasing power among American workers due to unemployment. The rational and ethical converged for him, however, in that the expansionary nature of capitalism, and the profit motive that fueled it, placed the business ideal above the general welfare of workers and farmers. The contradictions of business enterprise had driven American and global capitalism into a downward spiral for which there was no clear solution, Burke believed, except to rethink the very fundamentals of culture.⁶⁵

With the collapse of orthodox capitalism, Burke saw the choice going forward as between Fascism and Communism. Like Communism and the Soviet Union, he conceived of Fascism in broader terms than the regimes of Mussolini and Hitler, defining it as “the control of the state by business men and business ideals.” By this standard, he argued that America has lived under a form of “naïve Fascism” since the industrial consolidation that began soon after the Civil War.

Naïve Fascism had grown like a vine amidst the ethical traditions of the Protestant work ethic and Puritan notions of the good life, and inasmuch as “the history of big business is the history of fraud,” had exploited these virtues. According to Burke, with the rise of Mussolini, the critical stage of fascism had begun in earnest: “under critical Fascism, the method of control must move definitely into the category of conscious and organized strategy.” The dilemma of this critical stage was how to persuade a people used to thinking of themselves within a certain moral horizon as “good” not to reject the frank manipulation and exploitation necessary to critical Fascism. Echoing arguments he had made in the *Nation* essay, Burke was confident that Communism, as he broadly defined it, offered a better chance for permanent stability in the long run. This was because it valorized the virtues of work in good faith, as they had evolved culturally, as “the kind of motives adequate for turning the combative potentialities of man into cooperative channels.” Fascism, in contrast, ignored the contradictions inherent in capitalist expansionism, giving rise to the hysterical expression of combative attitudes in nationalistic wars and racial vengeance.

Although articulated in his own terms with reference to the historical and ethical particularities of the American system, Burke’s analysis up to this point was not far off from that of any orthodox Leninist reader of the *New Masses*. Where his proposal was unique, however, was on questions of superstructure, a term that he used in this instance. His “historical approach” involved probably the most idiosyncratic aspect of his theory – a Spenglerian account of four epochal “rationalizations”: magical, religious, scientific, and poetic. Each rationalization constituted the dominant mode for a period of social development, involving either the control of nature (magic, science) or the organization of humans (religion, poetry) in dialectical alternation. In effect offering a theory of modernity, Burke argued that the epoch of science developed parallel to the rise of capitalist enterprise, such that the imperatives of the profit

motive warped scientific endeavor towards the production of countless goods and sinister inventions such as “patent medicines, deleterious foods, and the munitions of war.” The epoch of poetry had begun to emerge in the nineteenth century as an attempt to restore the humane aspects of religion in the wake of scientific thought, viz. the cooperative attitude in response to the competitive drive. While “the anguish of the romantics” had intimated the beginnings of this dialectical movement, the long-term creative labor of transvaluation had only begun to coalesce into the new epoch with the emergence of Communism, “the only organized body of thought which seems competent to serve as the fourth rationalization.”

The culmination of Burke’s approach to communism involved the role that artists would play under a new system of communal ownership. For all of his vitriol against the corrosive effects of the profit motive, Burke maintained an optimistic and, for him, unironic outlook for the prospects of revolutionary transformation. But political means were largely absent in his theory, leaving unanswered whether he advocated violence, suasion, or electoral change. To a larger extent than his *Nation* article, however, Burke’s conclusions on the “aesthetic approach” seem to suggest that culture should follow revolution, whatever form that takes. Using a Marxian term, Burke anticipates a “new equilibrium” of communal ownership bringing about the stabilizing effects of the fourth rationalization. In the wake of collapse of capitalism with its “unstable and hysterical way of living,” artists will have the important task of creating values for the “great body of citizens.” Returning to his Eliotic conception of Culture, Burke argued that, “Culture is not a ‘luxury product,’ like icing on a cake. In the end, a people can be satisfied with nothing less than a very profound culture.” Yet Burke continued to recast Eliot using the pragmatist language of adaptation and environment: “For a culture is the adaptation of our spiritual values to external necessities.” And later, “A medium of communication is not merely a

body of words; the words themselves derive their emotional and intellectual content from the social or environmental texture in which they are used and to which they apply.”

The *New Masses* article represented Burke’s most thorough effort to convince his radical colleagues of the sincerity of his affiliation, even as he insisted on translating Communism into his own language. But among his writings from the early Thirties, this essay seems the most forced, perhaps because it lacks the irony and dialectical movement that characterized Burke’s rhetorical style throughout his career. In a sense, he seemed to be making an effort to simplify his ideas in order to reach a broader audience; he had taken up his own directive for propaganda over pure art, pamphleteering over inquiry. It is then perhaps telling that Burke never republished “My Approach to Communism,” even in his 1939 collection of “Thirty-minded” essays *Philosophy of Literary Form*. Soon after the *New Masses* essay, however, Burke published *Permanence and Change* on *The New Republic’s* short-lived book imprint. Although a great deal more complex than his other communist essays, *Permanence and Change* was the culmination of his effort at translation and the background for his speech at the 1935 Writers’ Congress.

Permanence and Change: An Anatomy of Purpose stands as one of the most peculiar and challenging works in the canon of American cultural criticism. With its complex formulations and recursive structure, it reads like Burke’s metaphysics, although in the post-metaphysical age he called it instead his “metabiology.” The sources of his theory reflected Burke’s autodidact education and career as a book reviewer, with important influences that he explicitly mentioned including: John Dewey, Thorstein Veblen, I. A. Richards, James Frazer, Oswald Spengler, Rémy de Gourmont, Jeremy Bentham, D. H. Lawrence, and behavioral experiments by Pavlov, Watson, and the Gestalt school. From Dewey, Burke borrowed the semantic strategy of reclassification, taking familiar concepts and resituating them in new contexts. In Burke’s case though, the concepts were more provocatively esoteric, such as Veblen’s “trained incapacity,”

Dewey's "occupational psychosis," and most strikingly, Nietzsche's perspectivism, recast as "perspective by incongruity." This last term has been perhaps the most well-known aspect of *Permanence and Change*, and indeed it is arguably the organizing principle of the text. As Burke argued, "Nietzsche establishes his perspectives by a constant juxtaposing of incongruous words, attaching to some name a qualifying epithet which had heretofore gone with a different order of names" (119). Such was Burke's method with regard to concepts, allowing him to work as the pragmatist-*qua*-artist that he had proposed in his 1930 essay on Dewey.⁶⁶

As he suggested in calling the book "a metabiology," Burke established his entire system on a naturalist basis, positing a Darwinian continuum of interpretation from animals to humans. To this end, he opened the book quite simply – "We may begin by noting the fact that all living organisms interpret many of the signs around them" – followed by a peculiar anecdote of a trout's learned behavior with respect to bait and hooks. Burke then extrapolated from the trout to behavioral experiments that suggest both animals and humans interpret present situation based on past experiences. Because circumstances change, this can lead to "trained incapacity," or an expectation that leads to an unexpected result, "a faulty selection of means" to achieve the desired ends. In a manner characteristic of the text as a whole, Burke moved quickly from behavioral experiments to American politics, suggesting his larger purpose in the text. Responding again, implicitly at least, to Cowley's criticism of the escapism of his bohemian orientation, Burke argued that the interpretive stance of the "dissatisfied fragment" of bohemians was just such a "trained incapacity" that needed to adapt to the new conditions of the Depression. But to call such a stance "escapist" was to make the assumption that there is a privileged version of "reality" from which they seek to escape. Instead, Burke asserted that there are only orientations of greater or lesser effectiveness.⁶⁷

Beyond the internal debates of left-wing intellectuals, however, the idea of trained incapacity has larger implications for a theory of motives in Burke's system. He criticized two practices that fall under this theory: scapegoating and hermeneutics of suspicion. As an example of the former, he described the psychological linkages that structure the racism of Southern Poor Whites: "There is a condition of intense economic competition. There also happens to be an outstanding way of differentiating some competitors from others – the distinction of color. What, then, is the 'direction' from which the misery of the Whites is coming?" Blaming their poverty on black people was a plausible linkage for poor whites to make, but such scapegoating would not resolve their misery. Yet Burke also cautioned liberals not to scapegoat poor whites as if they themselves were not susceptible to the same kinds of faulty linkages. To this latter point, Burke was even more critical of Freudian and Marxian modes of analysis that ascribe unconscious motives to groups with a different orientation. While he accepted that these are perfectly valid hypotheses about motives, they do not have an *a priori* claim to truth, but can only be articulated as one theory among many competing ones. Rather than scapegoating other groups or dismissing their motivations, he believed, a political actor has the responsibility to socialize her point of view by making an appeal to others. A theory of motives becomes fundamentally a question of communication.⁶⁸

The central concern of *Permanence and Change*, as it would be for the rest of Burke's career, was this question of communication within a theory of motives. Besides being the first instance of these concepts in his work, the book also clearly bears the stamp of the politics of 1935, particularly in a few pages that Burke expurgated in later editions under the pressure of Cold War anti-Communism. In this section, he correlated three etymologically related words – communism, communication, and communicant – to make a larger point. Having worked out in further detail his theory of epochal rationalizations, Burke again proposed the poetic rationalization as the

necessary humanistic corrective to the disintegrative effects of scientific progress. Poetry would serve the function that religion previously had served, but as a dialectical counter-statement to scientific authority:

After all, the devices of poetry are close to the genius of man: in framing a corrective philosophy with poetic standards, we should have a point of reference which was in turn 'biologically' grounded. In this respect it could enjoy an authority drawn from the scientific psychosis itself, a criterion based upon pragmatic demands and not offered as revelation.

As *communicant* was the key term in "the religious rationalization of the West," he hoped that the cooperative principle would be the pivotal term of the new *communistic* rationalization, which was seeking "a restoration of homogeneity in the means of *communication*" that Marxists described as a unifying ideology. If the rest of his analysis was driven by a consistent "perspective by incongruity," however, the aspirational congruity of this section seemed out of place in a Burkean system.⁶⁹

Such is the fault line that runs through the center of his theory, never convincingly resolved. On the one hand, Burke made a persuasive case for the value of impiety achieved by startling juxtapositions in the history of thought. Here he cited Darwin, Freud, Marx, Wilde, and even St. Paul, all of whom who were able to disrupt rigid linkages and open up new perspectives. On the other hand, throughout the text he speaks to the yearning for a new associative piety forged out of the dissociative fragments of incongruity. Pious linkages bring "all the significant details of the day into coordination, relating them integrally with one another by a complex interpretative network." Piety directs motives towards purpose, and according to Burke, there is a biological basis for this: "We wish simply to emphasize the fact that, insofar as the neurological structure remains a constant, there will be a corresponding constancy in the devices by which sociality is maintained . . . the essentials of purpose and gratification will not change." Thus, the

title of the book reflects the desire for a stability based in the *permanence* of biological needs even as it makes a convincing case for the necessity of *change* in the constructions of culture.⁷⁰

In some sense, the fault line in *Permanence and Change* comes back to the “problem of the individual and his relation to life as a whole” that had worried Burke in the case of the 1920s avant-garde poets and John Neal. The legacy of perspectivism was such that “a Babel of new orientations has arisen in increasing profusion during the last century,” the result of individuation brought on by the unsettled existence of modern society. Yet, Burke asked, “Out of all this overlapping, conflicting, and supplementing of interpretative frames, what arises as a *totality*?” [italics in original] In seeking the “restoration of homogeneity” in American culture via communism/communication, he expressed the desire for just such an achieved totality. But as we have seen, the dialectical impetus within Burke’s thought also resisted just such an arrival at certainty. The quest for certainty might be noble and purposive, but doubt is the necessary corrective to the danger of certainty achieved. Thus, in his insistence on a psychological basis for his theory rather than a metaphysical one, Burke undermined his longing for totality, and so replicated Dewey’s own turn away from Neo-Hegelianism to naturalism. But like Dewey, the defect of his system with regards to totality was the virtue of the system as a humane democratic politics. Burke admitted that ultimately his desire for the communistic rationalization was an act of faith on his part, an example “in all its nudity” of the Jamesian will to believe: “It amounts in the end to the assumption that good, rather than evil, lies at the roots of human purpose. And as for those who would suggest that this is merely a verbal solution, I would answer that by no other fiction can men truly cooperate in historic processes.”⁷¹

In the prologue to the 1953 Revised Edition of *Permanence and Change*, Burke took a moment to explain the excised passages on communism. In his telling, these five or six pages speculating on the form that material cooperation should take were a late addition to the text. He

continued, “Since, under present conditions” – meaning McCarthyism – “the pages could not possibly be read in the tentative spirit in which they were originally written, the omissions help avoid troublesome issues not necessary to the book as such.” With his typically light, ironic touch, Burke avoided a potentially difficult political reckoning, which many of his leftist colleagues faced or avoided with much stronger self-denunciations, such as Cowley. Yet as he took away with one hand, he restored with another, arguing that even without the omissions, the thesis of his book speculated on “the fact that a system of ideal cooperation (whatever that might be!) would be a momentous material aid to the communicative medium.” As much as his hopes for communism had been an act of faith, an ideal end-in-view, the absence of the offending passages provided greater consistency to his overall argument, giving psychology predominance over metaphysics, and doubt over certainty.⁷²

Ultimately, despite his good-faith efforts between 1931 and 1935, Burke could never translate into his own terms a form of communism that satisfied his turn to pragmatism in his mature thought or the commitment to perspectivism and individual moral autonomy that was the legacy of his aestheticism. But Burke’s failure in his own quest for certainty proved to be valuable in the American Popular Front’s efforts to articulate a radical democratic alternative to European Fascism in the lead up to World War II and propaganda efforts early in the war – an alternative that eventually brought them into conflict with proponents of another type of certainty in the wartime state. In his own thorny path to movement politics, Burke also outlined a position for aesthetic modernism within the American left, and provided a theoretical basis for writers as propagandists. Despite his own yearning for homogeneity, the implications of his theory make an eloquent case for heterogeneity in the give-and-take of communicative politics. As he concluded in *Permanence and Change*, the natural mode of action for the political actor “will be that of education, propaganda, or suasion,” accepting “that the pieties of others are no less real and deep

through being different than his” and constitute a valuable recalcitrance in formulating his own vision of purpose.⁷³

Chapter 3 – Poetry as Public Speech

“What the people believed seemed to us tremendously important.” Such was the pointed recollection of Archibald MacLeish in an October 1943 letter to James Allen, his successor as the assistant director of the Office of War Information (OWI). Having served as the Librarian of Congress at President Roosevelt’s request since 1939, MacLeish spearheaded the formation of the precursor to OWI, the Office of Facts and Figures (OFF), where he proposed to counter fascist propaganda with a “strategy of truth,” as he phrased it. Curiously, facts and figures were in MacLeish’s mind a matter of belief, a point that needs to be elucidated.¹

In his letter to Allen, MacLeish attempted to set the record straight from what he sees as the misguided criticisms of “intensely ill-informed people” about the purpose of OFF, and “democratic propaganda” more broadly. As the title of the bureau suggests, OFF was created to give the American people the facts about the war in order “to know precisely why they were at war, and what their enemy was like, and what they were up against.” But MacLeish made a distinction between “the profound facts of belief” and “the superficial facts of statistics,” which he accused his adversaries in newspaper journalism of narrow-mindedly emphasizing to sell papers. What was at stake for MacLeish was nothing less than “the morale of a great nation” based on the self-determination of the people: that “the people could stand hearing” the facts, and “had a right to hear them, and would know what to do about them when they did hear them.” But in the two years since he had helped to found OFF, MacLeish argued that “all the believers have been replaced by the fixers and that the fixers are fixing not only each other, but themselves and us.” The result, he concluded quite dramatically, is “a huge and terrible silence within and beyond the words and sounds” in conversations on “the streets of any town in this country today.” With curt finality, he told his successor, “You take it: I’m sick of it.”²

MacLeish's spirited defense of his idealistic vision of OFF as well as his resignation in disgust register a crucial juncture in the engagement of left-wing intellectuals in the war effort. As the historian Allan Winkler has shown, "the politics of propaganda" during World War II began on the left, as anti-fascist writers and intellectuals, with Roosevelt's encouragement, initially organized and set the agenda for countering the propaganda apparatus of the Nazis. Propaganda in the United States had fallen into disrepute for a generation following the excesses of George Creel's Committee on Public Information during World War I, and the isolationist bloc that opposed Roosevelt's war preparations was reluctant to authorize propaganda for another progressive internationalist president. Popular Front intellectuals led by MacLeish and playwright Robert Sherwood were nevertheless successful in late 1941 in establishing a provisional bureau for both domestic and foreign propaganda based on democratic ideals in the spirit of Roosevelt's Four Freedoms. Yet as James Sparrow has formulated with great sophistication, their "cultural strategy" was quickly curbed by the red-baiting activities of the Dies Committee and displaced by the corporate influence of "dollar-a-year" men, journalists, and admen selling, in Sparrow's words, "the Fifth Freedom of private enterprise as much as they did the other four." Following the Roosevelt Administration's shift in focus from social justice to national security, the war rehabilitated the power and authority of big business, decisively altering the balance of the New Deal mixed economy from public to private. MacLeish would remain in public service for another six years, transferring to a cultural-affairs post in the State Department from which he participated in the founding of the United Nations. But he never recovered the fervor of his commitment to achieving his own radical-democratic ideals through the nation-state and the Roosevelt Administration.³

For a cultural figure of such stature in his own time, MacLeish has received marginal treatment by intellectual and political historians as well as scholars of American poetry. MacLeish

had made his initial reputation as a poet when he won the Pulitzer Prize in 1932, achieving wide, if mixed, acclaim in the American literary establishment of the time. In a sense, the critical barbs that pricked his earnest, often technically brilliant poetry then have defined his legacy: that he was derivative in conception of the major modernist poets T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound while lacking their formal innovations; that his evocations of the American people constituted middlebrow romantic nationalism; and that he was a liberal apologist for the national-security state that took shape during the war. While not an unfair judgment with regards to his poetry, the assessment of MacLeish's career more broadly reflects the ideological biases of his political adversaries on the left who emerged as the literary and academic establishment after the war. MacLeish was the *bête noire* of the *Partisan Review* circle, whose critique of the Popular Front aesthetic as nationalistic kitsch came to be definitive among intellectual elites in the late 1940s. Largely known now for three to five poems in anthologies of American poetry, and dismissed as a naïve do-gooder pushed aside by a cold-eyed postwar political realism, MacLeish's reputation – like the Popular Front more broadly – was subsumed by the hardening structures and ideologies of the Cold War.⁴

In order to situate MacLeish politically, it is important to be clear about how to define the Popular Front, given the term's controversial history and strong associations with the Communist Party in the late 1930s. I think that Michael Denning has offered the most capacious and carefully articulated definition in his account of the Cultural Front: "The Popular Front was the insurgent social movement forged from the labor militancy of the fledgling CIO, the anti-fascist solidarity with Spain, Ethiopia, China, and the refugees from Hitler, and political struggles on the left wing of the New Deal." Denning makes the important point that the base of the Popular Front lay in the labor militancy of the CIO that began in 1934 and the unifying effect that it had on ethnic working-class culture. While Communist membership was frequent at all levels of this

movement, it was not definitive and many independent leftists like MacLeish had a history of opposing Communist doctrine even as they cooperated with Party members for the broader goals of the movement. In MacLeish's case, his participation in the Popular Front hinged on two factors: his interest in building a radical-democratic third party to the left of the New Deal; and his impassioned commitment to the "politics of international solidarity" inspired by the Spanish Civil War. Throughout this chapter, I use the term "Popular Front" with this understanding.

The disillusioned engagé who wrote the 1943 letter had come a long way from the glib, ironic poet of "Invocation to the Social Muse," published in the *New Republic* in October 1932. In this poem, MacLeish challenged the dour partisans among American Communists, arguing that a poet should not take sides in political battles. Rather than serving propaganda or theoretical necessity, he ribaldly suggested that a poet must maintain his autonomy: "Whores, Fräulein: poets, Fräulein, are persons of//Known vocation following troops: they must sleep with/Stragglers from either prince and of both views./The rules permit them to further the business of neither." But in his 1943 letter, poetry as political vision was specifically the basis for propaganda – or poetry as MacLeish had come to understand it: "the facts as they truly presented themselves to living men in terms of observation and feeling and perception."⁵

Here in simplified form, as borne out in MacLeish's theoretical essays of the 1930s, is a fusion of the concepts of poetry articulated by William Carlos Williams and Kenneth Burke: on the one hand, the fixing of the objects of experience by the perception and personality of the poet; and on the other, poetry as the formal architecture of facts, going beyond mere prosaic journalism, to mobilize a mass audience through poetic form. Indeed, the argument for the symbol of the people that Burke had presented at the 1935 Writer's Congress, would find no better proponent than the future Librarian of Congress. Although MacLeish was not an

interlocutor with either man, he worked from the same sources – the modernism of Eliot and Pound read against the background of American radical democracy.

The historian Richard Pells has proposed that in the 1930s, intellectuals of the American left tried – and failed – to forge a cultural alternative to the liberal tradition that the New Deal furthered. In forging an anti-fascist coalition first with Communists and then New Deal liberals, Pells suggests that radical democrats like MacLeish surrendered the electoral potential and ideological coherence of a third party for the chance at broader symbolic influence on the nation, and by extension, the democratic internationalism promised in the Atlantic Charter. Energized by the world-historical opening – and peril – that he saw in the crisis of the Spanish Civil War, however, I would argue that MacLeish boldly proposed that radical democrats, not Communists or liberals, could lead the Popular Front by the power of their vision, which he conceived in poetic terms. Where MacLeish failed, as Sparrow’s argument suggests, was in hitching his internationalism to the mechanism of the warfare state. Yet in cultural terms, the hopes born of the Spanish Civil War, however chastened, would persist into the postwar period, constituting a third-way democratic counterculture – a “true contrary” to Cold War liberalism and the elitist aesthetic autonomy of the New Critics.

A poor little swallow’s nest

At every stage of his career, Archibald MacLeish negotiated space to write poetry, sometimes deferring opportunities to keep poetry at the center of his life. In 1939, when his friend and mentor from Harvard Law School, Justice Felix Frankfurter, wrote MacLeish to sound him out for the position of Librarian of Congress, MacLeish graciously declined the offer: “I have never wanted to write as much as I do at the moment and have never had so many things which demanded to be written. I am afraid they would never be written . . . with the Library of

Congress as the principal interest in my life.” Even after receiving a direct offer from the President, MacLeish drafted a letter to decline it, before ultimately accepting with the condition that he have four months to finish the poems he was then working on. Likewise, when Henry Luce had first approached him in 1929 to join his stable of feature writers at the newly formed *Fortune* magazine, MacLeish in spite of some financial desperation at the time only agreed to take the job if his salary allowed him to take six months off a year to work on his poetry. In his nine years of writing for *Fortune*, even as he made himself indispensable to Luce, MacLeish the poet refused editorial posts and opportunities to rise within the rapidly expanding Time, Inc. publishing empire.⁶

MacLeish’s continual deferral of greater professional success in his dedication to poetic practice reflected, at least in part, the privilege of his upbringing. Unlike Luce, who travelled a nearly identical educational road as MacLeish but tirelessly strived beyond the humble status of his missionary childhood, “Archie” was born to the proverbial manor of Gilded Age America. Born in 1892 in Glencoe, Illinois, a well-to-do enclave if not the wealthiest of Chicago’s northern suburbs, he grew up at Craigie Lea, an estate overlooking Lake Michigan that his father Andrew MacLeish had built as a symbol of his success in business. Stern, laconic, and often absent for work, the elder MacLeish had emigrated from Scotland in 1856, and after two decades had established himself as a partner at the successful Chicago department-store chain, Carson Pirie Scott. Andrew was much older than Archie’s mother, Martha Hillard, who was his third wife; the two had met when Martha taught his oldest daughter at Vassar College.⁷

By his own admission, Archie derived his love of literature and his ethic of public service from his mother. Martha was the daughter of a liberal Congregationalist minister in Connecticut, and had pursued a career in education before marriage, rising as high as president of the Rockford Female Seminary in the 1880s, when Jane Addams was a student there. MacLeish’s

poetic education began at home with his mother, who home-schooled her four children as part of her interest in emerging theories of childhood development from Germany. Central to her method was reading aloud to her sons from the King James Bible, Shakespeare, and Dante. As MacLeish later described, “She had a marvelous voice and a real understanding of the innards of poetry; she understood the relation between intellectual rhythm and verbal rhythm.” In combination with the pastoral surroundings of their estate, this early exposure to poetry stoked the imaginations of Archie and his older brother Norman to compete with each other over who could write the most elaborate fairy tales or better imitations of Dante.⁸

Although he later considered his early education in poetry aside from his mother’s influence to be “abysmal,” MacLeish continued to find mentors and influences along the way. At the age of fourteen, his parents sent him to the Hotchkiss School in northern Connecticut, in close proximity to his maternal relations. Hotchkiss was one of a number of preparatory schools founded in the 1890s as feeder schools for elite universities, which together facilitated the social cohesion of an emerging national upper class. MacLeish succeeded at almost everything one could at prep school: the debate society, the football team, academic honors, and class poet. An English teacher at Hotchkiss inspired in Archie a passion for Swinburne, like many young poets of his generation. By the time he left for college he had written, in his own words, a lot of “awful fake Swinburne.” At Yale, he continued his high level of achievement in athletics, academics, and literary clubs, capping his collegiate career by being voted Most Brilliant and gaining election to the Skull and Bones society in 1915. For Luce, who arrived four years behind him at both Hotchkiss and Yale, but lacked MacLeish’s social confidence and athletic prowess, his predecessor set a lofty standard to live up to.⁹

MacLeish began the first of several ambivalent career paths after graduation, attending Harvard Law School as much out of a pressing desire to marry his high-school sweetheart, Ada

Hitchcock, as to pursue a career in the law. His father had made law school a condition for allowing the young couple to marry, but as with many of Archie's endeavors, he easily excelled at law school and even found some challenge in it. The law became a kind of language game for him, intellectually stimulating yet spiritually unfulfilling by the standard of poetry. In his view, lawyers used words only in their signatory function, standing for definite meanings, while poets were able to access the level of sound and symbol. In his 1917 poem, "The Library of the Law," MacLeish mused on the sordid realities that the dry formalities of his law volumes concealed: "Adjudicated quarrels of mankind,/Brown row on row! – how well these lawyers bind/Their records of dead sin, – as if they feared/The hate might spill and their long shelves be smeared/With slime of human souls, – brown row on row." As he wandered through the thickets of his training, Archie wondered if the words in his law books desired to be more than "records of old sin," longing to recover the vanished magic and ancient song implicit in their symbolic function. Despite his skill at the law and a desire to please his family's expectations, the disenchantment that he found in legal practice left MacLeish lingering on the threshold of the profession.¹⁰

Like many in his generation, the experience of World War I powerfully affected his outlook and, by his later reckoning, decided his lifelong commitment to poetry. After the United States's entry into the war during his second year at Harvard, MacLeish did not hesitate in accepting his duty to serve, casting the war in dark yet exalted figures in his poetry: "from this seed, this rotten corn//Of shame and doubt, has sprung this flowered thorn,/This burgeoned pain, this fire. We that were clay/Have lifted up our eyes – and lo! the spray/Of bright swords and the challenging high horn." Fearful of being drafted into the infantry and sent to the trenches, however, MacLeish used his Skull and Bones connections to gain assignments in a mobile hospital unit and then as a training officer in field artillery. During months of inactivity

away from the front, he gave a good deal of thought to his future as the experience of war prompted a deep re-examination of his beliefs. While trying to reassure himself that a career in law would still allow time to write, he could not resolve the question for himself. As he later recalled, “I would go out on the hard frozen roads beside the Loire and try to figure this thing out and decided, just for the sake of my sanity, to stop thinking about it.”¹¹

Two personal brushes with mortality only deepened MacLeish’s sense that he should commit himself to something more profound than a comfortable career in Boston. In July 1918, MacLeish’s regiment was providing artillery support for an Allied offensive in the Second Battle of the Marne when he received orders to return stateside to instruct artillery units in Maryland. Already reluctant to leave his regiment, he was shaken to find out several weeks later that half of his men had been killed in a German counteroffensive. Even more disturbing to him was the news in October of that year that his beloved younger brother Kenny had disappeared while flying a mission over Belgium. His family would not receive confirmation of Kenny’s death until late December 1918, six weeks after the Armistice. The loss of his brother haunted MacLeish for years, and inspired several of his most acclaimed poems. The poet who had written triumphally in 1917 upon enlistment, “Our death is swallowed up in victory,” returned to civilian life with a weightier sense of how bitter the irony of that triumph could be.

Upon his return to Boston, MacLeish half-heartedly resumed his former life, remaining at Harvard to teach history after he completed law school. He also tried his hand at journalism, writing briefly for *The New Republic*, but his resistance to the legal profession became more and more conspicuous to friends and family. Despite offers from a number of law offices, he preferred to “keep somewhere near the academic world where at least my poor little swallow’s nest could hang to the wall” – that swallow’s nest being poetry. In the close-knit world of Boston intellectuals, MacLeish and his wife Ada established lasting friendships, including Dean Acheson

and Felix Frankfurter, that would serve him well in his future career in government. In 1921, MacLeish at last seemed to accede to the responsible path expected of him, taking a position at Choate, Hall & Stewart in order to support his growing family. But this decision only led to a more dramatic departure from that path when, on the same day two years later that the firm offered to make him partner, MacLeish instead resigned because he and Ada had already decided the night before to move their family to Paris to cultivate their artistic talents. As he later recalled, “We really burned, like Cortes on the beach of Veracruz, every damn ship we had. Mr. Choate wouldn’t have hired me as a bus boy after that.”¹²

Although MacLeish’s route to a bohemian life of poetry had been markedly more cautious and conventional than many others of his generation who flocked to Paris, he took advantage of the same factors that made the city so amenable to American expatriates. Due to the strength of the dollar, he was able to stretch the same allowance he had received from his father since law school to support his family of four. More poignantly, Paris had become a magnet for an international migration of artists and intellectuals that filled the vacuum left by a generation of French youth decimated by the war. The MacLeishes were able to attach themselves to the inner circle of artists in Paris through their elite connections, in particular fellow Bonesman Gerald Murphy, at whose Paris salon and celebrated Villa America in Antibes they met Picasso, Stravinsky, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, and Harry Crosby, among others. Indeed, Ada quickly established herself as a favorite performer among modernist composers because of the unique quality of her voice, what the French called *une voix blanche*. As MacLeish proudly related to a friend, “her voice with its extraordinary precision, clarity, and tone is fitted for such songs as Stravinsky is now writing and Sati [sic] has been writing.” In the meantime, Archie undertook a two-year apprenticeship in poetry, patiently giving himself the

literary education he came to realize that he had been deprived of up to that point: “Ada works regularly & I long & aimlessly. Some day the wind will blow again.”¹³

“We wish to be each”

At first, MacLeish embraced the writing routine that he had been unable to establish during his legal career in Boston. He would retire every day to the attic space above his family’s cold-water flat on the Boulevard Saint-Michel, writing in the morning before attending to the couple’s two children in the afternoon. His routine netted “about three to four hours of writing,” he wrote a Boston friend, “and the same amount of reading (I am trying to find out *who* wrote English LITERATURE) which with some slight drinking & an occasional meal satisfies my daemon.” But within a few months, the imperative to read consumed his writing as MacLeish underwent a crisis of style, which he described to his mentor from Boston, the poet Amy Lowell: “I suppose the short way to describe the issue is to say that my creative & critical intelligences (or lack thereof) are engaged in bitter war. More briefly, I don’t like what I do. In fact I dislike it very strongly.” MacLeish placed blame on the insularity of his poetic education, in which his desire to emulate the mellifluous and “adverbial” Algernon Swinburne had cut him off from the modernist revolution in poetics taking place in the 1910s.¹⁴

After his arrival in Paris, he began to read those he regarded as the relevant poets of his time: Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Pound, Yeats, Marianne Moore, and Lowell herself. From this reading, “it became perfectly clear to me that there was a kind of poetry possible in this day, a compact, precise edged poetry which could be terribly poignant, exquisitely moving.” Haunted by the fear that it might be too late for him to change what he saw now as his second-rate style, MacLeish set aside his own poetry to focus on his reading notebooks, which were only occasionally punctuated by brief writing exercises. For the next two years, MacLeish worked his

way through an ambitious reading list, which included the contemporary avant-garde as well as key sources for their work: Dante (in Italian), Shakespeare, Rimbaud, Laforgue, de Gourmont, Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and Croce's *Aesthetics*. His informal tutor for this reading list was Sylvia Beach, proprietor of the Shakespeare and Co. bookshop, which MacLeish used as a lending library and social hub.¹⁵

MacLeish's reading notebooks and letters of this period show the clear influence on his thinking of the critical essays of Pound and Eliot, from *Instigations* and *The Sacred Wood* respectively. A decade after the Imagist movement, MacLeish discovered the key source for Pound's emphasis on the concrete image denuded of abstraction: Ernest Fenollosa's essay on the Chinese Written Character. The lesson MacLeish derived from Fenollosa was to shift the focus of poetry from the noun to the verb, using the verb's power to obliterate conceptual language and "give us the model of terse, fine style." Likewise, MacLeish ruminated on the implications of Pound's technique of adopting personae. He argued that rather than just imitate style, a young poet should adopt the pose or character of older writers, as Eliot had done with Laforgue in his early poetry or Pound with the Provençal troubadours. For MacLeish, this technique paradoxically released a poet to find himself "by borrowing an admired voice." In the poems of his Parisian period, we see MacLeish making use of this technique, borrowing from Eliot, Pound, E.E. Cummings, and St-John Perse. In adopting the personae of well-known contemporaries rather than obscure or foreign poets, however, MacLeish invited the charge of being derivative, which became a common criticism of his work.¹⁶

This paradox of personae that released the poet into himself points to a larger crisis of subjectivity that MacLeish expressed in his notebooks. In the entry on personae, he argued that, "the integrity of art is not the integrity of the police blotter . . . To speak of that other integrity, that other loyalty of the creator to himself as creator and in his capacity as a creator, needs a word

we have not found.” For the poet, he suggested, the self as a substantive, and certainly the self as a name, had been replaced by the self as process. On the one hand, this nameless “other integrity” seemed to reflect the influence of Eliotic impersonality, in which emotions are given form as an “objective correlative”: as Eliot defined it, “a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion” [italics in original]. In this formulation, priority is given not to the emotion but the form of the poem. MacLeish posited this idea elsewhere, saying that, “the relation of emotion to poetry is not the relation of end to means but the reverse. The end of a poem is to exist as a poem.” And even more succinctly, “The test of a poem is not its power to create emotion but to withstand emotion.” On the other hand, MacLeish went beyond Pound or Eliot in his interest in perception as a crucial aspect of form. In this respect, his ideas about poetic process resembled just as much Eliot’s American antagonist, William Carlos Williams.¹⁷

Like Williams in his earliest writings, MacLeish figured the poet as an amnesiac lost in a state of total disorientation. The common experience of this feeling is the moment of waking: “It happens to all of us to waken out of sleep without our lives around us: to waken ‘before our memories,’ and to stand naked not only in the body but the soul.” That moment, in both its joy and terror, provides an opening onto naked perception of the objects of the world. In answering his own question, “what are the uses of poetry,” MacLeish explored the case of the wind: “What is it that seizes a tree and sways it and lets it go? We say ‘the wind’ and do not think of it anymore and therefor [sic] do not see it anymore.” But if the perceiver does not attach the concept “wind,” then he becomes aware of the marvel of the movement that the wind produces. Just so, poetry: “What poetry does is to dissolve the name and reveal the thing, naked and beautiful.”¹⁸

MacLeish viewed this perceptual moment of experience, in a very Deweyan sense, as the basis of meaning in the form of the poem. The whole function of the poem, MacLeish argued,

“is to translate experience into significance”; the poet builds the structure of the poem “in the manner of science, out of the experiments of being.” Yet like Dewey’s empirical method in philosophy, the purpose is not only to accumulate knowledge, but also to discover the value that already saturates experience. As MacLeish drew the distinction elsewhere, poetry offers a more complete way of recording experience than prose. While prose represents facts in a basic sense, poetry captures the facts and their meaning. Much like Williams had argued in *Spring and All*, poetry for MacLeish served a qualitatively different – and more valuable – function than prose: “It is not the poet’s part to impose order by fiat like a ruler, or by argument like a philosopher, or by faith like a saint, but to *discover* it” [italics added]. Within the disorientation of sleep or amnesia lies the potential to forget habitual names and catch a glimpse of order in things as such – perception realized as form.¹⁹

As much as MacLeish’s ideas about perception and form resembled Williams’s theories, however, his primary influence in this regard was his mentor Amy Lowell. Like Williams, Lowell had emerged from the initial wave of *vers libre* poets influenced by Pound’s Imagist movement, but her verse had not been inflected as much as Williams’ by the experimental influences of Rimbaud, Joyce, and Cubism. While MacLeish made only one offhanded mention of Williams at the time, dismissing him to a friend as a “baudy [sic] fraud,” he devoted his first major critical essay to Lowell, published in the *North American Review* in 1925. Intended as a valedictory tribute to a cherished mentor, MacLeish nonetheless took the opportunity in this essay to crystallize themes that he had been developing in his reading notebooks. In clear terms, he proposed a parallel theory that directed the seismic effect of Eliot’s influence towards the poetics of experience.²⁰

In paying tribute to Lowell, MacLeish attempted to recover the importance of her work, which he said had been obscured by a new literary generation captivated by Eliot. In his view,

this generation “is an introspective, self-conscious, sensitive, doubtful, deeply stirred generation, a deflected generation compelled to difficult utterance.” Lowell’s poetry, by contrast, describes ordinary experience, “a daylight world lit by the sun” rather than the distortions of long contemplation. Although Lowell had begun as an Imagist, adopting the precise observation and concise diction of that style, he argued that she had moved beyond mere “picture-making” to the problem of the poem as a work of art. Rather than mere expression or oracular utterance, her work aspired to explore the relation of emotions to objects of the world. Where MacLeish distinguished Lowell from poets like Cummings and Williams was in her rejection of form derived from modernist art: “her poems resemble much more the mortal figures of classical poetry than the back drops of Léger or the curtains of Picasso.” This important distinction in the Lowell essay had crucial implications for the relation of MacLeish’s own poetry to his contemporaries.²¹

MacLeish movingly realized his conception of the poetics of experience – the relation of emotion, objects, and form – in “Memorial Rain,” a poem he wrote in 1924 upon visiting the grave of his brother Kenny in Belgium for the first time. A long letter to his sister Ishbel describing the visit offers a useful tool to decode the genesis of the poem. Indeed, MacLeish began the letter with a reflection that merges the powerful emotion of the journey with the theoretical tenor of his notebooks:

I know all too clearly what it will mean to come to that place on the earth where body of Kenny lies. Try as we may – try as I have – to reduce my life to those intangible conceptions of things which cannot be hurt & which we imagine cannot be destroyed I have only to open my eyes to realize that those intangible things are not real. It is only when an idea resumes the form from which it was at first distracted that it exists. The conception of beauty is only the memory of the beauty seen & the expectation of the recurrence of the seen thing. That is why the mere soil of the earth so powerfully affects us.

The movement from abstraction to concrete images that characterized Imagism and its heirs assumed a personal dimension for MacLeish as he sought to give form to the experience of

mourning. Rather than try to avoid painful emotions through “intangible conceptions,” he instead opened his eyes in order to understand the resonance of emotions in seen things.²²

The poem itself enacts this contrast. Two voices alternate in the poem, sharing the pentameter of the verse structure even as they offer strikingly different perspectives. The first voice is that of the American ambassador, paying official tribute to the soldiers buried in the Belgian graveyard. His cadence is rendered in regular rhythm and stirring platitudes: “Dedicates to them/This earth their bones have hallowed, this last gift/A grateful country . . .” The ellipsis shades into the thoughts of the mourner, whose sorrow and remembrance instead takes material form in the soil and elements of wind and rain:

Under the dry grass stem
The words are blurred, are thickened, the words sift
Confused by the rasp of the wind, by the thin grating
Of ants under the grass, the minute shift
And tumble of dusty sand separating
From dusty sand. The roots of the grass strain,
Tighten, the earth is rigid, waits – he is waiting –

And suddenly, and all at once, the rain!

The mourner’s reflections take form as an extended pathetic fallacy, which combines Eliot’s objective correlative with a precisely observed perception of a certain time and place, saturated with emotion. The overall effect of the poem is a genuine if indeterminate state of mourning, unconsolated by official rhetoric even as it acknowledges its function.²³

The aesthetic stakes involved for MacLeish in writing the poem were further revealed in an exchange he later had with his mother, who had objected to what she saw as the poem’s less than reverent tone. He explained to her that, “my mind was not directed to Kenny so much as to [the] way that I felt going to see for the first time the grave where Kenny is buried. I agree absolutely with you that Kenny’s life was wonderful and beautiful thing and that it reached a great moment and ended on that moment.” Sensitive to his mother’s faith and need for an ideal image

of her heroic son, MacLeish nevertheless subtly defended the integrity of his poetic gesture. And indeed, his own dogged pursuit of poetry, despite his range of talents, his professional promise, and his social advantage reflected a desire to transform his mother's intense religious faith, which he himself did not share, into aesthetic practice. MacLeish was in pursuit of order, but an order founded not on belief, or argument, or fiat, but upon discovery – discovery in perception through poetic form. Sailing to Paris in 1923, he wrote to his mother that though he was remiss in the practice of religion, his sense of “the not-self” was strong, and “it was partly to find myself in that direction that I want this time for real work.”²⁴

Over the course of his stay in Europe, however, the sense of “not-self” began to overwhelm him as metaphysical doubt that differed from Dewey's theory – and Williams's practice – of experience. In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey admitted the radical alterity of Nature, its lack of purpose however much we construct significance from our experience of it. This separation from Nature troubled MacLeish deeply though. In his notebooks, sometimes he experienced it as an enthralling and generative mystery, a silent muse never quite revealing her secrets: “What makes you desperate is the way the world keeps looking at you as though you *ought* to understand.” But at other times, invoking Schopenhauer, he feared solipsism and the existential loneliness that it implied: “What is it all artists from the beginning have put down in the many records? Images of the universe or images of themselves?”²⁵

This growing sense of metaphysical doubt found its fullest expression in “The Hamlet of A. MacLeish,” a long poem that MacLeish wrote during 1926-27 and published a year later. The structure of the poem was the most formally innovative that MacLeish had attempted to that point, even as his prosody remained traditional blank verse with end rhymes. The scenes and characters of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* provide the frame for a series of personal ruminations on existence, with the poet assuming the role of the melancholy Danish prince. Completed soon

after Andrew MacLeish's death in early 1928, the poem depicts its subject in a state of sleepless anticipation of the ghost of his father, introduced in a prefatory passage: "No man living but has seen the king his father's ghost. None alive that have had words with it." Sleepers arise from their bed, staring into the vast silence of the night sky, asking: "Question it . . . / What are thou . . . / And no sound." In contrast to "the daylight world lit by the sun" that MacLeish praised in Amy Lowell's work, this poem dwells in a landscape lit by the moon, falling back on the "doubtful utterances" that he criticized in his generation. The lunar atmosphere that permeates the poem is occasionally contrasted to the robust sensuality of the sun, figured as King Claudius: "He advises our souls with the babbled loose / Light over water. He declaims the spangles of / Glass in the high ways. He reproves us with / Shining."²⁶

Unmoved by these superficial expressions of life, however, the melancholy narrator hearkens to an ancient secret forgotten:

Only
 We have these dreams!

Only —
 the old have announced us the
 Irremediable woe, the ill
 Long done, lost in the times before memory.

Throughout the poem, MacLeish used imagery that evokes the quests of medieval epics, including a blatant appropriation of one of Pound's personae, his recasting of *The Odyssey* in ballad meter from *The Cantos*. MacLeish's version begins, "And by the sea was a ship but no man in her. / And sail was set on the ship and I led the beast by a / Rock's bridge and I cut rope and the wind was / Off shore smelling at first of the furze root." Like Yeats and Lawrence, MacLeish invoked the violence, frank sexuality, and cohesion of traditional societies in search of an answer for his alienation, while recognizing that he only heard echoes of these past societies, symbolized in a trip to a castle where "MacLeish goes up the / Stair built by the ancestors." Interspersed with

these imaginative flights are reflections on his futile, competitive attempts at poetic speech amid the integrity of silence: “Why must I speak of it? Why must I always/Stoop from this decent silence to this phrase/That makes posture of this hurt.” To make verses, he suggested, was to “crowd forward among those/That beg for fame, that for so little praise/As pays a dog off will go stiff and tell/Their loss, lust, sorrow, anguish!”²⁷

The irony at the heart of “The Hamlet of A. MacLeish” is that despite resolving to “Be silent only,” the poet arrives reluctantly at an acceptance that expressing his suffering, giving form to the emptiness that keeps him awake, is in fact the most genuine gesture available to him: “I’ll make a book of it. I’ll leave my rare/Original uncopied dark heart pain. To choke up volumes and among the rocks/Cry I! I! I! forever.” After which follows a powerful litany of concrete sorrows from MacLeish’s personal life – burying his infant son, losing his brother in the war, and his own terror on the battlefield: “The Marne side. Raining. I am cold with fear./My bowels tremble. I go on. McHenry/Hands me his overcoat and dies. We dig the/Guns out sweating. I am very brave:/Magnificent. I vomit in my mask.” In the poem’s final section, MacLeish seems to have come to the end of his poetic apprenticeship, still torn between a public career and a private vocation: “It is time we should accept,/Taught by these wordy fools, the staged/Encounter and the game-pit rules.” His acceptance was begrudging but necessary, the “dark heart pain” acknowledged as the shadow of a staged public life. Addressing the outer world in the poem’s final lines, he quoted Hamlet: “*Thou wouldst not think/How ill all’s here about my heart!*”

The reception of the poem by MacLeish’s contemporaries was crushing to his aspirations, and to some extent established a certain reputation for him among the modernist elite. Conrad Aiken, a leading American poetry critic, praised MacLeish’s technical genius, saying “he can say things with a cunning, a brilliance, a suppleness, a power which any living poet might covet.” But he was critical of MacLeish’s too visible influences from Eliot and the French Symbolists, which

led to a “falsity of tone” and rendered the poem “a brilliant pastiche.” In a letter to his publisher, MacLeish admitted that he was aware of his obvious influences, but considered that fact secondary to the integrity of the poem itself: “The experience I thought was mine, the emotion mine, the poetry mine.” In an exchange with Pound during the composition of the poem, he expressed more evidently the anxiety of influence: “Everywhere I arrived I arrived at your pace and everything I found out for myself I immediately found out more or less as you would have seen it. Nothing seemed fresh or real to me, nothing seemed my own, which didn’t come that way.” But again, MacLeish found something genuine in the paradox of borrowed style in contrast to the willful novelty of a poet like Cummings. In one key respect, however, MacLeish admitted that style occluded his perception: “I know the sea & sailing extremely well. But when I tried to make it as real in words as it was to me in fact I could only use the mode which had before me made it verbally real to me, viz. yours [Pound].” And herein lies the unresolved tension in MacLeish’s “Hamlet,” an otherwise moving and well-wrought poem. Aspiring to use perception to subvert “intangible conceptions” in his emotional experience, MacLeish became captive of the familiarity of traditional forms, not quite free of Swinburne. As Pound advised him, he needed to break the heave in his blank verse, “to get through to your OWN.”²⁸

Ultimately, the content of “The Hamlet of A. MacLeish” proved telling of its author’s state of mind when he left France with his family in May 1928 to return to Massachusetts. MacLeish turned away from his metaphysical doubts, or at least learned to carry his pain at an ironic remove from a staged public life. The outcome of his immersion in the poet’s life for five years in France had been the realization that poetic individualism was insufficient. In “An Anonymous Generation,” an essay written soon after his return to the States, MacLeish articulated his desire to find some reconciliation with a whole beyond the partial truth of the Romantic subject. He argued that with the rise of science, humans had been banished from the

center of their world, replaced by the arbitrary worlds of science. The result was disenchantment: “Nature, the spayed bitch. We have been into her too deep and too sharp. The magic is out of her and the meaning.” The Romantic poet, and his heir the Symbolist, had become exclusively concerned with “his own peculiar continent,” obsessed with originality separate of the common world; his work was partial, “lacking the power of the whole.” MacLeish could not see any clear solution to this quandary through art: “Alone and without interpreters before the opaque and resolute otherwise of hardened earth, of walls, of doors, of heavens, dig out in words, in paint, in marble, its impenetrable.” Painfully aware of Nature’s indifference, and dissatisfied with scientific knowledge and poetic solitude, MacLeish lyrically evoked his yearning for the “something more” he lacked, even as he found solace in perception of the present moment: “the wind was seaward and the sounds of the railroad yard and the yelping of dogs and her voice singing that thing of Stravinsky’s blew out to sea.”²⁹

In his notebooks, he also recorded a “new image of man” that seemed to offer an alternative: frescoes by Diego Rivera depicting laborers that he had seen in a little chapel while travelling through Mexico in 1928. MacLeish believed that these frescoes offered the “something more,” making one wonder “how this guessed-at figure of mankind can move our generation of morbidly swollen egos. . . . How can this image be feasible to us? It makes a man *less* and *real* and we do not wish to be either. We wish to be *each*. We are determined to be *each*” [italics in original]. The irony in this passage reveals the inspiration that MacLeish found in Rivera’s murals at a moment of personal disillusionment. This inspiration carried him into the 1930s determined to use poetry to craft a holistic vision of society beyond poetic subjectivity, a desire that proved to be in perfect step with historical events.³⁰

Nevertheless, one debt

What had been a philosophical quandary for MacLeish in the isolation of his poetic practice in France became a political question upon his return to America. In a 1931 essay for Harriet Monroe's *Poetry*, he outlined in brisk, compelling terms the "one debt" that he believed poets owed to the living world. Without specific reference to the growing economic crisis, MacLeish invoked its effects from a privileged vantage, arguing that sudden change posed a greater danger to poets than other professions. Because poets could only possess their life by fixing a moment in the artificial substance of sounds and signs, they were prone to disorientation when the world no longer resembled their fixed images. In terms that might have described MacLeish's own personal crisis, the poet "feels that he and everything about him are crumbling and dissolving away to no purpose and with no end." The solution was for the poet to adjust his method and respond to a living world, even as those immersed in daily life refused to see the changes around them. It became the poet's duty to be a sensitive register of the momentous changes in "an age of revolution."³¹

In a moment of upheaval in society, MacLeish like many intellectuals at the time cast the issue in epochal terms as the end of individualism due to the industrialization of society: "The individual is no longer the unit, the sacred integer, the solemn end. He is a fraction. He is an agent." For MacLeish, the fallacy of poetic subjectivity lay in the effort to preserve the self as "sacred integer," an effort whose peak had been Romantic self-consciousness in a tradition that stretched from Renaissance humanism through Baudelaire to the Symbolists. While this poetic tradition had resisted the rise of industrialism, withdrawing into aestheticism, he argued that the modernists of the 1910s had willfully assented to modernity, "belonging to their own time and revolting against the old time." Poets such as Apollinaire, Pound, and Eliot had "made a great many experiments in form" as they responded to the contemporary world. Yet this new

movement, in MacLeish's view, had still held onto the privileged self of the poet, which ultimately met its end in *The Waste Land*. Eliot's masterpiece was a poem that saw "the contemporary world as the wreckage and scattered ruin of many great and fallen cities." Despite its influence, it "was actually a termination: a lament and a prayer. Nothing could follow it but darkness and silence. Or a new beginning."

In some respects, MacLeish argument in the *Poetry* essay resembled that of Edmund Wilson in *Axel's Castle*, published the same year. In his lucid critique of the Symbolist tradition, Wilson created an enduring portrait of the aloof aesthete, who had cultivated his private sensibility at the expense of action in the external world or participation in a group. Like MacLeish, he saw the Symbolist's withdrawal as a reaction against bourgeois society that nevertheless replicated bourgeois individualism in an aesthetic form. Wilson still saw a good deal of value in the exploration of the soul that Symbolists attempted, but argued that the reality of the self that they had cultivated should be brought to the reality of the world. In this sense, Wilson retained some faith in poetic subjectivity that MacLeish had begun to question since his disillusionment in the late Twenties.³²

Although MacLeish had derived lessons about the poetics of experience from Amy Lowell, in his turn against the Romantic ego he also discarded the possibility of a poetic subject responding formally to the objects of the world. Like Williams, he had perceived the danger in the civilizational pessimism of Eliot's influential poem. But as an acolyte of Eliot, MacLeish saw it as the apotheosis of modernist poetics even as he marked it as the end point of individualism. The new beginning that it brought about suggested "the great poetic labor of our day": to accept the revolutionary change of the day and to "feel the race of men to be more important than any one man." Arguing still in vague, universalist terms, MacLeish nonetheless wanted to effect a paradigm shift in poetic function: "It is no longer A MAN against the stars. It is Mankind: that

which has happened always to all men, not the particular incidents of particular lives.” The debt owed by poets to the world was “an image of mankind in which men can again believe” – the restoration of belief after *The Waste Land* not only for the poet himself, but also a broad popular audience. In the terms of his “Hamlet,” MacLeish refused to beg for fame by displaying his private sorrows, but instead embraced the daylight world and the restless masses of society, no longer an ancient echo but startlingly present in the contemporary world.

Initially, the primary outlet that MacLeish found for this impulse was Henry Luce’s *Fortune* magazine, which he joined soon after his return from Europe. Considerable historical irony attended the founding of *Fortune*. Luce had been planning the magazine as a follow-up to the huge success of *Time* since before the Crash of 1929, but the first issue was not published until the following February. Like the early years of Herbert Hoover’s presidency, *Fortune* stood as a holdover from the prosperity of the New Era and its editors were slow to gauge the worsening crisis. Luce had intended the magazine as a combination of business and modern culture, modeled after Scofield Thayer’s *Dial* in its attention to luxurious design and materials, while appealing to a readership of the rising corporate managerial class. Like Hoover, Luce advocated an anti-statist yet progressive approach to business, appealing to an ethic of corporate responsibility in his readers even as he sold them “an economy of abundant beauty,” to use the historian Michael Auspurger’s apt phrase. Like its competitor *The New Yorker*, *Fortune* would later be mocked as “middlebrow.” But Luce’s intention was precisely middlebrow in a non-pejorative sense: to bridge the divide in American culture that Van Wyck Brooks famously identified between highbrow elite culture and the lowbrow world of competitive business – between *The Dial* and U.S. Steel.³³

MacLeish reluctantly agreed to accept the offer from his fellow Yale to join what was predominantly a Yale shop, staffed by a number of young radicals who did not seem to fit Luce’s

corporate liberal mold, most notably Dwight Macdonald and James Agee. The story of these writers is a colorful episode in the intellectual history of the 1930s, and as Robert Vanderlan has persuasively argued, it disrupts the postwar narrative that separated autonomous critical intellectuals from the organs of mainstream journalism. For a period of six years, these writers were able to act as “interstitial intellectuals,” using their work in dialectical relation to Luce’s editorial policies to engage the business class critically. In MacLeish’s case, he was able to negotiate a good deal of independence in return for a lucrative salary during the worst years of the Depression. In addition to six months off a year to pursue his own writing, MacLeish preserved his anonymity through unsigned features. While this condition allowed him to keep his literary reputation separate from his journalism, it also fit with his new ideal of setting aside the authorial ego to serve the public through the artful representation of facts.³⁴

Between 1930 and 1938, MacLeish wrote close to a hundred articles for *Fortune*, a few of them editorials and brief portraits, but most long-form articles and multi-part series dense with statistics, reportage, and photographs. His topics included the history of gold as money, skyscrapers, the housing crisis in the U.S., J. P. Morgan, King George V, farm strikes, the Japanese Empire, and cigar-box art. Working closely with a personal researcher (who was always female in the gendered division of labor at Time, Inc.), MacLeish developed a widely admired prose style thick with rhetorical and figurative flourishes. A sixteen-page article on the “American Workingman” from August 1931 begins with a theoretical defense of Fordism and a tribute to American productivity, supported by Department of Labor statistics. But sections deeper in the article address racism in the labor force, a case study of a Chicago family surviving on a meager wage, and the high risk of death in factory work, ending the piece on an ironic note:

There is no tablet to the Unknown Worker. No visiting mayor brays over the habitual silence of his bones. But he has a monument as anonymous as he. He has his digit place in the annual footnote totals. And it is possible that in his mathematical eternity he sleeps well.

In this article as in others, MacLeish situated his criticism between Luce's welfare capitalism and Marxist theories of labor, neither muckraking nor fully apologetic. Following the magazine's editorial policy, he was critical of Roosevelt and the New Deal, yet it remains largely unclear in the articles whether his true political beliefs lay to the left or right of the president. Indeed, it was only during the Spanish Civil War that MacLeish's convictions began to tip the elegant balance between ideological alternatives that his articles generally struck.³⁵

The neutral arrangement of facts that *Fortune* articles required suited MacLeish's politics through the early years of the decade, as suggested by his controversial poem "Invocation to the Social Muse": "They may drive him [the poet] out of camps but one will take him./They may stop his tongue on his teeth with a rope's argument —/He will lie in a house and be warm when they are shaking." In the desperate lead-up to the 1932 election, amidst a spirited debate taking place among intellectuals on the left, MacLeish held to an aesthetic position skeptical of partisanship and unwilling to commit himself ideologically. If anything, his position could be characterized as a facile populism, which blunted the Communist edge of Diego Rivera. In a February 1932 *Fortune* profile, he said of Rivera that when "he was offered the choice between ideology and art which Communism sooner or later imposes upon all its painters, he chose art." As a result, Rivera's appeal was universal, "equally comprehensible to the Indians of Morelos and the industrialists of New York." At this juncture, Rivera remained the ideal of an engaged artist for MacLeish, creating an "image of Mankind" that could appeal to all classes and nationalities.³⁶

MacLeish finally entered the political fray in 1934 when he critiqued the cultural policy of the American Communist Party over the question of propaganda. In "The Poetry of Karl Marx," a provocatively titled essay for the *Saturday Review of Literature*, MacLeish walked into the barrage of insults being hurled by aesthetes like Allen Tate and Communist advocates of proletarian realism like Mike Gold and Granville Hicks. Despite the vitriol of the exchange, MacLeish was

glad that the debate had raised the question of the “role of the poet in our time,” heightening “journalistic interest in poetry which the prosperous twenties had done their best to kill.” Yet to his mind, both sides had set up a false dichotomy between art and propaganda. “Anything which will make a work of art will make a work of art,” he argued. “It is just as silly to say that a poem can’t be a poem because it’s subject is the Young Communists as it is to say that a poem can’t be a poem *unless* its subject is the Young Communists” [italics in original].³⁷

MacLeish reconstructed this dichotomy to define his own position between the aesthetes and the Communists. He criticized the aesthetes’ disengaged formalism, which avoided political content as a vulgarization of the work of art. In what was becoming a familiar refrain for him, MacLeish believed that the content of poetry should be immersed in the “facts” of the world, specifically “the outstanding characteristic of our time” – industrialism. Eliding the difference between communism and capitalism, he argued that “whether modern society is run from Wall Street or the Kremlin, it is still first and foremost an industrial society. . . . But industrialism is not a theory. It is a condition. It is a fact.” “Theory” points to the core of his criticism of the Communists, however: that they were captive of theory and dialectic at the expense of knowing the world. Indeed, as much as their politics differed, formalists and dialecticians had a shared pedantry. Instead, MacLeish argued that the poet should offer himself to society as a “practical man,” building on the work of scientists and engineers in his commitment to facts, while providing something more: “the intuitive and the emotional perceptions of the great poets.”

As with many of his articles for general interest magazines in the 1930s, MacLeish makes a compelling case here for a broad ideal that does not stand up to strict critical scrutiny. In his view, the poet possessed the special power to fix “a focus which all the talk and all the staring of the world had been unable to fix before him.” And with yet more circular reasoning, “His is a labor which is at all times necessary, for without it that sense of human reality which is a poet’s

greatest accomplishment is lost.” Likewise, “the true poet is without prejudice.” Whatever the prejudices of his blood, his countryside, his education, and his class, the “only demand to which he listens in the making of the poem . . . is the demand which his art makes upon him.” As a theory of poetics, MacLeish’s assertions verged on the vapid. But the overall rhetorical effect cut through the knotty disagreement between the aesthetes and the Communists, articulating a useful compromise that balanced concerns for social justice with an appreciation of effective form.

In this respect, MacLeish’s essay provides a lucid, popularized version of Kenneth Burke’s rhetorical theory from the same period. Like Burke’s distinction between form and information in *Counter-Statement*, MacLeish believed that poetry, in a broadly metaphorical sense, could crystallize facts in a qualitatively different manner than prose. In his writings for *Fortune*, MacLeish tried to persuade his readers through the marshaling of facts. But this type of persuasion had nothing of the power of a work like *The Waste Land*, whose crystallizing effect “precipitated the cloudy confusion of an age, and made human and tragic what had before been impersonal and intellectual and for the most part unseen.” It was this kind of profound rhetorical effect, channeled towards positive political purposes, that MacLeish made the case for in “The Poetry of Karl Marx.” As he presciently concluded given his later government work, poets might indeed write propaganda “if their propaganda satisfies the necessities under which, as poets, they must work.”

MacLeish’s own poetry soon registered this theoretical shift in the aptly titled collection *Public Speech*, published in 1936. The core poems in this collection are cast as a series of speeches given to a broad audience: “Speech to a Crowd,” “Speech to Detractors,” and “Speech To Those Who Say Comrade.” The last of these continued his ongoing argument with doctrinaire Marxists, asking in effect how camaraderie is formed within groups: “The brotherhood is not by the blood certainly,/But neither are men brothers by speech—by saying so:/Men are brothers by life lived

and are hurt for it.” MacLeish then explored at length different sources of cohesion and loyalty. He used the example of his own experience as a WWI veteran, when the minds of “aging and lonely men” travel again to Soissons and Ypres, bound by memories of French girls, cafés, and “the metal odor of danger.” Echoing Malcolm Cowley, he also described brotherhood in terms of a generation who has “in common the same dead and the changes.” But what no longer had meaning for him was the private anguish of “the unshared and single man,” who must “cover his/Loneliness as a girl her shame for the way of/Life is neither by one man nor by suffering.” Given MacLeish’s own struggles with loneliness as depicted in his Paris notebooks, and the truth he had previously located there, one can read the repression of self in this passage, whether consciously or unconsciously deployed. On principle, he argued, the individual must recognize his sociality and the benefits of collective belonging, portrayed as laboring and fighting together: “Those who have . . ./Ridden the same rivers with green logs,/Fought the police in the parks of the same cities,/Grinned for the same blows, the same flogging.” Curiously, MacLeish crafted a paean to movement culture at the same time as he criticized Communist theorists. While he often used imputed adversaries as straw men, MacLeish also seems to have been calling attention to the “politics of upheaval” taking place across America in 1934 even as intellectuals debated Marxist dogma in New York.³⁸

Despite his invocations of modernist innovators such as Pound and Eliot, MacLeish’s poetics in *Public Speech* had fallen back onto the familiar nineteenth-century forms of Tennyson and Arnold – written in rhetorically direct blank verse with conventional heroic imagery and diction. As he recalled later, MacLeish had made the choice in the early 1930s to leave complexity behind to speak in clearer terms: “It’s a question of to whom the poet is speaking and in what language. Is it a language so esoteric and private that only a few people with the requisite reading and education and taste can possibly understand it, or is it a language which is in the open air and

which has open and public meanings?” Yet in his essays throughout the decade, he continued to invoke modernism as the touchstone for new uses of language and form, and as the appropriate response to the transformative conditions of industrialism. It would seem that these modernists held an incantatory authority for MacLeish even as he did not engage the particulars of their actual work – Pound’s more expressly political *Adams Cantos* from this period to take one example. In his own writing after *Public Speech*, MacLeish left behind lyric poetry for the next decade, only occasionally publishing a poem in a journal. Instead, he shifted his focus to reaching a larger audience for verse through theater and radio dramas, beginning in March 1935 with *Panic* for John Houseman’s Phoenix Theatre as part of the Federal Theater Project.³⁹

Politically, MacLeish situated himself in the fluid left-liberal space between Communism and New Deal liberalism. This “third camp” effort, in John Dewey’s phrase, to Americanize Marxism had begun with Edmund Wilson’s 1931 essay “An Appeal to Progressives.” In this widely discussed article published in *The New Republic*, Wilson argued that the tradition of progressive reform was dead, and that leftist intellectuals should begin to think in revolutionary terms. Wilson believed that Marxism should be adapted to American democratic political traditions, however; that the American left should “take Communism away from the Communists.” Although Wilson’s appeal was more a call to opposition than a program, it inspired some of the most sophisticated American political thought in the early Thirties, including Sidney Hook’s pragmatist revolutionary Marxism, Dewey’s reform alternative to use “democratic means towards radically democratic ends,” and other writings by Wilson, Stuart Chase, and Lewis Mumford among others. MacLeish never grappled with theoretical Marxism at the level of Hook or even Kenneth Burke, yet he made a case in “Preface to an American Manifesto” for a positive radical vision that could answer “the crisis of the spirit in which we find ourselves.”⁴⁰

Writing in 1934, MacLeish argued that revolutionary Marxism had failed in the U.S. because “it is a movement conceived, delivered, and nurtured in negatives.” Although he disagreed with the policies of the New Deal, MacLeish credited Roosevelt with responding to the spiritual aspirations of a gloomy public with his speeches and fireside chats. Contrary to MacLeish’s later reputation as a loyal operative for Roosevelt, however, he clearly articulated here, as he did for the rest of the Thirties, a radical-democratic vision that criticizes the pro-business policies that he saw in the New Deal. The challenge as he saw it was the challenge of industrial democracy: how to integrate industrial collectivism with “the interest of the richest and freest human life” of the individual. Although this challenge might have the disadvantage of inefficiency and conflict, citizens and especially artists should be mobilized to exercise their “freedom and responsibility” to replace the empty shell of political democracy, corrupted by business since the Civil War, with genuine popular control of society. As with other members of the “third camp” position, the lack of a political party hampered the coherence of their unified program, and the balance of policy and vision that MacLeish called for eluded them. For his part, he put his hope in the “democratic control of credit” as Burke put his in redistributive taxation. But as an aspiration, MacLeish staked out a position that combined the social justice of socialism and the concerns for individual freedom of liberalism, a position in which he hoped writers would take a leading role in providing the people something “more permanent than the barricades.”⁴¹

Because of his disputes with the CPUSA, MacLeish took only incidental part in the first American Writers’ Congress in 1935. By his later recollection, which might be apocryphal given the lack of evidence otherwise, he crashed the proceedings on a whim with the poet Carl Sandburg after dinner one evening. When they arrived at the New School, they found “grade-school intellectual types” making statements about “the American situation, the American

economy, American history but bearing no relation to what had actually happened. Carl and I got to laughing, and we were thrown out.” Ironically, when the next Congress convened in 1937, MacLeish would be its keynote speaker. What had changed in the intervening two years to make the League of American Writers credible and indeed vital for MacLeish were two things: the shift in Soviet policy towards a Popular Front with liberals and socialists; and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, which galvanized MacLeish’s commitment to build a genuine democratic internationalism that could challenge both the Soviets and American capitalism in making good his third camp beliefs.⁴²

Poetics of responsibility

One of the central episodes that eclipsed the reputation of MacLeish and cast the Popular Front more broadly in a negative light was a bitter argument between Dwight Macdonald and Van Wyck Brooks in late 1941 that played out in the pages of *Partisan Review* in the weeks surrounding Pearl Harbor. In his essay “Kulturbolschewismus Is Here,” Macdonald denounced in vituperative terms what he called the “Brooks-MacLeish Thesis,” in the process crystallizing the differences between *Partisan Review* editors and leading Popular Front intellectuals. In essence, Macdonald took issue with a series of lectures in which Brooks made a distinction between “primary” and “coterie” writers. The former wrote optimistic works that bespoke the collective life of their people, while the latter were perverse skeptics celebrating the death-drive and form with no interest in content. Tolstoy, Dickens, Dostoevsky, Whitman, and Mann fell in the first group, while Joyce, Proust, Rimbaud, Eliot, and Pound were in the second. As Macdonald rightly pointed out, Brooks’s distinction, with the exception of Mann, repudiated modernism in favor of a canon of nineteenth-century realists. Macdonald interpreted this as an instance of creeping totalitarianism in the Popular Front – a dangerous Philistinism akin to Nazi denunciations of

modernist art as “degenerate” or Stalinist official celebrations of European realism (and indeed the parallels between Brooks’s canon and that of Georg Lukács are striking). From the postwar perspective of the ascendancy of the New York Intellectuals and the rise of anti-Communism, Macdonald’s critique looked from one angle like a prescient defense of intellectual autonomy against folk nationalist groupthink, and from another an instinctive suspicion of Communist “fellow travelers.” Together with Clement Greenberg’s more celebrated 1939 essay “Avant-garde and Kitsch,” Macdonald’s article helped establish the cultural authority of the New York Intellectuals at the expense of Popular Front ideology.⁴³

With his off-handed linkage of Brooks and MacLeish, however, Macdonald’s polemic brushed over a substantive political debate about interventionism by focusing on Brooks’s admittedly intemperate lectures. Macdonald made only brief reference to MacLeish – “Librarian of Congress and intimate of the White House” – and to the essay that had stirred the debate in the first place: MacLeish’s “The Irresponsibles,” published in *The Nation* in May 1940. By going after Brooks instead of MacLeish, Macdonald avoided a debate that would have gone more to the heart of what was at stake in the Popular Front for MacLeish and other radical democratic intellectuals, and would have opened up the assumptions that led to *Partisan Review*’s split with much of the American left in 1937. At a personal level, Macdonald and MacLeish had traveled similar paths to different ends by 1941; their divergence helps us to see the contours of the debate over modernism, radical politics, and intervention in clearer terms.

Fourteen years younger than MacLeish, Dwight Macdonald had also grown up in a well-to-do WASP family, attending Phillips Exeter Academy before graduating from Yale in 1928. Their generational difference was not unimportant, as Macdonald did not have direct experience of the war and had come of age in the Twenties climate of disillusionment. Rather than MacLeish’s earnest path of achievement, Macdonald had embraced Menckente skepticism in his

college years, a temperamental suspicion of the philistine masses that persisted throughout his career. His interest in politics began in the 1930s when he went to work at *Fortune*, where along with James Agee he was among the strongest critics of American business on staff. Like MacLeish, he found the field research that the job involved – the immersion in facts – to be deeply affecting, which finally led to Macdonald’s departure from *Fortune* in 1936 after he submitted a harsh exposé of U.S. Steel’s labor practices. Although their reactions to the experience of reporting were similar, the two writers derived different lessons from their experiences. While MacLeish could be mildly critical of the corporate class, he tended to place positive emphasis on the decency and diligence of workers and farmers, bringing their lives into view for his business-class readers. Macdonald focused instead on their suffering at the hands of the indifferent structural forces of capitalism, which required revolutionary change. This difference informed their divergent responses to the formation of the Popular Front in 1935.⁴⁴

Taking their lead from the Comintern, the CPUSA softened its doctrinaire positions and shifted symbolic focus, as Kenneth Burke had urged, from “class struggle” to “the people.” As a matter of Soviet foreign policy, the Popular Front strategy was a defensive position that conceded a revolutionary brand of socialism for a united reform agenda with liberals and socialists to defend “democracy” against the re-militarized Fascist powers. In an increasingly drifting and uncoordinated international order, Popular Front parties argued for collective security between the Soviet Union, Western Europe, and the U.S. In the case of the United States, this call for robust security commitments in Europe was a decidedly minority position in a prevailing climate of isolationism and politically constrained internationalism on Roosevelt’s part. On the American left, the Popular Front offered Communists a measure of political legitimacy, and allowed them to graft their organization onto the still inchoate left-liberal coterie seeking to Americanize Marxism. While some leftists resisted the new alliance, especially those who had

experienced the Communists' doctrinal rigidity and Soviet loyalties up close in the early 1930s, an influential cross-section of intellectuals embraced "the apotheosis of unity" that the Popular Front offered, none more than Archibald MacLeish.⁴⁵

Contrary to later caricatures of him as a softheaded fellow traveler who had been tricked by wily Communists, MacLeish took a forward and assertive role in the Popular Front early on, and staked out a practical position that liberal democrats would lead the coalition with the support of the Communists. This was not surprising given his well-known disdain for dogmatic Communists before 1935. But their acquiescence, as he saw it, also suited his desire to present a positive vision of radical change that could challenge New Deal policies from the left and lay claim to a populist Americanism that he feared native fascists and oligarchs were exploiting. As MacLeish argued in the *New Masses* in September 1936, "If every human emotion to which Hitler has laid particular claim is to be surrendered to him, the revolution will have to express itself in the abstract symbols of pure mathematics."⁴⁶

In the *New Masses* article, MacLeish went to the main journal of his former adversaries and urged them to graft "the twig of world revolution" to the tree of the people that was the American political tradition. MacLeish believed that the last generation of radicals, under the spell of Menckanism, had lost its faith in the people, fomenting a cynical worldview that left the entire system vulnerable to fascism. He urged that intellectuals get out of the cities and "know the people," reflecting his own experience at *Fortune*. Intellectuals should especially appreciate the people's connection to the land, he argued, quoting Carl Sandburg: "The people know what the land knows/the numbers odd and even of the land/the slow hot wind of summer and its withering/or again the crimp of the driving white blizzard." Indeed, he quoted the title of Sandburg's collection from the same year, *The People, Yes*, as the central point of his argument: that "the revolutionary party which can support that belief [in the people] and give it new form,

the revolutionary party which can offer to restore the government to the people and which can convince the people of its sincerity in so offering . . . will inherit the history of this country and change it into truth.” Otherwise in lieu of a positive vision, those traditions would be vulnerable to cynical exploitation and deceit by the right.

As with so many of MacLeish’s popular exhortations, the power of his rhetoric makes a earnest and compelling argument that can seem by turns foolish or disingenuous given his propensity for mythic generalities. As a blunt counterweight against cosmopolitan cynicism, his paean to trusting the people was a bold intervention in leftist debates at the time, which efforts at unity made more plausible. Yet it can just as easily be countered that his position as a field researcher from a leading Eastern magazine – and as a charming and cultivated white man – gave him authority and access that blinded him to the realities of historical conflict and violence inscribed in the property relations that he mystified as “land.” Even in the case of other field researchers working not for Time Inc. but for the Works Project Administration, the particularities of local knowledge, as Susan Hegeman has argued, were in continual tension with the symbolic desire for totality that is implicit in the phrase “know the people.” Who exactly was doing the knowing, and how would the people be constituted? Hegeman is convincing that the spatial relativism of cultures that the cultural anthropology of Franz Boas and his students had helped initiate remained an unresolved antimony with divisions between those cultures and hierarchies of knowledge and taste. By his assertion of belief in the people, MacLeish flipped the switch from Menckente cynicism towards a populist mythology that could mobilize a broad political coalition. But mediations of the totality he imagined were lacking within the institutions that helped to construct this mythology.⁴⁷

In a sense, MacLeish’s choice of iconic poet for the Popular Front is revealing of what had gotten lost in his conception. Plainspoken, colloquial, and wry, Carl Sandburg offered a

folksy alternative to MacLeish's own heroic blank verse that could, in theory at least, appeal to a broad rural audience. Sandburg's evocation of the people was based on an ear for dialect and mural-style caricatures of stock types. But as William Carlos Williams had parodied Sandburg as far back as 1917, "Carl Sandburg sings a Negro cotton picker's song of the boll weevil. . . . the boll weevil's refrain is always, "That'll be ma HOME! That'll be ma HOOME!" Contrast "The people know what the land knows" to Williams's own portrait of a farmer on his land: "The farmer in deep thought/is pacing through the rain/among his blank fields, with/hands in pockets,/in his head/the harvest already planted." Rather than the mere assertion of agrarian conventions, Williams depicted a certain farmer on a detailed landscape, in specific weather and at a moment in time. Furthermore, Williams aligned the imaginative work of the farmer on his land with the work of the poet in his locality: "Down past the brushwood/bristling by/the rain sluiced/wagonroad/looms the artist figure of/the farmer—composing/—antagonist." In MacLeish's own desire as a poet to move away from an agonized subjectivity, he had lost the particularity of perception and local experience that his work in the 1920s had valued. The potential for a totality mediated from the bottom up was replaced by a top-down idea of "the people."⁴⁸

MacLeish had not entirely abandoned the cause of modernist poetry, however. In a 1938 essay, he again invoked the authority of Pound, Eliot, and Yeats as models for poetry as public speech. Against the neurotic "teacup art" of the nineteenth century, "which had exiled poets from the actual world," these poets in his view had "restored the conception of poetry in which a poem, like a war or an edict, is an action on this earth." But it was not just their authority, but also their formal revolution that had transformed the function of poetry. Pound had released living speech as part of the Free Verse movement and also proposed a new form that could fix and accentuate its living rhythms: "All forms in art are, from the point of view at least, devices

for catching the substance of experience in a timeless tension from which it cannot escape.” Out of this new form the modernists had created the potential for a great public poet in the lineage of Milton and Dante, yet had fallen short in their political aspirations. Prescient of Pound’s entanglements with the Fascists in Italy, MacLeish argued that Pound was “a man to whom the problems of society present themselves schoolmaster-wise as problems of stupidity rather than poet-wise as problems of humanity,” a judgment he registered in harsher terms privately in a letter.⁴⁹

Because of their example, MacLeish was hopeful that “younger poets of our generation who have known how to profit by the example of Pound and Pound’s generation” would be able “to use the revolution in their art to meet the revolution in their age.” But again, MacLeish offered no specific examples either from Pound’s work or from the work of younger poets to clarify what he precisely he meant by these general statements. He waited expectantly for the great Popular Front poet whose work would capture the age in the most advanced terms formally, as Eliot had captured the post-WWI climate in *The Waste Land*, but unwilling to take up this work himself, MacLeish relied upon more conventional poetic forms, whether heroic or colloquial, to appeal to the masses.

Although it is easy to criticize MacLeish for what in retrospect seem like hollow invocations of poetic greatness, his political acumen in leading the Popular Front was tough-minded and appreciated the threat from the Fascist powers in advance of many seasoned foreign-policy thinkers. In his keynote address to the 1937 Writers’ Congress, MacLeish cut through the carping and factionalism to the heart of the matter: “Spain is no political allegory. Spain is not, as some would have us think, a dramatic spectacle in which the conflicts of our times is acted out. The actors are not actors. They truly die. The cities are not stage sets. They burn with fire.” As his poetry from the 1920s demonstrated, MacLeish had suffered profound loss in personal terms

during the First World War and shared in his generation's disillusionment about that war. Such widespread disillusionment led to broad public support for isolationism and the Neutrality Acts that constrained the Roosevelt Administration's ability to intervene, whether to embargo Italy for the invasion of Ethiopia or provide material support for the Loyalist government in Spain.⁵⁰

That MacLeish overcame his own personal disillusionment to attempt to change public opinion about collective security, I would argue, reflected two strong convictions on his part. As his 1938 radio drama *Air Raid* showed, MacLeish imagined in vivid terms the terror unleashed on civilian populations by Fascist tactics:

(The pitch of the roar opens: the sound is huge, brutal, close.)

THE ANNOUNCER:

They swing: the wing dips:
There's the signal: the dip: they'll
Dive: they're ready to dive:
They're steady: they're heading down:
They're dead on the town: they're nosing:
They're easing over: they're over:
There they go: there they —

(A crazy stammering of machine guns hammers above the rising roar.)

A WOMAN'S VOICE: *(screaming)*

It's us do you see!

Broadcast three days before Orson Welles's famous "War of the Worlds," *Air Raid* reached the largest audience for MacLeish's verse to that point, and created a similar effect of fearful immediacy as Welles's program. Like Picasso in "Guernica," MacLeish hoped to bring home awareness of the radically new form of warfare taking place in Spain. A Loyalist victory in Spain, he told the Writers' Congress, would see fascism "defeated in its dearest hopes." Its theory of warfare, based on quick wars and overwhelming successes, and "a theory of conquest by sudden and unannounced attacks upon civilian populations" would meet meaningful resistance in a

concerted defense of popular self-government: “We know that a fascist failure in the Spanish war would mean a decline in that [military] prestige and a possible collapse of fascist forms.” As the historian Helen Graham has argued with great acuity, a realization of this new mode of warfare based on ethnic, cultural, and political purification “underpins our growing sense of the enormity of what the Republican war effort once held back.” MacLeish proposed the “mythological mobilization,” to borrow Graham’s phrase, of democratic internationalism against the mythologies of conservative nationalism.⁵¹

MacLeish’s other guiding conviction was a genuinely internationalist vision of radical democracy. As much as he celebrated the nobility of American farmers and steel workers as the basis of radical propaganda, he connected this populist vision, at least until 1939, to a universal solidarity among oppressed peoples, demonstrated for him by the courage of the Spanish people defending the Loyalist government: “Since [the siege of] Madrid, it is known that wars cannot be won against a courageous population in this way, and the dictators are sullen and afraid.” As his speech to the Writers’ Congress made clear, MacLeish was determined to define the Popular Front in these broadly populist terms, not as a dupe of Soviet influence:

One would have thought that liberals would recognize the issue as so clearly, so inescapably their own that it would never occur to them to wonder whether in accepting it they were being ‘used.’ One would have thought that they would more naturally think of themselves as the *users*, as the leaders in this fight, as the responsible men.

What had begun before 1935 as a left-liberal challenge to the perceived corporate liberalism of the New Deal had merged with the Communist Party into a broad-based democratic internationalism that, for his part at least, emphasized vision over policy. For MacLeish, the Spanish Civil War galvanized the meaning of this movement in the defense of democracy in the near term with hopes for an eventual social revolution. It was only with the collapse of the Popular Front in 1939 that he shifted his sense of purpose to the New Deal and the American state as the vehicle of democratic internationalism.

For Macdonald, a practical alliance with Stalinism was an impossible compromise to make. Phillip Rahv and William Phillips, his fellow editors at *Partisan Review*, had a longer history of dealing with the cultural policy of the Communist Party since their days in the New York chapter of the proletarian John Reed Clubs. After the dissolution of these clubs during the 1935 Writers' Congress, they had moved increasingly towards Leon Trotsky's dissident cultural position, which encouraged the avant-garde impulse within modernism, and likewise refused to concede a revolutionary goal for the reform agenda of the Popular Front. As a latecomer to Marxism, Macdonald himself lacked admiration for Stalin's achievements in building the Soviet economy compared to American intellectuals of MacLeish's generation. When the Moscow Trials of 1936-37 ignited a debate over Stalinism on the American left, these achievements led many older intellectuals to give Stalin the benefit of the doubt, where Macdonald saw only the specter of totalitarianism in the trials. For MacLeish, his sense of urgency about the escalation of the Spanish Civil War eclipsed any concerns he might have had about an expedient ally that he had not trusted much in the first place.⁵²

Re-formed in response to the 1937 Writers' Congress, *Partisan Review* was conceived as an oppositional refuge for Trotskyists, both in its revolutionary ideology and its appreciation of literary formalism. As the international political climate worsened precipitously in 1938, the journal's position became increasingly one of vital critical autonomy in eyes of its supporters, and unconscionable political quietism to its adversaries. The term "responsibility" crystallized the stakes of the debate for both sides. In his essay "The Irresponsibles," MacLeish bitterly criticized scholars and writers who chose to stay above the political fray, especially in decrying fascism at home and abroad. He imagined that when future historians looked back trying to find "those who fought the enemies of the intellect with the weapons of the intellect . . . who fought this danger with the weapons by which this danger could be overcome, they will record names of very

few.” In his view, the insidious danger posed by fascism was its corrosive effect upon the truth, its nihilism: “What is new and unexampled in these times we live in is *the repudiation of the forms*. What is new is a cynical brutality which considers moral self-justification unnecessary and therefore . . . dispenses with the filthy garment of the hypocrite” [italics in original].⁵³

Under these circumstances, MacLeish argued that intellectuals had a responsibility to defend the very form of truth or have their reason for being gutted. And in this respect, his essay erased the distinction drawn by Max Weber between science and politics as a vocation. The scientific ethic dedicated to disinterested objective truth had become a luxury; the political ethic of responsibility required that scientists defend truth in the political world: “The modern scholar at his best and worst is both these things – perfectly conscientious, laborious, and competent: perfectly irresponsible for saving the world.” Thus, it is in this sense that MacLeish conceived of democratic propaganda as propaganda for truth itself. Over the next eighteen months, as the isolationism debate came to a climax amidst the Battle of Britain, MacLeish quietly laid the groundwork for the Office of Facts and Figures to provide a venue for “responsible” scholars and writers, whose ranks would include anthropologists, geographers, folklorists, painters, and poets. With the breakup of the Popular Front in August 1939 following the Hitler-Stalin Nonaggression Pact, MacLeish transferred his hopes for radical-democratic internationalism to the Roosevelt Administration, which inspired his loyalty with the Four Freedoms speech and Atlantic Charter in early 1941. The wartime state would ultimately disappoint these hopes. But he was hardly the dupe of the White House any more than he had been a dupe of the Communists.⁵⁴

Dwight Macdonald took the charge of “irresponsibility” as a badge of honor. Yet he chose not to engage MacLeish’s essay on its own terms, instead attacking the softer target of Van Wyck Brooks. On one level, this choice had a certain symbolic meaning. Brooks had been an ally of Randolph Bourne in 1917, when Bourne had eloquently resisted the Progressive campaign to

enter World War I. By focusing on Brooks, Macdonald implicitly called out what he saw as the hypocrisy of older interventionists. On another level, Macdonald used Brooks's primary/coterie distinction to make his defense of modernism as intellectual freedom. His own anti-totalitarian views were so tendentious as to caricature the threat posed by MacLeish's calls for intellectual responsibility as "totalitarian cultural values." MacLeish had challenged artists to take up not a rifle but rather "the weapon of his words and carry it to the barricades of intellectual warfare, to the storming of belief, the fortifying of conviction where alone this fighting can be won." The coerciveness of this challenge seemed to be, at its core, what offended Macdonald in this debate.

Where MacLeish rightly saw the very possibility of intellectual freedom at risk in the war against fascism, Macdonald believed that the complex subjectivity that modernism cultivated preserved a necessary space for free inquiry and critical autonomy from the "truth" promoted by the military state. It is possible to agree with both writers, but the incommensurability of their positions points to the absence of a middle ground in their disagreement. Macdonald concludes his essay with this comment:

Looking over the back issues of [*Partisan Review*], I am struck with how continuously we have been fighting a rear-guard action against this growing official esthetic, first as it manifested itself in the Stalinist writers' front, then . . . as it has cropped up in the swing behind the government in the war crisis. The irony is, of course, that it *is* a rear-guard action, that the new social and political forces which alone can bring into being a new esthetic tendency are still frozen and impotent. Eliot, Joyce, Proust, James, Valéry — these represent, as Brooks says, an end and not a beginning. Their school has done its work, fought and won its battles by the end of the twenties. But it is still the most advanced cultural tendency that exists.

It is quite likely that MacLeish would have agreed with the irony expressed in this statement. He had been waiting for the much of the 1930s for what came next, asking who would take up the beginning that came after *The Waste Land's* end. His call for a younger poet the caliber of Pound or Yeats to give voice to the rising tide of radical democracy, as he saw it, remained unfulfilled, such that MacLeish finally turned on the modernists altogether in 1939, calling their poetry

fundamentally one of revolt, unable to help the people mediate the intensity of contemporary experience: “The poetry we call contemporary was originally, and still remains, a poetry of literary revolt. As such it is a poetry adapted not to the creation of new poetic organizations of experience, but to the destruction of old poetic organizations.” But MacLeish himself had surrendered a sophisticated understanding of form and subjectivity when he turned to “public speech.” His choice of Carl Sandburg as an exemplary populist belied his call for a poet on the leading edge of form.⁵⁵

Strides in seven-league boots

The missing middle ground between MacLeish and Macdonald was a democratic modernist poet who could have captured the radical promise that MacLeish saw first in “the politics of upheaval” and then in his understanding of the Popular Front as an internationalist movement; and whose formal innovation would have fulfilled Macdonald’s concerns about creative autonomy. Several artists in the period, not all of them poets, operated at this juncture, exploring its tensions: one thinks of Langston Hughes, Orson Welles, or James Agee. Likewise, a single figure might be the wrong standard as much as a broad-based movement, as Michael Denning has suggested about the Cultural Front. Melvin B. Tolson, a relatively unheralded poet working within the broad base that Denning describes, produced a series of poems in the early 1940s that in many ways exemplified the Popular Front poet that MacLeish was searching for. Because of the color line and his provincial location in small-town East Texas, however, Tolson did not come to MacLeish’s attention and would likely have been too controversial for his purposes.

In 1941, Melvin B. Tolson was a nationally renowned debate coach at Wiley College, a black Methodist college in Marshall, Texas. In his early forties at the time, Tolson’s career had

been characterized by a tension between the local and the cosmopolitan. He was born in central Missouri in 1898 to a Methodist preacher and “a little walnut-hued woman [who] was fiercely proud of being an American Negro, although in her veins flowed Irish, French, Indian, and African blood.” Tolson showed an aptitude for languages at an early age, receiving a classical education and becoming a locally known child poet as his family moved around Iowa and Missouri. After working in a slaughterhouse after high school, he gained admission first to Fisk University and then Lincoln University in Philadelphia. Although his college years in the East in the early Twenties stirred his interest in the New Negro movement, he moved to Wiley to take a teaching position because of marriage and family. After seven years at Wiley, however, he earned a Rockefeller Scholarship that allowed him to complete an M.A. at Columbia University in 1931. During his year at Columbia, he explored Harlem extensively and made the acquaintance of a number of leading New Negro writers, including Langston Hughes and Claude McKay, and heard W. E. B. Du Bois speak. This experience further radicalized Tolson, and led him to write his M.A. thesis on the “Harlem Group of Negro Writers.”⁵⁶

Because of their shared Missouri roots, Hughes in particular became a mentor to Tolson, encouraging him to undertake *A Gallery of Harlem Portraits*, a series of free-verse character studies of Harlem residents inspired by the *Spoon River Anthology*. Although more conventional than Hughes’s modernist lyrics, Tolson’s poems showed a great sensitivity to poverty and religious hypocrisy, and like Hughes deftly utilized Blues lyrics as choric elements in his poems. The two friends differed on the question of religion, but Tolson deeply admired Hughes’s commitment to social justice in his involvement with the Communist Party. When Hughes came under fire in the black press for his poem “Goodbye, Christ,” Tolson rose to his defense in an article for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, arguing from the perspective of devout Methodist that Hughes’s poem was “both a challenge and a warning to the churches of American and Afr-America” that they should

live up to their professed ideals of social justice. Upon his return to Texas, Tolson followed Hughes's example, joining the Communist Party and helping to secretly organize black and white sharecroppers beginning in 1935. Although he struggled to find a publisher for his manuscript, his dogged pursuit brought him to the attention of the Trotskyist editor V. F. Calverton, who with Hughes championed his work despite Tolson's relative distance from New York intellectual circles.⁵⁷

The first national acclaim that Tolson received outside of these circles was for "Dark Symphony," a poem that he submitted at Hughes's suggestion for the National Poetry Contest at the American Negro Exposition in 1940. The poem won first prize and as a result appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in July 1941. In "Dark Symphony," Tolson offered a powerful example of poetry as public speech, speaking in plain colloquial language that drew upon common American myths and political ideals. Unlike Sandburg's idealized portrayals of the people, however, Tolson spoke hard truths about the suffering of farmers and laborers and the legacy of racism. The poem opens with "Black Crispus Attucks" who taught "Us how to die," giving real meaning to what from "white Patrick Henry" were mere words, "give me liberty or give me death." Through a series of images, Tolson stressed that experience had given black workers, both as sharecroppers and slaves, a deep understanding of the labor exploitation of capitalism: "Aver we hobnailed Man beneath the brute,/Squeezed down the thorns of greed/On Labor's brow,/Garroted lands and carted off the loot." Tolson's rhetorical cadences, though accessible to a broad audience, nonetheless reflected his understanding of Du Boisian Marxist internationalism, which understood racism within a broader critique of colonialism and global capitalism.⁵⁸

A vocal proponent of not letting race be used to divide class solidarity, Tolson argued in "Dark Symphony" that the Negro experience could in fact help to realize the democratic ideals at the heart of the American political tradition, which were themselves universal revolutionary

ideals: “The New Negro/Hard-muscled, Fascist hating, Democracy-ensouled,/Strides in seven-league boots/Along the Highway of Today/Toward the Promised Land of Tomorrow.” Like MacLeish, Tolson had joined the anti-fascist cause early, but with the additional perspective of black internationalism, had focused as much on the colonialism in Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia as the populist cause in Spain. Despite his relative isolation in East Texas, Tolson reached a national audience for his anti-fascist cause in a regular column for the *Washington Tribune*, a black newspaper in the nation’s capital. In the months before Pearl Harbor, Tolson consistently opposed intervention in the war in his columns, not because he was “irresponsible” so much as his sense of responsibility did not include the U.S. government or the Roosevelt Administration, which in his view depended on a racist regime in the Solid South. After Pearl Harbor, he became an early proponent of the Double V program in his opinion columns, offering qualified support for the war effort. Unlike MacLeish, however, he did not tie his internationalist hopes to the warfare state, instead focusing on anti-colonialist networks that utilized the black press to create a sense of diasporic solidarity.⁵⁹

During the war, Tolson published *Rendezvous with America*, which in many ways embodied the populist aesthetic that MacLeish had championed since first encountering Diego Rivera’s murals. But Tolson’s vision of a pluralist America, explicitly based in labor solidarity, challenged the color line, using racial critique to question any kind of facile romantic nationalism:

America?
America is the Black Man’s country,
The Red Man’s, the Yellow Man’s
The Brown Man’s, the White Man’s.

It is not hard to imagine that MacLeish would have admired Tolson’s convictions and the power of his rhetoric if he did read his work. But by the time of *Rendezvous with America*’s publication in 1944, MacLeish himself had resigned from the OWI and the politics of the agency had shifted far from the anti-racist and Marxist tenets of black internationalism. As with his debate with

Macdonald, MacLeish's vision of a Popular Front poet who would galvanize the people foundered on his own uncritical universalism. Tolson had applied just such critical intelligence, based partly on his local experience as an organizer in Texas, and partly on Du Bois's sophisticated integration of Marxism and racial critique. Indeed, Tolson's skepticism about an emerging American imperialism, born of this Du Boisian black internationalist critique, prefigured the countercultural space that white radical democrats sought to create after the war.⁶⁰

Chapter 4 – Come Into Space

In the spring of 1949, the literary critic F. O. Matthiessen delivered the Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan. The address, entitled “The Responsibilities of the Critic,” was one of the few explicitly theoretical essays ever written by Matthiessen, who preferred to do his critical work in response to specific texts. In the lecture, Matthiessen challenged his fellow academic critics, in particular the formalists then in the ascendancy at American universities, to leave their “closed garden” and to make “renewed contact” with the fertile soil that lay outside that garden’s walls. His lecture provided an elegant, succinct genealogy of the “closed garden,” beginning with the revolution in criticism by T. S. Eliot and I. A. Richards after the First World War. According to Matthiessen, their revolution had been to transform prevailing standards from Matthew Arnold’s preoccupation with “the spirit of poetry” to a careful attention to form. In a period that had seen the rapid expansion of mass communication, poetic form served as an important counterpoint to arrest the reader’s attention, “to make you continuously see a physical thing, to prevent you gliding through an abstract process.” This new criticism had galvanized his generation, leading them to produce a “serious and exacting body of work” that displaced, especially in America, the old guard of philologists and literary historians. Yet the formalists’ emphasis on the technique of criticism and challenging works of literary modernism had, in Matthiessen’s view, led by the late 1940s to a “new scholasticism,” which caused a split in society between mass civilization and minority culture.¹

In urging critics to leave their garden, Matthiessen invoked William James, who loomed large as the great American thinker for his generation. James had insisted that an intellectual had the duty “to know as much as possible about life in his own time,” that an awareness of actual life was his responsibility. Matthiessen construed this awareness in several ways. He believed that

the critic should balance the interplay of past and present, keeping abreast of new works and new technologies with the perspective of tradition, even as he offered the renewal of tradition in light of present concerns. He also argued that a critic should be catholic in his tastes, avoiding narrow specialization through an interest in diverse fields and disciplines – whether music, anthropology, or linguistic theory – as well as popular culture. If critics turned their backs on the wider world, especially in the fateful climate of the new atomic age, they would abdicate their responsibility “to keep open the life-giving communications between art and society” and the insights that art can provide.

Beyond his general Jamesian exhortation, however, Matthiessen forthrightly addressed the fraught political climate of 1949. Although Matthiessen is commonly remembered as a formalist critic of the American canon he helped to create, he was consistent in his Christian socialist commitments throughout his career at Harvard. But it was only in the late 1940s that his radical politics began to infuse his criticism and he assumed a stance of resistance. At the time of his lecture, Matthiessen had become the target of anti-Communist critics, including Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin, who scorned him for what they saw as his political naiveté – both as a leading supporter of Henry Wallace’s 1948 campaign for president and in his defense of the postwar Czechoslovakian government. Against Howe’s overwrought charge that he was in “the service of the commissars,” Matthiessen calmly warned in his lecture that freedom of thought and speech had a thin margin of survival at the present. Provocatively, he also stood by the principles of Marxism, not as dogma, but as a reminder “that unless the problems rising from the economic inequalities in our modern industrialized society are better solved, we cannot continue to build democracy.” Ultimately, Matthiessen was more Niebuhrian than Marxist – the Thirties radical Niebuhr rather than the celebrated postwar sage – but he refused on principle to let go of the

continued relevance of Marxism, invoking the spirit of the Spanish Civil War against their anti-Communism.²

The lecture at Michigan, which might have announced a new, dissenting direction in Matthiessen's career, instead proved to be a poignant coda. Less than a year later, he took his own life for what friends thought to be both personal and political reasons: chronic depression worsened by the death of his long-term partner Russell Cheney, but also despair at the rising tide of McCarthyism. One interpretation might see Matthiessen's defense of his social-democratic beliefs as the ideologies of the Cold War began to harden as a closure of 1930s radicalism. But the persistence and intensification of his beliefs after the war also suggest an opening going forward. This narrow aperture found its most energetic proponents among a younger generation of writers, in particular a former student of Matthiessen at Harvard, Charles Olson.

A decade younger than the leading American modernists of the interwar years, Olson followed the path they had trod before him. Born in 1910 in Worcester, Massachusetts, Olson had developed a passion as an adolescent for both American history and modernist writers like Yeats and Lawrence. After excelling at Wesleyan University, he made an early mark as a scholar, contributing an important bibliographic discovery to the Melville revival of the 1930s. He studied with Matthiessen for three years at Harvard before drifting into the Stieglitz circle in Greenwich Village, where he transformed his dissertation into a work of creative historiography, *Call Me Ishmael*. In need of work, he found an occupation as a publicist with the ACLU, and through this association joined the cadre of anti-fascist writers under Archibald MacLeish at the Office of War Information. Olson's wartime experience in the government deepened his political convictions even as it disillusioned him with the increasingly corporate and hegemonic direction of American foreign policy at the end of the war. Due to this disillusionment, Olson charted a new course in

democratic poetics, a course that led him through encounters with Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams, before he made his widely influential theoretical statements in 1950.³

For both Matthiessen and Olson, the way beyond formalism was to recognize the inseparability of form and content, and the implications that had for the social responsibility of the poet. Matthiessen concluded his address by arguing that the “judgment of art is unavoidably both an aesthetic and a social act, and the critic’s sense of social responsibility gives him a deeper thirst for meaning.” Olson had taken this dictum one step further into poetic praxis, articulating a new poetic vocation for himself and others of his generation. At the dawn of the atomic age and the new American imperium that the Bomb protected, Olson returned to the live creature of Dewey and the localism of Williams. His theory of projective verse returned poetry to the body in space, emphasizing the integral experience of each subject in relation to another, “man as object not as mass integer.” Having witnessed the corruption of democratic internationalism into an ideology of empire, he sought to articulate a “true contrary,” an opening within the practice of poetry that resisted that ideology on experiential grounds.⁴

Men of letters

Writing in the late 1940s, Charles Olson recalled a pivotal moment in his childhood and in his close yet fraught relationship with his father Karl: “I was not ten when the Plymouth trip was planned but my father had long since got over to me his interest in the American past.” Karl had taken a week off from his route as a postman in Worcester, Massachusetts to attend the 300th anniversary (in 1920) of the Pilgrims’ landing at Plymouth Rock. It was to be the first vacation alone with his son, an only child in whom he had instilled his love of pageants, picture books, and local museums devoted to early American history. The night before they were to leave, however, Karl’s supervisors at the post office rescinded his vacation without notice –

punishment, his son later believed, for his union activities among the letter carriers. Suspicious that a reprisal was involved in the order, Karl ignored it and took his son to Plymouth anyway. His insubordination provoked his superiors to remove Karl from his prized mail route and the community he served there, assigning him to sorting duty on the night shift – in effect entry-level work. In his son’s view, his father never recovered from the dispute. He lost his immigrant enthusiasm for America, retreating into Swedish fraternal societies for support, and doggedly fought the post-office bureaucracy until his death in 1935, believing he had been wrongfully punished in spite of the great pride he took in his work. Privately, he became an increasingly dour and bitter father and husband.⁵

Written soon after Olson’s own conflict with the federal bureaucracy during WWII, “The Post Office” captured the values from his father that he recognized in himself. Matthew Brady’s photographs of the dead on Civil War battlefields, bought by subscription as “thin, large, blue paperbound pamphlets,” stirred young Charles’s historical imagination even as the brutality they depicted cured him of more romantic versions of history gleaned from popular compendiums. Olson also valorized his father’s postal route as an organic community joined by ritual courtesies and conversations with its letter carrier. “That route was my father’s parish, village to which he was crier and walking mayor,” he argued. “He was more intimate to the community, and the lives of all the people, than anyone else.” In his battle with the post office, Karl Olson fought for the *quality* of this connection – the ideal of a letter as “a communication between two persons” – against the *efficiency* and increasing Taylorization of mail routes. But in the process of reflection that the essay allowed, Olson found the central meaning of the Plymouth episode: that out of his father’s disillusionment, condensed in this episode, the son found his own purpose to reclaim the history and values that his father had believed in and lost, and to fight for them with fewer illusions using the power of his own intellect and creative force. “He valued America, as

immigrants do, more than the native,” he said of his father. While this belief did not prove to be a good thing in the case of his father, “his fascination with the story of this country was fruitful” for his son, the second-generation immigrant, replicating a common theme among immigrant intellectuals of his generation.

The younger Olson was born on December 27, 1910 in Worcester. His family members on both sides were steel workers, Irish-American in the case of his mother Mary, while Karl had been an itinerant laborer installing iron factory chimneys across New England before settling down in Worcester to work at the post office. Charles grew up in what he later called “an amniotic cocoon” as the only child of a devout Catholic mother and bright yet unschooled and brooding father. He found his outlet from this stifling home environment at the Worcester Classical School, where he received a thorough liberal education despite his working-class background. He particularly excelled in debate using his unusually large stature (he would grow to 6’8” as an adult) to great effect in public speaking.⁶

Likewise, Olson used his energy and intelligence to achieve great success at Wesleyan University, overcoming the teasing and snobbery at what was in the late 1920s still a gentleman’s college through his intense competitiveness and force of personality. Competing in debate on a national level, Olson also became deeply involved in the study of literature under the influence of his professor Wilbert Snow, who shared Olson’s relatively humble New England origins, hailing from down-east Maine. The two initially bonded over a mutual love of Yeats, whom Olson had embraced due to his Irish heritage, in fact meeting the poet himself on a summer trip to Ireland after high school. Snow later recalled the pleasure of long arguments in his office with his precocious student over the relative merits of Yeats’s early and late poetry as well as Olson’s passionate recitations. During this period, Olson made only fledgling efforts at writing his own poetry and tended to be more scholar than poet. Upon graduation in 1932, Snow encouraged his

star pupil to pursue a career in politics rather than letters, a suggestion that later proved to be prescient.⁷

In the near term, however, Olson decided to continue his studies at Wesleyan, completing an M.A. thesis in 1933 with Snow on Herman Melville, whose work was just then undergoing a revival of interest. Despite his youth, Olson was able to make a significant contribution to this emerging field over the course of a year's research. His proposal was simple and bibliographic in nature: to track down Melville's personal library, which had been divided up among family members and local archives yet largely neglected by scholars. Through a process of patiently ingratiating himself with Melville's elderly daughters and cousins, Olson was able to locate and identify 124 volumes belonging to the author, uncovering Melville's annotations as a critical resource. Because of his research, Olson established himself among the tight-knit community of Melville scholars, including Raymond Weaver, Jay Leyda, Lewis Mumford, and F.O. Matthiessen. Indeed, on the strength of his thesis, Matthiessen extended Olson an invitation to join the newly formed History of American Civilization program at Harvard, an offer he gladly accepted after two tedious years of teaching composition back in Worcester.⁸

In the summer before leaving for Harvard, Olson took a three-week voyage as a deckhand aboard the swordfishing schooner *Doris M. Hawes* out of Gloucester, north of Boston. Since his early childhood, Gloucester had been an annual summer destination for the Olson family. Like his father's love of history, Charles shared with Karl a fascination with the culture and lore of what was one of the oldest fishing ports on the Atlantic Coast. Karl had passed away the summer before this voyage, and one can speculate whether it was somehow therapeutic for his son to work among the men they had idolized together. Certainly, his immersion in the writings of Melville had stirred his imagination about the labor and informal political community that took place aboard ship. But he suggested in a journal from the voyage that it was the

Gloucester of his boyhood that especially drew him to the fisherman's way of life: "Fishermen are like gulls, tough ones. There's a muscularity about them, not of the biceps, but of the whole stuff of man, the gut . . . a command and thus a dignity . . . over this thing we introverts grapple for and miss and call life; they don't bother to name it but they've got it." As he prepared to embark on scholarly life at the highest level, Olson took the measure of distance and proximity to where he was from, and how he had chosen to make sense of it. He had made good the talents that his father had never had the chance to develop, but risked losing his connection to the set of values that shaped them both.⁹

Full circle

Olson's work on Melville remained the single constant in his life for the fifteen years after he graduated from Wesleyan in 1933. What had begun as a consuming passion his senior year that inspired his resourceful M.A. thesis became his calling card among the New England cultural elite and New York bohemian circles. His research into Shakespearean influences in *Moby Dick*, based on a careful reading of Melville's annotations in his seven-volume collection of Shakespeare, earned Olson two starkly different literary mentors for the project: the rising star of American literary criticism, F. O. Matthiessen, and the sardonic Lawrentian novelist and protégé of the Stieglitz circle, Edward Dahlberg. At Harvard, Olson also grounded Melville in the progressive historiography of Frederick Jackson Turner through Turner's disciple Frederick Merk. The project simmered in these influences for nearly a decade, first in a period of bohemian drift and then during a stint at the Office of War Information, where Olson was known for his frequent invocations of Melville during staff meetings. But it was only after his disaffection from what had seemed to be an ascendant political career in the Democratic Party that the project assumed its final form as *Call Me Ishmael*, completed in 1945 and published in 1947. A product of

its long gestation, this short, influential monograph also bore the unmistakable stamp of the wartime experience and its immediate, troubling aftermath.

When Olson arrived at Harvard in 1936, he found an atmosphere – which he later dubbed “the killer-place” – that sorely tested his intense academic competitiveness. The historian Henry May, a contemporary of Olson’s at Harvard, recalled how demanding the graduate programs were: “I never listened to the radio. I had no time for literary experiment. Politics receded to a minor place in my life.” Ambitious students like May and Olson competed for the single straight A grade that a professor like Merk would give out each year. In addition, Harvard’s newly instituted house system kept poorer graduate students busy as resident tutors. This system observed strict if unofficial quotas for Catholic and Jewish students, and as a result Olson took up residence in the Catholic-dominated Winthrop House, where his advisees included Jack Kennedy and his older brother. In May’s account, the protocols of Harvard snobbery, which reflected Boston society more generally, were entrenched. Yet wealth also sustained a cultural abundance, such that certain types of eccentric aesthetes like Olson, often poor and radical, ironically attached themselves “to the amenities and graces provided by the system for the enjoyment of the rich.”¹⁰

The figure who came quintessentially to symbolize this blend of cultural distinction and political radicalism was F. O. Matthiessen. Although born to a wealthy Midwest family, Matthiessen early on charted a radical social and political course from which he never wavered. An avowed disciple of Eugene Debs at Yale in the early 1920s, Matthiessen was also a devout High Church Anglican, a combination that led him eventually to revise the critical methods of his idol T. S. Eliot within the American tradition of democratic republicanism. As William Cain has perspicaciously argued, Matthiessen’s efforts in this direction remained largely aspirational throughout the 1930s. In his public life, he was president of the Harvard Teacher’s Union,

actively defended labor leaders under persecution, and helped to organize radical study groups among his loyal coterie of students. Privately, he bravely maintained a twenty-year homosexual partnership with the painter Russell Cheney as an open secret on the Harvard campus and in Boston society. Yet as Cain argues, in his writings Matthiessen remained a formalist in the Eliotic tradition, aligned with the conservative cultural criticism of the Nashville Agrarians until the politics of the Popular Front further radicalized him and began his shift to the social formalism of his post-war criticism.¹¹

The beginning of this turn came in his monumental 1941 synthesis *American Renaissance*, which also marked his point of conjuncture with Olson both practically and influentially. Matthiessen's innovation was to bring the technique of close reading and attention to "organic form" that he had derived from Coleridge, Eliot, and I. A. Richards to the emerging canon of American literature. The modernist generation, beginning with Van Wyck Brooks and including D. H. Lawrence, William Carlos Williams, and Vernon Parrington, first constructed the now familiar litany of American masterworks from the nineteenth-century: Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Hawthorne, Melville, and to a lesser extent, Poe and Dickinson. Matthiessen accepted this canon, but questioned the sociological methods of Brooks and Parrington. In his view, their emphasis had been on the "economic, social, and religious causes" of this remarkable flowering of literary production at the expense of these writings as works of art: "It is well to remember that although literature reflects an age, it also illuminates it." Matthiessen's quote prefigures the literary critic M. H. Abrams's classic distinction between putting a mirror to reality and illuminating it by lamp. First used in Romantic criticism, the lamp symbolized the mind of the artist fusing the content of the world into the form of the work of art. In Matthiessen's definition, this was not "form pathologically felt by aesthetes and decadents: it was nothing else than the entire resolution of the intellectual, sentimental, and emotional material into the concrete

reality of the poetic image and word.” His critical theory of illumination as opposed to mere reflection represented the supercession of mere content by “the fusion of form and content,” which for Matthiessen also had the potential to appeal to the common reader. Imbued with Popular Front optimism, Matthiessen hoped that his criticism could introduce a broad audience of “all the people” to an understanding of form, which in the case of the American Renaissance writers was itself the sensitive index of an antebellum culture full of “the possibilities of democracy.”¹²

Although Olson’s work on Melville aligned with Matthiessen’s subject matter, as a student he was unable to penetrate the coterie around the charismatic professor, which might have reflected his increasingly erratic work habits or his territorial feelings about the Melville annotations. In later recollections of his time at Harvard, Olson instead cited the historian Frederick Merk as a more formative influence. Merk had first come to Harvard in the early 1920s with his mentor Frederick Jackson Turner, and had taken over Turner’s famous lecture course on Westward Movement upon his retirement. Merk’s most notable scholarship reinterpreted Romantic conceptions of Manifest Destiny as an idea driving history. Rather, he argued that it was an ideology propagated by publicists and politicians to justify American expansionism in the 1840s, a thesis that he established with scrupulous empirical research. As Henry May recalled, Merk’s constant refrain to his students was to “get the facts straight.”¹³

As much as he challenged the Romantic school in frontier history, however, Merk was a conservative voice in a contentious methodological debate taking place at the time among American historians in response to Charles Beard’s 1933 presidential address to the American Historical Association, “Writing History as an Act of Faith.” Merk’s emphasis on empiricism reflected his position as a disinterested historicist in the Rankean tradition, which had been the ruling orthodoxy in American historiography until the interwar period. Beard instead drew upon

Benedetto Croce and pragmatism in his call for historians to acknowledge the implicit preconceptions that empiricism disguised. By explicitly stating one's "frame of reference," the historian could direct scientific method towards the concerns of his own society. As with Matthiessen's shift to formalist criticism against Parrington, Beard argued that historians should be more critically self-aware, and potentially activist, in their handling of form and content.¹⁴

While Olson stressed "facts" in his interpretation of Melville, he ultimately used them in an essentially formalist fashion, to lend his bold, intuitive readings historical grounding. Neither Merk nor Matthiessen's disciple in a pure sense, his method achieved a synthesis of the two, fusing Beard's "act of faith" with literary formalism. Ultimately, his work would not pass muster by the standards of either academic discipline, even as it stayed true to the interdisciplinary spirit of the American Civilization program. His departure from these standards, however, was also the result of a swerve towards creative historiography under the influence of his closest mentor at the time, Edward Dahlberg.

Dahlberg had first emerged in the early 1930s during the vogue for proletarian novelists with *Bottom Dogs*, his novel about his hard-bitten upbringing in an abusive family on the streets of Kansas City. Unlike many of the younger proletarians in John Reed Clubs, Dahlberg had received a classical education at Berkeley and Columbia before travelling in modernist circles in Europe, in particular the *Contact* group around Robert McAlmon in Paris. The wide acclaim he received in the U.S. for his first two novels led to his inclusion in the Stieglitz circle, where he became friends with Waldo Frank, Sherwood Anderson, and William Carlos Williams, as well as playing an organizing role in the First Writer's Congress in 1935. After this congress, however, Dahlberg grew disillusioned with political engagement and withdrew to Gloucester to work on a cultural history inspired by *In the American Grain* and Lawrence's *Studies in American Literature*. He met Olson by chance there during the summer before the latter departed for Harvard, and

throughout Olson's three years in graduate school, Dahlberg became a contrary voice, urging him to free his work of academic strictures.¹⁵

Like Matthiessen, Dahlberg benefited from Olson's recovery of Melville's library. In his 1941 cultural history, *Can These Bones Live?*, Dahlberg argued that Melville was the quintessential American artist in his isolation, sundered from friendship by the stifling effects of Puritanism, which echoed Williams in *In the American Grain*. Melville's tombstone "betwixt the subway terminus and the hither fringes of Yonkers" symbolized his life as a pariah: "Is it not so fitting, so American, that the most astonishing genius that ever came out of the Western Hemisphere should be so uncleanly slabbed in mean, cheap dirt, not among the pitiable poor, but with the common drab bulk of rightly unremembered dead." Dahlberg reveled in the generative isolation he saw for American writers, past and present, borrowing one of Melville's characters as their emblem: "Our artists are American Ishmaels doomed to be cut away from the human vineyard." But for Dahlberg, what further distinguished Melville from Poe or Whitman was his layering of the Western literary tradition in his work. His prophetic voice contained the memory of tradition, whether Odysseus, Dante, or particularly Shakespeare.¹⁶

Like Matthiessen, Dahlberg was working to elaborate the Brooksonian technique of excavating a "usable past" in American literature within the broader context of the Western canon. In this respect, both critics shared Eliot's rethinking of tradition as an historical sense. As Eliot had argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," "the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order." But their divergences were equally important in defining the critical and creative space in which Olson came to operate. Temperamentally, Dahlberg was unsatisfied with merely a critical agenda, and made the creative and deeply personal exploration of self his priority, aligning himself more with Lawrence than with Richards, with

Eliot the poet rather than Eliot the critic. This split replicated itself institutionally as Matthiessen represented a new generation of academic specialists in the Brooksonian line, while Dahlberg rejected this world in favor of the old antinomian dream, his Ishmael becoming a prophetic version of John Neal from Burke's novel. Akin to John Neal, Dahlberg also rejected politics following his break from the Writer's Congress in 1935, in particular what he saw to be the democratic pieties of the Popular Front. In this respect, he exerted an apolitical influence on Olson until the latter dramatically broke with his mentor with the outbreak of the war.¹⁷

In 1939, Dahlberg provided his protégé concrete means to break with Harvard as the stressful atmosphere there had become too much for Olson. He arranged for the publication of Olson's essay "Lear and Moby-Dick" with *Twice A Year*, a new literary journal edited by Dorothy Norman and affiliated with the Stieglitz circle. Through his connections, Dahlberg was also able to help Olson receive a Guggenheim Fellowship that provided him the time to finish his Melville project for the literary market. With the Guggenheim funds, Olson took leave of Harvard and began a process of deep self-exploration in the Dahlberg's creative mode. He moved to a garret apartment in Boston, and a year later, to Greenwich Village, where his mentor lived. Olson's reading around Melville began to range farther afield, as he became immersed in Dostoevsky's novels and Freud's *Moses and Monotheism*. His manuscript swelled to four hundred pages, and his interpretation of *Moby-Dick* took on thicker layers of self-identification, particularly surrounding emotionally charged issue of his father's death only a few years before. Two years of desultory research and writing finally culminated in Olson presenting a typescript draft to Dahlberg for criticism. In an earlier letter, Dahlberg had offered specific, constructive criticisms of Olson's "barnacled" prose in which "you lost your own Path"; but he praised "the glassy, flowered intuitions" and encouraged him to "write, work, and believe in your Ilium." A year later, however, Dahlberg was much harsher in his criticisms, accusing him of writing in "a tumid

bathetic Dahlberg prose, with all my worst faults.” Olson in turn resented what he saw as Dahlberg’s plagiarism of his ideas about Melville in *Can These Bones Live?* Working in such a similar mode, it was probably inevitable that their relationship would combust, as it did in 1941.¹⁸

At the end of his funds and newly married to Constance Wilcock, a young secretary from Boston whom he had met in Gloucester, Olson set aside the unfinished Melville manuscript and sought whatever immediate work he could find. His prospects proved to be fortuitous. Through Dorothy Norman, Olson began to work as a publicist, first for the American Civil Liberties Union, and then for the Common Council for American Unity, an organization dedicated to protecting immigrant citizens headed up by the radical historian Louis Adamic. Largely indifferent to politics throughout the Thirties, Olson suddenly found himself in the thick of Popular Front activities, and rediscovered the political energy and charisma that Snow had seen in him as a debate champion at Wesleyan. His talents soon gained the notice of his colleague Alan Cranston, who offered to take him to Washington in September 1942 to work for the Foreign Language Division of the Office of War Information, which Cranston headed. Olson enthusiastically accepted and began work on the domestic side of OWI, writing propaganda directed towards immigrant groups to rally their support for the war effort.¹⁹

For the first eighteen months of his stint at OWI, Olson found a political calling that energized him socially and intellectually. He had great admiration for Elmer Davis, the tough radio newscaster and Roosevelt confidante who led the agency, and as a fledgling poet-scholar, he fit in with a diverse staff that included theater and film producers, comic-strip artists, anthropologists, and translators. Indeed, two of Olson’s closest friends at the bureau were the anthropologist Ruth Benedict and the painter Ben Shahn. In the Foreign Language Division, Olson assisted Cranston in overseeing specialists that targeted thirty-nine different language groups in the U.S. Olson’s primary function at OWI was as an all-purpose copywriter, whether

for radio speeches, press releases, or pamphlets whose purpose was to persuade immigrant citizens to contribute to the war effort, both as soldiers and family on the home front. His most notable effort was a large-format pamphlet that eulogized the courage and sacrifice of Spanish-speaking soldiers in the Bataan campaign in the Philippines, combining the factual information of the campaign with the formal interventions of Olson and Shahn.²⁰

Olson's fresh enthusiasm for social democracy during the Elmer Davis-era at OWI ran into the same obstacles that Archibald MacLeish encountered. By 1944, the radical-democratic character of the OWI had changed due to the incursions of dollar-a-year men into the burgeoning bureaucracy that increasingly constrained the populist idealism of the old guard. At the same time, conservatives in Congress cast a wary eye on the agency, viewing it as a publicity office for the Roosevelt Administration. After Cranston left in protest, Olson stood to gain a promotion. But within a few months he resigned as well, sending a press release to the *New York Times* accusing his superiors of preventing him from "functioning to offset Axis propaganda" among immigrants in the U.S. The strength of Olson's disaffection came through in an article he wrote for *Survey Graphic* a few months later, in which he decried fascists in America who were guilty of "group libel" directed at "relatively powerless scapegoats" such as "Reds, democrats, Jews, liberals, Negroes, and Catholics." Between the "merchandising men" gaining influence in the wartime bureaucracy and emboldened reactionaries on the American right, Olson perceived that the battle for the meaning of the war was turning against the leftist values he had embraced and fought for during his time at OWI.²¹

After his resignation from OWI, Olson remained active in Democratic Party politics for the remainder of the 1944 election. He worked closely with the progressive wing of the party, including Senator Claude Pepper, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, and Sidney Hillman, chair of the CIO PAC. Olson used his experience in the Foreign Languages Division to help mobilize

immigrant voters in the Northeast and Industrial Midwest. He also travelled with Hillman to the party convention in Chicago, at which the progressives' favorite, incumbent Vice President Henry Wallace, was fatefully dumped from the ticket for Missouri Senator and reliable machine candidate Harry S. Truman. Truman's nomination only deepened Olson's sense that the "merchandising men" were taking over the party at the expense of a genuine social-democratic agenda. Still a stalwart supporter of the president, Olson worked vigorously for Roosevelt's re-election and earned himself political capital for a job in the next administration when strong turnout in immigrant communities proved to be a crucial part of victory. But soon after the election, his simmering discontent led to a departure from party politics that was as sudden as his entry had been in 1941.²²

Flush with savings from his campaign salary, Olson was able to take an extended vacation with his wife in Key West, Florida, where they stayed in the pool house of Pauline Hemingway, the writer's ex-wife and an important Democratic donor. This fortuitous opportunity appears to have inspired Olson to resume his literary interests, as he and Connie remained in Key West well past inauguration into April 1945. In what was largely a symbolic gesture, Olson composed a resignation letter in the form of a poem, "Telegram," which explained his departure from electoral politics: "Take, then, my answer:/there is a tide in a man/moves him to his moon and,/though it drop him back/he works through ebb to mount/the run again and swell/to be tumescent I//The affairs of men remain a chief concern." Voicing fears of his own mortality, Olson suggested that a return to the process of self-exploration was pressing: "Full circle: an end to romans, hippocrats, and Christians./There! is a tide in the affairs of men to discern." But this last line, with the repetition of the earlier personal "tide" in the "affairs of men" connected this expressive self, "tumescent I," with political judgment. In a letter to Ruth Benedict from Key West, Olson corroborated the poem, explaining to Benedict that the modern democratic artist

had to take leave of the increasingly bureaucratic nature of American politics. Under the clear influence of D. H. Lawrence, Olson envisioned for himself a new poetic vocation, both prophetic and political, grounded in the archaic sources of American culture, echoing Lawrence's interest in archaic cultures²³.

In his notebooks from Key West, Olson pondered where he might find those archaic sources: "I keep turning over in my mind what use can be made of old American tales. Is there any use they can be put to as did Yeats the stories of an older Ireland?" He identified several options: myths of the frontier, like Paul Bunyan; Native American mythology derived from anthropological documents; and historical tales of the old West, such as Billy the Kid and the Donner Party. Yet his purpose was also contemporary and public: he desired to act upon the present by telling its story "by refraction"; and noting the success of film westerns, he hoped to reach a wide audience while elevating these stories beyond their sentimental trappings of popular film. Finally after several days of reflection, he arrived again – "full circle" – at his Melville book. Frustrated by the overwrought narrative of the draft he had given to Dahlberg, he proposed a formal reinvention: "taking what you last did and taking the images up out of the language and making them a series of dance masks." The Key West notebooks contained other fragmentary ideas that Olson explored over the next decade, but his first priority upon his return to Washington, D.C. in April 1945 was completion of the long deferred Melville project.²⁴

People of Ishmaels

The final version of *Call Me Ishmael*, which Olson completed in August 1945 in the weeks after Hiroshima, is a hybrid text that had undergone radical compression from the sprawling 1941 draft. Several years removed from their dispute, Olson now found Dahlberg's comments useful

in pruning the elaborations of his prose. But he also discovered two new models for the book's concise style: Ezra Pound's critical essays in *Instigations* and *The ABCs of Reading*; and the "vivid shorthand" suggested by Ernest Fenollosa in his essay on the Chinese ideogram. At the core of the text was Olson's essay on "Lear and Moby-Dick," and indeed the Shakespeare thesis that he proposes – that Melville's reading of Shakespeare transformed a more conventional narrative – was the most notable and provocative claim for scholars at the time.²⁵

What distinguished the text from prior literary interpretations of Melville, whether Matthiessen or Dahlberg, was Olson's commitment to historical fact, both in Merk's empirical sense, but also in his conspicuous, almost formalistic, use of archival documents as objects in the text. No example is more striking than the book's prologue, "First Fact," which recounts the harrowing story of cannibalism among the castaways of the *Essex*, a whaling ship that served as the inspiration for *Moby-Dick*. With Fenollosan precision, Olson opened his book with a chilling description of corporeal horror and desperation: "They drank of the heart and ate it. They ate a few pieces of the flesh and hung the rest, cut in thin strips, to dry in the sun. They made a fire, as the Captain had, and roasted some to serve them the next day." Drawn from an archival document that he discovered in Nantucket the same week as the atomic bomb attacks at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, this opening section immediately grounded *Moby Dick*'s mythical sweep in the raw historical fact of sacrifice and survival. The visceral immediacy of this fact wrenches the reader out of any sort of aesthetic distance.²⁶

The tension between myth and historical fact was central to *Call Me Ishmael*, and allowed Olson to comment by refraction on his present political moment in the final months of the war against a background of American cultural history. Using the rhetoric of fact again, he opened the first chapter with a provocation: "I take SPACE to be the central fact to man born in America, from Folsom Cave to now." At a basic level, space as Olson conceived it implied the

expansionist motor of Turner's frontier thesis. The geographic scale of the American continent is harsh and merciless, Olson argued, driving men to two alternatives: "Some men ride on such space, others have to fasten themselves like a tent stake to survive. As I see it Poe dug in and Melville mounted." Implied in this dichotomy was Turner's belief that frontier expansion followed by settlement created the unique conditions of American democracy. But Olson also cast a skeptical eye on the rhetoric of democracy in the frontier thesis through Melville: "To Melville it was not the will to be free but the will to overwhelm nature that lies at the bottom of us as individuals and a people. Ahab is no democrat. *Moby-Dick*, antagonist, is only the king of natural force, resource." And in this recognition of an inherent will-to-power in American expansionism, Melville also offered, in Olson's view, a truer vision of "his people's wrong, their guilt" than the hopeful voice of Whitman. "Homeless in his land, his society, his self," Melville had the power to "make a myth, *Moby-Dick*, for a people of Ishmaels."²⁷

In making the case for this thesis, Olson continued to operate through the dual modes of history and myth throughout the book. The second section offers a rich historical analysis of the whaling industry during Melville's time, providing economic facts that are only implied in the narrative. Several important arguments emerge in this analysis. In his depiction of the *Pequod* and its crew, Melville captured both the pluralism of society in the boat's crew (as C.L.R. James later argued) and the hierarchy of capital and labor in the whaleship as a factory: "e.g. his *crew*, a 'people,' Cloutz and Tom Paine's people, all races and colors functioning together, a forecastle reality of Americans not yet a dream accomplished by the society; e.g. his *job on the whaling industry*, a problem in the resolution of forces solved with all forces taken account of: . . . OWNERS . . . MASTER . . . the MEN, and TECHNOLOGY." Olson also argued that the whaling industry was the antebellum precursor of the petroleum industry, establishing the earliest industrial fortunes as well as providing the model for exploitation of oil as a resource. Expansion into the

Pacific, an immediate issue at the close of WWII, had actually begun a hundred years before with America's dominant role in the global economy of whaling. Finally, Olson argued that the historical reality depicted in *Moby-Dick* used the microcosm of the whaling ship to show the decline of labor in America, from a collective, communal affair in its early days to an exploited, often racialized class of workers: "Consider whaling as FRONTIER, and INDUSTRY. A product wanted, men got it: big business. The Pacific as sweatshop." But however much Melville did not left these details below the surface, he had "had, the *experience*, what lies under. And his own *force* to resolve the forces." And it was in this force of myth that Olson saw as Melville's greatest contribution.²⁸

The myth that Melville created for the people of Ishmaels centered on "Ahab, American" and his tragic effect on American democracy. Olson argued that Melville created Ahab to merge two forces: the literary force of Shakespearean tragedy and the social force of America that "caused him to approach tragedy in terms of democracy." With his daemonic obsession to overpower nature, Ahab drove himself to a tragic fate, like Shakespearean figures such as Lear, Timon, and Antony. But he also drove his ship and his crew to disaster, and it is in the presence of the crew that Olson saw the political reverberations in *Moby-Dick*: "Ahab is the FACT, the Crew is the IDEA. The crew is where what American stands for got into *Moby-Dick*. They're what we imagine democracy to be." The relevance of the Ahab figure to the emergent American hegemony of 1945 was not at all hidden as well. "For the American has the Roman feeling about the world. It is his, to dispose of. He strides it, with possession of it. His property," Olson argued. "Has he not conquered it with his machines? He bends it resources to his will. The pax of legions? The Americanization of the world. Who else is lord?" In his fusion of historical analysis and cultural mythology, Olson achieved in *Call Me Ishmael* a synthesis of two prevailing schools of Americanist criticism: Matthiessen's emphasis on tragic democracy and the Turner school of

expansionary democracy. Deeply inflected by the politics of its times, in particular Olson's personal disillusionment with the fate of social democracy during the war, it went beyond both texts in its caustic vision of the will-to-power in American culture, anticipating the Cold War revisionism of William Appleman Williams.²⁹

Yet Olson's embrace of Melville was not entirely pessimistic. In his framing of the tragedy of Ahab, he also intimated the possibilities for a contrary opening within tragedy. If Ahab was Lear, Olson singled out his black cabin boy Pip as the Fool. Having nearly drowned, Pip saw in the wondrous depths "God's foot upon the treadle of the loom and spoke it." His so-called madness allowed him to seek and achieve the "true converse" that Ahab had denied himself. Likewise the character of Bulkington represented "right reason," preserving his intelligence that was "the crew's heart, the sign of their paternity, the human thing." Finally, Ishmael as the narrator, Olson argued, functioned as a Greek chorus. As the sole survivor of the wreck of the *Pequod*, his narrative placed Ahab's tragedy within the broader context of the crew and the ways to God represented by Pip and Bulkington: "Ahab's self-created world, in essence privative, a thing of blasphemies and black magic, has its offset. . . . By this use of Ishmael Melville achieved a struggle and a catharsis which he intended." Thus, by his own framing of Ishmael in a choric role, Olson was searching for the means to resist the hegemony that he powerfully portrayed in his analysis – to recognize the crew as Idea despite the reality of Ahab as Fact.³⁰

What Olson proposed in his conclusion to *Call Me Ishmael* was to imagine a new internationalism contrary to the hegemonic will-to-power he saw in the American wartime state. The experience of Space that he imagined as the site of this contrary, however, was the expansionist frontier of the Pacific theatre of war. One might argue that the influence of Olson's time as a propagandist persisted in his faith in radical-democratic internationalism guaranteed by benevolent American power. But the contradictions in his vision undermined his effort to assert

a positive alternative. The force of myth and weight of fact that he powerfully delineated in the first half of the book left Olson grasping inchoately in its conclusion after a new sense of purpose, viz. how to move forward as political actor within his new poetic vocation.

Few contemporary reviewers of the book took him up on his political vision. Lewis Mumford, reviewing it in the *New York Times*, took Olson to task for the intuitive, unscholarly, and formally pretentious aspects of his argument. Ultimately, Mumford found the enigmatic, vatic scope of the book to be less than intriguing: “The best that I can say about *Call Me Ishmael* is that it is a poem on the Melville theme that didn’t get written.” In an influential review in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Joseph Henry Jackson gave the book a much more generous reading, calling it “something a good deal more than a literary essay.” Although not as analytical as Mumford, Jackson’s approach reflected much more its influence on the poets of the San Francisco scene, who found its ambiguities and formal innovation to be more suggestive than pretentious. But as a prelude for a new postwar politics, Olson’s vision remained in a state of development. Full of the zeal that drove him to complete *Call Me Ishmael*, he further pursued this development in a prolonged encounter with his newest idol, the poet Ezra Pound, recently returned to the U.S. under indictment for treason.³¹

Confronting the treasonous Cassandra

On November 27, 1945, the poet Ezra Pound was arraigned in U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia on nineteen counts of “overt acts of treason” against the United States for radio broadcasts he had made from Fascist Italy during the war. At the time, Pound had just been returned to the U.S. after spending six months in an Army detention center in Pisa, Italy, where he had been placed in solitary confinement and held incommunicado from friends and family. While at Pisa, his captors initially kept their high-profile prisoner in a cage – reinforced with

airstrip steel mesh and open to the elements. But after Pound suffered a breakdown, they removed him to a tent in the medical facilities. In this relatively more comfortable makeshift cell, Pound procured a typewriter and over the next four months composed Cantos 74-84 of his ongoing epic, *The Cantos* – known as the *Pisan Cantos*. A moment from Canto 74 captures the view of guard towers from his cage:

4 giants at the 4 corners
 three young men at the door
and they digged a ditch round about me
 lest the damp gnaw thru my bones
 to redeem Zion with justice/
sd/ Isaiah. Not out on interest said David rex
 the prime s.o.b.

Recalling his exposure to the elements, Pound mocked the conquering American Army, the power that held him in the name of justice. With a souring anti-Semitic subtext, Pound questioned the redemptive claims of this justice, corrupted in his view by usury and enforced by Cyclops-like towers.³²

After receiving word of his capture, Pound's publisher and friend James Laughlin arranged counsel for him in the United States, asking New York civil liberties lawyer Julien Cornell to steer the bewildered poet through the initial stages of his trial. When Cornell first met Pound a few days before the arraignment, he found the poet in a fragile state, distracted and "very wobbly in mind" even as his talk remained entirely rational. The question of Pound's rationality would become critical as the trial proceeded. After their initial interview, Cornell began to formulate his defense strategy: Pound would plead "not guilty" to treason by reason of insanity. As Cornell argued in a letter to Laughlin, "the trial of such an issue is almost always a farce, since learned medicos who testify for each side squarely contradict each other and completely befuddle the jury. It then largely becomes a question of the sympathy of the jury." In

the immediate postwar political climate, particularly with Pound's case being the first treason indictment brought to trial in the U.S., Cornell had good reason to be concerned about the chances that a jury would bring a conviction. Cornell's fear was justified a few weeks later when Pound's counterpart Fascist radio broadcaster in England, William Joyce aka "Lord Haw-Haw," was sentenced to death under English common law.³³

In the courtroom on the day of arraignment was Charles Olson, who described the scene at the hearing in his notebook:

His eyes crossed mine once, and they were full of pain, and hostile, cornered as he was in a court, with no one he knew around him except his lawyer whom he had only known a week. The moment when he, a man of such words, stood up mute before the court, had its drama, personal.

Cornell had advised Pound to remain silent during the hearing, in part to emphasize his fragility, but also for procedural reasons: under the law, when a defendant stood mute, a plea of not guilty was entered by the court. But for Olson, the scene had a symbolic resonance: a poet of outsized ambition and stature on trial for traitorous speech and, as Olson came to understand, desiring to make his defense on free-speech grounds, silenced for tactical reasons. Olson's reading of the scene proved to be prescient, as Pound would never speak in court, even to enter a plea. His trial was postponed indefinitely when a group of court-appointed psychiatrists led by Dr. Winifred Overholser found Pound to be "mentally unsound" and unfit to stand trial, a controversial decision that nonetheless potentially saved the poet from hanging. Instead, he would serve a *de facto* thirteen-year sentence at St. Elizabeth's Federal Hospital for the Insane in Washington, D.C., until his charges were finally dismissed in 1958.³⁴

As much as Cornell had a practical and justified concern for his client's welfare, Olson understood the moment in political terms, and in this he intended to take Pound at his word, so to speak, to challenge the poet to live up to his own bold proclamations. Soon he began visiting Pound at St. Elizabeth's, about once a week during the winter of 1946, conversing with him,

running errands, and providing assistance – moral support even – such that in one of his handwritten notes to Cornell, Pound scrawled the non-sequitur, “Olson saved my life.” Despite his profound political differences with Pound, Olson aimed to be “a friend of the man” at a time when he had few friends visiting him.³⁵

Olson’s intentions were self-interested as well. In his journals at Key West, he had made the decision to emulate Pound: “Maybe Pound discloses to you a method you spontaneously reached for in all this talking and writing. . . . Is his form not inevitable enough to be used as your own? Let yourself be derivative for a bit. This is a good and natural act. Write as the father to be the father.” At one level, he came to St. Elizabeth’s to confront Pound’s politics, to claim poetic authority for social democracy from the poet who had done the most, in his view, to create that authority in the two decades before the war. On another level, he wanted to learn about poetic form and, fortuitously, gained access to drafts of the *Pisan Cantos*. Olson recognized in their innovative form and incorrigible content a model for dissent against the new American imperium. The key issue at stake for Olson politically was justice – the insufficiency of the nationalist justice of the Allied powers, and the need for a forward-looking political project for postwar poetry that would articulate justice in social-democratic terms.³⁶

The trial of Ezra Pound has long occupied a contested place in the cultural history of postwar America. The legal questions at stake in Pound’s trial generated a good deal of controversy at the time, not to mention subsequent medical analyses that second-guessed Overholser’s diagnosis. The decision by Cornell and Overholser not to allow Pound to stand trial, even after several years had passed and punitive tempers had cooled, deprived the poet of a chance to lay the charges to rest – either by acquittal, which one legal scholar who has looked at the case argues was likely given precedent and weak government evidence; or by serving a *de jure* punishment that might have mollified his more strident critics.³⁷

In lieu of a full trial under law, Pound was tried by proxy in the court of public opinion. In 1949, a bitter controversy erupted when a distinguished committee appointed by the Library of Congress – which included T. S. Eliot, Robert Lowell, W.H. Auden, and Allen Tate among others – awarded the inaugural Bollingen Prize to the *Pisan Cantos*. His publisher James Laughlin had urged his friends on the committee to confer the award on Pound in part to bolster his spirits during his confinement. A majority of the committee hoped to also make a political statement that whatever Pound’s political views, his poetry was of the highest order and deserved to be separated from those views. Officials at the Library of Congress were nervous about a political backlash, which is exactly what occurred. The popular literary magazine *Saturday Review of Literature* stoked the controversy, calling the Pisans a “ruthless mockery of our Christian war dead,” and excoriated the committee as an elitist cabal whose decision placed them, in the sententious words of the poet Robert Hillyer, “in an observable relation to our dead and to the nation they died for.” What was missing in the entire controversy was an attempt to evaluate the poem’s achievement, or how the form of the poem might relate to its controversial political content. Instead the book became merely a prop in a vicious debate over principles between anti-Communists and defenders of aesthetic autonomy from political censorship.³⁸

This controversy has received justifiable attention as a key early domestic skirmish in the politics of the cultural Cold War. But I would argue that the lesson commonly derived from it has been too reductive, too dichotomous, accepting the battle lines drawn by its participants. The historian Frank Ninkovich offers perhaps the most incisive account of the prevailing thesis: that the “Pound imbroglio” represented the ideological emergence of Cold War liberalism in the cultural realm, as a “formidable chorus of liberal intellectuals” was unwilling to concede freedom of thought and speech in the aesthetic realm. Their adversaries on the Bollingen committee in turn took a stand for aesthetic autonomy, arguing that the content of Pound’s poetry did not

matter given the genius of his formal poetics – form in essence trumped, and even negated, content. But in arguing for aesthetic autonomy, the New Critics depoliticized what was a deeply political literary statement, claiming Pound for a hermetic canon guarded by their interpretative authority. As the literary scholar Tim Redman has rightly argued, the formalist strategy of quarantining Pound's politics from his poetry has led on the one hand, to an elitist reverence for his work that risks an aestheticization of fascism; and on the other, to an anti-modernist backlash against just this type of apolitical formalism. In Redman's words, "if Pound is to be legible, his politics must be confronted."³⁹

Olson proposed just such a confrontation in "This is Yeats Speaking," an essay he wrote soon after the arraignment for the Winter 1946 issue of *Partisan Review*. In this essay, Olson assumed the voice of William Butler Yeats, who had died in 1939. He invoked Yeats both as Pound's mentor and as a poet who also held authoritarian sympathies. His "Yeats" spoke from the perspective of the afterlife, met as if in the Odyssean underworld. He criticized his own older generation of modernist poets for their attraction to the certainty and order that authoritarianism offered. "It was our glory, Pound's and mine," he argued, "to reassert the claims of authority in a world of whiggery. . . We opposed ourselves to a leveling, rancorous, rational time." But in opposing the ills of liberal society on aesthetic grounds, Yeats argued that Pound confused his own ability to order language with the political impulse of "brawlers" to order society until there was nothing left for him "but the fixed idea and hysterical hatred." Olson/Yeats urged the younger generation just emerging from the war to correct the mistakes of their elders, not merely to oppose or negate the liberal order but to "seek true contrary."⁴⁰

What exactly did Olson mean by a "true contrary" though? The answer is suggested in a series of poems and fragmentary sketches that he wrote in 1945 while pondering the Pound case. In an acerbic poem entitled "A Lustrum for You, E. P.," Olson mocked Pound's foolish

allegiance to Fascism – calling him a “revolutionary simpleton.” Because of his folly, Pound had put himself at risk of becoming a purificatory sacrifice – a “lustrum” – for the victorious American forces, echoed in the doubled sense of “order”: “There is a court/where order, traitor/—you stood with the lovers of ORDER.” At one level, Olson seemed to believe that Pound deserved to be punished for his wrong-headed allegiances and unreflective anti-Semitism, chillingly evoking Nazi death camps in the poem by the recurrent image of odors on the wind: “Where the wind is a warm breath/it does not smell of flesh in a furnace.” In this respect, Olson’s patriotism from OWI and disgust for Pound’s beliefs led him to be almost cavalier about the poet’s potentially fatal predicament: “So Pound is tried for treason. Pound broadcast, the State speaks back.”⁴¹

But for Olson there was a crucial distinction to be made between Citizen Pound, who regardless of his literary stature should be tried like any other citizen by the Department of Justice for his actions; and Pound the Poet, who should be tried by his fellow writers for “intellectual fascism.” Without this distinction, Olson believed that the press and the public would try Pound in the court of public opinion as the Poet Ezra Pound, which is exactly what happened. As a result, the political potency of poetic speech would be tarred with the brush of Pound’s fascism. But if writers were able to hold their own critical hearing not of his radio broadcasts but of his whole body of work “in the world of our value, separate from the state,” they could demonstrate that poets can be responsible citizens.

Olson here proposed an interesting gloss on Raymond Williams’s classic definition of culture as “a court of human appeal, to be set over the processes of practical social judgment and yet to offer itself as a mitigating and rallying alternative.” In the Yeats article, Olson hoped to rally the readers of *Partisan Review* to judge Pound on their own terms, separate of the Department of Justice. An aesthetic court of appeals would preserve the possibility that the

aesthetic realm could have real influence on the practical and the political. Thus, the central question that the Pound case raised, in Olson's view, was not "is he a traitor, but when and [why] did his sense of authority, a poet's possession, slip off and become identified with the Authoritarian State?" For Olson, directly engaging Pound's ideas, taking his political speech seriously if only to refute it was the only way forward: "I hate this anti-semite! . . . But for christ's sake have the courage to admit that Pound faced up to the questions of our time. I think he shows himself traitor to more things than the U.S."⁴²

Indeed, Olson was frank that he agreed with Pound's diagnosis of ills of liberalism even as he disagreed with his solution. His fragments show him to have been a reader of Pound's 1935 political tract *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, quoting several lines from it, including "Private gain is not prosperity, but that the treasure of/a nation is its equity." The origins of Pound's embrace of fascism lay in his immersion in the Social Credit Movement, an English offshoot of guild socialism that targeted finance capitalism as a usurious exploitation of labor. Olson agreed with Pound that Jeffersonian democracy had been corrupted by the rise of the financial sector.

Olson also began to express uneasiness about state power as such being brought to bear for an act of speech; he cautioned, "let any man beware who is a party to a state condemnation of a man." Here, his suspicion of the power of the warfare state aligned with Cornell's anti-statist defense of conscientious objectors and pacifists. He went further, however, and questioned the very premises of justice under which the Allied powers were prosecuting traitors as well as Axis war criminals – Göring as well as Pound. Showing his Popular Front true colors, Olson argued that the premise by which Pound "could be brought to proper justice is lacking. It was lacking in the war just fought." As he saw it, the correct frame for proper justice was the "international civil war" crystallized in 1937 by the Spanish Civil War, and hearkening back further to the first

proletarian stirrings in the 1905 Revolution in Russia. The justice being enforced at war's end, in his view, was nationalist justice, and thus an insufficient standard to measure Pound's crimes.⁴³

From the perspective of the "international civil war," the extremity of Pound's views offered a critical vantage from which to examine the still unexamined case of the Allied powers. Olson asked, "How then shall we try men who have examined us more than we have ourselves? They know what they fight against. We do not yet know what we fight for." Curiously, Olson's disillusionment with the emergent Pax Americana in 1946 was such that the fighting faith of the recently concluded war, which he had helped administer as a propagandist, remained an open question in his mind.

In that respect, he was animated with a prospective purpose, to seek and to articulate a true contrary, which galvanized his creative and theoretical efforts into the 1950s. For him, the term "democracy," given the new conditions at the end of war, was no longer sufficient, it is "too lazy, too dead of the past." Rather the old justice under which the Allied powers were trying Pound must be challenged by a "new justice" which would emerge from where the new world kept itself alive, in the chaos which moved irresistibly among the mass of the billions of the earth's people. What had been Olson's idealistic American internationalism began to intimate a radical-democratic internationalism grounded in anti-colonial struggles and, closer to home, the black internationalism of the Du Boisian left. Where modernism remained deeply relevant for him, however, was on the question of form. Speaking as Yeats, Olson urged his own generation to make profitable use of Yeats, Pound, and their colleagues. As he concluded the essay, Olson argued that matter could not subsist without proper form any less than brilliant form failed in the absence of genuine matter. And here, he proposed that form/matter corresponded to justice/reality. Establishing a new justice would be an aesthetic act, shaping the reality of the world into the appropriate form to demonstrate justice.⁴⁴

Olson developed a clearer sense of the content of his prospective poetics once he had actually visited Pound at St. Elizabeth's. Beginning in January 1946, Olson visited Pound a total of eight times over the next five months. In his meticulous notes recorded after each visit, Olson expressed continual disgust at having to listen to Pound's anti-Semitic diatribes, describing him in appropriately Dantean terms, blinded by hate with "only gangrenous bowels left, rotted from fear, and giving off nothing but the stink of hate." But in spite of his disgust, Olson was also charmed by his adversary, especially his gentle perceptiveness: "He remains, on the creative side of him, whole, and as charming and open and warm a human being as I know. Despite all the corruption of his body politic."⁴⁵

It was this dual nature, which Olson stayed open to in the effort to be "friend to the whole man," that led him to engage Pound's productively after several sessions of only listening. For Olson, the most important lesson in these encounters was a confirmation of his judgment about form/content:

In Pound I am confronted by the tragic Double of our day. He is the demonstration of our duality. In language and form he is as forward, as much the revolutionist as Lenin. But in social, economic and political action he is as retrogressive as the Czar.

Interestingly, Olson reaches back to 1917 to make his point about revolutionary poetics, in a sense avoiding the ideological permutations of the interwar years that culminated in authoritarian states, fascist and communist. That moment of revolution signified the potential he saw in early 1946, even if that potential remains more poetic than political.⁴⁶

His visits to St. Elizabeth's also proved to be fortuitous as he gained access to the *Pisan Cantos*. After the successful postponement of the trial in February, Olson found "Pound in power, anew. Flushed with his return to work. Full of plans to get on with new things, now that his fate was settled for awhile." With the threat of prosecution removed in the near term, Pound turned to revising proofs of his new work, and asked Olson to return the corrected proofs of the

first two cantos to his publisher Laughlin. Olson copied down for himself the first twenty-six lines verbatim in his notebook. In Canto 74, Olson had the model for a new formal poetics that built on the method of Pound's prewar Cantos, with their rich layering of classical, Renaissance, and Chinese texts, but with crucial innovations that the experience of confinement summoned in Pound.⁴⁷

At the time of his capture at his home near Genoa, Pound had hastily pocketed only a couple of books before being lead away by Italian partisans. Caught in the midst of translating the Chinese philosopher Mencius, he brought with him a Chinese dictionary and an anthology of Confucian classics. Once he had been released from the cage at Pisa, he retained these texts as well as random magazines and books lying around the infirmary, including a recent issue of *Time Magazine*, an Army Chaplain's prayer book, and an anthology of English verse. With these limited resources, Pound was thrown back onto his "extraordinary ear," as Olson termed it, and the catalog of literary texts he could remember – as capacious as anyone admittedly – as well as his immediate sensory impressions from life in the cage and poignant recollections of friends and colleagues from before the war. At the time he was writing the Pisans, the threat of execution still hung over him, lending urgency yet also a streak of defiance to the work.⁴⁸

Canto 74's famous opening in defense of Mussolini, inserted at the last moment as a provocation to American authorities, powerfully captures this defiance:

The enormous tragedy of the dream in the
peasant's bent shoulders
Manes! Manes was tanned and stuffed,
Thus Ben and la Clara *a Milano*
by the heels at Milano
That maggots shd/ eat the dead bullock

Unrepentant of his Fascist allegiances, Pound rendered a striking image of victor's justice in the mutilated bodies of Mussolini and his mistress, evoking the Manichean heresy and his own populist reading of Mussolini's political appeal. Yet after the forcefulness of the opening, Pound

subsided into an almost gentle account of Taoist process, depicting life in the detention camp layered with nostalgic ruminations from his own past and ethical and political arguments about Confucian leadership and international finance. The original opening of the canto, before the provocative insertion, began with this mood:

The suave eyes, quiet, not scornful,
rain also is of the process.
What you depart from is not the way
and olive tree blown white in the wind
washed in the Kiang and Han
what whiteness will you add to this whiteness,
what candor?

A later moment, evoking the sensory environment from his caged perspective, has little precedent in the previous Cantos, recalling Williams's poetics of experience:

and there was a smell of mint under the tent flaps
especially after the rain
and a white ox on the road toward Pisa
as if facing the tower,
dark sheep in the drill field and on wet days were clouds
in the mountain as if under the guard roosts.

Although Pound's anti-Semitism was never entirely absent, taken on its own terms, the formal power of the *Pisan Cantos* – its musicality, its vivid imagistic touches, its dynamic interweaving of argument, allusion, and experience – overshadowed his political pronouncements. In his journal, Olson commented about Pound, “so this is the other side of your sharp tongue,” judging these cantos to be Pound's finest work.⁴⁹

It was through Olson's engagement with the *Pisan Cantos* that he began to grapple with the implications of Pound's experience in the detention camp and the poetics that flowed from them. At the level of content, Pound's depiction of the camp itself provided a potent symbol of the invisible injustices of the new Pax Americana. DTC 6677 was used almost entirely to house African-American prisoners who had committed military violations. Indeed, Pound makes common cause with the black prisoners in the Pisans, capturing the racial tension at the heart of a

segregated American army. At one point they lay together in “Circe’s swine sty,” and at another, “with Barabbas and 2 thieves beside me,/the wards like a slave ship.” Although Pound’s defense of his fellow prisoners could be read as paternalistic and self-serving, it formed one part of his larger questioning of the legitimacy of the justice being administered at the prison camp. In a recurring line of argument, he invoked the Athenian fleets at Salamis as an analogy for the expansionary forces in a powerful democratic state: “and the fleet at Salamis made with money lent by the state to the shipwrights/Tempus tacendi, tempus loquendi./Never inside the country to raise the standard of living/but always abroad to increase the profits of usurers,/dixit Lenin.” Although Pound did not understand the ways in which the American warfare state combined welfare and military spending, his depiction of the compromised nature of “Allied nationalist justice” appealed to Olson’s own alienation from that state and his yearning for a truly internationalist justice.⁵⁰

Yet Olson also recognized great potential formally. In letters to Robert Creeley written a few years later, he reflected on the process of developing a field poetics based in part on Pound’s work. Ironically, the constraints on Pound in his confinement moved him beyond his trademark textuality, forcing him into an awareness of the space right in front of him as an opening onto the present. Olson recognized a formal tradition that began with William Carlos Williams, and he drew upon its Deweyan implications concerning experience and generative uncertainty to forge a reformulation of Pound’s alignment with order. The body of the poet within a cage pressed down by illegitimate justice, yet speaking with a lucid, dynamic voice, became a potent symbol for the form of resistance that Olson came to advocate by 1950.

‘What you depart from is not the way’

In May 1950, Olson wrote to a new and soon-to-be close correspondent, the poet Robert Creeley, who had contacted Olson at the suggestion of William Carlos Williams. Olson attempted to elucidate for Creeley his intentions behind *Y & X*, his first volume of poetry published in 1948: “a critique to be serious now, must also recognize that, c.1917 the scientist was done as leader (econometrics included), and c.1945, august, the political actionist likewise done.” With striking confidence, Olson provided Creeley his condensed view of postwar politics. The dates he referred to suggest that, in his view, Lenin’s political actionism had obviated liberal faith in scientific authority (*pave* Max Weber), and that in turn the atomic bomb had neutralized that same actionism. In the wake of these developments, Olson saw the only available means left to be cultural: “FROM THAT DATE FORWARD, man had left the only one who, since the beginning of the species, had spent 40 hrs a day on the problem, what is the reach of man’s imagination.” And here he quoted Ruth Benedict’s anthropological writings: “that people is provided with a technique of cultural change which is limited only by the unimaginativeness of the human mind.” While his sense of constraint was pessimistic, which the historical moment of 1950 justified for a writer on the left, Olson’s tone in this and his many other letters to Creeley was far from defeated. The two poets in fact bonded over their shared sense of burgeoning purpose.⁵¹

As we have seen, the profoundly sobering events of August 1945 played an important role in the historical conclusions that Olson had drawn in *Call Me Ishmael*. His expansive hopes for traversing space had been tempered by the depredation of cannibalism and corporeal horror that opens the book. Olson also seems to have watched newsreel footage depicting the liberation of Nazi death camps, as suggested by his chilling evocation of “the smell of flesh in a furnace” in “A Lustrum for You, E. P.” But his accumulated reflection on these events only achieved full

expression after Olson re-encountered his friend Corrado Cagli on a trip to New York in April 1946. Cagli was a muralist and neo-Cubist Jewish painter who had fled Mussolini's regime in 1938, and met Olson while spending the summer in Gloucester in 1940. The two had grown quickly close, with Cagli offering a positive creative influence as Olson grew disillusioned with Edward Dahlberg. Cagli had eventually gained American citizenship and enlisted in the U.S. Army because of his anti-fascist convictions. After landing at Normandy during D-Day, he was among the troops who liberated Buchenwald in April 1945, and had returned to New York a year later with a sketchbook full of drawings of the disturbing conditions he saw there. When Olson viewed these sketches, his vision of the postwar world, already addled by his encounter with Pound, crystallized in his first important poem, "La Préface."⁵²

As the title suggests, "La Préface" is a poem of beginnings, yet born of catastrophic ending. It opens with three short lines of descent that, evoking Dante, balance the weight of dead bodies and a new life embarked upon:

The dead in via
 in vita nuova
 in the way

Olson's exposure to the *Pisan Cantos* only a month before is evident throughout the poem: in its classical allusions; in its use of typographic space on the page; and especially in its arrangement of documentary and experiential details in dynamic relation. Indeed, right speech is born of the kind of experiential knowledge that Cagli had gained as a witness. Speaking of the dead on the road, Olson cautioned, "You shall lament who know they are as tender as the horse is./You, do not you speak who know not"; which is then followed by a collage of fragments, with quotes from prisoners alongside the elemental beginning that Cagli's sketches represented:

“I will die about April 1st . . .” going off
“I weigh, I think, 80 lbs . . .” scratch
“My name is NO RACE” address
Buchenwald new Altamira cave
With a nail they drew the object of the hunt.

Olson also directly engaged Pound’s icon of self from Canto 74, in which Pound invoked Odysseus’s ruse to elude the Cyclops, “I am noman, my name is noman.” For the prisoners, the race that marked them for extermination became a call to erase race as a marker. Olson thus reconfigured Pound’s punitive experience to fit persons who were the objects of a different hunt.⁵³

After its memorial opening, the poem shifts to a consideration of the way forward: what kind of “vita nuova” can be fashioned amidst the dead? Here, Olson made a characteristic move from the collapse of history that the war brought about into the space of the present: “Put war away with time, come into space.” In this space, he found his friendship with Cagli and the objects that made it up: “It was May, precise date, 1940. I had air my lungs could breathe./He talked, via stones a stick sea rock a hand of earth./It is now, precise, repeat.” This friendship, composed of a shared love of tarot, the seacoast, and creative process, carries a subtle erotic charge, a physicality that sets their live bodies in relation to the dead: “It is the radical, the root, he and I, two bodies/We put our hands to the dead.” As Cagli had done with his sketches, Olson used the form of the poem to set objects in relation: “these unburied dead,” the marks inscribed on prisoners’ arms, the closed parenthesis of death and the open parenthesis of a life lived forward. Ultimately any new beginning must reckon with this spatial relation to the victims at Buchenwald, and by implication all of “the dead in via” at that moment: “We are born not of the buried but these unburied dead”; and the newborn are, as the poem concludes, “The Babe/the Howling Babe.”

As one Olson scholar succinctly put it, “La Préface” was a “preface indeed” to Olson’s real work as a poet. As he searched for an outlet during his period of reflection at Key West, Olson had identified Pound as a potential model, and had single-mindedly sought out the disgraced poet at St. Elizabeth’s to learn from his poetics even as he fiercely disputed his politics. The fortuitous coincidence of being a courier of the *Pisan Cantos* provided him not only exclusive access to the poet’s newest work, but also a text whose form had been catalyzed by the very postwar historical forces that Olson was struggling to comprehend. It took the encounter with Cagli, however, to provide him a political model to counter Pound’s fascism: a dedicated anti-fascist, marked as a Jew, who had fled Mussolini’s regime and had fought against the Nazis yet returned with a deeply personal documentary record, and the experiential knowledge that went with it. Based on their re-acquaintance in April 1946, Cagli and Olson collaborated on *Y & X*, a small chapbook of poems inspired by and interleaved with the Buchenwald drawings, which along with *Call Me Ishmael* began to establish Olson’s literary reputation.⁵⁴

After their initial set of meetings surrounding the court hearing, Olson saw Pound only intermittently over the next two years. Safely ensconced in St. Elizabeth’s under Overholser’s aegis, Pound had less need of a protégé as he began to re-establish his American literary circle, holding court at the hospital to a degree that rankled his critics. For his part, Olson attempted to build off the modest success of *Call Me Ishmael*, earning a second Guggenheim Award for research on a sequel in “assault prose” about Westward Expansion. His research took him and his wife Connie on an extended trip to California, where he first made contact with the fertile poetry scene emerging in the Bay Area. An important friendship he established there was with Robert Duncan, an ambitious young poet who would later become Olson’s chief collaborator at Black Mountain College. Duncan was a match for Olson’s intellectual acrobatics, and shared his advocacy of Pound during his confinement. Olson also made a quixotic visit to Hollywood,

where he tried to convince the director John Huston to hire him to write a screenplay for *Moby-Dick*. During this period, Olson restlessly jumped between poetry and prose, literary and popular culture, using his contacts and rhetorical talents to propose a variety of projects that he failed to follow through on. In his own terms, the tide was dropping him back, and he had to work through the ebb. But in 1948, both his fortunes and his confidence began to shift, precipitating an inspired run of work that established him as a major theorist among the new generation of American writers.⁵⁵

The first key event in Olson's resurgence was his break with Pound in February 1948, described in his essay "GranPa, GoodBye." Upon his return to Washington, D.C., Olson visited Pound and found himself no longer able to tolerate the xenophobic and racist tirades – the "gangrenous" hate – that he had previously accepted as the price of his apprenticeship to the Master, as he called Pound. During a second visit, he baited Pound into another tirade in which he disparaged his old friend William Carlos Williams: "Bill has always been so confused. He's one of the reasons I make so much of race. It's hard enough for a man to get things clear when he's of one race, but to be Bill! – French, Spanish, Anglo, some Jew from Saragossa." These insults were the last straw for Olson, precipitating his reflections on hybridity in the essay as well as his shift in allegiances from the Master to "Dr. Bill."⁵⁶

Olson placed Pound on the side of Time rather than Space in the opening line of "GranPa GoodBye": "Time is in his conversation more often than anything else." For Olson, Pound in his confinement had become consumed with the past, spinning yarns of his literary past like Grampaw "giving a lesson." By turns enthralling and exasperating, Olson saw in this habit an index of Pound's style more generally: "The lines and passages which stand out, from the start, capture a mood of loss, and bear a beauty of loss," such that "I don't think it has been sufficiently observed . . . how much his work is a structure of mnemonics raised on a reed,

nostalgia.” In his critique of Pound, Olson found a number of points where he compared unfavorably to Williams. Extrapolating from the mixed blood comment, he contrasted Pound’s desire for clarity with Williams’s embrace of confusion – or figured another way, light vs. fire. While clarity might have its virtues, as the light of reason or moments of illumination in the *Pisan Cantos*, it also had the danger of becoming disembodied or sacrificing truth for ideological order, as with racial thinking: “light gets its knowledge . . . by going over things without the necessity of eating the substance of things in the process of purchasing its truth.” Fire, by contrast, “has to consume to give off its light”; and what fire consumed in Olson’s view was experience.

The essay suggests that Olson’s conversations with Duncan in San Francisco had influenced him towards Williams. Duncan had also made a pilgrimage to see Pound, and Olson agrees with his impression that Pound “does not seem to have inhabited his own experience.” Relatedly, Duncan argued that Pound’s version of *amor* was more idealized, as Dante’s love for his Beatrice, than physically erotic; of the spirit rather than of the body. For both poets, Williams represented an important contrast in all these respects, his poetry grounded in experience and bodily desire. Olson quoted Pound as being right about one thing, “that what has made Bill important is that Bill never sd one god damned thing that hasn’t first circulated entirely through his head before it comes out his mouth.” If Williams had mixed blood, “blood” was not a symbol of his race, as Pound would have it, as much as the material substance of his body through which experience has passed into language. “There he was in Rutherford to be gone to, to be seen,” Olson argued, “a clean animal, the only one we had on the ground, right here in the States.” Ironically, it was the presence of experiential elements in the *Pisan Cantos* that had rendered them so captivating, but the Pound confined at St. Elizabeth’s had come to seem captive of the past, having “made of himself the ultimate image of the end of the West.”

At the end of “GranPa GoodBye,” Olson made reference to an event that marked a new cultural alignment in American poetry: T. S. Eliot’s lecture at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. in November 1948, which had drawn a gathering of the new establishment poets such as Allen Tate, Robert Lowell, and Stephen Spender. In Olson’s view, Pound missed the significance of the event, seeing it only in terms of himself: that these poets would all “be coming to old Ez on his deathbed and telling him he was right.” Olson only implied his view of its real significance, but his phrases are telling: “coming to Washington (as tho to Rome)”; “like a laying on of hands”; and the creation of “the poets of Congress.” With his skeptical views of American ascendancy in the world, Olson read Eliot’s speech as a cultural coronation, the shift of Eliot’s modernist authority to the seat of power in Washington. And here his new alignment with Williams found a context, for Williams had also attended the event but only on its margins, a respected elder at a distance from his old adversary Eliot. Never reluctant to pick a fight over poetics, Williams wrote an essay, “The Poem as a Field of Action,” in response to Eliot’s exalted status that reset many of his old themes in the new realities of the atomic age. The essay became a poetic call to arms for Olson’s generation.⁵⁷

“The Poem as a Field of Action” was first presented as a lecture for a writers’ conference in Seattle at the University of Washington. Like F. O. Matthiessen’s address at Michigan, Williams gave his lecture in a public university roiled by conflicts over academic freedom and purges of leftist faculty, a fact that Williams noted in a letter home. The lecture does not directly address this fraught climate, but it is nevertheless deeply inflected with its political moment, employing revolutionary rhetoric to discuss questions of form. Although the title of the essay influenced the “field poetics” of Olson and Duncan, the term “field” is used in a military sense: “at what pitch the battle is today and what may come of it.” The battle in question for Williams was against the “staid concatenations of sounds” in traditional poetic forms, whether iambic pentameter, the

sonnet, or the measured quatrain. While he praised T. S. Eliot's particular talents in his own work, Williams considered his influential ideas about poetic tradition to be a turning away from modernist innovation to claim "a mass of more ready distinction." Thirty years after the "Prologue to *Kora in Hell*," Williams was fighting largely the same battle against Eliot and Pound's expatriate claim on the English poetic tradition, now transplanted back home to the United States as a rising world power. In calling for revolution, he argued that the battle has been going on for a long time – and here he is surely speaking of himself as much as anyone – "unrecognized for years."⁵⁸

Williams's fortunes had begun to improve after the war with the serial publication of the four books of his long poem *Paterson* between 1946 and 1951. In the Bollingen Prize controversy over the *Pisan Cantos*, the second book of *Paterson* had been the runner-up, a sign of the longstanding respect Williams had garnered among his colleagues if not yet a wider public. And even in this respect, a middle-class literary public finally had access to Williams's out-of-print texts from the 1920s as James Laughlin republished them for New Directions. Yet the conviction with which Williams presented his argument in the Seattle lecture suggests not so much professional resentment, or even a frivolous obsession with questions of poetic form at a moment of political crisis. Rather Williams believed that his call for a revolution in the poetic foot addressed a long unresolved need to expand "the possibilities of depicting reality in a modern world that has seen more if not felt more than in the past." Under the shadow of the atomic bomb, the need for a technical apparatus to *feel* more was even more pressing than it had been before the war.

Williams employed the language of clarity versus heterogeneity in his criticism of Eliot's emphasis on distinction. While he saw value in a critic retrospectively analyzing literature to clarify and extract moments of genius, the needs for a new literature were too pressing in the U.S.

to spend time on this: “We are in a different phase – a new language – we are making the mass in which some other later Eliot will dig. We must *see* our opportunity and increase the horde that others will have to use” [italics in original]. What the moment demanded instead was “accumulation”: “We seek profusion, the Mass – the heterogeneous – ill-assorted – quite breathless – grasping at all kinds of things.” Like Olson in his critique of Pound, Williams saw the end of a European tradition as the beginning of a new prospective phase. But as a member of the older generation of modernists with long-held Americanist beliefs, Williams still emphasized America as the cultural alternative: he references Mencken’s *The American Language* as a source for dialects; and laments that W. H. Auden came to America looking for an alternative language but stayed loyal to traditional forms. As Williams imagined a newer generation beginning the work of accumulation, he imagined the alternative they might construct in his familiar Americanist terms.

The key point of agreement for Williams and Olson, however, was that August 1945 had fundamentally altered the function of poetry in society – that poetry had become a vital replacement for “political actionism.” Williams argued that if there was any thing positive about “the bomb,” it was “the awakened sense it gives us that catastrophic alterations are also possible in the human *mind* . . . We are too cowed by our fear to realize it fully. But it is *possible*.” [italics in original]. The only way forward beyond the existential fear caused by the reality of the bomb, he believed, was to become clearly aware of the new reality and find its appropriate expression in forms that could expand to capture and structure the feelings of the new epoch. For Williams, the content of a poem was akin to a dream – a phantasy of Freudian wish-fulfillment – but the structure of a poem was reality, in tune with lived experience: “Reluctant, we waken from our dreams. And what is reality? How do we know reality? The only reality that we can know is MEASURE.” Williams gave his own answers to this problem in *Paterson*, as we will see, but his lecture provided the impetus for experimentation among the younger generation. The

accumulation he advocated, and indeed the poetics he had been advocating since the 1920s, began to take shape in earnest in the first decade after the war.

The will to change

“In the years since the war American poetry has entered upon a singularly rich period,” wrote Donald Allen in the preface to his influential anthology, *The New American Poetry, 1945-1960*, published by Grove Press in 1960. In it, Allen had collected together a large body of work, by 44 poets in all, which had only previously circulated in little magazines, pamphlets, broadsheets, and unpublished manuscripts. These publications reflected a vibrant bicoastal community of poets, painters, and musicians. “As it has emerged in Berkeley and San Francisco, Boston, Black Mountain, and New York City,” Allen argued, “it has shown one common characteristic: a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse.” Instead, they followed “the practice and precepts of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams” in forging a new conception of poetry. Divided into poems and “statements about poetics,” the first author in each section is Charles Olson, who Allen mentioned with Duncan and Creeley as important progenitors from their time at Black Mountain. While Olson was by no means the sole or even most important influence on this collection of poets – Allen made the point that they all drew upon each other as well as the older generation of American poets – his contact with and writings about Pound and Williams played a major role in framing the practice and precepts of these older modernists as a compelling alternative to the academic establishment represented by Eliot and the New Critics.⁵⁹

Years in the making, Olson’s creative synthesis came suddenly, within a year after his return to Washington, D.C. from his peripatetic research out West. Two circumstances seem to have shaken him out of his malaise. In 1948, he began to teach at the experimental Black

Mountain College in North Carolina, intermittently at first, and then eventually taking over as director of the school when its established faculty disintegrated because of factionalism. Even early on, Olson received an immediate jolt of confidence and self-esteem, much as he had at OWI, from having an audience for his eclectic syntheses of poetics, American history, anthropology, and cybernetics. Rather than being holed up alone in an archive or his small apartment, he found an outlet for his charisma and rhetorical gifts. Another boon to his confidence came from the attention of Frances Boldereff, an art historian and poet who had written to Olson as a fan of *Call Me Ishmael*. What began as an occasional correspondence grew into an intimate, wide-ranging dialogue about D. H. Lawrence, the occult, and archaic cultures, and finally an affair that roiled his marriage even as it gave Olson a Lawrentian surge of creative potency. The products of this fertile period between 1949 and 1951 included Olson's research into Mayan ruins, chronicled in his Mayan letters to Robert Creeley, and the first Maximus poems, which began as letters to Boldereff. But the two texts that Allen featured in his anthology, and what became Olson's signature statements to the postwar generation, were an essay and a long poem, "Projective Verse" and "The Kingfishers," which summed up his passage through Melville, Pound, and Williams in the creation of a poetics of space.⁶⁰

"Projective Verse," first published in the journal *Poetry New York* in 1950, is a clear elaboration of "The Poem as a Field of Action," so much so that Williams approvingly quoted it at length in his 1951 *Autobiography*. But as Burton Halten has persuasively argued, it also provides a key for interpreting Pound's poetic departure in the *Pisan Cantos*. By projective verse, Olson contrasted the "closed verse" of traditional poetry, whether the stanza or inherited line, with the "open verse" made possible by "COMPOSITION BY FIELD." Olson took what might be read as a metaphor of battle in Williams's essay and suggested it as a compositional process oriented towards space. On the one hand, this space can be read as the space of the present, whether

actual physical space or perceptual space in the mind. Indeed, Williams had written about this space of the present in *Spring and All*, but if he intended it in the 1948 essay, it remains implicit. On the other hand, Olson's definition of field also refers to the space on the page, the "measure" of lines, to borrow Williams's favorite term, that are liberated from the inherited forms of closed verse. Thus, composition by field involves the processual relation between these two spaces.⁶¹

The nature of the poetic subject was also a crucial aspect of Olson's argument. He contrasted the Egotistical Sublime that closed verse has encouraged – what he terms "the-private-soul-at-any-public-wall" – with the humility and embodiment that open verse allows. The process of open verse is a kinetic one: "a poem is energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader." These several causations might be direct experience, memory, an available text, or an anecdote. For example in the *Pisans*, Pound moves between Confucian adages, a critique of usury, and the slang of black soldiers in an adjacent cage to a perception of the wind, a blade of grass, and a memory of a French inn he visited in the 1920s. What preserves the energy of the poetic structure is a fidelity to the flow of experience, one perception leading directly to the next, as well as the push of the musical phrase: "Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces just now beginning to be examined." Pound's "extraordinary ear" served as the model for the importance of musicality in projective verse, and provided the opening for a return to the body as the necessary circuit for composition. The liberated form of open verse, focused on syllable and line, moves from the ear, which hears the syllable, through the head to the heart, which then forms the line through the breath. Composition by field remains responsive to the flow of objects in present experience, but also requires physical awareness on the poet's part rather than the abstract or sublimated ego of Romantic poetry.⁶²

The practice of projective verse, in Olson's view, was not merely a technical prescription but also crucially pointed to "a stance towards reality" and "what that stance does, both to the poet and his reader." The exhortation to "come into space" in "La Préface," and the elemental friendship with Cagli that Olson found there amidst the ruins of war, suggested the newly humbled and grounded subject of projective verse. The term that Olson used was "objectism" to describe a relation of man to his experience, such that the line or work that issues from his hand is "as clean as wood as it issues from the hand of nature, to be shaped as wood can be when a man has had his hand to it." By the practice of projective verse, the poet stays inside himself, contained within his nature as a participant in the larger force of nature; if he does so, "he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secret objects – poems – to share." Pound had provided the model for projective technique, but Olson looked beyond the caged Fascist poet to suggest a new orientation towards reality, an opening onto the present, that could be of use in building the future, from poet to reader.

"The Kingfishers," which was written in 1949 as Olson formulated the principles of projective verse, is at once an exemplary instance of the method and also a wider rumination on political questions than the essay on poetics. Echoing his teacher Matthiessen, Olson argued in "Projective Verse" that "FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT." True to the principles of objectism, "The Kingfishers" assembles a disparate collection of texts and experiences: Heraclitus on change; a quotation from Mao in French, the form in which Olson had heard it; details about kingfishers from ornithology and mythology; historical accounts of Mayan culture as well as direct experience of their ruins; and fragments from the *Pisan Cantos*. The assemblage is indeed kinetic, moving spatially between each of the subjects, yet preserving the musical tension of their parts. However disparate, though, the form of the poem preserves the content of its objects and creates a tension between them that reveals

Olson's rumination on personal change within a context of political change, and the value of beauty against the background of violence. The tension between objects remains present and unresolved throughout the poem, capturing a synchronic portrait of the Cold War coming into being.⁶³

In the broadest terms, "The Kingfishers" is a reflection on change, established in its opening quotation from Heraclitus: "What does not change / is the will to change." This maxim suggests both the constant flux of experience and the shifting sands of culture, but the concept of will is important, positing action as the only constant. Throughout the poem, this tension between the subject making sense of his present and the objective world in motion plays out at several registers. The self is made of appearances: "use/other words, feel other passions, have/not figure: appearance, disposition, tissue/the same?/To be in different states without a change/is not a possibility." Or articulated in cybernetic terms, "the factors/are communication and/or control, both involve/the message. And what is the message? The message is/a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time." Which is to say, like the poem itself.

At the same time, a series of civilizations rise and fall in the poem, sometimes by natural progression, sometimes by violent conquest. The initial anecdote concerns the changing value of kingfisher feathers, a cryptic comment overheard at a dinner party: "The pool the kingfishers' feathers were wealth why/did the export stop?" Olson then interweaved the flight of the kingfisher into the setting sun with observation of a Mayan stone and Mao's image of the rising masses:

rose from the “bloody loam” of violence. Ultimately, Olson in his pursuit of beauty acknowledged this:

this is also true: if I have any taste
it is only because I have interested myself
in what was slain in the sun

I pose you the question:

shall you uncover honey/where maggots are?

I hunt among stones.

Placed as the first poem in Allen’s anthology, “The Kingfishers” can be taken as a manifesto for the new generation of poets, accumulating the heterogeneous mass as Williams had urged in his essay. The most striking image of their method is one of Olson’s precise Fenollosan adaptations of an encyclopedia entry on the kingfisher:

On these rejectamenta
(as they accumulate they form a cup-shaped structure) the young are born.
And, as they are fed and grow, this nest of excrement and decayed fish becomes
a dripping, fetid mass

Beauty is born of the decay and detritus. As Williams had accepted his initiation in the filthy Passaic, Olson began with the harrowing facts of the postwar world and grounded as a body of space, moved forward into the field of action.

Epilogue – The Descent Beckons

William Carlos Williams had always still been there, writing in Rutherford and attending to patients on his rounds. He published occasionally with small presses – fiction, poetry, memoir – and continued to garner the respect of his colleagues and younger poets: fêted by Ford Madox Ford and “Les Amis de William Carlos Williams” in 1939, or asked to serve at the Library of Congress by Archibald MacLeish in 1942. As with his fellow poets Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens, however, the acclaim he had achieved with the 1926 Dial Award turned out to be a twenty-year plateau of relative obscurity. Hungry for contact and recognition from other writers and still conceiving of his work in radical terms, Williams expressed his frustration to the Seattle Writers’ Conference in 1948: the revolution in poetic structure he proposed had been going on for a long time, “unrecognized for years.”¹

Yet Williams’s stature and influence underwent a dramatic shift in the late 1940s due to several factors. James Laughlin, a wealthy protégé of Pound, founded New Directions Press, which made all of Williams’s older writings available, featuring them prominently in Laughlin’s personal modernist canon. An American literary establishment had also come into being – academic critics and modernist journals as well as a new literary nationalism that embraced the Americanist rhetoric of Williams’s work. But the most important factor was Williams’s late-career renaissance, in which he produced the finest work of his career beginning in 1946 with the five books of *Paterson*. As we saw with Olson, younger poets in particular responded to this newest work, making use of it to reinvigorate the poetics of experience in the context of the atomic age. Williams finally had an audience receptive to his revolution.²

By Williams’s own account, the idea for *Paterson* had been in gestation since as far back as 1913, when he had written “The Wanderer,” giving his high-flown Romantic sentiments a gritty

baptism in the filthy Passaic. The Ur-form of *Paterson* first appeared in 1927 in the same issue of *The Dial* that announced his award. At just over fifty lines, this early iteration was only an embryonic version of the book-length long poem of the late Forties. Nevertheless, it contained three signature elements from the final poem: the allegory of a man as a city; the Falls pouring in from above the city; and the famous refrain, “Say it, no idea but in things,” repeated three times.³

This noted dictum of Williams has always run the risk of becoming a mere slogan or shorthand for his poetics. In some sense, however, that shorthand has epitomized the popular reception of Williams’s poetry since the 1910s: objects presented in simple unadorned language, deceptively straightforward and seemingly lacking form. Even as shrewd a reader as Kenneth Burke had missed this in his review of “The Great Figure” in 1925. Yet as Williams argued in his 1951 autobiography, it was never just things, but ideas as well, inextricably joined – form as well as experience: “The poet does not, however, permit himself to go beyond the thought to be discovered in the context of that with which he is dealing; no ideas but in things. The poet thinks with his poem, in that lies his thought, and that in itself is the profundity.” As John Dewey suggested in *Experience and Nature*, the denotative method always begins with primary experience and returns to it as its final test; the knowledge accumulated and the values clarified in inquiry never transcend experience except by willful abstraction. For Williams, poetry was similarly inextricable from experience. Beginning with the particulars of the world as he found it, he used poetry “to discover the universal.” As he quoted Dewey in his autobiography, “the local is the only universal, upon that all art builds.”⁴

Unlike his early lyric poetry, however, the challenging final version of *Paterson* would never be mistaken for a poem lacking in form, a mere transparent presentation of content. As Williams made quite clear in “The Poem as a Field of Action,” his principal focus by the late 1940s was to finally realize the revolution in poetic structure, quite apart from subject matter, that

had been his purpose as early as his constructivist criticism of Whitman's free verse in 1917. With *Paterson*, the content of the poem was in a sense established in the initial concept: the allegory that "a man is indeed a city," and that the city of Paterson, a few miles upstream from Rutherford on the Passaic River, was the appropriate city for that allegory. Williams selected Paterson for personal reasons – that he had spent his entire life in and around its environs – as well as reasons of scale – it was complex enough but still knowable, a midpoint between Rutherford and New York City. Indeed as Raymond Williams has observed, whether communities are knowable has to do with "the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known." In this sense, Paterson was local enough to be knowable for Williams the poet. But the city was also representative of American history in two respects, which allowed Williams to make competing national mythologies a theme in the poem: Paterson had been the subject of Alexander Hamilton's writings on fiscal policy, a founding text of American capitalism; and it had been the site of the Paterson Strike, a landmark event in labor radicalism. With these subjects in place as part of his allegory, however, Williams began a process of discovery in writing the poem that fragmented his allegory as much as it realized it.⁵

The terms of the allegory are set in the opening lines of Book 1 of *Paterson*, "The Delineaments of Giants," which contains a core fragment from the 1927 version:

Paterson lies in the valley under the Passaic Falls
its spent waters forming the outline of his back. He
lies on his right side, head near the thunder
of the waters filling his dreams! Eternally asleep,
his dreams walk about the city where he persists
incognito. Butterflies settle on his stone ear.

As the "stone ear" detail suggests, we can imagine the statue of a giant where the city lies. The dreams of the giant are the life of the city – its people and their activities. But likewise, the poet is the giant, his subjective experience registering the city as if it were a dream given form in the poem. But even before Williams had laid out the terms of the allegory – a metaphor extended

into a narrative in its most basic definition – he had already undermined it in a Preface that stated his method: “To make a start,/out of particulars/and make them general, rolling/up the sum, by defective means—/Sniffing the trees,/just another dog/among a lot of dogs.” If the allegory of Paterson the giant proposes a stone edifice that dreams the city, the poetics of experience figured as the rolling up of particulars towards a universal – and in even more naturalistic terms as a dog sniffing for scents – shatters the rigidity of this allegory before it even begins. The allegory is the initial premise, but the process of discovery in the poem creates a form of much greater complexity, constructed from fragments of experience, text, and personal encounters mediated by the subjective vantage of the poet. Responsive to the multifarious particulars of the world, Williams registered a quite specific historical moment which had for him implications for the practice of poetry: the dawn of the atomic age.⁶

In announcing a “revolution in conception of the poetic foot,” Williams argued that the singular fact of his time that should be accounted for was Einstein’s theory of relativity, which affected “our very conception of the heavens”; so should its essential fact, “the relativity of measurements,” be incorporated in poetry. The “variable foot” that Williams developed and elaborated in *Paterson* and his later poems reflected this incorporation. But *Paterson* also captured a much darker side of modern physics that had transformed the sense of reality in the modern world. An extended section describing Marie Curie’s discovery of radium juxtaposed with her pregnancy and subsequent fatal sickness point to powerful forces unleashed by scientific progress, and the deformities and destruction they could bring:

A dissonance
in the valence of Uranium
led to the discovery

Dissonance
(if you are interested)
leads to discovery

—to dissect away
the block and leave
a separate metal:

hydrogen
the flame, helium the
pregnant ash .

Fire also figures prominently in Book 3 of *Paterson* in an extended sequence in which a conflagration destroys “the Library.” On one level, this sequence can be read as Williams once more rejecting the traditionalism of Eliot and his followers. But in the context of the bombings of Dresden and Hiroshima, the conflagration is relentless and terrifying, a tour de force of Williams’s poetic technique. In each of these examples, however, the poem never offers heavy-handed moral commentary on the atomic bomb so much as it shows to an almost disconcerting degree its effect on the particulars of everyday life.⁷

In a sense, the reality that Williams depicted in *Paterson* was no more pessimistic than it had been in *Al Que Quiere* or *In the American Grain*. As Pound had remarked about him years before, he was consistently fascinated with what grew from the “bloody loam” of the soil:

- P. Your interest is in the bloody loam but what
 I’m after is the finished product.
- I. Leadership passes into empire; empire begets in-
 solence; insolence brings ruin.

Yet the formal complexity of *Paterson* – both in its scale and its assemblage of so many varied particulars – allowed Williams to construct a more comprehensive portrait of his historical moment than he had previously achieved. *Al Que Quiere* had concentrated on the directly observed people and situations of Rutherford; *Spring and All* had been yet more ambitious formally, striving towards a national conception; *In the American Grain* had explored the soil of American history saturated with violence and passion. *Paterson* accomplished all of these things together, rolling up the sum of particulars not into a neat coherence but rather as a sprawling,

keep wanting to write you a long letter about deep things I can show you, and will some day—the look of streets and people, events that have happened here and there.”⁹

As he grew into an elder statesman of American letters in 1950s, it was no doubt gratifying for Williams to see the revolution in poetic structure that he had launched. Long deferred from the failures of *Contact* and his isolated position both in Rutherford and 1920s modernism more broadly, the vigorous efforts of the new generation of American poets finally began to realize his hopes for a genuine poetry of experience. At the end of the “descent beckons” section, Williams irreverently concluded,

Variously the dogs barked, the trees
stuck their fingers to their noses, No
poet has come, no poet has come.

For a poet who had worked from the beginning of his career to move beyond the example of the great democratic Bard that Whitman had set, the fact no poet had come allowed the space for many poets to build on the practical method of Williams, focused on the local, the experiential, the naturalistic, and the erotic – all fundamental to *Paterson*. “There he was in Rutherford to be gone to, to be seen,” Olson had written in 1948, “a clean animal, the only one we had on the ground, right here in the States.” In a nation passing from “leadership to empire,” and possibly then to insolence and ruin, poets like Olson and Ginsberg were eager to begin the process of accumulation, depicting the new reality in which they found themselves. For his part, Williams returned home from the sea at the close of the poem: “Climbing the/bank, after a few tries, he picked/some beach plums from a low bush and/sampled one of them, spitting the seed out,/then headed inland, followed by the dog.”¹⁰

Notes

Introduction

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Chapter 1

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Chapter 2

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