The Good Life: Weakness in the Survival Years

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Alma Lyell Graf St. Lawrence.

Abstract

In a 1948 questionnaire, the editors of the *Partisan Review* felt safe in asserting that "it is the general opinion that, unlike the twenties, this is not a period of experiment in language and form." The socially aware writers of 1948 felt the impasse of their situation acutely, a suspended sensibility given its clearest expression by John Berryman, who explained that "this has been simply the decade of Survival." The decade's self-image for many of its "Leftish" writers was bereft of the creative, life-building activity that had marked the revolutionary realisms of the past decades. It was underwritten with anguish about the perceived foreclosure of unity between political and aesthetic action from within the total entanglement of both World War 2 and its postwar settlements.

My project in this dissertation discloses the conflict between such despairing positions and experiments in the literary re-production of the good life undertaken in the midst of these survival years. By examining a set of writers whose negotiation with the representation of the good life has remained substantially unstudied, I explore the ways their work attempts to suspend an aperture in the "anguish" of the 1940s and early 1950s. The objects of study span from Marshall McLuhan's turn to popular culture in *The Mechanical Bride* to the premiere performance of Gertrude Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in 1951, from the anarchist neo-Romantic writing of British writer Alex Comfort in the first years of the 1940s to the decade-spanning influential work of Paul Goodman. Weaving through multiple genres and critical methods, I demonstrate the persistence of an aspiration to unify the production of radical literature and politics throughout the survival years. I show that this persistence is realized by writers not necessarily by opting out or taking on heroic conflict, but through the tools made available by their weakness within an inescapable system.

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Introduction - In Which Theory and Practice Are Unified: Writing Good Lives

In 1932, after fifteen years getting by on the income received working as a "freelance teacher," as he would later describe it, Scott Nearing and his second wife Helen Knothe purchased a hill farm in Vermont on which to live the good life.[1] The Nearings were opting out of what they considered "a revolting and increasingly intolerable social situation" by leaving New York City for the countryside, and they entered into a two-decade experiment in homesteading.[2] By that time in his life, Scott Nearing had transitioned from earning his income as a professor of economics at the Wharton School of Business at the University of Pennsylvania to working for the Socialist Party of America funded Rand School of Social Science as a pamphleteer—in which capacity he would be tried under the Espionage Act in 1919 for his pamphlet *The Great Madness: A Victory for the American Plutocracy*. He continued on as a teacher and speaker throughout the 1920s, even as he left the Socialist Party, joined the Workers Party (CPUSA), and was expelled from the CPUSA in 1930.[3] Having lost any organizational political affiliation, increasingly at odds with both the institutional left and right, Scott and Helen Nearing concluded that "western civilization would be unable

[1] Scott Nearing, *The Making of a Radical: a Political Autobiography* (White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing Company, 1972/2000), 210. In these later reflections, Nearing identifies the pressures that led to his removal from a teaching livelihood as specifically "right-wing pressures."
[2] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1954/1970), 5.
[3] For more on Nearing's shifting political affiliations, see John Saltmarsh, *Scott Nearing: an Intellectual Biography* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

henceforth to provide an adequate, stable and secure life even for those who attempted to follow its directives," and took flight from the city.[4]

The Nearings were hardly alone in this gesture. There was a small but significant movement to the country in the early years of the Great Depression, documented and inspired by books like Ralph Borsodi's 1929 treatise *This Ugly Civilization* and his 1933 elaboration on the homesteading ideal, *Flight from the City*.[5] The primary appeal that the homesteaders made, emerging as a minor movement in a moment of deepening economic insecurity, was that the transition to a household economy could serve as a method for ensuring the livelihood of a family. The cover of Borsodi's *Flight from the City* advertised the book as "the story of a new way to family security."[6] Borsodi argued that "insecurity is the price we pay for our dependence upon industrialism for the essentials of life," and "if the unemployed are to be made secure at least to the needs of life, nothing short of [ensuring the family can support itself by producing food, clothing, and shelter on its own homestead] is adequate."[7] He also took issue with the provision of home relief in a register that would later be mirrored in Franklin Roosevelt's own language. Borsodi claimed that direct relief was "demoralizing to the unemployed," and was a false solution to the problem of insecurity, which "destroy[s] their sense of responsibility and self-

[4] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life*. 4.
[5] In the prelude to Borsodi's *Flight from the City*, he uses US Census and Bureau of Agricultural Economics data to demonstrate that in the years after 1929, the migration of farm population to the city reverses itself—the net movement from city to farm in 1932 is over a half-million individuals.
[6] Ralph Borsodi, *Flight from the City* (New York: Harper Bros., 1933).
[7] ibid.,146; 139.

reliance," except in those circumstances where truly "temporary assistance" is provided (in which case, Borsodi suggests we view the aid as "hospitality").[8]

The Nearings aligned their own experiment with this rhetoric, describing their project—at least in retrospect—as a move toward just the sort of stability and security that had been promised in Borsodi's tracts on homesteading. In *The Making of a Radical*, Scott Nearing asserted "homesteads have been an answer for unemployed teachers throughout the ages."[9] One of the passages the Nearings drew on to situate their 1950 guide, *The Maple Sugar Book*, among the rich archive of writings on farming and household economy was the anonymously authored 1864 text *Ten Acres Enough*. The Nearings included as an epigraph a passage in which the author indicates they write for those who are "anxious to break away from the bondage of the desk, the counter, or the workshop, to realize in the country even a moderate income, so that it be a sure one."[10] And most importantly for the purposes of my own project, in their 1954 book *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*, the Nearings open the question of how to live the good life by presenting a heuristic in which "many a modern worker, dependent on wage or salary…has watched for a chance to escape the cramping limitations of his surroundings, to take his life into his own hands and live it in the country."[11]

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[8] ibid., 133-4.
[9] Scott Nearing, *The Making of a Radical: a Political Autobiography*. 210.
[10] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing. *The Maple Sugar Book* (New York: Schocken Books, 1950/1970), 209-210.
[11] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing. *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World*. 3. The Nearings were driven to write their two lengthiest works after "interest in the enterprise was

Much of their book on living the good life is given over to topics such as the logistics of building a stone house in the "Flagg system," tending a compost pile and sowing sweet peas, or the benefits of raw food. But woven into the whole are the values they announce at its outset: "simplicity, serenity, utility and harmony."[12] For the rhythm of their day, they committed to a division into two four-hour blocks of "bread labor" and "personally determined activities." Sundays were reserved for fasting and rest. A photo included in the book captures the Nearings on the roof of their stone house playing recorders. Though frank about the challenges of homesteading in Vermont, where a kitchen garden might collapse from cold even in August, life on their farm as something of a social experiment was every bit as much a part of its appeal in 1954 as the modest, self-sufficient security it proposed in 1932.

For the poet, novelist, and critic Paul Goodman, writing the introduction to *Living the Good Life* for a reissue in 1970, the appeal of the Nearings' farm was as a resource for "the provision of services to those starved for life," not "the efficient, cooperative production of goods" to secure one's livelihood.[13] But in the midst of the 1950s, the balance struck by the Nearings between arguments for economic self-sufficiency gained through hard work and their serious commitment to leisure called out important values for an American culture in search of the good life. To highlight this, where Borsodi's book on homesteading advertised "security" for the family on its cover, the Nearings'

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stimulated by the publication of several magazine articles commenting on phases of the experiment," including in anarchist periodicals such as *Alternative*, based in New York City (xix).

[12] ibid., 6.

[13] Paul Goodman, "Introduction," in *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), xii.

reflections on twenty years of homesteading were given the subtitle, "How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World." The appeal the Nearings make for their experiment in living "simply" for a 1950s audience shifts away from mere security, and toward the benefits of subsistence living as a way of life. They promote self-sufficient country living as a means of disentanglement from a social order in which city-dwellers experience "the years pass[ing] over frustrating labor, specious pleasures, drugged boredom, and futile, purposeless old age."[14] An "urbanite" is a servant to a mechanical system, but the farming homesteader is able to make their own schedule for the day, to own both their own labor and leisure, never bored, even if that labor may have been on a rigorous schedule.[15] As the Nearings would claim, "there is always something to do in a garden."[16] The purposeful work of the farm could grant "release" to the "nervousness" brought on by life in a post-industrial urban environment.[17]

The Nearings' appeal, then, was that life in the country could provide a kind of freedom from uncertainty, a release from the anxieties of an economic arrangement that offered only alienated labor and manufactured pleasure. They spent their labor time on "manageable units" of a project, and they spent leisure time playing music or reading books. Though ascetic in their hands, the Nearings offered a demonstration project for living the good life of simplicity, serenity, utility, and harmony outside of the politicized and political institutions that had rejected Scott Nearing and forced the decision to

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[14] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *The Maple Sugar Book*, 214.
[15] The Nearings reflect on the attitude that their Vermont neighbors held toward their "organized life" of labor, suggesting that those farmers "regarded our regulated life as self-imposed torture" (*Living the Good Life*, 45).
[16] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life*, 44.
[17] ibid.

relocate to Vermont. In the Nearings' telling, the institutions of alienated city life would "snare the unwary, reduce them to dependence, and force them into a life of servitude."[18] Individuals could only break that deeper servitude by embracing a tether to the demanding physical labor of farm life. Such work was self-reliant, making a direct link between labor and the production of leisure. Against "the accumulation of profit and unearned income by non-producers" and "regimentation and coercion," they promoted their experiment in subsistence as an instance of "the good life."[19]

In this endeavor, the Nearings were following a Thoreauvian trajectory; the transparency of the debt that their endeavor owed to Thoreau's *Walden* could perhaps best be revealed by the stark absence of *Walden* from *Living the Good Life*'s otherwise thorough bibliography—the book is so clearly formative for the Nearing's own project. The structure of *Living the Good Life* in many draws from Thoreau's *Walden*, particularly the "Economy" section. It begins with a discussion of the economics and reasons behind their purchase of the Vermont property, proceeding into a discussion of the houses and other structures they built on the farm, a chapter outlining the food they ate, and ending with a "balance sheet" (though the Nearings' is far less an exercise in accountancy than Thoreau's). Many of the principles that animate their experiment appear to have been transplanted from Thoreau's work. Like Thoreau, the Nearings seem to have been driven by a desire to reclaim the pleasures of craftsmanship, asking with Thoreau whether "[they should] forever resign the pleasure of construction to the carpenter," losing both "self-

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[18] Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Maple Sugar Book*, 215.
[19] Ibid., xvii.

sufficiency" and "the ingenuity and…the imagination" of the work as form of "training" and an instance of "responsibility."[20]

Like Thoreau, whose experiment in *Walden* was at least partly oriented toward the discovery of the "necessities" of life, the Nearings were uninterested in much beyond subsistence for the efforts of their labor. They write that "the object of economic effort is not money, but livelihood," and that "when we had the estimated needs, we raised no more crops and made no more money for that period."[21] Underneath their claims that "in a syrup season lasting from four to eight weeks, owning only the maple trees, the sugar house and some poor tools, and doing none of the work, we got enough syrup to pay our taxes and insurance," it is easy to hear echoes of Thoreau's insistence that "I found…by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of living."[22] Restricting what the Nearings called "bread labor" to just the amount necessary for subsistence enabled the more deliberate construction of a good life. This was life pared down and built back up again so as to, in Thoreau's terms, "put to rout all that was not life," and allow an individual live what the Nearings described as a "harmonious life…in which theory and practice are unified."[23] Such a life takes on the character of a well-crafted object.

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[20] Ibid., 149. Passage from *Walden* cited by the Nearings ("forever resign the pleasure…") can be found in: Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, Civil Disobedience, and Other Writings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008), 35. In the 1854 edition cited by the Nearings, this passage from Thoreau can be found on p. 51. It could be fruitful, if writing for another purpose, to reflect on the Nearings networks of influence as reflected in the citations they weave together, with a first edition of Thoreau's *Walden* as the warp through which the weft runs.
[21] Ibid., 24-25.
[22] Ibid., 18. Thoreau, *Walden*, 50.
[23] Ibid., 183. Thoreau, *Walden*, 65.

Though invested in crafting the good life, the Nearings built the text of *Living the Good Life* (as well as *The Maple Sugar Book*) with less transparent reflexivity about their poetics. To the extent that the book is presented as self-consciously literary, it is through the efforts to situate the text of the book as the end of a chain of works that celebrated the household economy, the small farm, and the simple life. Each chapter in the Nearings' books is situated behind a chain of quotations that serve as both epigraphs and tethers to history. Of the book's style, their only self-reflection is to explain the prose as a "report" and as a "handbook." Though frequently less of a "how-to" guide than a work of recollection, the Nearings' *Living the Good Life* situates the reader within what they refer to as "a circumference of choice," and proceeds from one set of such choices to the next, each chapter answering a series of leading rhetorical questions in turn.[24] Though not overt in its technique, the direct (in places almost technical) style taken up by the Nearings takes on additional significance when placed against the then-dominant reception of Thoreau's own aesthetic contributions.

To the extent that Thoreau had set a marker for a particularly American vision of the good life and its analogous aesthetic, much of the meditation on Thoreau found in F.O. Matthiessen's influential 1941 interpretation of *Walden* focuses on precisely the aesthetic contribution Thoreau makes. As Matthiessen will write of Thoreau, he sees the writer's "very lack of invention" as evidence of "craftsmanship, if by that term we mean the strict, even spare, almost impersonal 'revelation of the object' in contract to the

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[24] Ibid., 187.

'elaborated skill' [...] we describe as technique."[25] By comparison with other American writers, such as Longfellow, Thoreau's simplicity of style and statement are read as evidence of a studied experience of other practical arts in Thoreau's crafting. That relationship between "craft" and Thoreau's prose is important for Matthiessen's approach, because of the use he is putting to a series of claims by Constance Rourke about craftsmanship. Matthiessen cites Rourke's assertion that the works of American craftspeople are "the outgrowth of a special mode of life and feeling."[26] Matthiessen extends this claim against "technique," suggesting that Thoreau takes seriously the need to discover an aesthetic form for his materials, and not to impose "graceful derivations." For Matthiessen, the mirrored economies of Thoreau's way of living and his prose were rooted in a "deep obligation to… traditional ways," to American methods of craftsmanship that affected him "half unconsciously."[27] In the reading that Matthiessen gives to *Walden*, then, Thoreau becomes a craftsman whose experience of productive labor leads him to draw "life-giving analogies between the processes of art and daily work" in his writing.[28] And Matthiessen recognizes in this analogizing the impulsion in Thoreau to the "minute inspection of his own existence and of the intuitions that rose from it."[29]

Given this intervention in the reception of Thoreau's *Walden*, the election on the part of the Nearings to situate their own work as an extension of a tradition of

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[25] F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941), 173.
[26] Ibid., 172.
[27] Ibid., 172-173.
[28] Ibid., 173.
[29] Ibid., 174.

homesteaders reporting their experience takes on a different register. The Nearings' "report," pared of technique beyond those structures they've borrowed from Thoreau, is "the outgrowth of a special mode of life and feeling," in the terms Matthiessen had cited. However for the Nearings, unlike Thoreau, that "special mode of life and feeling" was more central to the aim of their work than the report itself. Their own experiment in uncovering the shape of the good life lasted for decades. Again unlike Thoreau, who would draw "life-giving analogies between the processes of art and daily work," the Nearings collapsed the terms of the analogy: their way of living became their art.

Though hardly alone in their elucidation of the dilemmas facing Americans in the years after World War 2, the Nearings' emphasis on opting out of the labor market in favor of self-sufficiency would not be realized as a social movement until the reissue of *Living the Good Life* in 1970. At the time of its 1954 publication, like many other texts from an anarchist or left libertarian perspective that engaged with the question of the good life, its message found only a small audience. After the Second World War, Americans came to markedly different conclusions about how to live the good life than that which evolved on the Nearings' farm. These dominant approaches to responsibility, domestic intimacy, the relationship between public and private lives, and alienated production formed the basis for a version of *eudaimonia* completely severable from self-reliant labor. This was one of the findings that surprised William Whyte, the reporter from *Fortune* whose access to the strivings of the predominantly white professional classes led to the decade-defining study, *The Organization Man*. Whyte's interviews with young people entering the workforce revealed that this postwar generation understood the

good life as "calm and ordered...equable; it is a nice place out in the suburbs, a wife and three children, one, maybe two cars...a good college education for the kids." To this summary, Whyte added, with some irony, that to these interviewees, "it is not...the money that counts."[30] Instead, in a nod back to the rhetoric of the 1930s, the salient element of a good life was security: a security found through having given up one's own creative energy or ambition to a job seen as depression-proof, owning a home and starting a family to insulate against the future.

The "insistence on hard, self-denying work" by which this security is purchased is balanced by a sensitivity to "the bogy of overwork" in Whyte's telling, implying an attention to the importance of dividing the day that resembles that of the Nearings.[31] However, as Whyte elaborated this was not a divide between two equally self-directed activities. The young businessmen he interviewed were clear that work was preferable in bureaucratic safety rather than as a form of self-reliant adventure. Whyte notes that "self-reliance" as a concept is treated with less of a straight face by the generation ascendant after the war. Such generational conflict regarding self-reliance by the business class took other forms, but was mirrored in other discourses, including in both literature and literary criticism.

For writers, this circumspection about self-reliance took the form of hesitancy about the possibility for artists to produce a "revolution of the word." In a 1948 questionnaire, the editors of the *Partisan Review* felt safe in asserting that "it is the

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[30] William Whyte, *The Organization Man* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1956/2002), 71.
[31] Ibid., 18.

general opinion that, unlike the twenties, this is not a period of experiment in language and form."[32] The socially aware writers of 1948 felt the impasse of their situation acutely, a suspended sensibility given its clearest expression by John Berryman, *Partisan Review*'s most frequent poetry critic, who explained that "many [writers] seem to have lost their nerve," and "there is a…paralysis."[33] The symposium initiated by the editors of the *Partisan Review* was evidence of a sense that some nebulous thing about *poiesis* had been thrown into crisis in the years after the war. The questions that the editors asked made frequent connections between the shifts in literature that had occurred in the '20s and '30s and the second half of the 1940s, wondering in particular how to characterize the relationship between art, experiment and politics in their moment by reference to the immediate past. Berryman's response is among the more telling for the way that he crystallizes the concerns that writers carried away from the war. He sums up the previous thirty years by writing, "if the twenties were Eliot's decade, and the thirties Auden's, this has been simply the decade of Survival."[34] Mere survival was a way of naming the moment of intellectual and creative paralysis, robbed of what critics sharing Berryman's sensibility imagined as the creative, life-building activity that had renovated aesthetic form in the twenties or political engagement in the thirties.

As though to draw a contrast with the "survival" of the 1940s, the critic Leslie Fiedler would reflect in his response to the same questionnaire that "when we were kids,

[32] "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* (August, 1948), 855.
[33] John Berryman, Response to "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* (August, 1948), 857.
[34]Ibid., 856.

becoming a writer seemed, if not synonymous with, at least an aspect of becoming a Communist; abandoning oneself to the proletariat and finding oneself as an artist seemed a single act."[35] But if that link between the crafting of art and life was potent in the twenties and thirties, by the 1940s, it has diminished. Nonetheless, Fiedler is clear to explain, there is a certain guilt associated with severing the endeavor of artistic craft from the endeavor of realizing a new society (even if that vision is no longer of a communist or socialist one). He writes that scarcely any writer with such roots "is entirely free of the suspicion that in coming to terms with our craft before righting the world, we are guilty." Fiedler describes this "guilt" as a voice from underground, whispering "'traitor!' because we do not spend ourselves…first of all in political action," and as "one of the many despairs of varying magnitudes we call these days 'anguish.'"[36] To write in a decade of survival, then, is to write with a guilty conscience, with no faith in redemption proffered by a society to come. It is to write in the midst of a "literary situation" where to take up the Thoreauvian coupling of art to life so deeply embodied by the Nearings was to "spend oneself," to accept a distance between social responsibility and "our desire to write a good sentence."[37] In Fiedler's rendering, the situation facing writers in the 1940s was one in which the good life projects of the Nearings were evidence of having fallen under the sway of a spell from which the intellectuals of the emerging order had been thoroughly disenchanted.

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[35] Leslie Fiedler, Response to "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* (August, 1948), 871.
[36] Ibid., 871.
[37] Ibid., 871.

My project in the chapters that follow aims to disclose the conflicts between the despairing positions articulated by Fiedler and Berryman and the existing experiments in the literary re-production of the good life undertaken in the midst of this same situation. By examining a set of writers whose negotiation with the representation of the good life has remained substantially unstudied, I explore the ways that writers attempted to suspend an aperture in the "anguish" of the late 1940s and early 1950s. I specifically focus on texts produced from the midst of the Second World War to the explosion of the first hydrogen bombs, bookending the study with anxiety-producing events of global self-annihilation. If this period represented a situation in which there was an acute distrust of both heroic, individualistic experiment and social revolution in literature, the writers I examine come to that distrust from the totalitarian dread to which those events gave reality. This makes for a much greater sense of circumscription in the writers whose work I examine toward the potential to "walk away" or "opt out" of society, even in the midst of fashioning oppositional understandings of the good life. Christopher Nealon has argued, in *The Matter of Capital*, that in the poetics of midcentury, an understanding emerges in which the "social function of poetic form…is to hide and protect forms of experience that are endangered by the encroachments of capital on subcultural life."[38] However, the archive of my own project is centered on moments of direct engagement with these encroachments. Rather than placing an emphasis on those writers hiding from

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[38] Christopher Nealon, *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 107.

the encroachment of capital, I place particular emphasis on writers whose hope of opting out of the situation of that encroachment has dwindled.

I employ the term "situation" here with some intention, because it is important to the way that the chapters that follow will think about these years. The concept of the "situation" had provided fashionable shorthand for *Partisan Review* critics like Berryman and Fiedler describing some aspect of their historical moment. However, I am using the term here not only in fidelity to a contemporary discourse, but to draw as well on the sense that it takes on in Lauren Berlant's recent *Cruel Optimism*. The situation, in Berlant's sense, is "a state of animated and animating suspension that forces itself on consciousness, that produces a sense of the emergence of something in the present that may become an event."[39] The invocation of the event as a concept here might suggest the eventuality of the "interpretive intervention" by the subject in nominating the event, as in Badiou, where the event emerges from the fidelity of the subject to the truth it discloses.[40] In Badiou's system, presented as *Being and Event*, this fidelity can function as the motive force for art, love, or politics, as the "illegal" nomination of the event recognizes a previously unthought or unrepresented "one" within the "multiple of multiples" we live

[39] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.

[40] Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 1988/2005), 181. Badiou writes "only an *interpretive intervention* can declare that an event *is* presented in a situation; as the arrival in being of non-being, the arrival amidst the visible of the invisible." His example in exploring this arrival is the French Revolution. The Revolution as an event, Badiou suggests, risks "being undone to the point of being no more than the forever infinite numbering of the gestures, things and words that co-existed with it" in the hands of a historian. Instead, such "dissemination" of the event's oneness can be halted by attention to "*the mode in which the Revolution is a central term of the Revolution itself*; that is, the manner in which the conscience of the times—and the retroactive intervention of our own—filters the site through the one of its evental qualification" (180). To put this another way, the historian lacks the fidelity to the event that would sustain its integrity unless he or she inhabits (to whatever extent possible) the "conscience of the times."

as history. Berlant shifts the emphasis away from such breaks, and the decisory fidelity of the emergent subject, and instead toward the "impasse" mitigating against such decision within the "state of animated suspension" of the situation. For Berlant's thinking of these "genres," the event is the "element in the situation that elaborates the potential good in a radical break," and is essentially a heroic form.[41] Her interest is in the way that "the antisovereign effect of the situation that undoes the subject and threatens general sureties threatens ethical action."[42] In other words, the uncertainty of the situation, its impasse, renders the modes of self-governance that had functioned as aesthetic preparation for a good life to come dysfunctional, an inoperative repertoire of broken promises.

The suspension of years following the war, one might suggest, contained the sort of experiential trajectory that Lauren Berlant suggested we might find under the "attrition of the subject of capital," but for reasons having to do less with the botched self-assembly of *homo economicus* than guilt in stubborn persistence: "'having a life'...after dreaming of the good life, or not even dreaming," where for "life" we might read "the scene of reliable pleasures located largely in those experiences of coasting, with all that's implied in that phrase, the shifting, diffuse, sensual space between pleasure and numbness."[43] These reliable pleasures would exist in tension with reflection, a state of what Berryman will call "bad conscience" that seems to lead ultimately to a position outlined in the portion of Theodor Adorno's *Minima Moralia* written in 1944, while Adorno was still in exile in America and Germany was in ruins. Adorno had written then that "there is no

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[41] Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 4-5.
[42] ibid., 5.
[43] ibid., 117.

way out of entanglement," even amid the consolations of those who had sat out the war. In the manner of the self-help genre, Adorno offers: "the only responsible course is to deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence, and…[therefore] to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required...by the shame of having air to breathe, in hell."[44]

To return to the example that the Nearings would present in the early 1950s, opting out of the social disaster of the 1930s for life on the farm had shown a path for the sort of private conduct that Adorno would describe. *Living the Good Life* was itself a kind of self-help guide for avoiding "the ideological misuse of one's own existence" by living the good life of serene simplicity, in harmony with personal principle and taking on useful, unalienated work. However, this was not Scott Nearing's only attempt to address the question of how to avoid such ideological misuse. In an essay of 1949, published in *Alternative* magazine, Nearing acknowledges the difficulty involved in declaring opposition to a dominant social order, noting that those who do "will be suspected, watched, ostracized, boycotted, blacklisted and so far as possible restrained." However, there are four ways he suggests to make a space for the reassertion of an oppositional existence: "(1) by subsistence living; (2) by gaining economic independence within the old social order; (3) by boring from within the old order; and (4) by establishing a means of livelihood that is independent or semi-independent of the old social order."[45] While the

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[44] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life,* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso, 1951/2005), 27-28. For more on Adorno's *Minima Moralia* as self-help, see Jakob Norberg, "Adorno's Advice: *Minima Moralia* and the Critique of Liberalism, *PMLA* 126.2 (2011), 398-411.

[45] Scott Nearing, "Problems We Face," *Alternative* (March-April 1949), 3.

Nearings' own report documents efforts toward achieving numbers 1, 2, and 4 in the list of options he provides, the third choice is unexplored by the efforts of Helen and Scott Nearings' laboratory in Vermont. To bore from within, Nearing suggests, "involves more or less a double life, which is neither easy nor comfortable," implying that the hell to be endured is at least partly the strain of subterfuge involved in living responsibly in private life while engaging the entanglements of a good life of security, encumbered by its scenes of reliable pleasures.[46]

In the first chapter of this study, I outline what "responsibility" meant to a neglected formation of writers in Britain, informed by exchanges with American anarchists and liberals in the transatlantic passage of periodicals including *Partisan Review* or *New Road*. These writers, who called themselves neo-Romantics, were organized around the critical efforts of the pacifist and anarchist Alex Comfort. Comfort's version of the Romantic retains the Shelleyan understanding that the Romantic work attempts to "discover those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered," providing an intervention in the understanding of what it would look like to live in harmony with principles.[47] Comfort's contributions to the discourse around questions of engagement and action emphasized weakness, contingency, and standing aside. Comfort's criticism holds as exemplary those examples of what Nearing called "boring from within" in which moments of the "boundless responsibility" to others appear. I argue that this way of thinking about responsibility, anticipating Levinas' face-to-face

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[46] Ibid., 4.
[47] Percy Shelley, *Essays, Letters from Abroad*, *Translations and Fragments,* ed. Mary Shelley (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), 7.

encounter with the other in compelling ways, marks an important missed opportunity in recent critical discussions of the contemporaneity of Romanticism.

From Comfort's Romanticism, I turn to the idiosyncratic American poet, critic, and novelist Paul Goodman. I discuss Goodman as a thinker who takes up both the injunction to discover the good life and to resist the kind of "relief" that might accompany security. Goodman's presence as a reviewer, correspondent, and mentor figure is a thread throughout each of the chapters that follow, but in my second chapter I focus first on his creative output in the years leading into the Second World War and beyond. I read his poetry and fiction as efforts in staging a resistance to the lure of relief, both in the form of direct relief and the "relief" offered by institutions. This latter sense comes from the fundamental anthropology of the German philosopher Arnold Gehlen, a Nazi whose work highlights the role that institutions play in "unburdening" the individual, and demonstrates the international context in which circulated concepts of individual strain relieved by social structures. The second half of the chapter turns on an exchange about domestic demands between Goodman and an unstudied poet and fiction writer named George Elliott. Elliott's work from the period under consideration, particularly his short story "The NRACP," negotiates a perceived obligation to the maintenance of domestic security, holding open the good life of security, against unmet and unspent political commitments. Ultimately taking both sides in an argument against the pessimism found in Dwight Macdonald's magazine, *politics*, Elliott's fiction and poetics demonstrate the appeal of the slow corruption of any private space propped open for responsibility or even oppositional politics.

I continue the exploration of this dynamic of public and private life in the third chapter, which begins with a reading of Jackson Mac Low's 1947 poem, "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," that queries the role of private mourning under such pressures. Mac Low's poem is both exemplary of the writing that circulated through anarchist magazine culture at the time and demonstrative of a very different poetics than his writing would evolve after engaging with John Cage and with the Living Theatre at the turn of the next decade. I use the analysis of this poem to frame the remainder of the chapter, which discusses Marshall McLuhan's turn toward the examination of popular culture in his 1951 book *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man.* McLuhan reframes what had been originally conceived as an exploration of high culture into an exercise in fostering resilience within the whirlpool of an industrially produced culture. I suggest that *The Mechanical Bride* is an assertion that forms of exercise are necessary to preserve a private life against its "ideological misuse" by capital—or even misuse brought about by the emergent recruitment of social science toward the production of mass culture.

My last chapter examines the Living Theatre's staging of Gertrude Stein's libretto *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. The performance was the first major work staged by the company, which would become one the most important venues for an antiwar avant-garde in the decades to come. I argue that the group's engagement with enlightenment, bureaucracy, and violence represent an instance of artistic practice that gathers experimental energy from the good life of security, focusing in particular on exactly the kind of alienated labor that the Nearings' vision of the good life had rejected. Emerging

in a moment of profound political despair and anger, as middlebrow publications hymned the explosions of the first hydrogen bombs, the Living Theatre's *Faustus* took the tools of an administrative aesthetic and turned them toward oppositional ends.

Each of these writers and works inhabits a different sense of what sort of good life is possible, or even desirable. There is no one ideal *telos*, no unifying vision, for what the writers living out this situation thought the good life might be, or even what it meant to represent that way of living. However, what appears throughout is an expectation of art and criticism that they will reproduce a sincere harmony, the unity of theory and practice, coming as closely as possible to the living and writing of one's ideals. That may also explain why there is such intense pessimism and anguish for the writers of this moment. Each of the writers I discuss was experienced in the foreclosure of hopeful idealism, but the work they produced continues to engage that foreclosed ideal.

Chapter One - Alex Comfort and Romantic Responsibility

To draw on Jacques Rancière's phrase, recent criticism has emphasized the Romantic in art as a "distribution of the sensible" anticipating social change. Critics have explored writers invoking the Romantic in terms that mirror Rancière's own, focusing on the Romantic as "'ways of doing and making' that intervene in the general distribution of ways of doing and making as well as in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility."[48] Accounts of Romanticism that have emerged in recent years, however, have not examined the New Romantic configuration of the 1940s. This was a group which drew on a theory of Romanticism inherited from the anarchist Herbert Read and centered on the critical work of Alex Comfort. The scholarly lacuna around the New Romanticism, however, has resulted in an incomplete picture of the context in which writers of the American 1940s and 1950s approached the Romantic poet's task of "discover[ing] those laws according to which present things ought to be ordered."[49] Comfort in particular among these younger British writers produced a radical vision of art's social function and the artist's social responsibility, which offered a forceful rebuttal to the way of thinking social responsibility in circulation during the war and in the postwar years. His self-consciously "Romantic" vision of social responsibility was an imaginary developed along the lines of pacifist empathy, weakness, and otherwise quietly

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[48] Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: the Distribution of the Sensible* (New York: Continuum, 2004), trans. Gabriel Rockhill, 13.
[49] Percy Shelley, *Essays, Letters from Abroad*, *Translations and Fragments* (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), ed. Mary Shelley, 7.

opting out of the violent engagements that characterized "responsible" action in the years of the Second World War in Britain.

At the close of the 1940s, there were efforts to cement the body of literary work produced under the sign of a New Romanticism into a canon. In Britain, a thin anthology was produced for Wrey Gardiner's Grey Walls Press in 1949, called *A New Romantic Anthology*. It included general essays on Romanticism by Comfort (an excerpt of his "Art and Social Responsibility"), Herbert Read, and the personalist / Apocalyptic Henry Treece, as well as poetry from throughout the 1940s by writers like Alex Comfort, Herbert Read, Henry Treece, Stephen Spender, G.S. Fraser, and other well-known figures like Dylan Thomas and David Jones. The anthology had in some ways recognized the incoherence of assembling an anthology around any single, coherent vision of "Romanticism." Editors Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece demurred that "it is an attempt to show how widely spread is the Romantic attitude in British writing today."[50] But in the United States, New Directions put a much more substantial anthology in that same year, edited by Kenneth Rexroth, called *New British Poets*, which made a more assertive argument for the value and the coherence of this "Romantic attitude." I discuss that anthology, which was not terribly well received in America, at the conclusion of this chapter. However, in spite of these efforts to create a canon of the New Romantics, much of this archive has remained undeveloped.

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[50] Stefan Schimanski and Henry Treece, "Acknowledgments," *A New Romantic Anthology* (London: Grey Walls Press, 1949), ii.

Studies of Read's or Comfort's political theory have tended to downplay the extent to which literary production and politics were interconnected in each poet's writing from this period. Literary histories have bypassed the attempts to promote a constellation of "New Romantics" in the interest of highlighting a narrower swath of poets clustered together as the "New Apocalyptics," and centering compelling work by Henry Treece. Even many of the contemporaries of the British New Romantics were dismissive of the quality of their poems, if not the thinking those poems instantiated.[51] This chapter argues that these elisions represent a missed opportunity, and not only for the recovery of a neglected poetic lineage. It foregrounds the connection between Romantic criticism and visions of a radical social order as "the germs of the flower," aligning the New Romantic as a formation along the axis provided by Alex Comfort's criticism. It also demonstrates not only the production of an oppositional form of social responsibility, but the way that this oppositional social responsibility found its mirror in literary form in America. During a decade in which writers were actively engaged with questions of social planning and the questions of how to ensure the good life within society, Comfort's version of Romanticism provided pacifist, anarchist equipment for addressing the obligations owed by the powerful to the weak. But prior to entering that moment of transatlantic exchange, it is necessary to review the frameworks introduced by current scholarship on the Romantic provide. That critical discourse provides context for

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[51] See Paul Goodman's review of the Kenneth Rexroth anthology, below.

the claims that follow, in which the Romantic persists as the poetic germ of practice that only ever partially springs, redeemed, into contemporaneity.[52]

Currents of Romantic Criticism

Albert Gelpi's critical work—most recently in *American Poetry after Modernism*—holds that the Romantic describes a sensibility complementing the "dry, hard" classicism of works of high Modernism (to borrow T.E. Hulme's formulation), or even the ludic indeterminacies of Postmodernism. It is a sensibility in which artists believe "even in the face of the violence of contemporary history, that the word can effect personal and even social change."[53] The canon Gelpi's work produces, then, is one in which he finds "Romantic inclinations [that] persist in postwar American poetry alongside, and often in active contention with, Postmodernist inclinations."[54] In spite of the diffuse approach to the Romantic that this seems to indicate, Gelpi does produce further criteria for the way that this inclination toward a belief in "the word" might look among in poets. Gelpi calls the writers in whom he can discern these "inclinations" "Neo-Romantic," arguing that although this is not how the writers would view themselves,

> the essence of Romanticism as a literary and critical term is the affirmation of the poet as seer and sayer. The persistent issue for

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[52] See Jacques Khalip and Forest Pyle's "The Present Darkness of Romanticism," the introduction to the recent collection *Constellations of a Contemporary Romanticism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), for a discussion of Romanticism's contemporaneity, particularly through their reading of Giorgio Agamben's embryological depiction of the unlived archaic within the contemporary.

[53] Albert Gelpi, *American Poetry after Modernism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 15.

[54] Ibid., 11.

> American poets, in different cultural terms and circumstances, is the capacity of language to locate the inner world of consciousness in the outer world of experience through an understanding or vision of reality—religious or humanistic, ethical or political—larger than the sayer and extrinsic to language.[55]

The Romantic sensibility, then, seeks to produce a vision of reality through the medium of language—even in the sort of autotelic configurations that one finds in rigorous formal experimentation—that harmonizes inner consciousness, an outer world, and vision for how that world should function. It is through sampling the core of this unity or harmonization produced by the "seer/sayer" that Gelpi's critical lens identifies the desire for the word to effect change.

Gelpi is hardly alone in the current critical moment. The seer/sayer's attempt to produce this harmonized vision of reality extrinsic to language, utilizing the medium of language, is similar to the emphasis that another constellation of contemporary poet critics has placed on what Jeremy Robinson and Julie Carr call "active Romanticism." This vision of Romanticism is one that Robinson and Carr conceive of as "a poetic response, either direct or indirect, to a 'social antagonism' (Marx, Adorno), an attempt to lift a repression that, at its core, keeps democratic pluralism in check."[56] As such, this response "emerges at any given moment of perceived social crisis" and "often invites

[55] Ibid., 277.
[56] Julie Carr and Jeremy Robinson, "Introduction: Active Romanticism'," *Active Romanticism: The Radical Impulse in Nineteenth-Century and Contemporary Poetic Practice* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2015), 1-2.

formal and linguistic experiment as an interruption in and defamiliarization of inherited elements of the medium of writing, since those elements are often interpreted by the poets as a fundamental carriers of oppression."[57] Such a periodic intervention in writing against oppression, undertaken in the name of a 'democratic pluralism,' identifies active romanticism as a poetics for the performance of the sort of "savage democracy" theorized by Miguel Abensour as "the always possible emergence of human struggle, the surge of the originary division that brings with it the menace of dissolution, of social explosion."[58] The active romantic artist, then, following in the spirit of both Henri Lefebvre's "revolutionary romanticism" and the radical theorization of democracy found in Abensour (following Lefort), enacts what Abensour describes as a savage democratic predisposition "to engender new forms of relations, to let the heterogeneous happen, to be a 'new disorder' that excavates a non-space (to borrow a beautiful phrase from Lefort), that is to say, a new space or series of spaces of invention and evasion that puncture the massiveness of the real."[59] In a reading of romanticism informed by the link that they assign between active romanticism and democracy, then, Carr and Robinson are able to offer the suggestion that "Romantic formal innovation often lies in tandem with its leftist politics and imagines its 'relation to the present' as poetically an intervention into and disturbance of culture."[60]

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[57] Ibid.
[58] Miguel Abensour, "'Savage democracy' and 'principle of anarchy'," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* (28:6, 2002), 722-723.
[59] Ibid., 720.
[60] Carr and Robinson, "Introduction: Active Romanticism," 14.

Such visions of Romanticism as a heroic force that intervenes against oppressive, necessarily anti-democratic structures in forms that scale throughout everyday life have an obvious appeal for critics who hope to make claims for the relevance of the artist. The recent resurgence of interest in Romanticism in aesthetic theory emphasizes the Romantic's emergence along a continuum correlated to social oppression. The Romantic irrupts through the transverse of structures on a political field, figuring new forms of relation in its challenge to inherited forms of seeing and saying. The priority this vision of Romanticism grants to 'revolution', alongside the conditional figuring of new forms of relation, puts these configurations of Romanticism into an aporetic relation with democracy that, to draw again from Abensour, exists in and attempts to extend the caesura between the social order being superceded and the order to come.

What Carr and Robinson discuss as the "transhistoricity" of Romanticism is "deeply implicated in historical event, word in deed," as the "active" component of their formulation suggests.[61] Romantic literary production is implicated in the social change whose germ it contains, a germ that shoots sprouts toward what might grow from the gap between social orders. However, thinkers of radical democracy argue that democracy in its insurgency, its "savage" state, has less identity with any order to come than it does the struggle against the emergence of new orders, or the attempt to "preserve the non-identity of the people with itself."[62] There is a tension, in other words, between the notion that the Romantic contains a germ that will be redeemed by the social order to come and the very

[61] ibid., 2.
[62] Miguel Abensour, *Democracy against the State: Marx and the Machiavellian Moment*, trans. Max Blechman and Martin Breaugh (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2011), xxxv.

radical democracy invoked by the critical defenders of the Romantic. As Cornelius Castoriadis has suggested in his project linking autonomy and democracy, the radical freedom of democracy has a tragic edge to the extent that "democracy is the regime of *self-limitation.*"[63]

Castoriadis clarifies that this "self-limitation" comes from the lack of any ground outside of the self on which to premise a *nomos*, or law—in a radically democratic order, the imaginary binding together any instance of community is contingent, self-organized, and limited in ways that shun the repression of any external law. So while Romanticism in art may promote radical democracy through its disturbance of sensibility, the new relations that it frames must not congeal into another order or law if it is to sustain and suspend the democratic caesura. To put it another way, even as Romanticist writing participates in the production of revolutionary social imaginaries, its practitioners are nonetheless arguably cautious about the reproduction of power to the extent that they tarry in the democratic.

Anahid Narsessian produces a genealogy of this sort of circumscription and self-limitation in Romantic aesthetic production throughout the 19th century in her 2015 study, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment*. Narsessian links William Blake to Theodor Adorno in writing of a Romanticism that "yokes an aesthetic protocol to an ethical one, locating in the Blakean boundedness of the work of art a model for the positive attenuation of desire's impacts on a material world under evermore impossible

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[63] Cornelius Castoriadis, *Figures of the Thinkable,* trans. Helen Arnold (Stanford University Press, 2007), 95.

duress."[64] In Narsessian's criticism, the Romantic work's formal limitation and bounded restraint, for instance, become the basis for modeling the restraint of a subject's demands on the environment, an ethical self-limitation against capricious instrumentalization that she is quick to sever from any conflation of liberal restraint with capitalist practice. On a pivot opposite the self-limitation in the sphere of the *nomos* that Castoriadis describes as tragic, Narsessian's work helps to identify the affective and aesthetic appeal of such limitation in the artwork itself. As she describes it, Romantic literature "presents [actively limited and limiting formal effects] as enabling to the very extent that they are privative, and pleasurable to the extent that they resituate pleasure on a continuum with renunciation and loss."[65]

This paradoxical formulation is one that has its roots, for Narsessian, in a realization that Marx had written into his critique of the rights of man as embedded in civil society—a critique embedded in the review essay "The Jewish Question," which takes up the question of political emancipation for Germany's religious minority. In a critique of Bruno Bauer, Marx famously contended that the right of man to perform whatever acts will not harm others, coupled with the right to hold and dispose of private property in whatever manner, led "each man to see in other men not the realization but the limitation of his own freedom."[66] Narsessian turns this schematic over to reveal that "regard for other men and dependence on society ought to function as caps on personal

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[64] Anahid Narsessian, *Utopia, Limited: Romanticism and Adjustment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 16.
[65] Ibid., 18.
[66] Karl Marx, "On The Jewish Question," *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 60.

freedom, and … those caps are actually what enable freedom's 'realization.'"[67] If Romanticist writing can contain such self-limitation and mutual dependence as its motivating ethical coordinates, it is all the more surprising that there remains so shallow a pool of critical attention to the work produced under a self-conscious reinvigoration of Romanticism during the 1940s.

Alex Comfort among Romantics

That a laudatory discourse of Romanticism should have arisen among Left anarchist writers and intellectuals within the atmosphere of the second World War is not surprising, given the politics of Romantic aesthetics explored in the criticism above. Amid a culture of panic and justifiable fear about the spread of totalitarian forms, the critical exposition of what was called even then a "neo-Romanticism" was difficult to extricate from the politics of self-limiting autonomy, or simply anarchism. In the most obvious instance, young British poets such as Derek Stanford and Alex Comfort had an explicit interest in shaping a Romantic discourse that would limn art's relationship to the political. These writers advocated for a political order in contradistinction with a Left power politics of military intervention, the totalitarian tendencies of not only fascists abroad but also Vansittartism at home, and the aesthetic theories of both modernism and the Marxist and Popular Front criticism of the 1930s. The theory of Romanticism developed in the midst of a transatlantic cross-pollination about the fit of art against politics proves remarkably well aligned with the way recent critics have thought the Romantic as both an active and

[67] Narsessian, *Utopia, Limited*, 19.

self-limiting tendency. Where the path diverges, however, has largely to do with the stock that these writers put in action.

Alex Comfort in particular, whose polemical 1944 essay, "Art and Social Responsibility," this chapter explores in more detail below, seems to have largely agreed with the assessment of the older Read, who wrote in a preface to *Lyra*, the anthology Comfort produced with Robert Greacen in 1942 for Wrey Gardiner's Gray Walls Press, that "by the end of the Spanish Civil War, the poetry of action had fought in the last ditch."[68] The "poetry of action" offered a shorthand for the kind of propagandized verse that marked the Popular Front era, stirring a reader to act in the interests of a socialist revolution. In place of what writers like Read saw as art's ideological capture, which led to a conflation of art and politics by which "the defeat of Marxist action in Spain...involved the defeat of that art which had been its propagandist expression" as Derek Stanford would later put it, Read proposed a new writing of "reconstruction."[69] Of the poets gathered under a rubric of "Neo-Romanticism," Read wrote that "their poetry is...projected away from the immediate struggle into the new world which has to be created out of the ruins of our civilization," oriented toward a reflection on what art might inspire a responsible society, or an individual toward a good life.[70] Read's claim would seem to indicate that the poetry Comfort had gathered for his portion of the anthology

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[68] Herbert Read qtd in Derek Stanford, *Inside the 'Forties: Literary Memoirs 1937-1957* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977), 81-82.
[69] Derek Stanford, *Inside the 'Forties: Literary Memoirs 1937-1957* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977), 82.
[70] Herbert Read qtd in Derek Stanford, *Inside the 'Forties: Literary Memoirs 1937-1957* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1977), 82.

demonstrated new paths forward, but as Clement Greenberg had testily remarked in a review of the anthology appearing in *Partisan Review*, "to have shown that it is still possible to write convincingly such nice derivative verse is a kind of triumph."[71] Even Wrey Gardiner, a friend of Comfort's who published *Lyra* and Comfort's better-known *New Road* annuals, co-edited with John Bayliss, would remark of Comfort's fiction that his writing was "potted Zola watered down for the British nine-and-sixpenny novel-reading bourgeoisie."[72] Those writings Comfort produced and collected were to a large degree marked by a relative lack of the kind of ironic, modern, formal innovation that Greenberg may have expected.

Comfort ran proudly against the grain of a literary style that Hulme had characterized as "classicist" for its detachment and artifice. His wartime novels, *No Such Liberty* and *The Power House*, were written primarily in a naturalist mode.[73] But his vision of a neo-Romantic ideology unifying the writers and artists he brought together under that rubric was striking for its oppositional relationship to the criticism of socialist and engaged liberal thinkers of his moment, and it was precisely its resistance to propagandized engagement that marked it as a different path forward. What Comfort's version of Romanticism introduces to our contemporary understanding of the Romantic and to a vision of what it means to live a good life is an emphasis on the centrality of weakness and a shared experience of precarity to the genesis of liberty and radical

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[71] Clement Greenberg, "Poets, English and American," *Partisan Review* 9:6 (1942), 535.
[72] Wrey Gardiner, *The Dark Thorn* (London: Gray Walls Press, 1946), qtd in Stanford, *Inside the 'Forties*, 105.
[73] One prominent exception to this appears in the final books of *The Power House*, which is discussed below.

democracy.[74] Comfort's was a discourse of Romanticism that not only followed his work across the Atlantic, but was also responsive to American controversies playing out through the publications of the American Left. Intellectual historians have recently begun the work of placing Comfort's writing from this period within the context of a longer chain of anarchist intellectual projects, particularly within a history of British anarchist thought that he had inherited somewhat directly from Herbert Read.[75] The argument in this chapter veers somewhat away from this recovery toward thinking the place of a Romantic discourse informed by left anarchism within this historical moment.

In the midst of a transatlantic argument in the pages of journals such as Comfort's *New Road, Horizon*, *politics*, *Now*, and *Partisan Review* about how and whether to support the war effort in Europe, the embrace of a Romantic discourse provides a model for thinking about "freedom" and aesthetics that has been neglected in efforts to recover the production of what Greg Barnhisel has called "Cold War modernism." Such an approach to the late modern moment involves the production of an ideological alignment where "modernism was not a rebellion against self-satisfied middle-class values and stale

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[74] In his discussion of Comfort's work over the span of the 1940s through the 1970s, Arthur Salmon, in one of the only extended considerations of Comfort's literary efforts, suggests that Comfort "does not believe that an awareness of the uniqueness and seriousness of human existence is fundamentally dependent upon an awareness of its precariousness or brevity" (25). When taken with precision, this is true to the extent that "fundamentally" is given emphasis, which Salmon's discussion unfortunately does not. As discussed below, Comfort takes pains to emphasize the extent to which it is only within those social groups produced through a forced experience of precarity that one finds communities of the "sane," who accept the reality of their own death. However, as Salmon points out, there is little reason to think, examining Comfort's work throughout the 1940s, that this experience of precarity is a fundamental dependency, and every reason to see it as a historical contingency (one realized in oscillations). See Arthur Salmon, *Alex Comfort* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978).

[75] For further consideration of Alex Comfort's place within the British anarchist tradition, see, for example, Carissa Honeywell, *A British Anarchist Tradition: Herbert Read, Alex Comfort and Colin Ward* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

artistic conventions; rather it was an expression of freedom, individualism, self-motivated enterprise, and the end of ideologies—in other words, an expression of Cold War liberalism itself."[76] The Romanticism championed by Comfort opens a complicating perspective on the paradox that work like Barnhisel's lays most clear regarding the relationship between politics and aesthetics in the years of late modernism. With few notable exceptions such as the instance from Comfort's 1944 novel *The Power House* discussed below, the anarchists and other left libertarians of the 1940s produced works in which such formalist aesthetic rebellion was minimal or even absent.[77] This absence is all the more surprising because these writers took quite seriously the effort to produce an environment of "freedom, individualism, [and] self-motivated enterprise," and editorial energy in journals such as Comfort's own, George Woodcock's *Now*, and Holley Cantine's *Retort* was devoted to literature produced by anarchists seen as germinal toward that end. As critics have recovered the passage from "Trotskyism…into art for art's sake" in American writing, the way that a specifically Romantic, frequently anarchist vision of freedom and individualism carried over the Atlantic into American literary discourse has arguably been underrepresented.[78]

Comfort himself devoted much of his mature career as a writer to the project of individual freedom, though his writing during the 1940s was marked by a great deal of

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[76] Greg Barnhisel, *Cold War Modernists* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 28.
[77] See, for example, Serge Guilbaut's recovery of the trajectory from anti-Stalinism to abstract expressionism in New York, in *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), trans. Arthur Goldhammer.
[78] Clement Greenberg, "The Late Thirties in New York," *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 230.

pessimism about that project. Nonetheless, his poetry and fiction demonstrates a commitment to the representation of responsibility to others rather than the experience of an individualist freedom. And this commitment to responsibility was also a feature of his criticism. When he specifies to whom art owes a responsibility in his Romantic era, Comfort provides a list that is frequently cited in discussions of his anarchism. Citing the version of this litany that appears in the 1944 version of "Art and Social Responsibility," Comfort writes to honor

> the woman who fails to fuse a shell securely, the clerk who does not look a second time at a pass, the girl who hides a deserter and the idiot who misdirects an escort, whatever their nationality, [who] are acting as members and soldiers of the community of the weak, the greatest conspiracy in history which is ceaseless.[79]

The citation of this passage frequently stops at this point, whether the version being cited appears in this essay or in his novel of 1944 (published in the United States in 1945), *The Power House*. However, the passage continues on tellingly, as he writes, "it is to these people that art owes a responsibility which is hard to measure."[80]

In the essay itself, the aside is a hard claim to locate against more dramatically rendered proclamations on behalf of Comfort's generation of artists, writing that "we recognize boundless responsibility to men, especially to all those who are deprived of their voices," and "we must demand the right to secession as the one square foot of

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[79] Alex Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," *New Road, 1944: New Directions in European Art and Letters*, 30.
[80] Ibid.

ground which is solid and from which we can...interpret the gigantic chaos of human existence."[81] After all, here Comfort claims that art owes a great responsibility to those participants in bureaucratic systems who tactically stand aside from their otherwise complicit existence to seize some temporary responsibility toward those persons whose deaths the remainder of their days are spent producing. But, Comfort suggests, these "aggregate intervals of sanity suffice to overthrow the entire edifice of society which has been built on their backs and out of their flesh," and artists must be invested in teaching others to "retain [their] lives as if we were really sane men in an asylum where all individuals were allies."[82] In other words, for Comfort, the way that the neo-Romantic young writers of his generation would engage art in the real cultural and political struggles of the moment was not through direct action but by inspiring readers to stand aside from society and retain an individual identity for which the deaths being produced by that society have a specific reality. Comfort's vision of responsibly standing aside, though less extreme than that of those intentionalists that turned away from the city in order to achieve a responsible, good life of self-sufficiency, was a compromise acknowledging the degree to which the totalizing impacts of the war left no way to opt out of its impacts. Even if there was no way to leave "the asylum," to engage more directly in the war effort, with a nationalist discourse producing both a fascist society in England (in Comfort's diagnosis) and the dehumanization of the German people as an anonymous, guilty mass, was to purchase entry into society. And when Comfort

[81] Ibid., 29.
[82] Ibid., 30.

describes society in his essay, he intends "not only a form of abrogating moral responsibility, [but] a womb into which one can crawl back and become immortal because unborn."[83]

Here, Comfort anticipates the kinds of claims about mortality that one finds in the work of Cornelius Castoriadis in particular. Castoriadis argued in a 1987 lecture, collected in *World in Fragments*, that "*the* difficulty facing the project of autonomy is the difficulty encountered by human beings in accepting, *sans phrase*, the mortality of the individual, of the collectivity, and even of their works," and that "death is the mainstay of institutions...the justified fear that everything, even meaning, will dissolve." Comfort's major claim for the ideology of the Romantic hinges on this point about mortality, as does his claim for the significance of the munitions worker who produces a faulty shell. Romanticism flourishes, Comfort argues, during historical periods when the recognition of one's own precarity and death becomes prevalent. And it is in the moments when individuals reflect on the death that their participation in organized violence produces that they are able to stand aside for at least a moment and retain what Comfort calls "personality" and the sense of their own shared exposure to violent caprice and death. The way that this materialized in the writings that were either brought together by

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[83] Ibid., 23. One might productively read Comfort's position, or that of the critical discourses around wartime mobilization broadly, in light of Hannah Arendt's much later discussion of forgiveness, promises, and the public in her later *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), which is frequently read as in terms of an elaboration of Arendt's responses to the question of collective guilt. Providing the inverse to Comfort's disinvestment in what he describes as "irresponsible society," Arendt argues that "without being bound to the fulfillment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helplessly and without direction in the darkness of man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities—a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm by the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel" (237).

Comfort or claimed the influence of this program will be explored in further detail below. However, to understand better the genesis of some of these claims, it is necessary first to review the immediate critical conversation into which Comfort was inserting himself in 1944. That critical discourse, specifically the left libertarian suspicion of scientism and reason in the hands of either Trotskyists or the CPUSA, left space open for a Romantic intervention.

Failure of Nerve

An advertisement for the *Partisan Review* series on what Sidney Hook would famously call "the new failure of nerve" spurred Alex Comfort to write "Art and Social Responsibility," before the series of essays was even published in *Partisan Review*.[84] Hook's curation of the essay series included work from influential figures such as John Dewey and Ruth Benedict. Its motivating contention was that "a survey of the cultural tendencies of our own times shows many signs pointing to a new failure of nerve in Western civilization."[85] This new failure of nerve mirrored what Gilbert Murray had described in *Four Stages of Greek Religion* in only a slightly less pejorative sense as a "failure of nerve" observed in the "rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism" between the years of the Athenian city-state and the emergence of the

[84] Comfort's essay opens by noting that, "'Partisan Review,' published in New York, advertised this year a number to be devoted to exposing the 'New Failure of Nerve' in Western liberalism" ("Art and Social Responsibility," 19).
[85] Sidney Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," *Partisan Review* 10:1 (1943), 2.

Christian era.[86] Murray had written that during the period he described, there was "an atmosphere in which the aim of the good man is not so much to live justly, to help the society to which he belongs and enjoy the esteem of his fellow creatures; but rather, by means of a burning faith, by contempt for the world and its standards, by ecstasy, suffering and martyrdom, to be granted pardon for his unspeakable unworthiness, his immeasurable sins."[87] While Hook acknowledges the difference in idiom between his own analysis and that of Murray, he writes that what he is calling the "new failure of nerve" "betrays...the same flight from responsibility, both on the plane of action and on the plane of belief" as Murray had attributed to the turn toward Christianity.[88] Even if the invocation of responsibility mirrors one of the discursive lodestars driving the neo-Romantics of the moment, what that responsibility looked like for Hook—particularly "on the plane of action"—was engagement with the war effort and planning for the coming postwar reconstruction.

An example of the sort of engagement that Hook finds so sparse as he surveys 1942 might be provided briefly by passing over Margaret Mead's wartime contributions. Mead describes her purposes, in the introduction to her 1942 study of American culture, *And Keep Your Powder Dry,* as an effort toward "the organization of social materials [so] that we may *do* more—here—now—in America toward fighting the war in a way that will leave us with the moral and physical resources to attack the problem of reorganizing

[86] Gilbert Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1912), 103.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," 2.

the world."[89] To that end, Mead chides the "great many Americans...acting as if the whole course of the war...were out of our hands," arguing that such an attitude is "completely out of key with American history, out of key with our picture of ourselves as a people."[90] In place of such passivity, Mead offers a plan of action by which each American community can support the war effort if it begins to "tackle its own problems, get its civilian defense going, organize its own housing and settle its own feeding problems without waiting for Washington like so many helpless and spineless invalids waiting to be lifted from one deck chair to another."[91] This formulation, drawing on physical disability to contrast with the supposed virility of the American character, rhymes significantly not only with the physical condition of Franklin Roosevelt—the "Washington" that leaves middle America waiting—but also draws out the sort of "responsibility" that might contrast with a paralytic "failure of nerve." If the central bureaucratic apparatus of the nation won't push for the total mobilization of the American people, driving for the conduct of a war under the sign of an idea of "America," then writers and social scientists must get to work on their own to move the people toward organizing that effort on their own.

The visions for responsible action in Hook's essay harmonize with Mead's project in significant ways. Hook argues that "the chief causes of our maladjustments are to be found precisely in those areas of social life *in which the rationale of the scientific method*

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[89] Margaret Mead*, And Keep Your Powder Dry* (New York: William Morrow, 1942/1965), 4.
[90] Ibid., 159.
[91] Ibid., 160.

has not been employed [emph. in original]."[92] Mead devotes an entire chapter to articulating how the application of social science will lead to the realization of democratic ideals, though she provides greater clarity than Hook about the need for social scientists to commit "not to coerce living persons" and to lay "a solemn injunction upon our ardent imaginations" so that "we become able to use the control that science has given us to set future generations free."[93] However, in spite of their shared sense of the need for intellectuals to engage with the war effort and postwar planning, Mead and Hook's diagnoses of the tendencies mitigating against that engagement differed.

This is where Hook's essay stands out among other efforts to compel intellectuals to action. Mead was concerned merely about passivity, or—in the alternative—a will toward control that would be perhaps too overtly coercive (she preferred incentive-shaping proposals as a means of social control without the perceived danger of a planned social *telos*).[94] Hook finds danger in a whole catalog of the "signs of intellectual panic," including not only "the refurbishing of theological and metaphysical dogmas" and campaigns to "'prove' that without a belief in God and immortality, democracy—or even plain moral decency—cannot be reasonably justified," which in the form of arguments

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[92] Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," 9.

[93] Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, 192.

[94] Mead had argued that "a great many Americans appear to be...acting as if the whole course of the war...were out of our hands, just lunging along by itself, like an engine with the engineer asleep at the throttle. [...] This is an essentially passive attitude towards the world; an attitude completely out of key with American history, out of key with our picture of ourselves as a people" (ibid., 159). Mead attributed this attitude to the experience of an urban modernity in which people are "riding on subways, working in office buildings, and poring helplessly over ticker tape," and so they have "lost their sense of being able to control their own destiny by their own inventiveness and toughness and determination" (ibid., 159). As is clear below, the experience of being acted upon, and of lacking control over one's own destiny is one of the factors to which Alex Comfort attributes the Romantic character of his moment.

with Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Maritain take up much of Hook's space in the essay.[95] He also strikes out against "prophecies of doom for western culture, no matter who wins the war or peace, dressed up as laws of social dynamics; [...] contempt for all political organizations and social programs because of the obvious failure of some of them, together with the belief that good will is sufficient to settle thorny problems of economic and social reconstruction; [and] posturing about the cultivation of spiritual purity."[96] Hook, who had a reputation as a pugilistic debater, had painted a clear target on the work of Niebuhr since at least 1941.[97] But it is noteworthy that he seeks out conflict with positions held broadly among the literary left as "obscurantist," even in an essay that seeks to defend what he refers to as "liberalism as an intellectual temper...as a tradition of the free market in the world of ideas."[98]

Because Hook's anti-metaphysical position required that he promote the idea that a scientific approach to social planning could lead "to the construction of a social order whose institutions provide for the negotiation and compromise of claims" and in turn "greater security," he was unwilling to brook the caution with which writers had taken up similar claims for planning in the years following the Popular Front.[99] Hook was confident that reasoned social planning could secure the good life after the war. Probably because of the extent to which the essay was an explicit provocation, Hook's forum

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[95] Hook, "The New Failure of Nerve," 3.
[96] Ibid., 2-3.
[97] Hook had reviewed Niebuhr's *Nature and Destiny of Man* in an essay called "Social Change and Original Sin" in Daniel Bell's *New Leader* in November of 1941.
[98] Ibid., 3.
[99] Ibid., 17.

became a target to which writers felt a great deal of pressure to respond. Over the span of three issues in 1943, two response essays appeared in the pages of *The New Republic*. Malcolm Cowley, the first respondent in that magazine, commented—pointedly, given Hook's history with the Soviet Union—that Hook's own courage has failed in not asking "why Russia—which did make [a concerted effort to apply the scientific method to all areas of social life]—produced something less than a Utopia after twenty years of devoted efforts." [100] If the Russians had applied the scientific approach Hook promoted, why had their planning failed to secure the good life for their people? Cowley acidly notes that such a line of inquiry, "if approached without preconceptions, in a purely scientific spirit, might lead to answers not wholly in agreement with what Hook regards as the only scientific philosophy."[101] Cowley's comments reflect an individualist pushback against social planning, particularly planning for the production of literature, that was widely held among radicals. [102] But they also highlight the mix of personal and

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[100] Malcolm Cowley, "Marginalia," *The New Republic* 109:2 (1943), 50.

[101] ibid., 50. The British poet Herbert Read would strike a similar chord to Cowley, though absent the immediate inspiration of Sidney Hook, in his 1943 *The Politics of the Unpolitical*. Writing of the promotion and incentivization of artistic production in Russia, and noting that this has not inspired "anything in the nature of an artistic renaissance," Read suggests that "it is a scientific problem" that "should be examined dispassionately" (see Herbert Read, *The Politics of the Unpolitical* [London: Routledge, 1943/1946], 138).

[102] See, for instance, *Retort* editor Dorothy Paul's response to Camp Angel writer Glen Coffield. The exchange illustrates the extreme suspicion with which proposals to "improve" cultural production through planning were viewed on the libertarian left following the breaks of the Moscow Trials of 1936-1938, even when the writer making the proposal was an otherwise committed pacifist and anarchist. Coffield, writing in the context of the collectivist arts that flourished in the Oregon CO camp, had written a brief essay for *Retort* proposing a collective production system, in which writers would share and move between the specialized roles allocated along the production process for publications. He wrote that "the creative process has become so involved as to need the efforts of the group." One of the advantages to such a system, he argued, would be a coherence and continuity of technique among the creative workers (see Glen Coffield, "Speculations on the Socialization of Art," *Retort* 2:4 [1945], 29-30). Paul responded by quoting from Max Eastman's controversial *Artists in Uniform*, dismissed Coffield's sympathetic circumstances, and

critical antagonism that the sentiment in Hook's essay provoked—particularly among writers and cultural critics.

For instance, Isaac Rosenfeld, who would generate a brief but potent reputation as a novelist with the postwar publication of *Passage from Home*, took particular issue with Hook's "scientific" positivism. In his own response in the pages of *The New Republic*, he writes that "the official position of empiricism" finds "what exists in the human personality as emotion and need [as] a deviation from an arbitrary standard of rational behavior." Because of this, Hook's empiricism "has missed the richness, the variety, pleasure, tragedy, the sheer possibility of experience," or—to put it differently—the kind of information about human experience one finds in art.[103] In Rosenfeld's telling, Hook misses something basic in rendering as obscurantist those tendencies that seek to fulfill needs by appealing to a supernatural absolute or some other determinist, often-pessimistic view of progress. Other writers, such as Herbert Read in his 1943 collection *The Politics of the Unpolitical*, were more explicit in drawing the contrast between the dogged optimism about reason that Hook championed and the role of the artist. Read, who was by this time known as much for this political theory as his poetry, intervened against the "rational planner" by interposing a "libertarian planner," who would hold foremost in their attention that "houses and buildings will be inhabited, not by ciphers, but by human

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quipped "maybe I've got an evil mind, but every time I come across one of these totalitarian uplift projects I suspect that its chief design is to uplift the fellow with the project" (see Dorothy Paul, "Further Speculations…," *Retort* 2:4 [1945], 31-33).

[103] Isaac Rosenfeld, "The Failure of Verve," *The New Republic* 109:3 (1943), 81.

beings with sensations and feelings."[104] In order to secure the good life within those houses and buildings, the planner must promote the creativity of the individual rather than the collective interest. Read's libertarian planner would, then, "search for methods of encouraging the artist."[105] But Hook's emphasis on reason, however, and the optimism that reason might further the cause of the twinned principles of individual freedom and security, was hardly unique. And the combination of optimism in reason, engagement with the mobilization effort, and vehement rejection of any attitudes not rooted in reason was toxic to more writers than just these few.

One finds the contour of this debate repeating itself in reverse, for instance, when Arthur Koestler calls for a "society of pessimists" in November of 1943 for the *New York Times*. Writing against Hook's strain of optimism about the mobilization of intellectuals in the planning effort, Koestler expresses hope that they "will not brandish the surgeon's knife at the social body, because they know that their own instruments are polluted," and that "their chief aim will be to create oases in the interregnum desert."[106] In Koestler's vision of society, intellectuals and artists eschew large-scale efforts to reshape society and build only provisional oases until such time as the fever of totalitarianism has passed. They do this by actively withholding participation in the planning efforts of engaged

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[104] Herbert Read, *The Politics of the Unpolitical*, 120. Read's argument against the "rational" mobilization for planning had largely to do with his belief, expressed later in his own argument, that encouraging the practice of art production could improve happiness, because "in [creating an object external to himself, the artist] vitally reorganizes the balance of impulses within himself" (121). Only a libertarian planner, in Read's telling, would be capable of executing a plan that accounted for the necessary encouragement.
[105] Ibid., 121.
[106] Arthur Koestler, "'We Need a Fraternity of Pessimists,'" *New York Times Magazine* (Nov. 7, 1943), SM12.

leftists. But this is at least partly due to Koestler's fear that the instruments of reason are polluted by a strain of totalitarianism.

The responses to Koestler's influential essay produced the mirror image of the responses to Hook, and indicate the extent to which these two lines of argument seemingly magnetized all available discursive threads. For example, Robert Gorham Davis, who was at the time publishing short stories in the *New Yorker* but would become known more for his literary criticism, responded to Koestler in the *Antioch Review* by arguing that "in his abnegation of reason at a moment when we need it most, when we are entering an international period of great danger and great possibilities, he is, I think, a harmful guide and teacher."[107] While Davis's response to Koestler is a minor event, it is nonetheless telling for the way that it reveals the availability of "reason" as an alternative to the sort of political and social pessimism expressed and championed by Koestler.

But while Koestler's pessimism held out the possibility of oases, other responses to the sort of argument that Hook had advanced against the "failure of nerve" of writers and intellectuals held even less hope. And at least for some the reason was that the position of intellectuals and artists had little to do with "nerve," and more to do with a

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[107] Robert Gorham Davis, "The Sharp Horns of Arthur Koestler's Dilemma," *Antioch Review* 4:4 (1944), 517. Worth noting in this context is Davis's short story, "Then We'll Set It Right," published in the *New Yorker* in August of 1943. While Davis was highlighting the abandonment of reason on Koestler's part, his most recent short fiction (which would be highlighted seventy years later in a reading by his daughter, the novelist and short fiction writer Lydia Davis, for the same publication) largely invoked an adult "reasonableness" to draw *pathos* from its very inadequacy. In the story, a child playing soldier with a real gun accidentally shoots and kills a friend. When he returns home in tears to tell his parents what has happened, his father—not comprehending the magnitude of what has happened—makes light of the cries of the dead child's father and tells his own son that all he needs to do is get the words out to describe what has happened. Once the story has been told, the father suggests, they can get a look at the problem objectively, and "then we'll set it right."

realistic assessment of their social position. For instance, responding in part to Hook's series in the *Partisan Review*, C. Wright Mills would coolly note in the pages of Dwight Macdonald's *politics*, from the perspective of a similar pragmatist training to Hook's own, that "attempts to reinstate pragmatism's emphasis upon the power of man's intelligence to control his destiny have not been taken to heart by American intellectuals."[108] However, in Mills's reading, this was the result of "the social position" of intellectuals. The social situation, Mills argues in "The Powerless People," was one in which, "at the centers of public decision there are powerful men who do not themselves suffer the violent results of their own decisions." As the essay notably argued, this "organized irresponsibility is a leading feature of modern industrial societies everywhere," and the pessimism that Koestler champions and Hook rejects is transformed by Mills from a future tense to the present: individuals, intellectuals included, feel "dwarfed and helpless" in such a social order.[109]

Mills, whose commitment to an intellectual pragmatism no less dogged than that of Hook, had begun "The Powerless People" in part as the exposition of an abortive attempt at an autobiographical short story in which the protagonist expresses guilt at having only been able to speak truth about military discipline at his college under the mask of anonymity, signing a letter to the editor of the school paper as "A Freshman." As though in response to the sort of "prophecies of doom" that Hook had decried, Mills's draft—collected in a letter to his colleague Hans Gerth—has the paper's editor explaining

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[108] C. Wright Mills, "The Powerless People: the Role of the Intellectual in Society," *politics* 1:3 (1944), 68.
[109] Ibid., 69.

to the protagonist that "You were doomed before you wrote the letter, and you are doomed even afterwards, because you would never have written it had you not known that you could and would sign it 'A Freshman.'"[110] The prophecy of doom contained in the story is one that links a feeling of guilt and political despair to a structural incapacity of individual's to tell the truth when their livelihoods depend on maintaining purchase within the smooth operation of a larger bureaucratic system. Because of the precarious employment through which intellectuals such as Mills (not to mention many writers) made a living, the sort of personally responsible action necessary to motivate change in a massive undertaking like postwar mobilization was an impossibility.

Pushback against Hook's "failure of nerve" thesis by appeal to this differing notion of responsibility—a personal or individual responsibility, rather than a responsibility to society in the abstract—routed Hook's discussion more directly through some of the specific arguments animating writers in pacifist and anarchist circles throughout the Second World War. Broadly, writers within these circles, publishing in venues such as *politics*, *Retort*, or *Why?* in the United States, or in journals such as *Horizon* or *NOW* in Britain, were acutely aware of the conflict between taking part in bureaucratic systems and the exercise of responsible action—speech in particular—that Mills's response to the "failure of nerve" thesis dramatized. Taken abstractly, concern with failures of individual responsibility appears throughout the pages of Holley

[110] C. Wright Mills, "To Hans Gerth, from Greenbelt, Maryland, dated December 7, 1943," *C. Wright Mills: Letters and Autobiographical Writings* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 57-58. The short story only appears to have been a fragment, but Mills' correspondence highlights its emergence from the same set of concerns as the essay that would become "The Powerless People."

Cantine's journal *Retort*.[111] For example, in his immediate postwar editorial "The Age of Flight," Cantine takes inspiration from an advertisement for a commercial airline to call out not only the disruptions brought about by increases in social and geographic mobility but also "flight" as "a hasty and on the whole unpremeditated running away from a too oppressive reality."[112] Cantine's diagnosis is that "the average individual...takes refuge in flight, either physical or psychological" but this flight "has become meaningless and futile, since the ramifications of the system now extend to the remotest corners of the world."[113] The course Cantine advocates, taken by on a responsible few, is "to make a beginning at establishing a new way of life based on liberty and brotherhood...acting primarily because they feel that to live as human beings should live, even for a brief period, is an adequate reward in itself, and is infinitely more satisfying than anything the system has to offer, or anything that can be gained by running away from it."[114] Put into other terms, Cantine shifts the problematic away from engagement or disengagement with the mobilization efforts of the state and toward the project of living in a way that is responsible to one's own sense of "liberty and brotherhood." To this way of thinking, war

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[111] For a discussion of the place of Cantine's *Retort* in the landscape of midcentury anarchist thought, see Andrew Cornell, *Unruly Equality: U.S. Anarchism in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016). Cornell emphasizes *Retort*'s place among the anarchist periodicals of the forties as a venue for art, noting that "throughout the 1940s, the hand-printed journal served as an important early-career venue for a variety of now canonical figures, including Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, and e.e. cummings" (184).

[112] Holley Cantine, "Editorial: The Age of Flight," *Retort* 3:1 (1945), 2.

[113] Ibid., 7. For a discussion of the way that the growing realization of a global world-system and aesthetic form twined together for writers in the 1940s, see Thomas Davis, *The Extinct Scene: Late Modernism and Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Davis argues that "on one hand, the outward turn (of late modernist texts toward the world) is generated during the late stages of the British world-system; on the other, late modernist attention to everyday life makes systemic disorder [generated within that world-system] legible" (24).

[114] Ibid., 8.

and the total state are treated not as cudgels to escape but noise in the background of the positive project of discovering ways “to live as human beings should live” at a much more individual scale.

As though to bring home his point, Cantine appends a brief translation of the Tang dynasty poet Tu Fu by Kenneth Rexroth to the dead space at the end of his editorial, which reads:

> In the penetrating cold
> I sleep under the bamboos,
> Under the penetrating
> Moonlight in the wilderness.
> The thick dew turns to fine mist.
> One by one the stars vanish.
> Only the fireflies are left.
> Birds cry over the water.
> War breeds its consequences.
> It is useless to worry,
> Wakeful while the long night goes.[115]

As the speaker sleeps, closed in by bamboo, the orienting sky is obscured by fog, replaced with the disorienting light of fireflies and the cries of birds over water. The fallout of an unspecified conflict joins with the other events of a night’s progress, initiating the speaker’s turn to reflection: “it is useless to worry.” Whatever the conflict,

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[115] Tu Fu, “[In the penetrating cold],” trans. Kenneth Rexroth, *Retort* 3:1 (1945), 8.

there is nothing to be done about it. The speaker sleeps, rather than remaining "wakeful while the long night goes."

Placing the poem immediately after an editorial in which he had argued for the need to build of one's own life an alternative to "the system" that had quite recently produced the Atomic Bomb, Cantine calls into relief the poem's vision of "war" as something about which it is useless to worry. More important is the effort, Cantine suggests, of "establishing a new way of life."[116] War may be on the horizon, encroaching on individuals who have decided to opt out of the system and live in a manner responsible to their ideals. But as the anarchist Herbert Read had concluded his "A World Within a War," published earlier in 1945 in *The Sewanee Review* and figuring a speaker in a state of vulnerability similar to that of the sleeper in Rexroth's translation, "Should the ravening death descend / We will be calm: die like the mouse / Terrified but tender. The claw / Will meet no satisfaction in our sweet flesh / And we shall have known peace // In a house beneath the beechwood / In an acre of wild land."[117] Just as "war breeds its consequences," as the speaker of Rexroth's translation puts it, Read's poem suggests that even death can be met calmly if one lives a life responsible to one's own values and rejects the compromises of participation in the system of organized irresponsibility. Such gestures by Cantine, Rexroth, and Read were the closest thing to an invocation of a settlement with "the good life" that this cluster of literary radicals would produce, even as

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[116] Cantine, "Editorial: The Age of Flight," 8.
[117] Herbert Read, "A World Within a War," *The Sewanee Review* 53:1 (1945), 51.

the terms of the discourse following from the "failure of nerve" series were centered in large part around the question of how to ensure and secure the good life.

Failure to Do What is Expected

A recent graduate of Trinity College in the Natural Sciences, Alex Comfort had initially intervened in the debates surrounding literary engagement with the war from an intellectual position similar to Cantine's advocacy for proactively living out alternatives to the disaster of the State and its production of death. Comfort's earliest forays into social theory were largely about the relationship between the artist and society. Comfort had, since at least 1942, been a staunch defender of the "younger" generation of writers who, as he enumerated in a letter to Cyril Connolly's *Horizon* in May of that year, were on the defensive in "three separate campaigns…for their failure to do what is expected of them."[118] The most significant criticism, in Comfort's eyes, was that of Stephen Spender, who had argued in his annual survey of the previous year's poetry for *Horizon* that no poets were currently writing work that met the needs of the moment for art that offered imaginative interpretation of the war.[119] While engaging with Spender's critique, Comfort was also quick to note that the disagreement Spender had with the younger generation was in large part due to "a very marked change of attitude among the 'new' writers since 1937 or so...there is an attitude of passivity, which does not see the war as a struggle in

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[118] Alex Comfort, "On Interpreting the War," *Horizon* (May 1942), 358.

[119] Spender's argument, as quoted by Comfort, was that "no poet has created in imaginative terms (1) any major event of the war, (2) any statement of the nature of the struggle in which we are involved, either as suffering or as ideas (3) any positive faith in the democracy for which we are fighting, (4) any effective statement against the war" (qtd in Comfort, "On Interpreting the War," 358).

the way that Spain was a struggle."[120] Elaborating on this in a discussion of G.S. Fraser's poem elegizing the SS *City of Benares*, Comfort argues that even though the poem meets some of Spender's criteria for the imaginative labor expected of younger poets ("it interprets war in terms of suffering"), "it regards war not as a struggle at all, but as a calamity...it is impersonal as lightning, aimless, possibly inevitable, but not a struggle."[121]

Comfort's argument is that poets cannot articulate any unifying idea that could give expression to the broader disaster of "the war." The best work, he had argued, was confined to the individual's experience of war, "in which there are no general principles and no objective" that can align the individual with a broader social force.[122] Comfort chooses Fraser's poem to illustrate this point, because it is "confine[d]...to the small, which we can comprehend, and which we can handle out of our experience."[123] Fraser's poem proceeds from a speaker attempting to console himself about the suffering experienced by children drowned after the sinking of the evacuee ship SS *City of Benares*, who presents and then rejects an imagining of a drowning evacuee's experience that the speaker realizes was meant "to cheat my pain." The poem concludes with a refusal to offer any closure against the sense of responsibility felt to the children's suffering; the speaker argues that a reader can "think what you will," imagining a "stained-glass heaven, where each darling sings," but those thoughts will "crack to grief" because "In the drenched valley, whimpering and cold, / The small ghosts flicker,

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[120] Ibid.
[121] Ibid., 359.
[122] Ibid.
[123] Ibid.

whisper, unconsoled."[124] The elegy is noteworthy for the way that it centers the experience of the speaker, far from the tragedy, as that speaker works through the lingering images of a discrete atrocity in which they were powerless to intervene.

It was in his response to Spender in *Horizon* that Comfort began most forcefully to articulate the sort of self-limitation, a confinement to individual scale, which he notes in Fraser as Romantic. Building on both his initial presentation of Fraser's poem as an instance of the kind of "interpretation" that Spender hoped artists might provide, and a lengthy exposition about the sort of fiction that might best interpret the war, Comfort's argument concludes by arguing that "while one cannot interpret the present war in any set of sociological or even military rules...one can produce 'major' poetry...by a thoroughgoing return to romanticism."[125] Providing an instance of the way that Comfort's literary theory fit against the social theory of anarchists like Read or Cantine, Comfort suggests that the poets who would produce this new Romantic work are not only "like the rest of the nation...unutterably weary." They have also "lost the psychological ability to identify themselves with the professed aims of their fellow men."[126] And this means that for writers of his generation what Comfort will call "classicism" (a shorthand in this instance for the "intellectual exactitude" demanded by Spender, though Comfort's definition of "classicism" will expand to more closely mirror Hulme's use of the term) is impossible. Comfort continues, "you can be intellectually exact only when you are

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[124] G.S. Fraser, "SS *City of Benares*," *The New British Poets*, ed. Kenneth Rexroth (New Directions, 1949), 63.
[125] Alex Comfort, "On Interpreting the War," 362.
[126] Ibid., 359-360.

participating in an integrated purpose, because then you can postulate rules." However, his generation of writers cannot do this because they realize that "we are no longer an integrated body held together by a purpose."[127] If there is no purpose holding together society, then there is no longer any common measure of precision—the only ground is individual, and the only communities possible are those forced into existence through the shared experience of violence.

This realization becomes central to Comfort's vision of Romanticism, uniting his political anarchism with the self-limitation of a Romantic tradition. For Comfort during the years of his most prolific writing on the topic, there is no organic or purposive community possible other than one established through shared hardship or oppression. This decidedly colors the way that Comfort takes up the question of participation in mobilization. He goes so far in his response to Spender as to claim "no therapy short of military defeat has an chance of re-establishing the common stability of literature and of the man on the street," and "the greater the adversity the greater the sudden realization of a stream of imaginative work."[128] Comfort's unmistakable conclusion, here, was that it is only through the loss of freedom that would accompany military defeat that a true wellspring of literature capable of re-establishing stable culture and a sense of individuality might emerge. This position was, for obvious reasons, provocative. For American readers of the *Partisan Review*, an uncharitable citation of this passage by George Orwell in the 1942 feature "Pacifism and the War" would be the first introduction

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[127] Ibid., 360-361.
[128] Ibid. 360.

of Comfort's thought to an American audience. Because of its limited distribution, such an audience was unlikely to be broadly familiar with Comfort's first novel, *No Such Liberty*, written while Comfort was still at Trinity College. However, even if Comfort's novel was unfamiliar to readers, Orwell's stinging review of *No Such Liberty* in October 1941 in the *Adelphi* may have crossed some paths. There, Orwell articulated an objection that he would use repeatedly to push against Comfort in particular, but which would live on in interventionist political discourse for the next seventy-five years:

> that individual salvation is not possible, that the choice before human beings is not, as a rule, between good and evil but between two evils. You can let the Nazis rule the world; that is evil; or you can overthrow them by war, which is also evil. There is no other choice before you, and whichever you choose you will not come out with clean hands.[129]

When called on to contribute to the 1942 feature "Pacifism and the War," Orwell would put the point more simply in the pages of the *Partisan Review* as a parry to Comfort's letter of response to Spender: "Pacifism is objectively pro-Fascist."[130] Even as the older Orwell found the position of Comfort and the other pacifists among the younger generation dangerously naive, his interest was nonetheless a spur to greater engagement with Comfort in particular for American readers. The *Partisan Review* feature was in response to a swipe Orwell had taken at Comfort in a "London Letter" from earlier in 1942, and Comfort got a second opportunity to explain "English Poetry and the War" to

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[129] George Orwell, "No, Not One," *The Adelphi* (Oct. 1941), collected in *All Art Is Propaganda: Critical Essays*, ed. George Packer, (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), 175.
[130] George Orwell, "War and Pacifism," *Partisan Review* 9:5 (1942), 419.

American readers of the *Partisan Review* the following year. This was more of an airing than homegrown anarchist war objectors, such as those who contributed to *Retort*, would receive from the better-distributed *Partisan Review*.

In his contribution to the "Pacifism and the War" feature, Orwell expresses fascination with what he calls "the psychological processes by which pacifists who have started out with an alleged horror of violence end up with a marked tendency to be fascinated by the success and power of Nazism."[131] This characterization is, of course, unfair—though it is true that Comfort's later novel, *The Power House*, published in Britain in 1944 and America in 1945, would be praised in part for its humanizing and sympathetic depiction of a German officer in occupied France.[132] Orwell's deliberately uncharitable reading of both Comfort's first novel and his letter to *Horizon* in response to Spender brings Comfort's claims for romanticism into more immediate contact with the "Failure of Nerve" thesis that his "Art and Social Responsibility" would take as a prod for producing a more comprehensive theory. Comfort's arguments that a return to romanticism was necessary because the war had no unifying purpose and was experienced with no shared grounding beyond the individual were precisely the sort of pessimist's diagnosis that Hook would argue against in the winter of 1943, just months after the exchanges between Comfort and Orwell in the *Partisan Review*. But the sense of

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[131] Ibid.

[132] See Marjorie Farber, "Means Laid End to End," *The New Republic* (April 2, 1945); Farber both praises the novel's depiction of the German Captain Ritter for not resorting to nationalist stereotypes, but also expresses the hesitation that "the identification of a hypothetically 'correct' Nazi, before he has committed any crimes, with the French saboteur who falls into the Nazi error of believing that 'history must be lubricated with the grease of human lives'—this has only a philosophical meaning for us" (450).

experiential scale for art was not a meaningful response for the “standing aside” that he had advocated for artists, even if what Orwell calls Comfort’s “turn the other cheek” style of pacifism would provide a positive model for disinvesting from the kind of mobilization that Hook argued could result in “the construction of a new social order.” Comfort’s belief not in “the success and power of Nazism,” as Orwell had had it, but in something resembling “doom for western culture, no matter who wins the war or peace,” as Hook had generalized, squared his pacifism and romanticism against an older and committedly anti-Fascist left in Britain. It also mitigated against Comfort finding common cause with the Americans mobilizing to reorganize European society after the war. So when Comfort set out to respond to Hook in “Art and Social Responsibility,” first in the pages of his *New Road 1944*, then in an expanded version of the essay for his collection *Art and Social Responsibility* in 1946, he had the rhetorical task of accounting for both the direct critique of pacifism and the indirect critique leveled at his generation as “obscurantist” doomsayers by Hook.

A Romanticism of Weakness, Death, and Social Responsibility

At its heart, Alex Comfort’s “Art and Social Responsibility” is less concerned with characterizing an art that is socially responsible than it is the conditions under which a socially responsible art might be produced. The central problem that the essay works through is given crystalline form by an anecdote that occurs about halfway through it. After a year developing his thinking about the new Romanticism of his generation following his 1942 and 1943 correspondence in magazines on both sides of the Atlantic,

Comfort's agenda for Romantic self-limitation shifted to emphasize the realization of death as a form of individual contingency. This entailed a rejection of society as irresponsible, an asylum of the mad, because participation within a group allowed for the abrogation of death as an individual. Comfort argued that his generation was Romantic precisely because they saw themselves as victims of their environment, and "the awareness of death, the quasi-priestly function, are omnipresent for anyone who knows contemporary English art and letters. No artist can escape from them and retain his art."[133] This awareness of death is not, it should be noted, a celebration of death. To Comfort, the celebration of death was for Fascists who attempt to form "a refuge from Death in death," and in doing so effort epitomize society.[134]

Against Sidney Hook's characterization in "The New Failure of Nerve," Comfort argued that "history is not a process that is amenable to reason."[135] and humanity has "a congenital inability to form a community which does not involve the abuse of power."[136] The artistic sensibility is able to perceive this abuse, because artists retain an awareness of death and therefore of the integrity of the individual. It is against this "quasi-priestly function" that society teaches that "the individual is unreal, and therefore death, the termination of the individual, is unreal also."[137] This argument about the nature of society and the individual runs through Comfort's work of the mid-1940s through to his more completely elaborated thinking in *Authority and Delinquency* in 1950. It serves as the

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[133] Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," 20.
[134] Ibid., 22.
[135] Ibid., 20.
[136] Ibid., 21.
[137] Ibid., 21.

anchor to a critique of society that responded to both Hook's appeal for reason and Orwell's push for engagement, and the basis for Comfort's thinking of what could constitute the living of a good life. In order to flesh out the foundation of the good life that Comfort saw as available in his historical moment, however, it is necessary to explore both how Comfort understood responsibility and how this understanding fit against his claims for neo-Romanticism.

Comfort's explanation for the relationship artists have to their society and the interpretation of their moment emphasizes the importance of this recognition of death. He writes that society has "absolved us by rejecting individuality, to which as artists we are obliged to cling, even though in retaining it we are forced to face the reality of personal death, the bitterest thought that any interpretative mind can face."[138] As a result, "all our politics are atomized," and those who would participate in "corporate action" owing to the belief that they have obligations to a strawman "society" are definitionally behaving in a manner consistent with what Comfort calls "mental disease."[139] With this gesture, Comfort establishes a critique by which participation in society involves a delusional rejection of the individual and death as well as offering a screen that obscures the responsibility one owes other individuals. Comfort argues that it is these two points that lead "a great personal friend" of his to take pride in having "helped to exterminate, under orders, the population of a city where he has a good many acquaintances."[140] Comfort is quick to point out that this makes his friend neither "a fool nor a sadist," and Comfort is

[138] Ibid., 22.
[139] Ibid., 22-23.
[140] Ibid., 24.

clear that he "shall not hate or distrust any of [his] fellow patients [in the asylum of society] singly."[141] In fact, he argues that "we have boundless responsibility to every person we meet," and the true problem for his moment is that "each sincere citizen feels responsibility to society in the abstract, and none to the people he kills."[142]

This distinction between those to whom we have a "boundless responsibility" and the sense of meaning, value, and responsibility that "each sincere citizen" experiences is a profound one in Comfort's thinking. The language he uses in describing these relations anticipates in compelling ways the arguments that would be developed by Emmanuel Levinas in his 1961 work *Totality and Infinity*. In the preface to that work, Levinas too reflects on war. He explains that in war, the vision of being granted a subject is totality, in which "individuals are reduced to being bearers of forces that command them unbeknown to themselves," and "the meaning of individuals…is derived from the totality."[143] This is a fundamentally alienated arrangement, but Levinas avoids assembling a falsely autonomous subject in opposition to a viewpoint from the individual remains embedded in totality. The breach of totality will not come from the autonomous power of the subject—as Levinas's work demonstrates, "the harsh law of war breaks up not against an impotent subjectivism cut off from being, but against the infinite, more objective than objectivity."[144] For Levinas, the infinite emerges in the encounter with the other encountered as other, the Stranger. Unlike in encounters with the "formal" alterity of the

[141] Ibid., 24-25.
[142] Ibid., 25.
[143] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1961/1969) trans. Alphonso Lingis, 21-22.
[144] Ibid., 26.

objects of the world, when the "I" encounters the other as other, the "sway of the I will not cross the distance marked by the alterity of the other," and cannot effect the dissolution of the other into the same.[145] In such an encounter with the other, "he escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal," and this generates "a relation whose terms do not form a totality."[146] The thinking of this infinition, the escape of the absolutely Other overflowing from this relation, breaches totality.

When Levinas turns to address ethics directly in these terms, he is clear that "the absolutely other—the Other—does not limit the freedom of the same; calling it to responsibility, it founds and justifies it."[147] In other words, the experience of the other's radical alterity and resistance to the totalization of the "I" is experienced not as a negative pressure but a positive structure, and this structure is ethics. Because the radically other cannot be neutralized, the power of the "I" can no longer be expressed through an operation that brings the sensible world under its sway—the power of the "I" could only be realized by the murder of the Other, its annihilation. As Levinas explains, this is because "murder exercises a power over what escapes power."[148] But that temptation is opposed by the infinity, "stronger than murder" which "already resists us in his face, is his face…is the first word: 'you shall not commit murder.'" In other words, the encounter

[145] Ibid., 38.
[146] Ibid., 39.
[147] Ibid., 197.
[148] Ibid., 198.

with the infinity of the other transforms power, but also "paralyses power by its infinite resistance to murder."[149]

Levinas's project is quite different than that of Comfort, coming as it does some fifteen years later than the period of Comfort's greatest activity and responsive to a different tradition, genre, and discursive environment. However, Comfort's emphasis on the exemplification of instances of hospitality as "sane" and "responsible" can be understood as assertions anticipating the kind of ethical structure that Levinas's work outlines in the face-to-face encounter. It is the entrance into ethics that leads to the production of a "community of the weak" in Comfort's essay: "the woman who fails to fuse a shell securely, the clerk who does not look a second time at a pass, the girl who hides a deserter and the idiot who misdirects an escort."[150] The similarity between the exemplification of hospitality and "boundless responsibility" that Comfort describes and the encounter between the subject and the other in Levinas's *Totality and Infinity* highlight some of the features in Comfort's thought that mark the pacifist, anarchist approach of "Art and Social Responsibility" as a prescient and overlooked work—in particular in those moments where its claims were the most radically antiwar. There are even significant similarities in the ways in which the war elides the individual and mitigates against responsibility for each of the two writers.

However, the difference that is most notable in reading Levinas's more fully articulated account of the genesis (and wartime abdication) of responsibility against

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[149] Ibid., 199.
[150] Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," 30.

Comfort's essay is the distance between the way that the two writers approach expression—a difference that makes sense given the different traditions into which each writer has situated their work. For Levinas, the outcome of the impasse with infinity generated in the face-to-face encounter is expression—"the face speaks" and is what forbids us to kill.[151] This is a "primordial discourse whose first word is obligation."[152] Comfort, however, sees the obligation presented to artists as giving expression to "the complaint of all those who cannot speak" and all others who are at some time victims of their environment, including the dead.[153] These are, of course, different conclusions about what the expression of the face of the other demands. Comfort's depiction of this relation is one that could be understood as an attempt to complete a transcendental maneuver of appropriating and making same the plastic form of the other encountered by the artistic "I." The expressive gesture is one that could easily be appropriated toward an exploitative rhetoric. However, it is precisely in this gesture of giving expression to the hospitable encounter with the face of the other that Comfort feels the artist can best respond to the concrete communities of the weak, meeting their obligations to others and toward living a good life.

In Comfort's writing, the artist is responsible to a broad community of precarious individuals, a community that emerges most visibly in extreme settings: "the shelters during the air raids, the Cossack villages, some primitive tribes, prisoners in Dachau or

[151] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 66.
[152] Ibid., 201.
[153] Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," 29.

Huyton, the Russian collective farms."[154] Comfort's regrettably imprecise conflation of these settings emerges from an attempt to valorize victims of political violence as being counter-intuitively "free," because they have been brought face-to-face with a power that can take their lives and this experience has counter-intuitively given them their individuality as subjects.[155] This interest in the "freedom" of the politically oppressed or physically disabled comes out of an attempt to articulate the extent to which the realization of responsibility to other individuals comes at the expense of a sense of personal agency or strength, a realization of the limits of the individual's power. Comfort's essay, on this point, begins to overlap with his poetry.

In the "Elegy for a Girl Dead in an Air-Raid," collected in his *Song of Lazarus* (which gathered poems written between 1940 and 1945 for American publication), Comfort's speaker objects:

> I will not lift my hands to history
> for history itself is become a child
> that puffs all flames and does not heed the colour—
> a cold wind having no goal, but blowing endlessly.[156]

History, the speaker tells us, lacks purpose beyond the endlessly self-satisfied blowing out of lives, only "a cold wind having no goal." In the face of such a wind, the speaker

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[154] Ibid., 30.

[155] It is not clear whether Comfort is referring to Cossack villages before or during and after the campaign of Decossackization, or what he would identify in common between Soviet collective farms and the Dachau camp.

[156] Alex Comfort, "Elegy for a Girl Dead in an Air-Raid," *Song of Lazarus* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), 12.

can offer no resistance, he “will not lift [his] hands to history.” History lacks any intrinsic motive or direction, is not a process of forces by which humanity is shaped toward progressive improvement. History instead is a child that “puffs all flames” indiscriminately. There are similarities here between Comfort’s history as a “cold wind” with no purpose and the “storm” called progress that drives back the wings of the Benjaminian Angel of History and prevents the Angel from piecing together what has been smashed. In both figures, the redemption of history by the present has been foreclosed.

But for Comfort, there remains hopefulness in the connections made between subjects outside of the networks of world history. His speaker continues, “we have set our hearts on those small lamps / lit by the blood for its own purposes.” The emotional bonds between individuals have meaning to those living through history’s cold wind, even if “in the darkness one is as dark as another, / and history pinches them out, being all darkness.”[157] Our hearts are still set to each other, even though history may pinch off those hearts indiscriminate as a child. Further, our bodies are themselves autotelic organisms, if only because they are embedded in a natural and biological process that is not only autotelic but autopoietic in the poem’s telling. In the midst of the reflection on the meaninglessness of history, with darkly ludic “puffs” that extinguish even the vibrancy of youth, the speaker is recalled to the sounds of “those wise white artisans / my bones in my limbs, my spine, plotting together / who made me mortal and shall yet be

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[157] Ibid., 12.

born / being my hungry heirs and I their debtor."[158] The speaker is called into a relation with his physical body, erected on the framing of the skeleton and musculature, which has made itself as mortal and will in time birth its bones back into the earth, serving only as a sort of temporary ossuary while the speaker defers the fulfillment of its debt. Comfort extends the encounter with the other that issues the ethical relation to the other-in-the-same of his own physical body.

This fundamental obligation to physical precarity, as well as the command of an absolute otherness embedded in the finite bodies of the world, undergirds every other commitment in Comfort's work. In this, Comfort's poetry and criticism takes up a similar structure to that identified in the discourses of historical Romanticism by Novalis, who had suggested that the Romantic operation functioned by "endowing...the finite with the appearance of the infinite."[159] However, Comfort's neo-Romanticism modifies Novalis's hope that in arguing that "the world must be made Romantic:" to find "the original meaning again" and rediscover that "we shall understand the world when we understand ourselves, because we and it are integral *halves*."[160] For Comfort, doubts linger about the ability of the subject to "find the original meaning again," which remains unredeemed, even in death.[161] His speaker in "Elegy for a Girl Dead in an Air-Raid" concludes with a

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[158] Ibid., 15.

[159] Novalis, "Logological Fragments I," *Novalis: Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. by Margaret Mahoney Stoljar (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 60.

[160] Ibid., 61.

[161] There are poems from these years of Comfort's writing that produce the mirroring of self and natural world found throughout the Romantic tradition, such as his more famous (and frequently celebrated by critics) poem, "The Atoll in the Mind," which presents the brain coral as mirror for the speaker's mind, "dark as water, its root among the bones" (*The Song of Lazarus*, 27).

direct address to the dead girl that unfolds into the form of something like a prayer: "grant you who feared no evil find no heaven / being happier so: puffed out by history / with every good and beautiful flame / [...] Death without end."[162] Calling back to the Anglican common prayer version of the "Gloria Patri," which inserts "world without end" for "εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων" or "in saecula saeculorum," Comfort's speaker wishes for the dead girl that she find no such eternal life of the spirit, and that—simply dead—she is happier for it. After all, "every good and beautiful flame" is extinguished. The poem's promise is not the immortal spirit, but simply death without end. And this is, in the terms of the poem, a happier fate. Better to return the material of the body to the "savoury earth" that produces the body's "inheritors."[163] This cycle of the return of the body to the soil itself, its chemical disintegration, is one that appears throughout Comfort's poetry, and it presents images in which he will attempt to locate "infinity."

To the extent that the infinite appears in Comfort's poetry, it is always purposeless, a blind and material infinity that has its grounding in the physical earth. This is, obviously, a thinking of the infinite that exceeds the Other inherent in the face of the other presented by Levinas. However, the injunction of "thou shalt not kill" remains embedded in the infinite. For example, in "The Syracusan Expedition," Comfort concludes the poem with the reminder that "each of us suddenly / [...] / come upon purposeless Infinity."[164] This "Infinity" is no Christian infinite of the spirit, or the evocation of mystery of a historical Romanticism; rather this is an infinite both embedded

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[162] Comfort, "Elegy for a Girl Dead in an Air-Raid," 17.
[163] Ibid., 15.
[164] Comfort, "The Syracusan Expedition," *The Song of Lazarus*, 46.

in a Romantic vision of nature that invokes the ethical relation. Here, "Infinity" is "a daisy chain of days / dawnless, endless, under kind hills" as corpses transform into the trees that "are protests of the numberless dead."[165] The "infinite" appears in a material process that returns, in the discursive register of the Romantic, to the "boundless" responsibility owed to even the dead.

This resistance to the infinite as mystery—a resistance informed by Hulme's characterization of the Romantic view as "unable to admit the existence of beauty without the infinite being in some way or another dragged in"—is the product of a commitment to art that is, in some measure, objective.[166] For Comfort, "objectivity" follows from the artist's "standing aside" from society in producing their work. As he argues in "Art and Social Responsibility," "though one can at the same time admire the scale and tragic quality of an event...the poetry is subsequent to the fact that whoever writes it has already stood far enough away from his subject to be able to see it in reasonable proportion."[167] The invocation of a requirement of distance from the event is a familiar enough trope for historical Romantic criticism, whether the distance is temporal and (as in Wordsworth's formulation of recollection in tranquillity), spatial (such as might be found in those articulations of the sublime in which the power observed has no dominion over an undemeaned observer), or affective. The shift in Comfort's version of

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[165] Comfort, "First Elegy," *The Song of Lazarus*, 47; "Second Elegy," *The Song of Lazarus*, 53.
[166] T.E. Hulme, *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1936), 128.
[167] Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," 29.

this invocation comes from the way that he valorizes the "objective" as the result of such a distance.

This shift is embedded in the contingencies under which his essay was produced. Given an intellectual and artistic climate that oscillated between inward-turning despair and war mobilization in the name of reason, Comfort's appeal to the distance necessary to generate "objective art" is an attempt to turn Romanticism toward rhetorical ends. He argues that "there is no more serious threat to the will to continue fighting than the existence of a body of objective art."[168] The neo-Romantic artist utilizes the distance preserved by standing aside from society to produce work that reflects the tragic experience of individuals, obeying the "boundless responsibility…to all men," rather than "society in the abstract." The "objective art" that follows is necessarily oppositional to the self-image of societies: "it requires to be explained away, blackguarded into silence, conscripted, or ignored, according to the methods in vogue in the society concerned."[169] Comfort's novel of this period, *The Power House*, gives voice to many of the ideas found in "Art and Social Responsibility" through Claus, a "volunteer" laborer at a German-occupied textile factory in a fictionalized Calais. Befitting Comfort's sense of what must happen to such an objective perspective, only a character inhabiting a position of great weakness, that other characters perceive as delusional and that the state has effectively incarcerated, has obtained the objectivizing distance to speak a responsible truth.

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[168] Ibid., 29.
[169] Ibid., 29.

The novel focalizes around Claus only in its final pages, slipping from the use of free indirect discourse to adopt Claus's voice in the first person. The reader encounters Claus only because he was in the same work unit as one of the novel's central protagonists, Vernier, an indecisive but literary man. Vernier, whose interest in the writings of Jean Giono mirrors Comfort's own, had been an officer in the French army and deserted after the Germans burst through the Ardennes. When volunteers at the textile factory riot in the novel's fifth book, Claus comes out of the events unscathed where Vernier does not. His avoidance of the action comes in part because the other characters assume that he is delusional, endlessly obsessing over the decoration of a belt to the consternation of the occupying forces' guards and his fellow volunteers. Both Claus and Vernier are taken to the hospital of a detention camp. Vernier is barely conscious, fighting off infection after a piece of grenade shrapnel lodged in his leg. And as Vernier drifts toward death, the novel delivers a message in Claus's voice that takes on the language of Comfort's criticism directly in some places. Claus reflects from within the hospital hut that "sickness and deformity are coming to be valuable...a game leg is a treasured possession, a sort of passport to life...I sometimes wonder how many wives would buy one for their husbands, how many mothers for their sons."[170] The passage, embedded as it is in the fiction, answers the rhetorical question that Comfort had put in the same terms in "Art and Social Responsibility," asking "what are we to make of a world where disablement and sickness are priceless possessions, a sort of passport to life?

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[170] Comfort, *The Power House*, 459.

How many wives would buy a game leg for their husbands—how many mothers for their sons?"[171]

In the novel, the narrative drive for closure has put more substantial demands on the question. Comfort provides a tentative answer to the essay's rhetorical "what are we to make of a world…" when Claus muses:

> That's what one means when one says it's an age for the weak. The strong are done for from the start—there's always a stronger. We're the weak. We're bombed, starved, taxed, jailed, conscripted, shot or frightened collectively. [...] We are the enemies of society, and we must learn disobedience. Then we shall probably inherit the earth by default when the maniacs have burned each other to a cinder. [...] Europe stinks of murder and groans with partings; your strength or your skill has got to be hidden, or if you display it, your mind—all sources of danger: the lunatics either desire you or fear you, and I do not know which kills you more rapidly.[172]

This passage offers an example of the sort of stance that led the critic Isaac Rosenfeld, reviewing the novel for *Partisan Review* in 1945, to argue that the book "tends to reduce politics to draft-dodging." Rosenfeld writes that in *The Power House*, "the state is something to be ducked, rather than changed; war is a thing to be avoided, rather than destroyed—and it is the solitary self, who alone is sane, who is to do the ducking and the

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[171] Comfort, "Art and Social Responsibility," 28.
[172] Alex Comfort, *The Power House* (New York: Viking Press, 1945), 459-460.

avoiding."[173] Rosenfeld's critique of the novel's politics bring them into sharp relief. While Rosenfeld appears to hold out hope that the state can be made beneficent or that war can be eradicated with the right exercise of violence, Comfort's ventriloquism of the imprisoned and weak Claus admits no such hope for force. Even the examples of the "community of the weak" Comfort had provided in his criticism exercise disobedience not through any overt assertion but through standing at a distance that grants objectivity, never entering into a collective politics. In moments where the encounter with the face of another reveals the Other, the clerk obeys the command to "not look a second time at a pass." As Comfort writes in the third book of *The Power House*, a young woman sees the faces of deserters, and ignoring the immediate threat to her household allows them to take refuge in her family's outbuilding. These examples of the community of the weak coming into being play out the sort of individualistic and "objective" understanding that Comfort argues would threaten the continued conduct of the war.

To put this another way, in Comfort's telling, "objective" understanding allows one to know and anticipate tragedy, to internalize it, and come to anticipate the fact of individual death, and therefore to step aside from participation in society to mitigate against specific, individual deaths. This is the other side of the valorization of physical or mental disability in Comfort's work. While disablement ensures that an individual's creative and other capacities remain hidden to corporate purposes, it also makes more immediately visible the materiality and contingency of the human body. As the speaker of his "Hoc Est Corpus," a poem published originally in *The Nation* in 1943, unwinds the

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[173] Isaac Rosenfeld, "In and Out of War," *Partisan Review* 12:2 (1945), 253.

fact of physical finitude, of being a body: "I who am nothing, and this tissue / steer, find in my servant still my maker." The servant body is, reciprocally, the maker of the self. The "nothing" that speaks is the self "whom the blood maintains, / whom the heart's coming, slight defection / shall spill."[174] The self, in this telling, both exceeds and emerges within the physical body itself—the title a revision of the "hoc est corpus meum" that removes the possessive. The end of the self, its spilling out from the body, is contained in "the heart's coming, slight defection." As such, the body is both genesis and terminus for the self. Comfort's emphasis on the precarity out of which the "free community" emerges suggests that the demands of the weakened, precarious body can be understood as freeing to the extent that they recall the self to itself, enabling the face-to-face encounter of the ethical relation and pulling the individual away from society.

This embrace of the community of the weak as the model for a free community made Comfort's vision of what it means to represent and live the good life difficult to transfer across the Atlantic to an American audience. In an intellectual and artistic climate in which conversation was oriented around social planning for the postwar settlement, the idea that the truly free community was found in the detention camps of Europe was unintelligible. Even so, there was a robust cross-pollination of thought and of aesthetics between Comfort, the New Romantic constellation he brought together, and prominent anarchist and libertarian writers in the United States. This was most visible in the way that the face-to-face encounter of strength and weakness was represented in an

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[174] Alex Comfort, "Hoc Est Corpus," *The Song of Lazarus*, 26. The only change between the version published in *The Nation* and the version collected in *The Song of Lazarus* is the addition of a stanza break in the later version.

essay by Paul Goodman that Comfort had included in *New Road* in the year that his *The Power House* was first published.

The short, lyrical essay by the American poet, playwright, critic, and psychoanalyst is called "A Statue of 'Strength and Weakness'." In it, Goodman offers three, evolving readings of an allegorical sculpture of "Strength" and "Weakness," in which Strength kneels over Weakness, pressing her down onto her back. In Goodman's reading, the pair's struggle is captured at a moment in which "something *new*, as yet unthought of, will well up," and the moment of impasse rendered in the statue will resolve through the intervention of Love.[175] But in the essay's first reading, only the statue's violent presentation is visible, and Strength is described as wearing "a look of intense perplexity."[176] The figure is perplexed because, Goodman writes, "Strength does not want to exert force on Weakness; yet she is intent on striking him." The essay continues:

> being powerful, Strength does not want to strike but to *rule*; he wants, that is, to exert the *persuasiveness* of power. But this puts him in the greatest difficulty when his power is challenged by the violence of Weakness; the difficulty is tellingly expressed by the perplexity on his countenance and even more by the excessive strain of his muscles far beyond what is needed to hold her down, as if he hoped to hurt her merely by forced

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[175] Paul Goodman, "A Statue of 'Strength and Weakness'," *New Road*, ed. Alex Comfort and John Bayliss (London: Gray Walls Press, 1944), 241.
[176] Ibid., 239.

> *inaction*...constraining [his hurtful power] within himself, so that the real struggle is the knot of his own muscles![177]

Having been struck by Weakness, though not harmed, Strength exerts power against himself to hold Weakness in place and constrain further action from the female figure. This exertion, however, becomes visible as an excessive strain because Strength avoids striking directly out, preferring to persuade through his constraint—that is, to rule.

For her part, Weakness "wants to strike and be struck just in order to have her own nature made manifest; what she wants is not to be ruled but to be defeated...thus it is Strength who bears the wounds and the signs of straining, whereas Weakness is as if untouched."[178] In the moment of perplexed impasse that the sculpture captures, Weakness retains equipoise as Strength strains to understand why Weakness demands the defeat that will make "her own nature...manifest." Weakness, in Goodman's reading of the sculpture, strikes out at Strength to draw out his power and compel the return of her violence; in making her own vulnerability manifest, she brings about the realization, in Strength, of the truth of his power. Goodman's second pass over the stature proceeds through what he calls "the struggle among his own forces" of Strength, and what might be recognized as "an effigy of *Fear*." This fear, Goodman continues, is "not fear of something before him, but self-fear."[179] Against the physically violent vulnerability of Weakness, Strength shrinks in fear of his own violence, and it is this fear "that restrains

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[177] Ibid., 239.
[178] Ibid., 239.
[179] Ibid., 240.

him from striking out."[180] The allegorical encounter is one in which the suspension of action, the moment of physical impasse, has captured an instant of reflection during which each figure realizes their nature and relative position. Strength carries the fear and guilt of his power, while Weakness scatters her resources in violence and, in Goodman's reading, remains both willful and innocent.

The appeal of Goodman's allegorical figures to Comfort's politics, and ultimately to Comfort's vision of Romanticism, is their fit against a vision of the weak individual recalling the strong to the consequences of violence. However, Goodman poses a challenge in both his literary output from this period and his criticism to the normative ideal of an integrated and earnest personality—including in his criticism of the retrospective formulation of British "new Romanticism" by Kenneth Rexroth in 1949, which will be discussed below. Comfort, who deploys just such normative language in his criticism against participation in society, nonetheless draws in Claus a character who speaks in Comfort's own voice but does not conform to the normative standard of the integrated personality. And although Comfort's intentions in *The Power House* are clearly earnest, his aesthetic practices challenge and call attention to the "naturalness" of even naturalist fiction because of the ways that the artifice of the novel resists absorption and produces distance. For instance, it is possible to note the way that Comfort has transparently adopted the fusion of polemic and fiction that Ira Wells has recently suggested characterize American naturalist fiction, granting his own polemical positions

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[180] Ibid., 240.

the upper hand while failing to bother even with a sleight of narrative hand.[181] The heated confrontations between characters in Comfort's novel are often where the suspension of disbelief, a crucial critical trope in the drama of readerly absorption attending earlier forms of Romanticism, is least possible—and not simply because of heavy-fisted writing.

For example, contemporary critics were quite complimentary of the first "book" in Comfort's *The Power House*. Randall Jarrell, reviewing *The Song of Lazarus* in *The Nation* in December of 1945, would write that "the first part of Alex Comfort's novel is better than anything in his book of poems," for instance.[182] In that first part, the novel runs on a fully naturalist track, following the life of the young engineer Fougueux, who struggles with impotence as foreboding about the coming war rumbles through his community. The engine Fougueux attends is called "*La Virginie*," and his friend, Loubain, becomes involved with a desperate masochist named Arsule, whom he accidentally strangles in the concluding scenes of the book's first part. From the aptonymic engineer attending the virginal machine, the first part of the book consistently tries to distance readers from the text, disallowing absorption. And as if he were too smooth in the artifice of the first book in *The Power House*, midway through Book Two Comfort renders a confrontation between Vernier and the young industrialist, Duneulin, in which Vernier argues in favor of the pacifist writer Jean Giono—a gesture that forces readers to re-evaluate the masochistic Arsule as a distorted mirroring of the Arsule character in Giono's 1930 novel *Regain*. The argument also was one that clearly narrows

[181] See Ira Wells, *Fighting Words: Polemics and Social Change in Literary Naturalism* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013).
[182] Randall Jarrell, "Verse Chronicle," *The Nation* (Dec. 29, 1945), 741.

the distance between Vernier's words and those of Comfort himself, who was a champion of Giono's anti-war writing and included a section of Giono's 1937 *Refus d'obéissance* in *New Road*.

So Comfort's fiction, then, relies on an artifice that will not only demonstrate the fiction of the fiction, but that also redirects the attention of a reader from the apparent situation of the narrative to the polemic of the writer. Its absorptive effect draws the reader deeper into an environment populated largely by the broader system of fictions in which the novel is situated. Even in the novel's moments of greatest absorption in the details of its fictional world, such as the retreat of the French forces after the German military advance, the fiction pushes against the fictive quality of the "realist" technique in much naturalism by refusing to grant its characters any orientation to the action. The result is a free indirect discourse that is as lost as its characters in a forest of detail, resisting the relief of narratorial intervention to clarify the picture. One of the most common objections readers made of Comfort's novel was that, as Diana Trilling complained, it was possible to "read the first two dozen pages three times without having any notion of what [she] was reading."[183] The focalizing character, Vernier, reflects that "he never made the smallest attempt to understand what the situation was, or, having failed to understand it, did not care."[184] This disinvestment can be understood as readerly resistance to this distancing absorption of characters by the particulars of the fictional world, absent an orienting "situation." However, this was an approach that the critic,

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[183] Diana Trilling, "Fiction in Review," *The Nation* 160:13 (1945), 368.
[184] Comfort, *The Power House*, 273.

poet, and novelist Marguerite Young saw in terms similar to the face-to-face encounter that Levinas would render as a resistance to transcendence and the breach of the tangible nudity of the face by the infinite.

Marguerite Young had published poems in *Horizon* as well as in *New Direction*, and she had just published the historical study *Angel in the Forest* (1945) before reviewing Comfort's work. Young was a sympathetic audience for the novel's political content, but more importantly she was receptive to its aesthetic practice. In what was to be one of her final publications before 18 years devoted to her epic novel *Miss Macintosh, My Darling*, Young addressed Comfort's *The Power House* as the centerpiece of her review essay, "The Anarchic Principle." That essay begins by recounting an argument from Comfort's *Horizon* letter in response to Stephen Spender, which is that history "is ignoble to those who view it in details rather than in generalities."[185] She suggests this as the lens that Comfort brings in *The Power House*, but extends the contention into an aesthetic theory that unites Comfort's anarchism and his poetics more forcefully than Comfort had done himself.

Young suggests that Comfort's work employs "the anarchic principle that reality is given to us only through our sensations, which may be, for that matter, defective, so that no accurate report can be made." His novel, then, "accurately report[s] the evidence at hand, making no reference to any supposed ideal…[and admits] no such entities as universals in actuality." Young asks, "what higher reality is there...than that of particular things" to a writer for whom "there is no possibility of introducing...the mentality of the

[185] Marguerite Young, "The Anarchic Principle," *Sewanee Review* 53:4 (1945), 670.

angel," and for whom "the accident is the absolute" even when those "half-realized, half-realizable particulars, which dissolve at a touch...may be as papery as the faces of two dead German soldiers washed up from the winter sea."[186] Young argues that Comfort's novel casts light on sensible particulars without recourse to any transcendent totality into which they might be integrated, turning those particulars into their own purposeless absolute, as Comfort's own argument for a return to Romanticism had envisioned. Young suggests that in doing so, Comfort is in fact working in accord with a principle of anarchism, of an anarchist aesthetic embedded in an accident of sensation. Though such an aesthetic may be prone to what Young describes as "fallibility and relativity," she nonetheless lauds Comfort for resisting "the transcendent unity" in favor of showing the "blind, instinctive life of man in an irrational world which he did not altogether design."[187]

The movement from the accident to the absolute, the discovery of the absolute in the accident, in Young's critical account mirrors in compelling ways the characterization of the work of art as "monadic" in Theodor Adorno's "Theses upon Art and Religion Today," published with an eye toward an Anglophone readership with in *The Kenyon Review* in 1945. There Adorno argues that the work of art addresses the "universal" more profoundly "the less [it] copes explicitly with universalities [and] the more it becomes infatuated with its own detached world."[188] The autonomy of the work, the separation its self-containment introduces between work and world, is important for the conception of

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[186] Ibid., 671.
[187] Ibid., 672.
[188] Theodor Adorno, "Theses upon Art and Religion Today," *The Kenyon Review* 7:4 (1945), 681.

the work of art as a monad. Adorno's illustration for this is Proust, who he suggests, "tried to salvage life, as an image, from the throes of death," and did so "by giving himself up to the most futile, the most insignificant, the most fugitive traces of memory."[189] This obsessive quality, Adorno suggests, is what grants the work of art something of the same function that the religious once held: "by obstinately following up the desiderata of its concretion...the work becomes truly the bearer of the universal."[190]

Young offers a succinct argument for understanding Comfort's fiction as resisting the universal and embracing the "most futile, the most insignificant, the most fugitive" traces, as Adorno had suggested of the monadic work. Young captures the extent to which the work's resistance to "purpose" and "unity" becomes, itself, a thread in the "unknown aggregate" of the work, which is also true of his poetry. However, Comfort's Romanticism has more invested in the contingent individual than could be exhausted by an understanding of his work as monadic in the sense of the accident containing the absolute. Although Young's sympathetic reading of Comfort is revealing, it is not true that the accident alone can be genesis for accessing the absolute in Comfort's case. Rather, the accident must be encountered through the subjectivity of a contingent and weak individual, an individual who experiences this particular in such a way that neither the individual nor their object is incorporated into the other. This encounter leads to the absolute through the revelation of the obligation owed to every other, to "the voiceless

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[189] Ibid., 682.
[190] Ibid., 681.

poor we have always under our feet," and even "the shoreward dead," redeemed only partially by engaging the expression of each other.[191]

American Reception

While Young's reception of Comfort's novel makes clear that this poetics involved more than earnestness, the editorial embrace that brought the New Romantic poets to an American audience as a movement was less nuanced. Kenneth Rexroth's *New British Poets* squeezed seventy poets into 300 dense pages, not including his own lengthy prefacing essay. In a combative introduction betraying a lack of interest in the literary criticism around which the New Romanticism took shape in England, Rexroth argues that "it is a moral quality, rather than a literary theory, which marks the New Romanticism," and that this distinguishes it from the attitude that predominated in the years before the war.[192] In those years, Rexroth suggests, "it was almost universally taught and believed that the work of art was not communicative, was not 'about anything'...should be approached [...as] a sort of machine for precipitating an 'aesthetic experience'."[193] Were there to be "any telltale fingerprints" of the artist in the work, "they were ignored with a nervous little laugh."[194] In a gesture that seems to forget much of the writing that was produced outside of an Imagist or Objectivist mode, and even a great number of those

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[191] Comfort, "Third Elegy," *The Song of Lazarus*, 55; "Epitaph," *The Song of Lazarus*, 68.
[192] Kenneth Rexroth, "Introduction," *New British Poets* (New Directions, 1949), xiv.
[193] Ibid., x.
[194] Ibid., x.

works, Rexroth argues that it was this “suppression of all acknowledgment of personality” that is part and parcel of “the splitting of the modern personality.”[195]

This partial narrative serves the rhetorical purpose of enabling Rexroth to introduce the younger generation in Britain as a group who has reasserted “moral earnestness and personal integrity.”[196] The “next phase” of British poetry, Rexroth suggests, will be marked by “simplicity and candor.”[197] What Young had identified as an anarchic principle of fidelity to the accident in an essentially monadic work, to the contingent particulars of unreliable and fallible sensation, is overwritten by Rexroth in favor of a personalist earnestness and integrity. The appeal that Rexroth wants to make in his “Introduction” is for sincerity in place of irony. But in doing so, he conflates the New Romanticism with sincere and direct communication at the expense of not only fidelity to the poetry under consideration, but as the objection of Paul Goodman demonstrates, his own poetry as well.

As Paul Goodman argues in a review of the anthology for *Poetry* in 1950, at the height of his interest in gestalt therapy, the values that Rexroth had attributed to the New Romanticism were essentially “medical norms:” “there is such a thing as a disintegrated personality to be healed; there is no such thing as a whole personality qua creative agent.”[198] Against these ideals of “moral earnestness and personal integrity,” Goodman responds with an anecdote drawn from a reading Rexroth gave of his own poetry:

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[195] Ibid., xi.
[196] Ibid., xiv.
[197] Ibid., xxxv.
[198] Paul Goodman, “The ‘New Romanticism’,” *Poetry* 75:4 (1950), 237.

> […] commencing with an old poem of his from the time when he was an Objectivist...Now that kind of thing, he said at the reading, did not communicate, he no longer liked it, and he went on to read recent poems in a more 'direct' style. William Carlos Williams was in the gathering and he rose and pointed out (what was evident) that the earlier piece communicated much more directly and more subtilely the underlying feeling and character; and that by trying to speak to the audience, the poet created a fictitious "I" between his feelings and the audience rather less interesting than Kenneth Rexroth himself struggling with rhythms and warping the syntax.[199]

Goodman develops the point immediately from here without reflection, but it is worth pausing on what Williams apparently identified in the style that Rexroth had adopted, apparently, from the influence of the New Romanticism. The fictitious "I" inserted into the poem, grafted on in order to produce more direct communication, ultimately led to a less direct transmission of "the underlying feeling" of the poetry. In the attempt to address his audience with candor, he had developed a fictitious "whole personality" in the form of the speaking "I" of his poetry. This is what Goodman will ultimately reject about the anthology itself.

After recounting Rexroth's performance, Goodman turns to the poems included in the *New British Poets*. He writes that "we know by theory that human nature is such that love, birth, death, sociality, the easy animated intercourse of faithful creatures, these are

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[199] Ibid., 238.

the things that matter. But the new Romantic poets are impatient and try to get right to the point."[200] The difficulty with such an approach, Goodman seems to suggest, is that in those poems that represented them to an American audience, the British poets built so direct a fictional mouthpiece for "the things that matter" as to draw all of the attention to the mouthpiece itself. Accounting for the resistance of a certain type of reader to the poems collected in *New British Poets*, Goodman argues that in spite of what any avatar of sincerity might assume, "we are what we are, mostly are not such that what finally matters is graspable by us as what matters—except maybe by blundering in the opposite direction."[201]

Goodman's objection was that the poems of the New Romantic poets gathered in *New British Poets* attempted to relieve readers of their burden to blunder, to ease the work of discovery by asserting a "moral quality" in their speakers without the difficulties of the encounters that brought that moral quality about. This was a criticism that could only be partly fair, because Rexroth's editorial intervention had in some cases excerpted poems in such a way that they embodied his own arguments to a greater extent than the poetics of the poets. To return to Comfort, the anthology included poems from a wide spread of years, but one of these was "Notes for My Son," from the title sequence of *The Song of Lazarus*. The poem in the anthology was excerpted from a series in which the speaker is shifting and unstable, never easily resolved. In the full sequence, the speaker begins by telling us that "I am too much / bound to those who have lost the power to

[200] Ibid., 238.
[201] Ibid., 238.

speak / ever to call my voice my own. // I am young Lazarus." The speaker then accounts for his various resurrections after scenes of death in the war. In the next section, the speaker observes this Lazarus as he walks in a village. In the third, the speaker is difficult to locate, but can "hear the sound of digging" for a mass grave. In the fourth section, the speaker is again observing Lazarus. The fifth section is a "Folksong for Myself," with an ambiguous speaker, and the sixth is the "Notes for My Son" section included in *New British Poets*. These shifting speakers unsettle any sense of the "directness" or "sincerity" of the poem taken as a whole, which intends clearly for an aesthetic experience on the part of the reader that is more complicated than simple persuasion. By the time "Notes for My Son" is spoken, the poem has presented its direct morality as a realization, a consequence of engagement with the world.

However, absent the context of a sequence in which the poem's speaker has shifted from perspective to perspective, diving into and out of the fictive "Lazarus" figure, "Notes for My Son" reads as though it is intended to be read simply as direct speech. It begins, "Remember when you hear them beginning to say Freedom / Look carefully—see who it is that they want you to butcher."[202] The poem seems almost naively direct, and it can be read in those terms. The first section of the poem had planted its Lazarus-speaker firmly in the register of "butchers," with a direct injunction to, "Listen, my enemies / are the pimps and the butchers / the blind and the voiceless are /

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[202] Alex Comfort, "The Song of Lazarus," *The Song of Lazarus*, 93; "Notes for My Son," *New British Poets*, 29.

always my comrades. // Follow me."[203] However, read through the lens of the poem in which it originally appeared, the "Notes for My Son" would appear to be written through the scrim of a speaker not necessarily identified with the author himself. Read through the lens of the anthology that attempted to popularize his work for an American audience, "Notes for My Son" seems composed almost entirely of anaphoric injunctions from the author to "Remember…" In his transmission of the "New Romanticism," Rexroth erases the burden of those textual effects that situate or build an edifice for the speaker of Comfort's poems. In an effort to fit many diverse poets into the paradigm of a new sincerity and candor, Rexroth glides past the recognition about the individual being something hard-won, achieved only in moments of mutual recognition, that was central to Comfort's rendering of this new Romantic sensibility.

Rexroth's assertion that the writers he gathered had achieved personal integrity, however, helps to return to one of the most idiosyncratic gestures in Comfort's depiction of the Romantic sensibility. Comfort had argued that the artist owes the greatest responsibility to individuals like the bureaucrat who looks the other way, or the deliberately imprecise munitions worker in the moment of their imprecision, and not to heroic figures directly challenging a State. This is, of course, a contrast to Rexroth, who would hymn Sacco and Vanzetti, as well as Emma Goldman. Rexroth's emphasis on the candid voice highlights the specificity of Comfort's interest in the contingent ways individuals come to the fact of their individuality, as a response in the radical sense of responsibility. His excusal of otherwise obedient behavior only makes the point more

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[203] Comfort, "The Song of Lazarus," 86.

clearly. For Comfort, part of the realization of the Romantic sensibility is the recognition of weakness—we are not strong enough to "fight history," or even to resist the relief offered by participation in such institutions as the state bureaucracy or the munitions plant. He acknowledges that the disobedience to the State necessary to recognize another individual is too great of a burden to maintain at all times. To the extent that he formulates a positive philosophy of living the good life, his is in every way what Scott Nearing had called a "bore from within" approach.

Comfort's is a pessimistic Romanticism, in which the poetic "intervention into culture," to draw back to Carr and Robinson's phrase, is an appeal for moments of disobedience and care to multiply, setting these out as the germs for a time that he recognizes can never be fully redeemed. But Comfort's pessimism, however much it may distinguish his work from the Romantics of the 19th century, is in keeping with Narsessian's description of the Romantic appeal to self-limitation, in which "regard for other men and dependence on society ought to function as caps on personal freedom, and … those caps are actually what enable freedom's 'realization.'"[204] Though Comfort would obviously object to the phrase "dependence on society," his prioritization of those individuals who momentarily accept the burden of their individuality and their obligation to others before sinking back into the relief of society places his thinking squarely within the Romantic tradition. But in neglecting his work, recoveries of the Romantic have also neglected the opening of responsibility that he introduces to that tradition. In the chapter that follows, however, I will expand on the way that the negotiation of this responsibility

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[204] Narsessian, *Utopia, Limited*, 19.

was taken up in an American context, looking through the lens of precisely that sense of "relief" that could be found through institutions.

Chapter Two - Structures of Relief: Despairing Domesticity

Addressing the nation's Congress at the height of the Depression, it was above all "security" that Franklin Roosevelt prioritized. In his 1935 Annual Message, Roosevelt would identify three areas in which this security was to be gained, including the security of a "livelihood" through the cultivation of the "national resources," security "against the major hazards and vicissitudes of life," and, importantly, "the security of decent homes."[205] It was the link between the first and last of these areas, with resonances of the home as a center of moral life sustained by work, that Roosevelt promoted when he proposed what would become the Works Progress Administration as a means of employing those "three and one half million employable people who are on relief." The effort to put people to work rather than ensuring their security through direct economic relief had moral underpinnings, and situated the Works Progress Administration's efforts within an American tradition of self-reliance. As he argued in this address, "continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fibre" and "to dole out relief in this way [as direct relief] is to administer a narcotic, a subtle destroyer of the human spirit."[206] The millions receiving direct relief would need to get to work or the temporary security purchased through that relief would lose the nation's citizens "their self-respect, their self-reliance."[207] Direct relief was the agent of a narcotic effect that would make families dependent and lead to a

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[205] Franklin D. Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress, January 4, 1935," *The New Deal: Franklin D. Roosevelt Speeches*. https://publicpolicy.pepperdine.edu/academics/research/faculty-research/new-deal/roosevelt-speeches/fr010435.htm (Accessed February 12, 2017).
[206] Ibid.
[207] Ibid.

shameful debasement of autonomy, would lose something crucial to the "human spirit."[208]

Roosevelt's rhetoric situates the notion of relief as a dangerous sort of narcotic that seemed to promise a good life of economic security and "coasting" of the sort identified by Lauren Berlant in *Cruel Optimism*, but which would lead to demoralization. Further, the value accorded to "work relief" by those who advocated it was that it would preserve "the initiative, the virility, the independence and sense of responsibility in the American people," as William Matthews put it in 1935.[209] However, that sense of responsibility was toward the maintainance of the norms of an "American Way," as suggested by the historian William Bremer.[210] Any vision of a good life of responsible disentanglement from the politics and systems that co-opt and misuse the individual, such as was lived out by Scott and Helen Nearing, was not within sight for the New Deal reformers. Nonetheless, I begin with this passage from Roosevelt in particular to highlight the national political environment under which this specific argument about the obligation to secure one's own livelihood emerges. While the idea of "relief" has implications for aesthetics in the 1940s and the turn of the 1950s more broadly, in this chapter the focus will be on an American 1940s. However, the idea of "relief" as a destructive narcotic was one that fit into an international conversation regarding the roles of institutions in the lives of individuals, a philosophical discourse with immediate

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[208] Ibid.
[209] William Matthews, "Relief Can Be Too Cheap," *Survey* LXXI (Jan. 1935), 6.
[210] William Bremer, "Along the 'American Way': the New Deal's Work Relief Programs for the Unemployed," *The Journal of American History* 62:3 (Dec. 1975), 638.

political ramificaitons in the charged environment of the 1930s and 1940s. Where Roosevelt's twinned gesture of direct economic relief alongside a suggestion of its corrosive potential was an attempt to walk a tightrope between elements in what would become his "four freedoms," it was also a challenge to emergent discourses about individual's relationship to institutions in Europe. To give context to this challenge, and to give body to the other purposes that the concept of "relief" would serve politically, it is helpful to pull away from the American scene—where relief posed so immediate a threat to the human spirit in the midst of economic Depression—to consider the emergence of a conservative discourse in Germany regarding the role of institutions. In that political environment, there was a demand for philosophical approaches that would promote institutions as bearers of significance and value that superseded and subsumed the individual, but without the negative connotations of a loss of self, such as one might find in the "crowd in action" in Max Scheler's rendering of "emotional infection."[211] Although his major contributions toward producing such an approach were seen as insufficiently steeped in a National Socialist ideology to satisfy party critics, Arnold Gehlen's work produced during the height of Nazi dominance provided a transversal understanding of the "relief" that institutions could provide individuals from that found in New Deal America.[212]

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[211] See, for instance, in Scheler's *The Nature of Sympathy*, the description of "the genesis of psychopathic group-movements" as carrying such infection, in particular "the emergence of enduring pathological customs and usages on a national scale" (in Max Scheler*, The Nature of Sympathy* [Hamden: Archon Books, 1970], trans. Peter Heath, 16n1).

[212] For a discussion of Gehlen's status within the National Socialist regime, see Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "'Images of Mankind,' and the Notation of Order," in *Nazi Germany and the Humanities: How German*

Gehlen was a committed National Socialist, which places his work in philosophical anthropology and the powerful contrasts it makes visible with Roosevelt's New Deal rhetoric into a register that is politicized in advance. He joined the party in May of 1933, the same month that Roosevelt would announce the Emergency Relief Administration as a component of the first New Deal. Gehlen was by many accounts an enthusiastic party functionary, and while there have been efforts to recover his work among art historians in recent years, Christine Magerski notes that it is impossible to disentangle his "political commitment and his anthropological conviction."[213] This difficulty resides primarily in Gehlen's insistence on the need for and value of institutions, which he describes as "the great orders that preserve us and destroy us, that outlast us…[as] our destinies upon which we human beings hurl ourselves."[214] Institutions are fundamental to humanity in Gehlen's thought, because humans are disposed by their nature toward finding ways to obtain relief (or "unburdening;" Gehlen's term is *Entlastung*) from environmental pressures and dangers. As he frames this in his 1940 work, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, "the basic challenges man faces are liberating himself in order to pursue circumspect and anticipatory activities and obtaining relief from the pressures of the immediate present."[215] This distinguishes humans, for

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Academics Embraced Nazism (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), ed. Anson Rabinbach and Wolfgang Bialas, 178-206.

[213] Christine Magerski, "Arnold Gehlen: Modern Art as a Symbol of Modern Society," *Thesis Eleven* 111 (2012), 82.

[214] Arnold Gehlen, uncited quotation in Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "Arnold Gehlen's Elementary Anthropology—An Introduction," in Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, trans. Clare McMillan and Karl Pillemer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), xxxvi.

[215] Arnold Gehlen, *Man: His Nature and Place in the World*, 43. Gehlen's book was published first in 1940, then in a second edition that removed some references to figures associated with the ideological work

Gehlen, because "an animal exists in the here and now and hence does not encounter the problems man faces." Whereas for humans, which do not live "with time" but possess "knowledge of time," there is a constant need to act toward the future, "to inhibit spontaneous instinctive actions in the immediate present whenever long-term interests are vital."[216] By finding ways of decoupling experience from the situation of the immediate present, humans unburden themselves, offering relief from the pressures introduced by the human animal's open mode of engagement with the world. As social life evolves for humans, this need to inhibit impulse, to promote a hierarchy of need and interest, is fulfilled in Gehlen's telling with the development of and ultimately the "imprinting through institutions in which the problems of life are mastered," which relieves the human animal of the "great problem" any individual poses to himself or herself through "actions in the immediate present."[217] Institutions provide a structure of relief for humans, orienting individuals and outsourcing the obligation to preempt future need and master "problems of life," so that an individual will can be directed toward other tasks.

Gehlen's anthropological project explores the ways in which the human's openness to the world requires the pursuit of forms of relief from the pressures that basic physical deficiency introduces. For Gehlen, that relief comes eventually in the form of institutions that could become an unconscious background for individual action in the present. The impulse to seek relief in institutions, which provide orientation and offer the

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of National Socialism, such as Alfred Rosenberg, in 1944. The text of the 1988 English translation comes from a postwar edition, published in 1950.

[216] Ibid., 43-4.

[217] Ibid., 53.

hope of mastery over fundamental problems, was, in Gehlen's moment, thoroughly politicized. As I argued in the previous chapter, Alex Comfort identified the overwhelming of individual responsibility for action by the abstraction of society, an abstraction which promised victory over personal death. But Comfort located the desire to lose one's person to the orientation offered by society in a response to nationalist, fascist, and totalitarian violence during the war. For Gehlen, that need to relieve the self by recruitment into institutions was a fundamental feature of human life, rather than the consequence of specific historical conditions. To be sure, this naturalization of the primacy of institutions over the individual was useful in promoting self-sacrifice in the context of National Socialism, which Karl-Siegbert Rehberg argues was one of the only reasons Gehlen was tolerated by a Nazi intellectual class irritated by his recourse to an anthropology free of racial science.[218] For Gehlen the discovery of a human need for unburdening and relief was the result of study in biology and philosophy that, as Vittorio Hösle suggests, came about through pragmatically focusing his inquiry on action after rejecting more existential approaches to human experience.[219] Gehlen's work suggests

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[218] Karl-Siegbert Rehberg, "'Images of Mankind,' and the Notation of Order," in *Nazi Germany and the Humanities: How German Academics Embraced Nazism*, ed. Anson Rabinbach and Wolfgang Bialas, (London: Oneworld Publications, 2007), 192. Rehberg notes a review essay by Josef Münzhuber, who argues that in Gehlen's work one can observe "the 'natural harmony between Gehlen's thoughts and the National-Socialist interpretation of life even without the explicit reference to the words of Nietzsche and Alfred Rosenberg."

[219] Vittorio Hösle, *A Short History of German Philosophy,* trans. Steven Rendell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 233. Hösle's bad object is Heidegger, whose querying of the essential Hösle finds dubious in comparison with Gehlen. He argues, in a gesture that feels contrary from the perspective of English-language criticism that has neglected Gehlen's work, Gehlen's 1944 book is the most important philosophical work produced under National Socialism.

that that institutions and institutionalization have, through all of human history, provided a matrix within which the individual finds stability and orientation.

Gehlen made attempts to transfer his theory of institutionalization into the sociology of art after the war and the denazification of the university system. Over time, Gehlen even became an important interlocutor to Theodor Adorno.[220] But the most compelling element of Gehlen's sociological analysis is already present in his anthropological work of the 1940s. Where genres and forms become ritualized, their institutionalization is significant not only as the demonstration of crystallization on a cultural field, but for the way that the emergent institutions of form provide a feedback to reinforce specific collective values. In such a reading of artistic form, when work discovers the relief of a ritualized form, artists and writers accumulate a shared orientation that has political consequences.[221] In this and the following chapters, I explore what such "relief" meant in the context of a long 1940s, bookended by the outbreak of the second World War and the stalemate of war in Korea, and marked by not only political despair among those leftists who were unable to fully embrace the war in the early 1940s, but tremendous uncertainty about how to bring together the relief of security and the vitality of freedom. While the neo-Romantics discussed in the previous chapter circulated a rhetoric of responsibility and individualism in response to the demands of an

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[220] See the discussion of this intellectual rivalry in Hauke Brunkhorst, "The Tenacity of Utopia: The Role of Intellectuals in Cultural Shifts within the Federal Republic of Germany," trans. Jamie Owen Daniel, *New German Critique* 55 (Winter 1992), 127-138.

[221] For a positive view of this sort of crystallization, one might point to Mike Gold's invocation of a "proletarian" literary form in his September 1930 essay "Proletarian Realism," in which—for example—spare language stands in for a rejection of "verbal acrobats" whose showy language indicate their "bourgeois idleness." (*New Masses*, 5).

abstraction in the heat of war, the writers discussed in these chapters struggled to offer social criticism while negotiating the relief of institutions.

Chief among the institutions around which such relief was contested was domesticity, and this became even more apparent in the years following the war. Where the Rooseveltian 1930s was concerned about securing "decent homes" alongside issues such as the use of environmental resources, the elevation of domesticity as an institution apart from the strains of a hostile world carried over into the consumer culture that followed the Allied victory. This elevation of the domestic served as a through line from the anxiety of the prewar years to the anxiety of the postwar situation, and it was accompanied by efforts to cordon the home against the return of economic turmoil. When *Time-Life* surveyed the country in 1947 to gauge its mood, the correspondent in Chicago reported that "profound pessimism about the state of the world and gloomy foreboding about the future shadow almost everyone's daily life." To make matters worse, "there doesn't seem to be much anyone can do about it," which leaves "a listless, weary fatalism."[222] The Denver correspondent relayed that businessmen felt out of control, "aware of the dangers in sky-high prices, but...helpless to do anything about them."[223] Other reports acknowledged the uncertainty of the moment; while a particularly black mood was certain to surround the country during this report, which chanced upon the immediate aftermath of the Texas City disaster that April (in which hundreds were killed and millions in damage done to the Texas port city), the survey noted that in the face of

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[222] Ralph Getsinger, "Detroit," in "Life's Reports: the State of the Nation," *LIFE* (May 12, 1947), 20.
[223] Barron Beshoar, "Denver," in ibid., 26.

such events, people seemed to enjoy baseball and tell jokes. The Chicago reporter informed readers that "there is plenty of interest in the rejuvenated White Sox," and both the Atlanta and Kansas City reporters told stories about the sort of humor making the rounds, though in Kansas City, this was qualified with overtones of nostalgia: "no one told a joke like they used to in more carefree days."[224] This anxiety about the future, a well-placed suspicion about the onset of economic recession (the Recession of 1949, which lasted for 11 months) that might have actually helped to bring that recession about, comes in the form of the recession of happiness.[225] As Sara Ahmed schematizes this dynamic in *The Promise of Happiness*, "when happiness is present, it can recede, becoming anxious, becoming the thing that we could lose in the unfolding of time...we can become defensive, such that we retreat with fear from anything or anyone that threatens to take our happiness away."[226]

Such a turning away from the objects that would threaten the happiness of the immediate postwar moment, away from those areas of concern outside of the control of the private individual, was dramatized by the attentional priorities encouraged in mass culture. For instance, an ad campaign run by Revere Copper and Brass at the time played on the near memory of wartime bombardment and its after-effects, but transported those concerns to the home itself. Within a cartoon where oversized raindrops wearing angry

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[224] B. Barton Jr. & S. Hillman, "Chicago, in ibid., 22; John Cauley, "Kansas City," in ibid., 28.

[225] On the causes of the 1949 recession, see Arnold Zellner, "Consumption and the Consumption Function in the U.S. 1948-1949 Recession," *The Review of Economics and Statistics* (August 1957), 310-311. Zellner writes that the recession can be attributed at least in part to the combination of "postponement of purchaes in late 1948 by those expecting price declines" and "worsening of income expectations between July 1948 and early 1949."

[226] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 161.

scowls loom over a small town with residential neighborhoods stretching away from a central square with a Main Street and church, a man and woman point into the air in fear while a leaflet in the foreground reads, "Homes threatened by enemy action!"[227] The home was imagined as a space where happiness could be guarded through proactive cultivation, even if the contingency of economic conditions might lead to despair at one's lot at work or in politics. As Ahmed points out in her work on happiness, that contingency is one that is fundamental to happiness as a form of affectivity: if we take seriously the "hap" of happiness, then it becomes clear that happiness comes about primarily through an orientation toward objects. As government investment in wartime industry dissipated and monetary policy made money tighter, if these objects were less available in the uncertain terrain of the work- and marketplaces then the persistence of the turn toward the domestic as an object of attention makes immediate sense. So where Ahmed quotes de Beauvoir's apt assertion that "the ideal of happiness has always taken material form in the house," it is also the case that the notion that happiness must be guarded and given pre-emptive defense for its cultivation would leave that ground—the domestic space—as what remains available to the private individual in middle-class American society.[228]

politics and Paul Goodman's Resistance to Relief

[227] See *LIFE* (August 13, 1945), 16.

[228] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. H.M. Parshley (London: Vintage, 1949/1997), 467; qtd in Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 45.

The two writers that I discuss in the chapter that follows, Paul Goodman and George Elliott, both negotiate the implications that this has for living the good life. Specifically, Goodman and Elliott are both engaged with the question of whether the good life involves the active preservation of a normative domestic space as the only scene of reliable pleasure, or whether the work necessary for that preservation constitutes a version of what Goodman would call "sociolatry." As I hope to demonstrate in my discussion of his domestic epiphanics later in this chapter, the rituals of form in the neglected poet, short-fiction writer, and novelist George Elliott's work offer an institutionalized expression of an orientation seeking relief from the currents of political despair that make immediate action in the present difficult. By way of contrast, and presenting a perspective about such relief that may have been far more Rooseveltian than he would have perhaps admitted, the anarchist writer Paul Goodman strained against the relief offered by such institutionalization. Goodman, as a theorist of the advance-guard in art at the turn of the 1950s, presents further contrast with Gehlen's thinking of institutions for his interest in what it was that constituted an avant-garde, although his investment in and influential consideration of "community" was an important feature of what would become the New York School of poets and painters.[229]

However, the reason to begin this discussion with Paul Goodman has less to do with his status as adopted spokesperson for some of the avant-gardist artists in the New York of the late 1940s and early 1950s than it does with his own thinking about the

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[229] See Terrence Diggory's "Community 'Intimate' or 'Inoperative': New York School Poets and Politics from Paul Goodman to Jean-Luc Nancy," *The Scene of My Selves: New Work of New York School Poets*, ed. Terrence Diggory and Stephen Paul Miller (Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 2001), 13ff

relationship between the individual and society. While his celebrity as a theorist about that relationship would evolve about a decade later, crystallizing around his influential *Growing Up Absurd* (1960), Goodman's first real flourishes as something like a public intellectual were written for Dwight Macdonald's monthly review, *politics*. Irving Howe, in his 1969 retrospective "The New York Intellectuals," had called *politics*, "the one significant effort during the late forties to return to radicalism."[230] Howe's rhetorical and polemical purposes almost foreclose his characterization of *politics* as anything other than a critical dead-end (arguably resurrected in Howe's *Dissent*), as he attempts to offer an explanation of the cultural shift from the radical movements of the 1930s to the profound conservatism of the 1950s and 1960s. But as Kevin Mattson has highlighted, Macdonald's magazine was a crucial incubator for the ideas about the grounds of radical critique that came to matter in 1960s America, and Macdonald not only "gave Goodman a forum in which to write social and political criticism," he also "[relied] upon Goodman's thinking to formulate his first steps toward an independent form of radicalism."[231] What this radicalism would look like for *politics*, and for the social

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[230] Irving Howe, "The New York Intellectuals," in *A Voice Still Heard: Selected Essays of Irving Howe*, ed. Nina Howe (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 100. In spite of Howe's characterization, *politics* was arguably its most vital during the mid-1940s, rather than the late 1940s. It should be noted that for whatever praise Howe offered for *politics*, he was openly dismissive of Goodman as an intellectual. See Howe's review of Goodman's *Art and Social Nature* (1944) and *The State of Nature* (1946), "The Discovery of Sex," in *Commentary* (February 1947). In a telling and bitter kicker paragraph, he writes of Goodman's novel, *The State of Nature*, that its perceived failures of spontaneity in the face of a "call to arms in its behalf...shouted from every page" should offer Goodman an opportunity "to reexamine the values that cause his dilemma" (196). Howe simply could not agree with what he considered to be a "naive assumption" on Goodman's part that there was such a thing as "human nature" which was "devoid of tragic content," and—to paraphrase Howe's understanding of Goodman's thinking—that alleviating repression would offer a fix for the problems of modern society (195).

[231] Kevin Mattson, *Intellectuals in Action* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 106.

movements that could trace their intellectual heritage to Macdonald's magazine, was one rooted in a struggle over the political value and meaning of individual autonomy.

The emphasis on autonomy in *politics* developed over time, particularly as its writers negotiated the consequences of war against fascism in Europe. But even in navigating the entanglements and socio-economic fallout of intervention during the war, Macdonald foregrounded the compromises involved for Americans at home both during the war and, projecting outward, in its immediate aftermath. The first article that readers of *politics* encountered—page one, issue one—was an analysis of the American Communist Party's statements following the Tehran conference in 1943, in which Macdonald seized on Earl Browder's comment that "capitalism and socialism have begun to find the way to peaceful coexistence and collaboration in the same world." Macdonald turns this remark around in terms that highlight the concerns he shared with Goodman, writing that this coexistence would necessarily be understood as "the indefinite extension into peace time of the authoritarian, highly centralized kind of State capitalism which this country has adopted as a war measure."[232] Macdonald would leave to Walter J. Oakes the articulation of this extension as the "permanent war economy," a concept whose consequences were expanded upon by many others not so closely aligned with an emergent New Left, including Daniel Bell, whose *The End of Ideology* would be published in the same year as Goodman's *Growing Up Absurd*.[233] But in criticizing Browder's rhetoric around the centralization he feared, Macdonald latches onto the detail

[232] Dwight Macdonald, "The End of the C.P.," in "Comment," *politics* (February, 1944), 1.
[233] Walter J. Oakes, "Toward a Permanent War Economy," *politics* (February, 1944), 11-17. Of Daniel Bell, see his "Planning For Whom—For What" in *The New Leader* (March, 1943).

that would come to matter throughout the initial years of *politics*: the erasure of social difference under such economic and political conditions. He writes that Browder's vision of a peaceful coexistence between socialism and capitalism "will be reached through a National Front of all 'decent'—Browder constantly uses the word as a political criterion—Americans, regardless of trivialities like class or economic status."[234] In the plain-speaking, confrontational tone for which he was known, Macdonald deftly turns the rhetoric of the Communist Party and by extension the institutions of socialism to which he had turned his back against itself ("trivialities like class or economic status") while highlighting the loss of individual interests within a "support" role applicable to "all classes and groups" underwritten by the tendentious moralizing criterion of "decency."[235]

This loss of autonomy (read politically and culturally, as Macdonald's criticisms of popular culture and academicism make clear) preoccupied the pages of *politics*, as well as much of the anti-Stalinist Left in the years following the Moscow Trials and the rise of fascism in Europe. As Mark Greif has recently argued, the reevaluation of a concept as foundational as "the human" and "human nature," by which one could understand the set of practices, desires and responsibilities that made up the individual life, was a marker not only of intellectual seriousness in the years following the political disasters of the 1930s.[236] It also served as a response to one of the most exigent concerns initiated by

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[234] Dwight Macdonald, "The End of the C.P.," 1.
[235] Ibid.
[236] See Mark Greif, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015). Greif sees the effort to limn the "human" as a sort of maieutic discourse. He writes, "midcentury thought faced a desire for a protected human-as-such whose existence it could neither immediately 'prove' nor 'disprove.' Yet thinkers knew they needed (for themselves, and their philosophizing) an assumption of that entity's

totalitarian regimes; if such authoritarian revolutions are not only possible but spreading, and they are greeted by the majority of those they would rule with cheers, then, as Peter Drucker put it in his book *The End of Economic Man*, "it must be owing to a revolution of man's concept of his own nature, of the nature of his society, and of his own function and place in this society."[237] The intellectual's job, then, was to explain, and in the case of *politics*, to politicize that transformation.

Throughout the mid 1940s, following the publication of his first novel, *The Grand Piano*, in 1942, Paul Goodman intervened in the pages of *politics* on precisely this question. Macdonald's editorial eye had helped to spotlight conditions under which human nature seemed open to some fundamental revisions, such as in his highlighting Bruno Bettelheim's influential analysis, "Behavior in Extreme Situations," both with a brief notice of the article's publication in the February 1944 issue and with republication in August 1944. However, against this idea of a core humanity made malleable in the apparent thrall to the modulations and manipulations of social institutions, Goodman offered a consistent defense of the resilience of human nature. The first elaborations of Goodman's position become visible from his initial foray into a critique of psychoanalysis in the course of his review of Anna Freud and Dorothy Burlingham's *Infants Without Families*. Goodman's review is overwhelmingly positive, calling the book a "little classic" that will be "convincing to any one who knows children at all." But

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real existence, or knew that they needed it as an active concept (for other people, for present justice, and for future safety), empty though it might sometimes be, to push men gradually to make it real and full." In other words, the concept of man was important to activate in part because it could provoke political change in safeguarding the rights and liberties of the individual.

[237] Peter Drucker, *The End of Economic Man* (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1939), xvi.

it also provides the occasion for an argument about human nature and the grounds on which any liberatory struggle might take place, and which will form the basis for a very public disagreement with C. Wright Mills in the months that followed.

Goodman writes, adopting a swiftly dissolving ethos of the intervening amateur, that Freud and Burlingham's book does contain "a single point I am not sure that I can agree with," and that is the book's understanding of the "normal superego...as the right basis for later social and moral good behavior." Why this should be the basis of such conflict becomes clear as Goodman goes on to explain that he sees this emphasis on healthy adjustment as, firstly, the basis of a misreading of Sigmund Freud for which revisionist psychoanalysts such as Karen Horney and Erich Fromm are particularly guilty, and further, the crucial point on which revisions to Freud misunderstand the potential for his thinking as social psychology. Where Goodman finds these revisionist perspectives emphasizing a fatalism in Freud's thought concerning the rebellion of the ego against the superego's demands for adjustment, he is quick to suggest that an agreement with this diagnosis implicitly constitutes an argument about "human progress." Freud represents a fatalist perspective, Goodman writes, "if the idea of human progress is to impose upon original nature a strait-jacket called 'adjustment to society,'' because "the soul will sullenly non-cooperate and (God-willing) will eventually rebel." But for Goodman, this is precisely the wrong way to understand the engine of human progress, which comes not—in Goodman's telling—from the ossified social institutions to which the ego is made to adjust, but from creative expression. He continues by suggesting that Freud's perspective is in no way fatalistic "if human progress is

conceived as the continuous revolutionary readjustment of institutions to existent human-beings so as to release the powers and the inventiveness in us all."[238] On the basis of this heuristic representation of the perception of human progress and human nature, Goodman goes on over the next several years to elaborate a theory for not only the consequences of 'adjustment,' but a positive theory of what life lived more in accordance with human nature might look like. Goodman was not alone in his frustration at the Freudian revisionists and their interest in 'adjustment'—he shared his frustration at such a reading of Freud with Theodor Adorno, who would lay out his own broadside against Horney and Fromm in a 1946 lecture to the psychoanalytic society of San Francisco.[239] It is important to highlight, however, the specifics of Goodman's objections so that the intellectual context for his literary work, which I understand as part of this conversation about living in accord with some resilient human nature, are clear.

Goodman had some practical experience in working with children—the premise for the Anna Freud book under review in *politics*—as a drama instructor at a Zionist summer camp and as a teacher at the progressive Manumit School, though he had been fired from his teaching jobs on the basis of his homosexuality.[240] It was on the basis of sympathy for the lost opportunities for expression that were institutionalized in children's development that he seems to have founded his interest in the possibilities of a Freudian

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[238] Paul Goodman, "Review of *Infants Without Families*," *politics* (March, 1945), 80.
[239] See Jean-Michel Rabate, "The Death of Freud: What Is to Be Preferred, Death or Obsolescence?," *Qui Parle* (Fall/Winter 2010), 38-39. Adorno's speech consisted largely of the essay "Revised Psychoanalysis," originally published in *Psyche* (1952).
[240] Goodman would fictionalize these experiences in "The Break-Up of Our Camp" (1935-1947, published 1949) and *Parents' Day* (1951), respectively.

social psychology. He grounds his critique of Anna Freud by way of his experiences as a teacher, writing that progressive education, once interested in "the drawing-out of instinctual drives in social groups into plastic and verbal communication, self-government, etc.," has been wholly enervated "in the interests of 'citizenship.'" Such a "sterilizing and hygienizing" effort, Goodman suggests, is telling of a larger dilemma having to do with the way we conceive of the connection between people and institutions. If progressive education's potential, for Goodman, lay in the extent to which it made a space for the expression of instinctual drives in a community, and that community's basis of "self-government" might rest on the "drawing-out" of such drives into some sublimated form, then it offered a vision of what society might look like when the id and ego were in productive agreement. Goodman rooted this utopian vision of self-government in his reading of Freud's late work on anxiety, translated by Henry Alden Bunker and published in *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* in 1936, placing his own theory of a resilient, instinctually coherent nature into conversation with psychoanalytic theory.

Goodman chose as an epigraph to his novel, *The State of Nature* (1946), Freud's speculative conclusion that, because the ego is identical with the id ("only a specially differentiated part of it") then when we contrast the ego, that which regulates the interaction of instinct and social existence, with the id, "then the weakness of the ego becomes apparent." The defense mechanisms of the ego are weak in comparison to the potency of the drives in the undifferentiated id, which allows for a great deal of behavior deemed antisocial or maladjusted. As Bunker's translation of Freud has it, "repression has demonstrated to us the strength of the ego, but it also bears witness...to the ego's

impotence and to the uninfluenceable character of the individual instinctual impulse of the id." But, and this is where Goodman will place a great deal of emphasis in his own later thinking (crystallized as his theoretical framework in *Gestalt Therapy*), "if...the ego remains one with the id and indistinguishable from it, then it is its strength that is apparent." When Goodman borrows this passage from Freud, it is on this note that he ends his quotation, and it is clear from the way that Freud continues this line of thinking that Goodman means to contrast this with those times in which the ego, as an organized portion of the id, comes into tension with the superego. Freud suggests that "as regards many situations, they are one and the same; as a rule, we can distinguish them only when a state of tension, a conflict between them, has arisen."[241] Goodman clearly understood this as the point not only by which he could analyze Fromm's misreading of Freud, but also as the basis for a rethinking of the social order from the grounds of community and everyday life. As he wrote in a later article, "according to Fromm, the obstacle to general psychological health is the presence, in the family and the culture, of irrational authority. According to Freud, the obstacle is the presence, in all civilization—so he thinks—of instinctual deprivation."[242]

The political ramifications of this were clear for Goodman. His review continues by suggesting that "if...the political mechanism is to consist of (1) centralized big-factory technology of the present kind, (2) mass-distribution and the present conception of the

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[241] For the quotations from Freud, see Sigmund Freud, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety," trans. Henry Bunker, *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 5:1, 1. For Goodman's use of this language from Freud, see Paul Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions to Freud," *politics* (July, 1945), 199. Also, see Paul Goodman, *The State of Nature* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1946).

[242] Paul Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," 199.

standard of living, (3) bureaucratic centralism in government—then indeed there is need for more and more efficient devices of social adjustment." In other words, if Macdonald was right in his prognosis and the extension of the "highly centralized kind of State capitalism which this country has adopted as a war measure" is the direction in which the "political mechanism" has been oriented, then the revisionists whose work in social psychology Goodman sees carving a space for adjustment to society are well-justified in that emphasis. But as Goodman continues, "if this is Civilization there will be more and more of its Discontents."[243] Goodman's investment in the consequences of these Discontents comes to the foreground in curious essay written at roughly the same time as his disputes with Fromm and Horney (and later, with Mills and Salter), "The Father of the Psychoanalytic Movement." In it, at the end of a circling reading of Freud-as-Abraham, he writes that "*everywhere* he looked in all the war-sick world old and tired, the *fact* was that indeed people wished to die…[and] with unerring success millions have achieved their wish."[244] What Goodman feared was the status quo of total war as the inevitable outcome of the sort of civilization he saw championed in Fromm in particular. In his rejection of this outcome, the contours of the pursuit of *eudaimonia* for Goodman become clear, though he seldom takes up that specific language until his preface for the Nearings' book in 1970.

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[243] Paul Goodman, "Review of *Infants Without Families,*" 80. That this is neither a charitable nor a particularly thorough reading of the Freudian revisionists was highlighted by two letters to the editor published in the June 1945 issue of *politics*, as well as the need for Goodman's elaborative essay, discussed below.

[244] Paul Goodman, "The Father of the Pychoanalytic Movement," *Kenyon Review* (Autumn, 1945), 644.

Where Fromm had advocated for "rational authority" and "rational faith," Goodman saw a paean to the "modern industrial system, war and peace."[245] The parsing of Fromm on Goodman's part serves a largely polemical purpose, rather than an analytical one, because ultimately what Goodman takes issue with is the extent to which Fromm asserts that "human happiness" requires that man "actively participates in the social process" and "masters society."[246] Goodman questions why we need to root human happiness in any such engagement within institutions, particularly those as abstract as "society." To Goodman, this emphasis on society's significance has its intellectual roots in Auguste Comte's "sociolatry," paraphrased by Goodman as "a rational faith for the spiritual organization of men, so that the modern industrial system could continue to work more efficiently."[247] In a later essay addressing the concept, he would write that sociolatry constituted a "mass-attitude," and that under such an attitude, "the revolutionary tension of the people is absorbed and sublimated by the interesting standard of living."[248] This absorption of "revolutionary tension" by an "interesting standard of living" rhymes in clear ways with the itinerary of institutional stress absorption that served as the backbone to Arnold Gehlen's anthropology of unburdening. Though Goodman had no exposure to Gehlen's work when he was criticizing Fromm, in his engagement with Fromm he pulls out precisely those underdeveloped components in Fromm's work that make the strongest case for Fromm as an institutional conservative of

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[245] Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," 201.
[246] Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941), 274.
[247] Goodman, "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," 201.
[248] Paul Goodman, "Revolution, Sociolatry and War," *politics* (December, 1945), 378.

Gehlen's ilk. However Goodman located this specific set of feedbacks between the individual and institutions in the terms he shared with Fromm—a social psychology.

Goodman understood the sociolatry of which he accused Fromm to be "the psychology of state-capitalism and state-socialism," and as was fitting for the pages of *politics*, drew from sociolatry what he saw as an error in the analysis of Marxian leftists who failed to challenge such psychology as alienated. Goodman argues that "the demand…for a living-wage and tolerable working-conditions...becomes a demand for a standard of living and for leisure to enjoy the goods" in the thinking of Leftists like Fromm who have been influenced by Marx's theorizing of alienation. As he elaborates, "the scientific leaders of the masses" become "economists of full employment, psychologists of vocational guidance, and politicians of administrative bureaux," and there remains no one "to recall us to our original creative natures, to destroy the inhuman subdivisions of labor, to look to the bands of comrades for the initiation of direct action."[249] Instead of working to adjust the fit of people to institutions, as Fromm and Horney's work suggested to Goodman, which assumes the prevalence of sociolatry and the desire for ever-increasing "standard of living," Goodman proposes a vision for the good life that involves "drawing the line" against participation within social orders and adopting immediate, direct action within small groups.

This is where Goodman's thought begins to rhyme with a tradition of anarchist thought rooted most often in the writings on mutual aid that Peter Kropotkin published first in *Nineteenth Century* (1890-96) and later collected as *Mutual Aid: A Factor in*

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[249] ibid., 377.

Evolution (1903). Goodman suggests that "mutual aid is our common human nature mainly with respect to those with whom we deal face to face," echoing Kropotkin's assertions that the assumption of social duties by the state has left citizens "relieved of their obligations towards each other" but that "unless men are maddened by the battlefield, they 'cannot stand it' to hear appeals for help and not to go."[250] Kropotkin wanted to reevaluate modern orthodoxy about the nature of human behavior, interjecting against the so-called "social Darwinism" of figures like Thomas Huxley, whose 1888 essay "Struggle for Existence" was the immediate impetus for Kropotkin's articles in *Nineteenth Century*, an interpretation of human and animal behavior that emphasized the necessity of cooperation for species' thriving.[251] The argument that Kropotkin makes, though somewhat obliquely, is that the decision to emphasize mutual struggle over mutual aid is an ideological one, borne out of a set of assumptions about the social order; this is also the reason motivating Goodman's resistance to what he thinks of as the social psychology of state-capitalism.

If sociolatry emerges from a sense that society is the best means for diminishing the "struggle for existence," as a set of institutions designed to insulate individuals from the natural order, then Goodman's critique of the post-Marxist, post-Freudian Left suggests that the premises of their intervention are flawed. Fromm and Horney's

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[250] See Peter Kropotkin, "Mutual Aid Amongst Modern Men," *Nineteenth Century* (January 1896), 67; and "Mutual Aid Amongst Ourselves," *Nineteenth Century* (June 1896), 922.

[251] As Kropotkin points out in his introductory material to *Mutual Aid: a Factor in Evolution*, this was an idea that had been important to Goethe earlier in the 19th century, and one that Kropotkin himself took from Karl Kessler, a Russian zoologist whose lecture on the topic of mutual aid Kropotkin attended in 1880.

psychoanalysis of adjustment, Goodman suggested, misunderstands not only the liberatory spirit of the projects of Marx and Freud, but also the nature of the human actors in whose lives they hoped to intervene. Goodman argues that improving the conditions of labor or the standard of living among the poor and working classes is not likely to alleviate the alienation of these groups from what he calls "their deep natures," but instead to lead to a fundamental retrenchment of that alienation under the political form of state-socialism. As Goodman would argue in an essay reprinted across anarchist periodicals in 1945 and '46, "Revolution, Sociolatry and War," Marx's social psychology of alienation may be at odds in important ways with Marx's thinking about political action.

It must be noted that the positive *telos* for which Goodman would displace such a faith in society does not ultimately look terribly different than the future in which social institutions adjusted for and accommodated human happiness advocated by Fromm. Both advocated for a world in which people could have creatively fulfilling work and be free from both war and want. But Goodman saw these ends as impossible to achieve by way of what he called a "frontal attack" on social institutions, and instead adopted a theory of political progress that was essentially of the millenarian sort found among present day Accelerationist critics. The industrial system, Goodman argued, would "crash of its own weight" under the "many-sided and...indirect" efforts of small groups who choose simply to draw the line against their participation within state institutions. He suggested that "the society we want is universally present in the heart," but "can be brought into existence piecemeal, power by power, everywhere." This society present in the heart, which

Goodman contrasted with the organized systems of Fromm and other Leftists by calling (somewhat unoriginally) a "free society," had several characteristics that are important to the way that I will be discussing Goodman's literary interventions below. First, he argued that a free society would have to rethink the basis of its juridical norms and allow for some behaviors now considered criminal—this alongside the encouragement of "the sexual satisfaction of the young." Second, he suggested that smaller, *ad hoc* groups formed a more coherent basis for political initiative and that these could be the basis for a re-evaluation of the standard of living. Third, and importantly, he argued that "it is a matter of guilt—this is a harsh saying—to exhaust your time of day in the usual work in office and factories, merely for wages," because "the aim of economy is not the efficient production of commodities, but cooperative jobs themselves worth doing."[252]

From this last point, contours emerge that lend a shape to the thinking of community, the good life, and literature that would follow from Goodman's involvement in radical politics in the 1940s. Goodman had established the conflicts between state capitalism/socialism and what he considered a creative human nature in the pages of *politics*. In the pages of literary journals, like John Crowe Ransom's *Kenyon Review,* he would draw the implications of this conflict into a theory of literary form and experiment. And he would put this thinking into practice in not only his early novels (1942's *The Grand Piano* and 1946's *The State of Nature*), but his short fiction and poetry as well. His short stories are littered with an interest in the desires of children, including their earliest sexual experiment: bookending the short fiction he published during the 1940s

[252] Goodman, "Revolution, Sociolatry and War," 378.

was his "Terry Fleming, or Are You Planning a Universe," published in *New Directions* in 1948, and links a young boy's creation of a narrative for his father's imprisonment with compulsive masturbation; his first *Partisan Review* publication, in 1940, was the short story, "The Mean, The Maximum, and The Minimum," which contained some elements that would later appear in *The Grand Piano,* and the second section of which concluded with school-children having a sexual liaison to culminate a night of play in a department store. These stories take on an element of prurience beyond even the discomfort that their subject matter might otherwise introduce due to the accusations of pederasty that were leveled against Goodman and led to his dismissals as a teacher. But the remaining elements Goodman had emphasized as necessary to realizing "the society…universally present in the heart," Goodman's own good life project, were promoted elsewhere in his literary output throughout the 1940s.

For example, Goodman's poem "'Dreams are the Royal Road to the Unconscious'," published in June 1947 in *Poetry*, draws on his readings of psychoanalytic theory and his critical interests in community and the realization of the good life. The form of the poem, its couplets mirroring the torsion of the speaker's rapidly turning mind, emphasizes repetition, as does much of Goodman's formally compelling work of these years. And the brief poem begins with an invocation of the well-known "Royal Road" from the *Interpretation of Dreams*, which gives the poem its title: "The King's Highway to the Dare-Not-Know / —but I beg my rides and oh I know / these boring roads where hundreds and hundreds / of cars fade by in hundred-hundreds." The "royal road" here of the "dare-not-know" seems less reliable for a speaker who

"beg[s his] rides," hitchhiking along the "boring roads" of an industrial society in which he shares the road with "hundreds and hundreds / of cars." The result of this is that along this path to the unconscious, there are cars with "flashing windows too bright too fast / to see my face." The speaker cannot be found or isolated for something like his authentic self, hitchhiking and invisible behind the envelope of the shining car of an industrial channel to the unconscious. The speaker interjects that, "I used to think I could be happy," but no longer knows what that might be like. He asks, "What is it like?—like Plato oh / we'll copy it at large and oh / plan a city where all the distances / (where? where?) are walking distances."[253] Mirroring the social diagnosis of his "Revolution, Sociolatry and War," happiness emerges through the human and not the industrial scale, the planning for which also would seem to produce more direct routes to the unconscious—no longer requiring the speaker to hitchhike, catching a lift and sequestered behind the shining metal and glass of a speeding car, to access the unconscious.

Goodman's novels, however, contained the most sustained social criticism to extend his writing in the pages of *politics*. The first two volumes of his tetralogy *The Empire City*, in particular, were produced during the period of his initial forays in both *politics* and the *Partisan Review*, and elements from each are worth examining in the context of the more serious elaboration of social theory found in "Revolution, Sociolatry and War." Taken together, the four novels constitute a *Bildungsroman* for a character named Horatio Alger—one of many knowing gestures in the books—and the first two

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[253] Paul Goodman, "'Dreams Are the Royal Road to the Unconscious'," *Poetry* 70:3 (1947), 139.

novels in particular focus on the affairs of Horatio and his siblings (Laura and Lothar) and the family of Hugo Eliphaz, a wealthy financier who lives in a department store. Eliphaz, who prices his own children for sale and keeps a ledger-book filled entirely with zeros from all of the commodities he has converted into their exchange value, disrupts the life of the Alger siblings first by sending them an enormous grand piano for their tiny apartment, then by adopting Horatio as his son. The first two novels take the reader from the late 1930s through to the end of the second world war, in a sweeping, comic epic form interrupted periodically with brief essayistic flourishes, narratorial interjections, pictograms, and lines of music and verse. It is tempting, from the perspective of the completed tetralogy of novels and with the well-established lenses of postmodernist and post-structuralist theories of the novel in hand, to see the sweep of *The Empire City* in terms of a ludic, self-reflexive interrogation of mimesis. But as Donald Morton has argued, "while Goodman's metafictions do explore the forces of signification, they also investigate historical forces that shape the social."[254] In other words, they are invested—underneath their exaggerated sense of play—in a project of social critique not unlike the naturalists in its ambition. The play of artifice in the novels provokes resistance to any thorough absorption into the novels' mimesis, but even the reflexive and anti-absorptive details are invested with rhetorical seriousness about the forces—both historical and psychological—that have brought the social world represented in the novel into being.

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[254] Donald Morton, "The Crisis of Narrative in the Postnarratological Era: Paul Goodman's The Empire City as (Post)Modern Intervention," *New Literary History* 24:2 (Spring 1993), 412.

For example, as the first book of the novel, *The Grand Piano* (1942), progresses, it becomes clear that the site of education and social development for the protagonist and his siblings is not necessarily, as the narrative's liberal intellectual, Mynheer, would have it, the open city. Although Horatio and the novel's narrator both make much of the way that the streets of New York have been the shaping force in Horatio's development, the lathe on which the edges of those experiences are sharpened is the community of artists—as the novel's occasional structural allusions to *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* reveal. For Goodman, this emerges from the social fact of the artistic communities he engaged with in New York. After the "Committee for Post-War Art" meets to discuss the development of the movement that will be known as "bombism" (Horatio will be recalled by the narrator throughout as a "bombardier") in the novel, it becomes clear that the group contained individuals from all socioeconomic straits—Mynheer, the liberal, attends with the Algers, but so too does Arthur Eliphaz, the heir of the financier. When Mynheer begins to pick at Eliphaz for seeming out of place in a community of artists, the narrator jumps into the conversation to explain why such a socially disparate crowd might have come together. He writes:

> we people are more personally engaged in what we do than the average folk, and therefore as we turn from one of our activities to another, we again find one another there [...] We have gone to the same marginal schools; we have praised to the skies the dancer whom the rest of New York has not yet heard of; and if one of us steals off to a secluded coast

> that seems promising, he will meet another one of us walking naked
>
> toward him up King's Beach.[255]

Goodman's narratorial interjection is not only a reminder of the artifice at work in the novel—he continues, "nevertheless, I'll write it down, the history of our friends"—but a way of explaining how it is that artists develop aesthetically and politically within their communities. It is a moment of reflexivity that highlights not only the extent to which the story itself is an exercise in aesthetic play, but that this exercise emerges in the context of a lived set of social relations—as, in important ways, occasional.[256]

So even as the novel strains against any straightforward representation, it is nonetheless invested in the production of both an oppositional mode of and instances of representation toward the same rhetorical end as one finds in Goodman's poetry, with the insistence on articulating the same sorts of social criticism found in his political essays. For example, combining Goodman's investment in the aesthetic possibilities of repetition with narrative experiment, one of the longer sequences in his 1946 *The State of Nature* involves the repetition of a trauma that evolves into an examination of human nature from the back of an escaped yak. A scene of profound absurdity, it also represents the narrative's rejection of any domestic redemption, particularly through the experience of childhood. Throughout the novel, the toddler August—son of city-planning architect

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[255] Ibid., 67.

[256] In 1951, Goodman would write of the function of a species of "advance-guard" writing, thinking clearly of his own practice, that had as its purpose the "physical reestablishment of community," and in which the writer writes about his audience as a means of solving the "crisis of alienation." This approach, tremendously influential, for the New York School, was one in which "the advance-guard at once becomes a genre of the highest integrated art, namely "Occasional Poetry—the poetry celebrating weddings, festivals, and so forth." See Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing, 1900-1950," *Kenyon Review* 13:3 (1951), 375-377.

Emily and Arthur, at this point killed in the war, a doomed heir to the financier Eliphaz—has traumatic encounters with animals, including a recurring series of dreams about animals eating him. The novel's narrator suggests that this is because "when...half his present age, he had been thrown down by a large, playful-bounding shepherd dog with grinning teeth," so that "now in a quite normal way, with hysterical excitement, he loved gingerly to pet animals both large and small...made for the zoo, but...willing for them to be in their cages."[257] This repetition in conscious life, an effort to gain some mastery over the traumatic event, reappears in dreams that refresh the trauma but also reproduce the "real story uncensored" of the fairy tales his mother tells him, having stripped them of their terrors.

The zoo reproduces this fundamental censoring of the "real story" of nature by placing "the beasts in cages." The narrator muses about, and then the story enacts, these "beasts" coming out of their cages, noting that this would "re-establish the continuity between the man and the other generations, and on both parts teeth and lust."[258] In an extended scene at the zoo, August reflects with his mother on the cruelty of keeping the animals in their cages and wonders—in a question that is quoted from the book of Anna Freud's that Goodman had reviewed for *politics*—whether God can make his father come back to life after the war. As a "direct action" conducted in part by the brothers Lothar and Horatio Alger (Horatio is the tetralogy's central figure) to recall people to the state of

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[257] Ibid., 192. The novels collected as *The Empire City* are a tetralogy including *The Grand Piano* (1942), *The State of Nature* (1946), *The Dead of Spring* (1950), and *The Holy Terror* (1953). They were originally published as "The Empire City" in 1959, and the most accessible copies are now those that remain from the 2001 edition published by Black Sparrow Press.
[258] Ibid., 192.

nature, Lothar and his "lieutenants" release all of the animals, and the zoo's tiger mauls and kills August. Mynheer, the novel's "man of intellect" is stunned at the cry of Emily, August's mother, and allows Lothar to place him in a cage, while in the plaza of the zoo the chaos of "kicking up...heels and stamping and bellowing" continues as a kind of positive example against the "anger accumulat[ing] in the soul" that has led to the frustrations of the war. Having conducted this direct action, and believing himself free of the "social compact" that had limited him, Lothar, speaking as a mock lecturer, produces for the animals a living political cartoon from Mynheer's situation behind bars. He explains, "'This bar...is *Liberty.* And this bar is *Education*. This bar is the human *Standard of Living*. And this bar is *Justice*. And the man,' said Lothair with a choking voice, 'is held in the cage *incommunicado*.'"[259] The freed animals roar and lash out, purging themselves of pent-up energy, while the man of reason is imprisoned by his ideals and unable to act—at least in Lothar's accounting.

Horatio on the other hand, who unaccountably is struck by the ability to understand the animals, hears that the escapees are speaking in fugal repetition a paragraph of Goethe's, from the *Conversations* with Eckermann, "the world could not exist if it were not so simple," and comes to the conclusion that society could not emerge only from its deformation by "contradictory institutions." Rather, society existed, "in so far as it existed, because of elementary desires and the wonderful virtues of courage, patience, the extraordinary endurance of the people," and that it could be saved not by

[259] Ibid., 239. The character "Lothar" is variously called "Lothar," "Lothario," and "Lothair," among other things throughout the novels.

recall to the state of nature, but by "simple revulsion—what an unsubtle observer might even call simple disgust," in the current state of things.[260] The scene is restored to order by shots fired by the zoo attendants, but the novel's interest in revisiting the origins of society remains unresolved, as the people who had been at the zoo had—like Mynheer—sought safety in their own cages, retreating to their individual cells.

The chaos of the scene contains tragedy in August's death in the jaws of the tiger, but it is rendered in terms that are both comic in their absurdity (Lothar rides a yak that he refers to as his "sacred cow") and didactic in form. Formally, the scene layers the culmination of August's repetition compulsion (the trauma cannot be mastered when its truth is repressed) with the conversion of the quotation from Goethe into a refrain itself, as Horatio turns the fugal repetition he hears from the animals into a reflection on repetition itself: "this wretched soil—it has been tilled a thousand years, yet its powers are always the same: a little rain, a little sun, and each spring it grows green and so forth."[261] These phrases reappear again and again, spoken in rounds by the animals as a kind of revelation to Horatio, whose inquiry into the reason society has come to total war remains unresolved, but is given a solution in the form of the pastoral intertext. The progress of the narrative and the development of the character both follow these essentially textual trajectories, with the scenes represented by the novel functioning as nodes in events of textual repetition. In fact, in the final chapter of the novel, Horatio's vision becomes fully identified with the vision of the animals, as "the brute beast sees

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[260] Ibid., 240.
[261] Ibid., 239.

what is outside [our interest]" or in "das Offene," a feature within the narrative that again is generated textually in the citation of Rilke's eighth Duino elegy.

Struck with this insight from the animals, the vision of the good society promoted by the novel becomes apparent to Horatio with a didacticism that Irving Feldman had described as "the elbow of doctrine poking through the threadbare sleeve of the fiction."[262] The passage from Goethe itself invokes the seasonal repetitions of pastoral life, progressing the novel from the scene of animals freed from their cages to the setting of its final chapters, in which city children are evacuated into the countryside. In the countryside, brought closer to the pastoral, the children and returning soldiers work together in "occupational therapy" to discover the fraternity needed to rehabilitate a notion of society. Ultimately, they come to see "the vegetables original in the ground and how plums grow on trees," and this offers hope that another path is possible for society on a different scale and with fewer intervening institutions.[263] The novel encourages the reader to see the same rebirth and repetition spoken through the animals in what Horatio has called society, as Horatio discovers that it may be necessary to go through the painful process (brought about by the war) of taking "all the commodities out of circulation and painfully to learn again that there is a use value before there is an exchange value."[264] This ending sequence for the novel seems in its way to reproduce the movement from city to farm that the Nearings had undertaken in the 1930s, and the book appears to assert a vision of the good life as one in which a return to the land is a necessary component.

[262] Irving Feldman, "Review: The Empire City, by Paul Goodman," *Commentary* (August 1959), 179.
[263] Goodman, *The Empire City,* 269.
[264] Ibid., *The Empire City*, 270.

The formal artifice and absurdist narration of the novel, then, are the hinges on which hang the social critiques that the novel wants to make visible, and which complement those Goodman had written for *politics*—including the need for smaller, more direct communities to re-evaluate the standard of living (to "learn again that there is a use value before there is an exchange value").

However, one of the more prominent oppositional representations in the *Bildungsroman* of *The Empire City* is its interrogation of the comforts of home in the first novel, *The Grand Piano*. This critique is significant in part because of the resonance between the function of the "relief worker" Miss Pitcher in the novel and the discussion of the domestic in the work of George Elliott that follows in this chapter. But it also involves one of the primary complications of the novel's absurd narrative. Through their political and artistic endeavors, the Alger siblings both run afoul of and impress the financier Eliphaz, who sends them a grand piano as a form of punishment for Lothar's radicalism. When the piano is installed in the apartment, no one can move through the space anymore, and the two brothers sleep on top of and beneath the instrument, respectively. But more important to the siblings' domestic arrangements, the gift of the piano brings closer scrutiny from the relief worker, Miss Pitcher. Miss Pitcher, as the representative of the state, is involved in the lives of the Algers as a monitor of their domestic situation, ensuring that they have been assigned the proper dole. But as a vector of social theory in the fiction, she serves a function beyond her narrative role as an easily surmounted obstacle. If relief was, as Roosevelt had claimed in his 1935 address, a "narcotic" that induces "spiritual and moral disintegration," the representatives of the

state who administered that relief were, in Goodman's telling, regulators of the proper alignment of the spirit and of morality.[265] Goodman's novel produces an oppositional critique of the administration of relief that is oddly aligned to Roosevelt's cautions about relief in its discussion and representation of Miss Pitcher. However those cautions locate the problem of relief outside of the debilitating effect it might have on its recipients. Goodman points instead to the psychological debilitation of Miss Pitcher, whose role it is to administer direct relief and who stands in for the sort of authority under which relief is provided. Miss Pitcher as a relief worker bears a metonymic relationship to the pressures of the institutions bearing down on the Algers. Consonant with his criticism of the psychologists promoting adjustment in the pages of *politics*, Goodman finds that it is the repression of instinctual impulses that relief promotes, identifying—allowing for the slippage from one register to the next for "relief"—the feedbacks that Arnold Gehlen had argued were so functional for the human animal. Goodman suggests, however, that the repression of spontaneous action presents an obstacle to human well-being, with his citation of Freud's contention that strength is found with that portion of the ego that is undifferentiated from the id. Put into other terms, the fit of the individual to institutions is healthier when accommodation exists for reshaping institutions according to the pressures the individual places on those institutions, rather than for the institutionalization of the individual.

Miss Pitcher, however, "belonged to that curious class of persons that is interested in saving other people's money for them [...] Precisely the way in which this small cross-

[265] Roosevelt, "Annual Message to Congress, January 4, 1935."

eyed woman was at home in the great society was to make sure that everybody had his station and its duties mathematically defined."[266] And Pitcher provides both enforcement of domestic normativity and insurance against deviation from the institutional requirements of economic relief. Scolding the Algers on their early morning return home from a performance of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (during which Horatio denounces the opera's antisemitic representation of Beckmesser as a scapegoat through which the narrative can find resolution—another vector of Goodman's layered metafiction) Pitcher tries to bring Laura and Lothar into line with her expectations for a domestic unit while checking up on their living arrangements.[267] She tries to compel the family to use electric lights because the power company has complained about their noncompliance, to ensure that Horatio is attending school, and that any income represented by the piano has been given its accounting. But Miss Pitcher is sidetracked by her own repression, unable to continue her investigation because of a psychological block through which she has associated the word "piano" (including those she might substitute for it) with "penis." Her shame is such that she cannot continue. So Horatio goes to retrieve the ownership

[266] Goodman, *The Empire City*, 108.

[267] Horatio, it is noted by the narrator, has "an infallible sense of sleight-of-hand," and objects to the dismissal of Beckmesser during the Prize Contest. His sister, arguing in favor of narrative resolution, tries to shush him by explaining that "you can't have a comedy and a generally satisfactory ending without a scapegoat," but Horatio persists that "It's all spoilt by this little man spirited away." As they leave the opera, he expands on this idea more broadly: "What I think is this: how'd you like to live in a place where everything is just ducky, where you don't get a toothache an' nobody is a pain in the ass—but it's all because that little dope is left *out*. What about the feller who is a pain in the ass?" (104-5). Horatio's insight provides a telling contrast to the view of childhood attributed to Miss Pitcher during the Prize Contest's repetition at the conclusion of the novel, and which concludes with the "pain in the ass" emerging victorious.

papers for the piano from the magnate Eliphaz to restore the household's good standing and receipt of direct relief.

While Horatio is visiting Eliphaz, he is treated to a lecture on the purpose of education by Mynheer, in his guise as "Commissioner of Education at the League of Nations," who is promoting a new kind of school. Mynheer explains to Horatio that his aim is "to make us feel at home in the Empire City," and that the reason this needs addressed is that "[people] can't cope with the problems," which are "too many, too big and too complicated." He argues that by "tempering experience to our powers," and providing education in the streets themselves, it might be possible to cultivate an ease with the problems of daily life: "you feel easy when you feel adequate." However he is challenged by both Horatio and Eliphaz, who point out that feeling "at home" is not always a positive experience; in response, he argues for the cultivation of "nonattachment" to the way the Empire City is now. As he explains, "you've got to be able to criticize it and change it and circumvent it." To that end, his system of education will require that "our kids must learn two things: Skills and Sabotage." This will be how children can maintain a "habit of freedom," so they might "prevent being swallowed up by" the "vast corporate organization" of the city.[268] By way of contrast, then, with the stable domestic organization promoted by Miss Pitcher, the relief worker, the novel imagines an alternative sense of "home" which involves not adjustment, but adequacy—not incorporation, but nonattachment. The "relief" linked both economically and

[268] Goodman, *The Empire City*, 124.

conceptually to stable domesticity is rejected in Goodman's major work both within the narrative and by the structure he gives to it.

Spoken to Like a Grandchild, and Finding Relief

To the extent that Goodman's approach toward the adjustment to organization, and particularly toward the relief of the domestic, could be seen as representative of a broader swath of radical intellectuals, the brief quarrel that Goodman and others associated with Macdonald's *politics* had with George Elliott in the first years of the publication is instructive. Elliott, who in 1944 had completed his Master's degree in English at UC-Berkeley but not yet secured one of the teaching positions from which he would live out the remainder of his writing career, wrote a critical evaluation of what he referred to as the "*politics* writers" that Dwight Macdonald published (alongside his own reply) in September 1944. In his critique, Elliott implies that he is writing for "that sizeable group of leftish intellectuals of loose political orientation, intellectual enough to feel foreign to the people in their tastes and needs, leftish enough to worry about the part they are going to play (if any) in averting catastrophe in this country after the war." From this vantage point, Elliott suggests that he speaks for many readers of the journal when he says that he regrets "that this magazine suggests not the narrowest channels for action against the disaster."[269] Instead, what Elliott has found in the pages of *politics* is "preoccupation with large, general human issues over specific political and social issues about which something can be done," and because of this roughly millenarian outlook, Elliott writes

[269] George P. Elliott, "'Where are you going?' said Reader to Writer," *politics* (September 1944), 246-247.

that he worries other Leftists will leave their encounters with *politics* "uneasy but ineffectual, worried but without power to oppose what they distrust; they will become bureaucrats."[270]

Macdonald published his own response to this criticism in the pages immediately following Elliott's brief essay, and while he parses the argument fairly carefully to explain what he feels is misguided in the substance of Elliott's thinking, his characterization of the tenor of the disagreement is more immediately significant. Macdonald writes that "there has developed in the last decade among American leftist intellectuals a most significant split, which might be termed Half-a-Loafers v. Whole-Loafers," and that the very miserableness of their time "has caused the majority to lose faith in any very radical reform of things and to conclude that half a loaf is better than no half at all." In place of revolutionary change, Macdonald argues that the Half-a-Loafers (of which he certainly counted Elliott) argue for the lesser evil, and that they see those "who continue to insist on...uncompromising radicalism...as foolish Utopians."[271] Even accepting the extent to which Macdonald is hardly an impartial observer of the conflict, this characterization is useful for the way that it generalizes the narrower question of the intellectual tenor of *politics*. The writers of *politics*, Macdonald seems to suggest, are uninterested in the compromises and complicit participation within state capitalism that would allow them a reformist mirage while enjoying an increased standard of living. In other words, if the magazine's readers become bureaucrats from a lack of hope, it is the

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[270] Ibid, 247.
[271] Dwight Macdonald, "'Here Lies Our Road!,' said Writer to Reader," *politics* (September 1944), 248.

faith of the writers that non-participation may offer the only standpoint from which a just future can become thinkable. This moment in Macdonald's essay also set the spring for another riposte to Elliott from among the *politics* writers, penned by Paul Goodman for the November issue of the journal, and taking issue with Elliott's diagnosis of enervation and despair among the writers and readers of the magazine.

Goodman takes the opportunity of his response to touch on the question of 'alienation,' because he finds in Elliott's criticism a suggestion that this might be Elliott's diagnosis for the intellectuals associated with *politics*, littered as his critique is with "the words 'disinherited,' 'rejected,' and of course 'neurotic.'"[272] Goodman sums up his take on what Marx meant by alienation, writing that because Marx spoke of the alienation of the bourgeoisie, to the extent that the masses are alienated, it is not because of their subjection to questionable "standards of living," but because of the extent to which they adopt the values of the bourgeoisie and fail to insist on "friendship, political indignation and initiation, sexual freedom, and honest letters." In other words, the masses are alienated because they have found themselves emulating those who would actually desire half-a-loaf rather than a foolish Utopia.[273] And it is into this group Goodman casts Elliott, making an argument about creative labor along the way. Goodman turns, after rejecting the substance of Elliott's argument about *politics*, to a personal comment about Elliott.

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[272] Paul Goodman, "The Unalienated Intellectual," *politics* (November 1944), 318.

[273] Ibid., 318. Goodman's reading of Marx was, particularly for his moment, idiosyncratic; the pressure he placed on this understanding of alienation throughout the mid-40s was a prominent feature of that idiosyncrasy.

Writing that he will speak to Elliott "like a grandfather," Goodman pounces into personal territory in the conclusion of his response:

> When [Elliott] pathetically says in his autobiography that he has "two ambitions: to write poetry and to make a living. The latter seems to be winning out recently;"—might one not ask, What kind of *living* is it that a poet would make which would be precluding his writing poetry? Is one to call this a living? Which elements of this *standard* of living (here is the *real* point!) give as much life as the possibility of art? I have long been in exactly the same family situation as George, and I know whereof I speak.[274]

Goodman is making an argument, here, that many of his contemporaries would have considered irredeemably romantic. Or, worse, could be seen in the terms Irving Howe used to characterize Goodman's writing on sociolatry, "snobbish intellectual insensitivity."[275]

It is true that while Goodman had spoken truthfully about his own poverty and family obligations, his comments toward Elliott reflect the sort of uncompromising and often abrasive personality that would earn him the dislike of many in his lifetime. There is little better example of the quality of his literary voice, however, which Susan Sontag described as "that direct, cranky, egotistical, generous American voice." He prods Elliott, here, effectively telling him that he has adopted the standards of one sort of living in

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[274] ibid., 319.
[275] Howe, "The Discovery of Sex," *Commentary* (February, 1947), 195.

place of the creative fulfillment that might come by devoting whatever portion of his effort is necessary to find productivity as a poet. The comparison of Elliott's "family situation" to his own situation is certainly an egotistical one, but it is in accord with the theory of art and labor that motivated Goodman as both an artist and a critic during the years between the second World War and around 1950, when he committed more fully to psychoanalytic theory.

One can find among Goodman's critical output during this period bracing castigations of critics whose investment in social realism he finds reflective of just the sort of adjustment to standards of living which he accuses Elliott of making. Goodman would write of Edwin Burgum's forgotten work of criticism, *The Novel and the World's Dilemma*, that "in his thirst for the good society, Burgum is far from thinking of a society of creative joy and passionate mutual aid," and "he is thinking of an organized democracy of 'normal interpersonal relationships.'"[276] And he is just as critical of creative works that he finds "superficial," writing later, in an essay on popular culture, that "works of popular art" all seem to "present an important emotional situation...in a framework where everything else is as usual." Such works fail to disturb the structuring features of life, such as the "norms of morality" or "the time-table of work," even when the narrative events that make up the "passional situation" should bring these things into crisis.[277] Goodman's criticism during this period is such that he embodies the position described by Donald Hall, who had written that attacks on the "New Poetry" of "the

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[276] Paul Goodman, "Stale Marxism," *Kenyon Review* (Autumn, 1947), 612.
[277] Paul Goodman, "The Chance for Popular Culture," *Poetry* (June, 1949), 159.

patronage system established by the universities" were simply enacting "the romantic cliche of the poet as starving revolutionary...contradicted by the contemporary poet who lives in the suburbs and lectures to undergraduates."[278] To some extent, Goodman could be understood as the principled feedstock for this very cliche, himself a starving revolutionary who lived out the argument that one could not compromise by accepting the priority of a standard of living over one's intellectual output.

Elliott, on the other hand, lived precisely the good life of undergraduate lecturing and comfortable domestic reflection once he found a teaching position at St. Mary's College in Morago, to the east of Berkeley, in 1947.[279] The narrators of his stories and speakers of his poems are often rendered on a walk at the end of the workday, trying to parse some unresolved dilemma of self. The tonal quality of his poems and stories is often placid, in spite of the equally often fierce politics they captured. As the reflective speaker of his poem "From the Berkeley Hills," one of several from that period in the 1950s published by the *Hudson Review*, ruminates while on a walk in view of the bay, "the long day's languid change / turns me toward thought; the air promises All is well."[280] The poem follows the speaker as he works through the details of the landscape, the presence of plan or law in the scene, involved in the sort of quest for order found in Wallace Stevens' much-anthologized "The Idea of Order at Key West," but in the place

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[278] Donald Hall, "The New Poetry: Notes on the Past Fifteen Years in America," in *American Literary Essays*, ed. Lewis Leary (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1960), 225.
[279] See Carol Frost, "George P. Elliott," *American Short-Story Writers Since World War II: Fourth Series. Dictionary of Literary Biography*, 102.
[280] George P. Elliott, "From the Berkeley Hills," *The Hudson Review* (Winter, 1957), 504. Though the poem was published in 1957, to the extent that the poem's speaker is an avatar for Elliott himself, it must be set in the early 1950s; Elliott had begun a teaching job at Cornell University in 1955.

of the ordering voice Elliott's speaker finds that his "peace-making eye / finds the checkering of streets small evidence of plan." The occasion for Elliott's speaker, however, even in the face of this otherwise calm scene, is one of being deeply disturbed by his own contingency ("such and so was, and is, but did not have to be") in the presence of "the cyclotron / Building, domed at the edge of Berkeley" which "will not let / Me ignore, who would, guards fences bombs."[281] The breakdown of syntax in this last clause goes unresolved by the poem, but performs the speaker's own disturbance at the proximity to the scientific infrastructure of war in its lack of resolution. It is unclear, for instance, whether the speaker intends to say that the cyclotron building will not let him ignore "guards, fences, and bombs," or that the cyclotron itself "guards, fences, bombs," secreting the products of its scientific labor away even as it calls attention to the presence of those secret products.

The poem, as will become even more clears as it evolves, ultimately finds the perturbations of such industry important only for the effect they have on a subject's self-regard, however, as Elliott's speaker is brought to a brief personal crisis by a contemplation of his own hand in plucking thistle as the cyclotron's presence resonates. He reasons that the hand is

> Mine, yet none of myself; part of whatever all;
>
> Of God being a thing; innumerably one;
>
> Human as a city, yet wholly natural;
>
> None of the atoms of my hand are of the sun

[281] ibid.

(But might have been); my hand made nothing that I see.[282]

The poem performs here precisely the sort of alienation that Goodman suggests are dangerous for political action, rather than low or challenging “standards of living.” The speaker’s hand both is and is not part of who he is—has become quite literally disposable to the speaker’s sense of himself—and the result is that the speaker finds his own necessity not in the construction of a human world but as an extension of some cosmic or natural whole that he cannot know. He has not participated in the human work of making the order of the city, and this remove mirrors the distance he feels from his material self, a construction that he had no part in making either, being a “thing” and therefore “of God.” The poem turns to the rhetoric of physics for help, invoking the continuity of matter at the atomic level as the speaker reflects on his lack of authorship over the world around him.

The greater totality of God or universe is equally distant from the speaker, leaving his body as a presence with no recoverable path toward its author. Displaced from his own physical being, the speaker cites both his disbelief in the presence of God in the material world (“Sea, hills, nor sky can be my God's familiar home”) and his ignorance of the physical microcosmos of the physicists’ cyclotron, “Whose symbols, I am told, mirror the mystery / Hidden at the jointings and boundaries of things, / Believe because they see; and I believe they see.”[283] Unlike the physicists who write equations that reproduce the structuring of the material world, Elliott’s speaker cannot re-assemble any order for the

[282] ibid., 505.
[283] ibid., 506.

world before him, at the scale of either the city or the "sprays of rainbowing light" that "Up from shreds of glass glow."[284] He turns away from the ruminative walk that seemed at first like it would occasion a reprieve of calm, and instead has left the speaker mired with "nearer happenings, / Inharmonious, obscure, manifest in locked strife / Heart-hot, too slippery with the heart's reasonings / To lurk in mind's symbols."[285] By the poem's end, he rejects the environment which his walk had been intended to bring into close contemplation and toward the comfort of family, his intimate relations, and books, "which for [him] are hills and evening air." It is within this matrix of ideas and intimacies that the speaker wants to engage his "Godward searching" and "there plunge where I must end."[286]

The turn inward, a rejection of complexity in the form of interlacing geographies of physics, politics, and consciousness, enacted by the poem's speaker is perhaps as explicit an instance of what Jed Rasula has called the "suburban epiphany" as can be identified among mid-century American poetry. The suburban epiphany, which instantiates the desire for a fantasy of what Rasula understands as "the spectral enticements of 'family values' as such," takes the form, here, of a future tense destined to

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[284] ibid. In comparing his own attempt to make sense of life's contingency to recent concepts in physics, Elliott's speaker is participating in a genre of inquiry that he shares with an essay by R.P. Blackmur that immediately proceeded this poem in *Hudson Review*, called "The Great Grasp of Unreason." Blackmur's essay sets out to generalize the proposition of a principle of indeterminacy (an older term for Heisenbergian uncertainty), as observed in literature from Shakespeare to Eliot.
[285] ibid.
[286] ibid.

be fulfilled.[287] Elliott's speaker anticipates that when he arrives home, his "daughter will rumple [his] clothes and say her prayer / Gladly." The adverb hangs across the enjambed line in a way that draws attention to the importance of this wished-for compliance (not only does the daughter say her prayers, she does so "gladly") with the fantasy of a stable "mommy-daddy-me" circuit of family intimacy reinstated by the speaker's return "where [he] belong[s]."[288] And when Elliott's speaker turns outside the circle of the immediate intimacies of his family, addressing at the poem's conclusion a series of "loves" that affirm his existence ("Love is my only where, love my only calm though I drown / Of its turbulence"), his response to "The should be loved and aren't," which include "the bomb-physicist my neighbor," is that the bomb physicist needs only to be loved more openly, brought more fully into a sort of stable domestic intimacy.[289] Overlooking the apparently troubling profession of this neighbor in exchange for an embrace of something like his humanity reproduces as intimacy with another the rejection of the speaker's actual material environment in favor of the "blank sheets of paper on which [he learns his] mind."[290]

Given the likelihood that the "bomb-physicist...neighbor" of the poem refers to the poet and publisher Bern Porter, Elliott's friend who had published his early verse in *Circle*, the poem's playing up of professional identity is all the more interesting for the

[287] Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 429.
[288] Elliott, "From the Berkeley Hills," 506. I take from Rasula the significance of an Oedipal circuitry to the suburban poetics fulfilled in such epiphanic lyric closure.
[289] ibid.
[290] ibid.

extent to which the bomb-physicist in question was ardently against the use of atomic weapons. The interpersonal difficulty suggested by the qualification of the neighbor's profession on the part of the speaker, an avatar for Elliott the leftist who pities the world's victims, is one that the speaker builds up in order to more easily assert intimacy. Where should be difference we find sameness after all, revealing the humanness of the neighbor to be that much easier to wrap inside this domestic love.[291] What seems as though it would have occasioned conflict for the troubled leftist who had written critically but sympathetically of *politics* a decade earlier has been resolved in social stability, a loving consensus that was always already there for him to find.

This had not always been the case for Elliott's literary efforts. While this poem of the 1950s, which would become the title poem in Elliott's only significant book of poetry in 1969, fits comfortably into the wish-fulfillment of 1950s domesticity after it shrugs away the looming presence of what was by then a thermonuclear bomb, the speakers of his texts had not always come away so unscathed. By contrast, and to illuminate the difference that exposure to bureaucratic labor seems to have on the sorts of poems and stories that Elliott produced after he found himself less burdened by the need "to make a living," as he had put it in his *politics* biographical statement, I want to briefly look at Elliott's better known short story from 1949, "The NRACP."

"The NRACP," which was anthologized in the following year's *The Best American Short Stories* by Martha Foley, is epistolary fiction written from the

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[291] For the connection between Elliott and Porter, and a sketch of the community of writers around Berkeley circulating in conversation with Porter in the late 1940s, see James Schevill, *Where to Go, What to Do, When you Are Bern Porter: A Personal Biography* (Gardiner, Maine: Tilbury House, 1992), 3.

perspective of a young bureaucrat named "Andy," working for the titular fictional government agency—the *Hudson Review* publication helpfully adds in parentheses under its title, "(*The NRACP is the National Relocation Authority: Colored People. The CPR is the Colored Persons Reserve. PR is Public Relations.*)"[292] The shadings of bureaucratic labor in the story itself, in which circuitous layers of communication feedback on one another in the PR office as its workers are prevented from any contact with the agency's primary efforts, would have been accessible from Elliott's own experience working as an analyst for the National War Labor Board during World War II, around the time he was writing his 1944 letter to *politics*. His narrator confides in a letter, "we work and avoid work, backbite, confide, suspect. It's a bureaucratic existence, no doubt of that."[293] Certainly the story's interest in acronyms refers to just that world of military-industrial abstractions; the narrator nods knowingly in his correspondence, "you knew better than I what the CPR would mean—you were most wise to stay in Washington."[294] But what had attracted readers to the story was neither its evocation of the way that the agency's bureaucratic arrangements had, in the words of the narrator, "driven [him into himself] in a very unhealthy way," nor its depiction of burgeoning romance between the story's protagonist and his co-worker Ruth, a self-possessed woman "reared in a perfectly usual American city, [who has] chosen from its unconscious culture the best in custom and

[292] George Elliott, "The NRACP," *The Hudson Review* (Autumn 1949), 381.
[293] ibid., 404.
[294] ibid., 382.

attitude."[295] Rather, readers were taken by what Nolan Miller, reviewing the story as part of a survey of recent short fiction in the *Antioch Review*, called its "startling surprise."[296]

The "NRACP" in question is the instrument of a dystopian near future (the story seems to be set in the 1950s), in which the US government has decided to solve the "Negro Question" by removing all African-Americans to a reservation in the Nevada desert where they can labor to produce goods for sale in the rest of the US while their self-governance is secured by the military that surrounds the reserve. The trajectory of the relocation itself seems borrowed from the real experience of Japanese-Americans at the hands of the War Relocation Authority only years before. The narrator of the story is a bureaucrat in the "public relations" office established to filter the messages leaving the reservation and ensure that the most positive possible message about the relocation is sent out to promote the relocation effort. The surprise that the story offers is that this reserve has been built as an extermination camp, and the terrific meals that the narrator writes to his chief interlocutor's wife about ("we eat handsomely, except for vegetables...roast, steak, chop, stew") have been cooked from the flesh of the exterminated African-American population as they are relocated to the camp. The revelation forces the reader to re-interrogate their recognition of the world described by the narrator's secretary-cum-wife, whose folksy explanation of the American system had so charmed that narrator: "There are those who get it and those who dish it out; I intend to be on the side of the

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[295] ibid., 381 & 392.

[296] Nolan Miller, "The Short Story as a 'Young Art'," *The Antioch Review* (Winter, 1950), 546. Miller groups Elliott's story among the "single effect" stories, of which he claims that "removed from our experience of life, the 'single effect' of these stories, in being successful, successfully limits the demand made upon our sensibilities."

dishers."[297] Ultimately, Elliott's earlier story reflects the deepest sort of pessimism about the sort of social planning undertaken after the war's end; depending on a reader's perspective, it can operate as both an allegory for a predatory state capitalism supported by the labor of minorities whose outlook is little better than for minority groups under National Socialism, and a lament and critique of those who would work toward the planning of social justice under a centralizing and bureaucratizing state. It inhabits and maps the contours, in other words, of precisely the sort of despair that he had accused the writers of *politics* of inspiring in its readers: a despair that "will do most of its [*politics'*] readers very little good," but of which Elliott had concluded that these readers "ought never be without it."[298]

There are reasons within the text of the story that encourage the suspicion that "The NRACP" responds fairly directly—if belatedly—to the exchange of ideas that Elliott had incurred with the writers and allies of Macdonald's *politics*. From the story's first letter, traces of the disagreement between Elliott and Macdonald take shape as elements characterizing the various sectors of the NRACP's PR bureaucracy. Elliott had begun the analysis of the *politics* circle in his 1944 letter with a discussion of the relationship the journal had with 'culture,' asserting, with particular reference to not only Macdonald but "articles by Paul Goodman," that "*politics* feels a strong sense of depression when it contemplates American culture."[299] So there is no little symmetry in the letter-writing protagonist of "The NRACP" beginning his exposition of worklife at

[297] ibid., 390.
[298] Elliott, "'Where Are You Going?' said Reader to Writer," 247.
[299] ibid., 245.

the agency with an heuristic division of his colleagues into "two varieties of people:" "those who 'have culture,' and talk about the latest *New Yorker* cartoons, listen to imitation folksongs and subscribe to the less popular book clubs; and those who play poker, talk sports and sex, and drink too much."[300] This attitude toward the relationships that others have with American culture, I would suggest, must be understood as an attempt on Elliott's part to paint the protagonist as a sympathetic reader of *politics*, the very sort of "uneasy but ineffectual, worried but without power to oppose what they distrust" bureaucrat that he anticipated such a reader would become. The protagonist, Andy, finds himself alienated from both camps, writing, "I prefer the latter type as people, but unfortunately I do not enjoy their activities, except drinking; and since I know the language and mores of the former type, and have more inclination toward them, I am thrown with people whom I dislike intensely." Like Elliott had suggested of the *politics* writers, of whom he had written that they "wince at current American culture," the protagonist may think little of the pretensions to "culture" among the former group, but they are nonetheless the group with which he shares the most.[301] As the letter continues to explore the social scene of the agency's residential headquarters in the Nevada desert, however, Andy does confess to a cultural vein shared universally among the employees: detective stories.

This detail is important not only for the way that it offers foreshadowing for the lens of genre through which readers might best understand the slow unveiling of the

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[300] Elliott, "The NRACP," 381.
[301] Elliott, "'Where Are You Going?," 245.

agency's actual purpose, but for the way that it calls back to the concerns he had written about several years earlier. Elliott had written that a reader of *politics* would be justified, in spite of the "forms of self-protection" by which the writers of the *politics* circle insulated themselves from American culture, if they let themselves "perceive the vitality and imagination in Popular Art writers like Raymond Chandler, James Cain, and Dashiell Hammett."[302] This was of course a point that Macdonald handily conceded in the reply that followed Elliott's letter, writing that "I reject...the notion that I 'cannot participate in public forms of pleasure'" and including as one of his first exempla for participation in such pleasures the claim, "I read detective stories."[303] But while Macdonald listed no authors, a reader that followed his career could see Elliott's effort to continue processing this shared popular interest through a parsing of authors through cultural pretensions. His narrator writes, "I must mention the two universal topics of conversation," but forgets to go any further than the first, writing "I know of no one, including myself, who does not talk absorbedly about mystery stories," before diverting into some categorization:

> the folksongers to a man prefer the tony, phoney Dorothy Sayers-S.S. Van Dine type of pseudo-literary snobbish product, and the horsey folk prefer the Dashiell Hammett romantic cum violent realism; there is one fellow who does nothing but read and reread Sherlock Holmes, and he has won everyone's respect, in some strange way, by this quaint loyalty.[304]

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[302] ibid, 246.
[303] Macdonald, "'Here Lies Our Road!' said Writer to Reader," 248.
[304] Elliott, "The NRACP," 382.

The narrator, who I've suggested we should understand as Elliott's reckoning of something like the bureaucrat he describes in his *politics* letter from 1944, admits to no such preference in his letter. He does, however, manage to draw out a quotation from Auden after suggesting that "everyone finds a strong need to read the damnable things, so strong that we prefer the absolute nausea of reading three in one day...to not reading any."[305] Reading Elliott's postwar bureaucrat narrator position himself amid his coworkers' cultural leanings leaves the unspoken sentiment, given voice by Macdonald several years earlier, that with respect to these elements of popular culture, "a thing can be depressing and hateful *and also extremely interesting*."[306] The sifting of coworkers' interests through his own pretensions to culture highlights the narrator's sensitivity to the "depressing" but "interesting" nature of popular culture, even as it plays up his participation in a habit he hopes to break. His letter writing, we learn, is actually an attempt to do something more productive with his time than consume mystery after mystery, and instead to embark on a "voyage of discovery into [himself]" while embedded in an agency doing work that he hates.[307]

That hate is itself important to the ways this story realizes the trajectories built into the exchange between Elliott and the *politics* writers years earlier. The narrator, much like Elliott had written of himself in the biographical statement he provided for his letter, works solely in order to make a living: "Nothing but the salary keeps me here.

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[305] ibid.
[306] Macdonald, 249. Emphasis in the original text.
[307] Elliott, "The NRACP," 388.

Nothing."[308] As a means of heightening the tension that the appeal of an increased "standard of living," as Goodman had put it, might have, the workers of the National Relocation Authority "are paid fantastic salaries" and have very little work to do.[309] The narrator, Andy, tells his correspondent that he has done very little for his work other than write some copy advertising the physical beauty of the landscape in the "Reservation" set aside for the African-American community and read up on "their primeval culture," which he laments "is wonderful enough to merit study...but not by me."[310] Andy feels, as he will admit later, tremendous guilt at his existence in such an organized system, though as he comes to terms with his job over the course of the story, he fits his guilty work into a broader sense of responsibility and complicity: "this job is a sop to my sense of guilt at being white and middle-class, that is to say, one of Ruth's 'dishers,' a sop because I am participating in an enterprise whose purpose is social justice...yet the actual luxury of my life and my actual status in the bureaucracy...nourishes the guilt which supports it."[311] In other words, it is precisely his high standard of living and undemanding work that feedback into his sense of responsibility toward society: "social guilt," Andy tells his correspondent, "is a good thing to have, and I intend to exploit it in myself."[312] What

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[308] ibid., 381.
[309] ibid., 381. We learn later in the story that the narrator's salary is $8000/yr, aside from the provided room and board at their installation (388). In today's dollars, this would come to around $80,000, according to the US BLS's CPI calculator, or about 300% of the nation's median per-person wage but without any significant monthly expenses. The narrator reveals that he is in fact prohibited from leaving the Reserve at all for three years, which means that he will primarily accrue income as savings over that period unless he starts to gamble or an extensive black market develops within the Reserve. This employment should be enough to secure his financial stability for a significant period of time.
[310] ibid., 383.
[311] ibid., 390-391.
[312] ibid., 391.

Elliott rather patiently teases out in his characterization of Andy is the self-justifying logic by which the "leftish intellectuals of loose political orientation" that he had written to *politics* about "become bureaucrats themselves."

When we trace the affiliation that Elliott's short story draws back to his political correspondence, it not only becomes clear that he is hoping to continue this political conversation through fiction, however. It also becomes clear the extent to which he understood precisely the warning that Goodman's letter chiding him about vocation and standards of living hoped to convey. Recall that Goodman had written his letter of response to Elliott emphasizing firstly that Elliott's accusations of disinheritance misunderstood alienation, and ended with the rhetorical questions, "what kind of *living* is it that a poet would make which would be precluding his writing poetry? [...] which elements of *standard* of living...give as much life as the possibility of art?" But aside from the prods for Elliott to make poetry, if he would consider himself a poet, Goodman wanted to dispel the notion that the *politics* writers were unhappy people. They were not, he wrote, and "for amiability of intercourse and for seeing the humorous side, they surpass those employed, say, in the government agencies here."[313] In other words, the "standard of living" offered by even such lucrative government work as Elliott held during the war and his narrator held in a fictional postwar bureaucracy could not compensate for the amiability that seemed to Goodman to go along with working toward one's vocation.

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[313] Goodman, "The Unalienated Intellectual," 319.

For example, one could map the above discussion of cultural leanings against the degree of contentment that Elliott sees fit to grant each character in "The NRACP," in their lot in the order of the organized system and in the work—executing the duties of a propaganda ministry for extermination camps—that the story slowly unveils for these characters to perform. Those with the greatest degree of idiosyncrasy in their cultural leanings are aghast as they discover the purpose of their work; O'Doone, the colleague who reads Sherlock Holmes and improvises doggerel verse with Andy in their off hours, ultimately commits suicide rather than continue on in knowing participation. The more populist workers seem unflappable to him, including Ruth, who becomes Andy's wife and who is pregnant at the story's conclusion. Ruth, Andy suspects, has maintained that unflappability in the face of terrible knowledge. Having just discovered the truth of his suspicions in a high desert encounter with a military guard, he writes in invisible ink to his correspondent that "sometimes it seems to me that she must surely know it all. I do not want to know whether she knows."[314] The narrator himself, standing in for those who know something of the evils of the society they prop up with their labor and continue to clock in every day, is left devastated by the end of the story. However, he continues to do his work, wracked at night by "that little lullaby that sings in my ears whenever I stop: I have eaten human flesh, my wife is going to have a baby; I have eaten human flesh, my wife is going to have a baby."[315]

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[314] Elliott, "The NRACP," 413.
[315] ibid., 416.

Andy admits to his failure to notice what, in retrospect, seemed the clear purpose of the Reserve: the genocide of the African-American population. In his work as a censor for the letters leaving the Reserve, he had been tasked with the cleaning of letters leaving the Reserve to ensure that they promoted the relocation in the best possible light. This task finds its metaphor in the consumption of the unassimilable flesh of the murdered population; to draw on the idea of heterogeneity found in Georges Bataille's 1930s *corpus*, in Andy's "lullaby," the violated taboo rings in the obscene mirror of the ingestion of this heterogeneous element and the flesh growing in Ruth's body. Where for Bataille the heterogeneous is a "charge," "a force or shock" that transfers from object to object, in Andy's anguish the shift of repulsion to attraction from swallowed flesh to a growing fetus leads to a change in his subjectivity.[316] He confides in a sober note to his correspondent that "I am in a state of transition, from being one of the unfit to being one of the fit," as "the good and the lucky are assisting at the birth of a new age […and] the weak and the unfit are perishing in the death of an old."[317] Andy imagines himself as one of those "good and the lucky" who will be midwives to the new age, entering a state of transition that is freighted with a dark sovereignty. The discursive register adopted by Andy is informed by that of National Socialism, but leads also toward his embrace of a bureaucratic mission to benefit the CPR, taking on a new stance toward the project he had previously held in disdain. And when Andy laments to his correspondent at the story's conclusion, "our child shall be fortunate; it is the first conscious generation of each new

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[316] Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1985), 143.
[317] Elliott, "The NRACP," 415.

order in whom the greatest energy is released," he has conceded any resistance to the part he is playing in the work that will lead to that new order, surrendering his sense of responsibility in exchange for a future in which his child might have the chance to release her "energy."[318]

The story develops these terms in a way that, in light of the reading that I've been suggesting, can only point back to the discourses circulating in *politics* at the end of the war. Andy writes, as though in heavy exhalation, "I accepted the NRACP as inevitable, as Necessity; there remained only the task of trying to understand wherein lay the mystery of the Necessity and of adjusting myself to the situation."[319] This notion of adjustment to an inhuman situation was precisely what Goodman had cautioned against in his essay on "The Political Meaning of Some Recent Revisions of Freud," indicting as well the "rational authority" which Fromm hoped might replace the "irrational" authority of fascism. The story plays out such adjustment to rational authority as the consequence of an encounter with the heterogeneous in an excessively homogeneous environment and domestic scene. The narrative becomes a bad faith parody of Fromm's hopeful assertion that "only in a planned economy in which the whole nation has rationally mastered the economic and social forces, can the individual share responsibility and use creative intelligence in his work."[320] The trajectories of his characters indicate that Elliott was alert to the point Goodman had made about the alienation that accompanied a high

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[318] Elliott, "The NRACP," 416.
[319] ibid., 415.
[320] Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, 271.

standard of living, a good life fantasy about adjustment to the bureaucratic organization until "the aims of the individual and society are identical."

However, Elliott was not without at least one last rejoinder to the *politics* circle. Elliott's story understands the population of the government installation as an extension of America as a whole. Andy concludes in light of his discovery that the elaborate but easily defeated "system of apparent preventatives" erected around the CPR actually only exists because the government agency has in fact planned for a slow drip of rumors that will lead to general acceptance of its purpose among "the people." Andy's own secretive missives would be part of this leak of information. He writes, "it is in the people's interest that the CPR function as it does function, and especially so that they can pretend that they have nothing to do with it. The experience of the Germans in the Jew-extermination camps demonstrated that clearly enough."[321] As has been noted by historian Gregory Sumner, addressing the place of Macdonald's magazine in the closing years of the World War, *politics* stood out in part for the way that it offered an early and sympathetic outlet for what is sometimes known as concentration camp literature.[322] But although Macdonald's magazine had given publicity of the atrocities of the extermination camps, as well as providing an early outlet for Bruno Bettelheim's "Behavior in Extreme Situations," he wanted still to offer a reprieve from responsibility for those who stood outside of the supposed specialists in "torture and murder" who had devised and ran the camps. The argument Macdonald deploys in "The Responsibility of Peoples" is one that

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[321] ibid., 414-415.

[322] See Gregory Sumner, *Dwight Macdonald and the politics Circle* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 46-55.

pivots on the assertion that if everyone who had the slightest sense that these camps existed was guilty, then the almost the whole world deserves to hang. His ultimate conclusion is that "we must look both more widely and more deeply for relief from the dilemma of increasing political impotence accompanied by increasing political responsibility."[323]

The response of Elliott's story to such claims seems to be that looking for relief from such responsibility only deepens one's complicity with the accomplished fact. Macdonald's argument, as Andy's reflections suggest, offers the sort of consolations that the planners of those atrocities could only have both anticipated and hoped to exploit. In other words, the forgiveness of those who did not directly take part in planning or murder, or the leveling of guilt among all, mollifies the consciences of those who had stood apart from the organized system, justifying their disengagement and extending the smooth operations of that system's mechanisms—particularly the horrific ones. The dissent of those who refused to engage, then, becomes a blessing for the system to continue on its way, since those who "draw the line," as the anarchists associated with *politics* had put it, are consoled by the pretense that "they have nothing to do with it." Elliott's story concludes in a way that not only mounts an ironic challenge to the *politics* circle, already dissolving into other projects at the time of the story's publication. "The NRACP" also presents the imposing spectre of an order in which one's political contentions become just one cultural choice among others—resistance to the war economy or participation in it having become a dilemma of the same order as one's

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[323] Dwight Macdonald, "The Responsibility of Peoples," *politics* (March 1945), 93.

preference in mystery stories: the purity of Holmes or the indulgence of Dashiell Hammett.

Elliott's story was the first that he sold for any significant sum as a writer, and was controversial enough that he would recall in a late interview that his friend Josephine Miles, a central figure in Berkeley literary circles, refused to take him up on a celebratory dinner on the basis that the story's premise was too horrible.[324] "The NRACP" not only allegorizes actually-existing race relations in America but also imagines a world that extends toward dystopian ends the *politics* circle's contention that state centralization and rationalization in the United States was no less dangerous than it had been in Germany. The story's concluding emphasis on the psychological ramifications of life as a functionary of such a state, however, and its bleak outlook on both participation and refusal in such systems, offered another round of a conversation with the intellectuals associated with Macdonald and Goodman. It presents a discomforting understanding of the domestic as relief from the pressures and tolls imposed on the powerless functionaries of a capacious state, which presents a confounding understanding of the domestic to that given in Elliott's later work.

The only instrument by which Elliott's early poetry and prose were able to stave off nihilism, a great concern of Elliott's later career evidenced in both interviews and the 1970 *Harper's* essay "Never Nothing," was a turn to domestic intimacies, although the treatment of the consolation offered by domesticity changed between the publication of

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[324] See George P. Elliott and Paul Archambault, "An Hour of Last Things: An Interview with George P. Elliott," *Syracuse Scholar (1979-1991)* (1:2, 1980), 42.

"The NRACP" and "From the Berkeley Hills."[325] Staging the ironic recuperation of the narrator of "The NRACP" through the promise of a happy future with his wife and child, domesticity becomes a sort of anesthetic relief whose intake can ease one's adjustment to working within an inhuman system. That anesthetic role, however, seems to lie at clear odds with the literary productivity: in "The NRACP," the emergence of a new domestic order signals an end to the poetics of self-discovery found in the letters written to that point by the narrator—letters written to evade the anesthetic of the mystery novel enjoyed by the narrator's co-workers, an instance of popular culture described by Paul Goodman in an essay of 1949 as offering "a continual petty draining off of the tensions nearest the surface."[326]

This "tension" constitutes one of the most important sources of creative energy for the discourse around literature in the late 1940s, inheritor of an essentially Romantic aesthetics, as discussed in the previous chapter; its significance was so taken for granted, in fact, that John Crowe Ransom could lament Kantily in his contribution to the same "seminar" as Berryman above, that the great volume of literature being produced after the war comes "out of tension, moral protest, sheer animal mal-adaptation, which drives one quickly into affairs, but scarcely into perfect art, for it precludes the free sensibility."[327] Where Ransom and some among the New Critics valued the formative, contemplative

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[325] See Elliott's interview with Robert Archambault, in which he argues that the great philosopher of nihilism is Sade and the contemporary he most associates with a philosophical nihilism is Jean Genet—a favorite positive example, not coincidentally, of Paul Goodman in *Growing Up Absurd*, who writes of him as a "literary prophet" (190).
[326] Paul Goodman, "The Chance for Popular Culture," *Poetry* (June, 1949), 159.
[327] John Crowe Ransom, "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* (August, 1948), 880.

remove that enabled such “free sensibility,” such shaping distance was not, in their schema or Goodman’s, to be found through a turn to the domestic sphere. Where the figure of “the poet as Brooks Brothers mannequin,” as Jed Rasula aptly calls it, stood in during the 1950s for the compromised academic poet, Rasula argues that it was not this conformity of appearance that was seen as a threat to poetry, however conceived, but that, as Donald Hall put it at the close of the 1950s, “domesticity is the real enemy.”[328]

Elliott’s poetry and fiction are determined by the significance he places on domesticity. In this light, it is worth recalling that Goodman’s encouragement to Elliott to place less priority on making just any sort of “living” had been, of course, capped off by the claim that Goodman had been in the same “family situation” as Elliott himself, and he had managed to make radically different choices about the priorities that made for a meaningful life in both his own life and his fiction. It is helpful to focus on the value of domesticity as a recuperative mode for Elliott, one that provides—as a cultural given, if not exactly as a practice—a form of relief analogous to that described by Arnold Gehlen. This comes about in part because of the way that it places the rather internecine disagreement reflected in Goodman’s scolding of Elliott within a broader social nexus. When Donald Hall rejected domesticity for poets, he was not, it needs clarified, rejecting domestic comfort or love. What he saw as his target was, as he put it, “domesticity as an alternative to history,” or as a “a positive force in a negative universe.” In other words, the domestic as a mode of retreat or relief from individual action on the plane of history.

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[328] Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum*, 194; Donald Hall, “Ah, Love, Let Us Be True: Domesticity and History in Contemporary Poetry.” *The American Scholar* 28.3 (1959), 310.

Elliott would not be in bad company under such terms: Hall's greatest target in this argument is Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach." But what we find in Hall is essentially a rejection of precisely the internal logic of wish-fulfilling epiphanics that Rasula would reject forty years later. Putting his case as schematically as it gets, and damning in the process the poetics of coterie flourishing in his moment, Hall would sum up the previous decade's squabbles over domesticity and poetic community in these terms:

> if a man writes a love poem to his wife, it is childish to complain that he is conforming to a bourgeois institution; but one might well argue that in a specific poem the poet attaches a relevance to his love, or a value to his affirmation of it, which falsifies his poem and makes it sentimental.[329]

It is easy to see how Elliott's uses for domestic intimacy—the shrugging off of contingency in the face of nuclear weaponry or the slow adjustment to an industrially managed genocide—fit here against the accusation of sentimentality. But what Hall neglects here, a reasonable omission given the venue of the essay's publication (*The American Scholar*), is the extent to which this affirmation of domestic intimacy accorded with the elevated value assigned to the domestic under the bourgeois culture of the moment, or even that of the Berkeley/San Francisco community of writers, of which Elliott was a part.

It is helpful to understand Elliott's uses of the domestic in the context of the Bay Area culture with which he interacted. Scarlett Higgins, for instance, has written compellingly of the significance of the household to the avant-garde practices of Robert

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[329] Donald Hall, "Ah, Love, Let Us Be True," 311.

Duncan and Jess, whose continuous cohabitation each thought of as marriage, and whose home was a vital space in the broader San Francisco community of writers.[330] Her contention is that Jess and Duncan's thinking about the household, which preserves the ornate intertwining of public and private spaces important to the Victorian home against the dominant cultural current that would remove the division of public and private spaces in the home (through the use of open plans, for instance), was mirrored by their conception of the role of the private, occluded, and hidden to public spheres themselves. She argues that for Jess (and Duncan), "the insistence on remembering stories, or recalling images, in the face of society's will to forget, is what collage offered to both of these artists: room for the dark places and recurring images to remain hidden and yet present."[331] That the personal, the private, the hidden life of even the "Brooks Brothers mannequin" should more frequently be elevated into public, though aesthetic, consideration in a time that aspired increasingly toward the separation of these spheres was even present in middlebrow critical writing of the moment.

To draw out another San Francisco poet, Kenneth Rexroth would invoke just such language in arguing for the value of a recent collection of poems by John Ciardi, who was better known as an editor and whose status as an academic poet-anthologist has left him as a frequent foil for discussions of poetry's institutionalization throughout the Cold War. Rexroth wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* that in Ciardi's collection *I Marry You*, we discover that "it is a great thing to write sharply personal poems about the

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[330] See Scarlett Higgins, "A Private Public Sphere: Robert Duncan and Jess's Cold War Household," *Arizona Quarterly* 70:4 (Winter, 2014). 109-142.
[331] ibid., 134.

intimacies of marriage and parenthood in a time when most of one's colleagues dread and eschew the slightest hint of the personal—a subject, doubtless, they would find, if they dared try it, barren and unmanageable."[332] Particularly coming from a man who was married to two women at once, in a questionably legal arrangement, for much of the 1950s, Rexroth's valuation of Ciardi's differentiation from the academic poets that Rexroth had very little respect for (telling James Laughlin in a letter of 1950 "the cranks and bigots & people of eccentric taste are in the academic world—not outside") in terms of rendering the domestic poetic can only be seen as high praise.[333] To put it another way, where Hall was writing that the problem with domestic fantasy as a way of resolving a poem that had aspired to include its historical moment was the forcing of a false equivalence, Rexroth's criticism and Duncan/Jess's practice both can be seen as suggesting that domesticity is by no means undergoing an unjustified inflation of merit when its fantasies participate in a poetic speaker's understanding of world events. In fact, for these two writers among the avant-gardists of the West Coast, the recuperation of certain forms of domesticity carries within it a politically oppositional status.

Aside from the oppositionality granted to some forms of domesticity, with its status as a sort of counterpublic (to draw on the language used by Higgins), other forms had been upheld for a generation as the only grounds upon which the good life could be

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[332] Kenneth Rexroth, "Animals, Stars and People: MARRY YOU: A Sheaf of Love Poems, by John Ciardi," *New York Times* (Aug 3, 1958), BR6.

[333] Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin, *Kenneth Rexroth and James Laughlin: Selected Letters*, ed. Lee Bartlett (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 157. Of Rexroth's household during the early 1950s, see, among others, Sam Hamill and Elaine Laura Kleiner, "Introduction," *Sacramental Acts: The Love Poems of Kenneth Rexroth*, ed. Sam Hamill and Elaine Laura Kleiner (Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1997).

lived. In this, more conventional forms of domestic intimacy actually formed the basis for a version of *eudaimonia* completely severable from labor. This was one of the findings that surprised William Whyte, the reporter from *Fortune* whose access to the strivings of the predominantly white professional classes led to the decade-defining study, *The Organization Man*. As discussed in the my introductory chapter, Whyte's interviews with young people entering the workforce revealed that this postwar generation understood the good life as "calm and ordered...equable; it is a nice place out in the suburbs, a wife and three children, one, maybe two cars...a good college education for the kids." The salient element of a good life was security: a security found in giving up one's own creative energy or ambition to a job seen as depression-proof, in owning a home and starting a family to insulate against the future. It is in the discursive matrix formed by these currents and those more oppositional tendencies above that one must understand the place of domesticity in Elliott's early poetry and prose, in spite of its apparently obvious fit within the caricatures of retrospective nostalgia deflation.

Having come to maturity as a writer and thinker in a World War II era Bay Area, Elliott was not only a witness to the suburban expansion of the California coast, but also to the military industry that was one of that expansion's chief drivers. Partly this came in the wake of massive government investments in the shipbuilding and nuclear research industries of the Bay Area during World War II, a phenomenon responsible in part for the expansion of large corporations such as Bechtel. Another durable source of military-industrial growth came in the form of the nascent electronics and high-tech industry in the Santa Clara Valley to the Southeast, where by the 1940s and 1950s, projects like

Frederick Terman's Stanford Research Institute (and the later Stanford Industrial Park) had attracted companies such as Lockheed, Sylvania, General Electric, IBM, and Westinghouse.[334] These companies were engaged in the sort of world-historical exploits that would qualify their inclusion in the "history" that Hall suggested might only be carried toward a false equivalence with the domestic. But where Hall had argued that "the evasion of history by domesticity is a fault both moral and technical," what becomes clear is that if there is a moral component to Elliott's prose and poetry resolving in celebrations of the domestic, it is in the rejection of the priority of California's war economy—a rejection duplicated in his eventual turn to teaching after the war, leaving the National War Labor Board. It is significant that the turn of Elliott's writing, and this is what makes him an interesting foil for the *politics* writers, is not the turn toward "confession," as we find in a major work of the late 1950s like Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, nor is his domesticity a celebration of the home and family for their own sake, as in the writing of a popular 'middlebrow' poet such as Phyllis McGinley. Rather, the turn in Elliott's toward the domestic is a means by which to recuperate a subject enveloped in a specifically military-industrial California economy, to provide some relief for the overburdened subject. For Elliott, this came in the specific wake of ideas about organized and individual responsibility that circulated through the pages of *politics* in the 1940s, but his development of the domestic as an institution in his fiction and poetry indicates the

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[334] See Aaron Sachs, "Virtual Ecology," *WorldWatch* (January-February 1999); Sachs' essay explores the period's invention of the "industrial park" with its planned occlusions of the visible traces of industry, and the impact that the resource intensive industries of these companies had on the region's ecological well-being.

persistence of the international discourse about the role of "relief" through the postwar moment. The next chapter begins in this same moment of postwar anguish, but shifts attention to other approaches to the modes of subjective resilience that might offer relief and a path toward *eudaimonia* from the impasse of a compromised public and irresponsible private life.

Chapter Three - Private Mourning Keeps a Public Silence: Mac Low, McLuhan, and Aesthetic Exercise

The argument between writers from *politics* and George Elliott that I explored in the previous chapter was only one minor front in a many-sided conflict around the idea of action for writers after World War 2. This conflict was in some ways crystallized in the *Partisan Review* questionnaire on the state of American writing in 1948. In that forum, John Berryman had written with bleakness about the moment's moral situation:

> men who can think and are moral must stand ready night and day to the orders of blind evil. What has created this is an usurpation which is not complete: usurpation of individual decision, which yet leaves the individual nominally free—and of course actually free if he happens to be a hero. But literary men are seldom heroes...it is not a state of mind, this readiness, favorable to writing.[335]

In the face of such a paralysis, Berryman suggests in his response to the *Partisan Review*'s questionnaire, "nihilism is more articulate and impressive than in any other period of which I have knowledge."[336]

Berryman's argument about the state of affairs in American writing was such that it rhetorically cut off anticommunist rumblings about lower artistic standards following the war, reaching back with criticism toward the high water marks of proletarian literature. The postwar version of this criticism was crystallized in the following year's

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[335] John Berryman, "The State of American Writing, 1948: Seven Questions," *Partisan Review* (August, 1948), 857.
[336] ibid.

publication of Arthur Schlesinger's *The Vital Center*, which suggested that "where direct political control cannot reach, the Communists and their friends have exerted their influence toward lowering and softening artistic standards in a pseudo-democratic direction."[337] Rather than adopting the anticommunist critique that was available to him, however, Berryman's assertion pointed to unfreedom conceived of more broadly—the loss of any meaningful autonomy outside of oppositional heroism. The challenge facing writers of Berryman's temperament, the "Leftish" group whose despair Elliott had been prescient to predict, was finding a reason for creative expression at all in an environment where one is compelled to "stand ready…to the orders of blind evil" in the organized system. While Elliott attempted to find a solution in the preservation of the domestic space, the writers I discuss in this chapter turn their attention to ways that this standing ready, the suspension of action, might be captured as a sort of aesthetic exercise.

In this chapter, I discuss the relationship between the treatment that little magazines of the 1940s and the mass cultural magazines of the same period gave the balance of private and public lives. I place particular pressure on a poem by Jackson Mac Low, "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," published in 1947 in George Woodcock's magazine, *Now*. That poem dramatizes the foreclosure of action, enacting a closure between private and public that represents an impasse between responsibility and liberty. I move from this discussion into a consideration of the development of Marshall McLuhan's first major work, *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*, in 1951. McLuhan's work is framed explicitly as an effort at cultivating the individual's capacity

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[337] Arthur Schlesinger, *The Vital Center* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1949), 19-20.

to endure the whirlpool of a mass culture; however, he is also clear that however much his project in rendering the Typhon of American mass culture could become a facile challenge to ideological false consciousness other hands, his interest terminates in that culture's uninhibited inspection, content with the standard of living it might offer.

"The candid protest seems a mannered pose"

That the compromises of the political Left were mirrored by compromises by artists of the Leftist vanguard has become something of a truism within cultural histories of the midcentury. These compromises did not put an end to the chain of formal experimentation extending from the 19th century, obviously, but comprised a reflection of a shifting ideological terrain. The pessimism of the postwar moment, of course, was the pessimism of the war years, and that pessimism got around. One of the few points of agreement shared between little magazines and mass cultural offerings like Marshall McLuhan's frequent object, *Life*, was that the outlook for the individual was not good. In a survey of the social and cultural landscape at the conclusion of the 1930s written for *The Partisan Review* in 1939, in the early years of the war, Philip Rahv could take for granted that "the chronic crisis of capitalism extorts from every human being greater and greater sacrifices of will, consciousness, and individuality, depriving people of whatever independence they might have had and of whatever power was theirs to act upon and determine their own lot."[338] Of the hope that might reside in aspirations toward the revolutionary socialist promise of classless society, Rahv concedes that such hopes,

[338] Philip Rahv, "Twilight of the Thirties," *The Partisan Review* (Spring 1939), 8.

which might have found expression in the moment's art, have been drowned under "the two great political catastrophes—profoundly related to each other—of our epoch: the victories of fascism and the defeat of the Bolshevik revolution."[339] Rahv's concern, a significant one, given the importance of the *Partisan Review* and Dwight Macdonald's splinter-periodical, *politics*, to the artists and writers discussed in the previous chapters was that as a result of this loss of individuality, the literary and other expression granted to private life was diminishing.

As Rahv would put it, "the crisis is socializing the art-object," making as much a swipe at Mike Gold and *The New Masses* of the early 1930s as at any specific work on the threshold of the 1940s. [340] But this socialization was proceeding "in a manner so retrograde as to force it down to lower levels of awareness and formal value."[341] The socialized art-object, in other words, was residing at such a level of formal self-consciousness (or, to draw on language that would be important in the following decade, expressiveness) that its social use-value was little different from propaganda. Artists, to follow the grim diagnosis Rahv leaves readers with at the end of the 1930s and at the dawn of the Second World War, could choose between a retrograde social poetics or turn to the increasingly insolvent and seemingly politically irrelevant concerns of private life. The recuperation of expression about the private life, however, would become an increasingly politicized concern, as the transition from a wartime economy seemed more

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[339] ibid., 9.
[340] ibid.
[341] ibid.

like it might lead to a permanent restructuring of the market enterprise in the United States.

In January of 1946, the editors of *LIFE* magazine published an editorial with the rhetorical question, "Should We Be Optimistic?," as its title; the subhead clarifies that at best 'we' might say, "maybe." At issue for the magazine's editors, and presumably the broad swath of the public that *LIFE* spoke to and for, was the question of whether the government would relinquish its wartime powers in arenas such as collective bargaining for labor; if the government did not return considerable power to labor and industry to set their own agendas, then the editors' answer to their title was emphatically "no."[342] After all, the largest strike wave in American history was then shutting down switchboards across the country, following an autumn filled by dozens of major strikes in industry.

Layoffs, reduced productivity, and worker resentment at union acquiescence to War Labor Board demands were producing so many wildcat strikes that the days of work lost in the previous year had totaled well into the millions. An effective plurality of workers had lost faith in the capacity of collective bargaining to represent their interests in the face of government-imposed arbitration. In his history of the labor unrest of the late 1940s, George Lipsitz argues that, "informal and spontaneous methods rendered legitimate authorities powerless, eclipsing the channels of bureaucracy with the methods of direct action."[343] However, even these victories highlighted the precarity of workers' gains on the path to recovering the "good life" of full employment. Lipsitz continues,

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[342] "Should We Be Optimistic?," *LIFE* (Jan. 21, 1946), 30.
[343] George Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 107.

"organized violent repression...intimidated individuals, while charges of Communist influence bred suspicion in the ranks and helped shatter [a] fragile unity."[344] It is little wonder that *LIFE*'s editors would suggest, in the face of such a climate, "there is a sense in which pessimism is a more scientific mood than optimism."[345]

The withdrawal from organization as an outlet for political expression and the channeling of such efforts into the personal was both effected in the interests of a good life fantasy surrounding the "private" and a rejection of a public sphere in which unity seemed compromised by both bureaucratic canalization and mutual suspicion. As if to foreclose entirely on the notion of organized oppositionality, Philip Rahv would take again to the pages of *Partisan Review* in May 1948 to excoriate the "homeless radical" writers—his example is John Dos Passos, who had that January written for *LIFE* of "the failure of Marxism" in the Soviet Union and Britain—for turning in recoil away from Stalin's Soviet Union toward a blinkered faith in private capitalism as the only remaining foothold of individual freedom. At the other pole of responses to the postwar moment's despair, Rahv locates his former colleague Dwight Macdonald, who he accuses of "tak[ing] cover in a position of absolute utopianism, swapping Lenin and Trotsky for Tolstoy and Gandhi."[346] Rahv's broadside places it amid the first reports of the Berlin Blockade of April that year. That series of events cemented the dynamics of the Cold War that would follow between the Soviet Union and what became the NATO alliance. In the year after the events of the blockade and the formation of the German Republic,

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[344] ibid., 108.
[345] "Should We Be Optimistic," 30.
[346] Philip Rahv, "Disillusionment and Partial Answers," *Partisan Review* (May 1948), 524.

the choice of greater and lesser evils was a pressing one for the Left. Rahv would argue against both Dos Passos and Macdonald for what he called the "democratic socialism" favored by the anti-Stalinist constellation publishing in *Partisan Review*. In 1948, the *Partisan* writers may have still been socialists, but they were willing to embrace a strategic dalliance with American capitalism as a means toward political reform. Rahv argued that rather than despairing, the Left should seek "a strategic alliance, chiefly in this country, with bourgeois democracy and to a certain extent even with the bourgeoisie as a class," and that such an alliance has become "unavoidable and in fact indispensable if the struggle is not to be conducted in a quixotic and futile manner."[347]

In other words, the future of any Left to come depended on suspending action for the time being, in the hope that at some point in the future an opening might present itself for engagement. It is worth noting that this accommodationist suspension of action had been the official position of the CPUSA at the height of World War 2, as articulated in Earl Browder's response to the 1943 Tehran Agreement. Browder suggested then, well before Rahv wrote of partnering with the "lesser evil" of capitalism, that in Tehran "capitalism and socialism [had] begun to find the way to peaceful coexistence and collaboration in the same world." It was just this compromise that had set Dwight Macdonald's offshoot, *politics*, in 1944 on the direction of a more radical position for the critique of culture. Sounding a similar note of accommodation in the postwar moment, the compromise from Rahv signaled the abandonment of hope for fundamental change in

[347] Ibid., 521.

favor of a suspended revolution from one of the last prominent socialist redoubts in America.

The removal of revolutionary politics' public aspirations for fundamental social reform had its effects on artists beyond those represented in the *Partisan Review*. As Serge Guilbaut observed in his *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art*, "from compromise to compromise, refusal to refusal, adjustment to adjustment, the rebellion of the artists, born of frustrations within the left, gradually changed its significance until ultimately it came to represent the values of the majority." However, as Guilbaut is quick to clarify, they retained their modernist credentials along the way, reflecting these cultural values "in a way (continuing the modernist tradition) that only a minority was capable of understanding. The ideology of the avant-garde was ironically made to coincide with what was becoming the dominant ideology."[348] Guilbaut's point here is a useful one, even if the ideology to which Guilbaut refers is the slightly later one "that came to dominate American political life after the 1948 presidential election." Guilbaut does suggest that the "liberated and liberating" expressionist art that was elaborated in 1947-1948 reflects a "dominant ideology," a position that probably attributes too much currency to the affirmation of personal "freedom" in the dominant ideology of that period. Guilbaut's suggestion is that amid the political fallout of the American 1940s, we discover that even the shape taken by experimental art fell broadly in line with fantasies of the good life that shaped the dominant popular culture.

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[348] Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 3.

The links between vanguard *poiesis* and broader cultural currents present in the mid-century US, of course, is not only one of the animating observations of Guilbaut, but a perennial concern for literary critics. One finds this problem emerging in Jed Rasula's discussion of mid-century poetics from *The American Poetry Wax Museum* in 1995, with particular reference to the way that the appeal of the Beats to the public of the late 1950s came from their fulfillment of a "social fantasy," citing approvingly the characterization of Norman Podhoretz that those in the suburbs "think of themselves as conformists and of Bohemianism as the heroic road."[349] Rasula's study continues by noting that the difference between Action painting and its poetic contemporaries could be reduced to the differing statuses of the avant-garde in each medium: poetry's vital center, unlike that of painting, could hardly be described as 'free' in the way that Pollack was by "the explanatory liberal reasoning of the voice-over."[350] Drawing on the diagnosis of a generational brain-washing by *Understanding Poetry* given by Karl Shapiro in *The Nation* in 1957, Rasula's study makes the case that if the Beats represented an at-best countercultural rather than revolutionary vanguard, this was because the "increasingly bland" young people Shapiro thought conditioned by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren were more than ready to receive a subculture of heroic individuals as an oppositional ideal.

On the other hand, Michael Davidson's 2004 study, *Guys Like Us,* addresses the ways in which, during the 1950s, "the ideology of liberal consensus" as he calls it, "went

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[349] Jed Rasula, *The American Poetry Wax Museum* (Urbana, Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1996), 201.
[350] ibid., 202.

hand in hand with a joiner mentality from which literary bohemia was not immune." Offering a history of literary community's postwar deployment of a homosociality reflecting the broader culture, much of the book's criticism addresses the history and consequences of a climate in which "the 'boys' club' served an important function when more institutional forms of community (university affiliations, class privilege, religious affiliation) could not be assumed."[351] Here the very practices of community-formation, with complicated literary gestures of inclusion and exclusion and particularly among oppositional subcultures, are made into the reflection of postwar society's *ad hoc* production of consensus through voluntary organizations. Even formally avant-gardist or politically progressive coteries of writers, Davidson emphasizes, worked to generate the sorts of group mentalities that characterized the Elks' Club—much as David Riesman's famous 1950 study had suggested one might find, as cultural forces urged the individual character toward 'adjustment' and personalities became legible as 'other-directed.'

This conflict of public and private, of organized agency and individual quiet, draws out a link between the immediate postwar moment of the late 1940s and the good life obsessions of the 1950s. That conflict had called the function of poetic experience into question over the despairing years of the 1940s—years particularly despairing for the "socially aware" writers discussed above. That question might reasonably have been generated by turning the hope of Holley Cantine, the anarchist editor of *Retort*, into an interrogative: how could poetry be mobilized as part of the "new society...lived out by its

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[351] Michael Davidson, *Guys Like Us* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 19.

advocates"?[352] In one of the most significant poems of his pre-1960 "intentional" period, Jackson Mac Low can be seen working through these questions in "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," published in George Woodcock's *Now* in 1947.

Mac Low had been producing poems for the little anarchist magazines, as well as reviews of music and books, since the last years of the war. He was a regular contributor to *Why? / Resistance* and a member of the War Resisters' League, participating in the WRL/*Catholic Worker*/*Liberation* protests against nuclear weapons and civil defense in the 1950s. His early days in New York embody as emphatically as any other writer of the late 1940s the tensions between literary experimentation and political activism. But very little commentary exists about these years of his life and his poetic output, in part because much of it differs quite drastically from the non-intentional compositions that he started performing around 1960, the year that *The Marrying Maiden* was produced by The Living Theatre. One exception to this critical inattention comes in Jesse Cohn's recent *Underground Passages*, which discusses Mac Low's output as part of a "new direction" away from the stridency of anarchist calls-to-action in magazines like *Retort* and *Now*. Cohn writes that in these poems, "old oral-musical forms and genres...fall away entirely...abandoned in favor of quieter, more private and meditative modes, elegies not only for the passing of a moment but that of community and meaning."[353] To demonstrate how Mac Low embodies this new direction, he isolates an untitled work from *Retort* and "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," suggesting that in the latter poem,

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[352] Holley Cantine, "Editorials," *Retort* (Winter 1945), 6.

[353] Jesse Cohn, *Underground Passages: Anarchist Resistance Culture, 1848-2011* (Oakland: AK Press, 2014), 116-117.

we can find Mac Low offering an oblique explanation of why the turn to the ostensibly less populist and public mode of non-intentional experiment may have made sense.

Cohn argues that the poem's diction is self-consciously "too corrupt for poetic use" and "belongs to a 'public,' corrupted by 'corporation prose,' which is unreachable, willfully ignorant, determined to misread."[354] Cohn's reading of the poem places a great deal of weight on its last lines, which suggest that "private anger, cloth'd in 'outworn styles' / provokes in private readers public smiles." He argues that these smiles come from a contemptuous public sphere that would mock protest, too corrupted by the cultural environment's "corporate prose" to recognize genuine anger. My contention is that a more complete reading of the poem suggests that Mac Low's sense of audience is more complicated than the one implied through Cohn's reading, however productive that reading is.

Cohn is certainly right to suggest that the poem is notable for its attention to the way that poems are received, breaking in its first section to quarrel with the tone that has been established for this sort of writing. Mac Low opens with the close of the war, as his title might suggest:

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

[354] ibid., 119.

forgotten—

No! Not this tone! Can I not pay

some tribute to these deaths, some human feeling

such as they deserve, without concealing

nature beneath ambiguous irony?[355]

The abrupt enjambment of the first two lines performs the sort of irony with which Mac Low has adopted the form, which serves in the first stanza as a kind of syntactic hobble, keeping the reader from passing too smoothly over the grain of the sentence as the preposition is severed from the action. The dead and dying are "foreclosed / on," and their effects have been "disposed / of," as the poem advances the sense that, unless the poet has a tin ear, there is something ironic happening in the poem's form. That intuition heightens as the poem continues. The folding back of the "forgotten" name and fame, here, come with a resounding thud in part because they are so dramatically shoved forward by the poem's form: the hesitant emdash at the line's end points like an arrow to the bitter, grinning, and clunky rhyme. However, immediately the line breaks in a step, and the voice of the speaker intervenes against these first faltering attempts, exclaiming, "No! Not this tone!" Rejecting the knowing wink of repetition, the self-consciousness of the poem's rhetoric, the speaker intervenes with a self-critical plea for directness of expression, "some human feeling / such as they deserve." The speaker then tries to find a form for his voice that might circumvent the indirection of poetic form, even as he performs in consistent couplets.

[355] Jackson Mac Low, "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," *Now* 7 (Feb-Mar 1947), 37-38.

Underneath this wish for directness, the reference of the poem's title seems to be echoing: like the speaker of Owen's "Dulce Et Decorum Est," the speaker of Mac Low's poem wants to cut through the figures and abstractions that cloud the memory of the war dead, to speak more directly of the losses of war. The speaker in Owen's poem had concluded that if the person he was addressing could only have heard "at every jolt, the blood / Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs" of the gassed soldier being drawn in a wagon away from the trenches, they "would not tell [the lie of the poem's title] with such high zest / to children ardent for some desperate glory." The Horatian ode stands between its reader and the horrible physicality of dying, but Owen reminds us of the drama of the dying body, its intensely personal, singular demand on the responsibility: "in all my dreams, before my helpless sight, / He plunges at me, guttering, choking, drowning."[356] Mac Low rejects both the anonymous abstraction of death in the public sphere, by which the war dead are instrumentalized, and the indirection of the poetic mode that would give shape or mold the mourning of the dead into a received form.

In place of the ironic, obvious rhetoricity of the stanza he began with, then, Mac Low's speaker changes direction. He concludes the poem's first section:

> —Now that *these* degrees of tyranny
>
> triumph, they who died unwillingly
>
> at last alone, in private—for the pain
>
> of public hypocrites—are mourned alone,

[356] Wilfred Owen, *Poems by Wilfred Owen* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1920), 15.

in private. I, alone, in private, mourn.[357]

In the course of the poem, it isn't clear whether "*these*" refers back to the degrees of irony deployed above it or to the work of instrumentalizing the dead. The poem seems to be indicting its halting attempt at a heightened oratorial mode in the form it had taken above, which is reinforced by its affirmation of the incommensurability of mourning, of the private dream interrupted by responsibility for each individual death. The poem's first section concludes on this note, seeming to reject the ambiguity of poetic form, even as it continues trudging on in rhymed or off-rhymed couplets, utilizing the formal substitutions it employs (for instance, its single tercet encompassing "irony," "tyranny," and "unwillingly") to reinforce the more explicit rejections of artifice in the poem's public address.

Mac Low takes up the non-heroic death of Owen's poem in "Post Victoriam"'s second section, amplifying his concern for the "forgotten" dead—particularly those not honored for their "heroic courage." His speaker begins by exclaiming,

Heroic courage wasted for the cash
and power of public faces! for the trash
of public nonsense! Let me honour here
those who died as cowards screaming Fear!
Fear! and the pain of human deaths, to curse
the public vampires riding on their hearse;
mixed with the mud, burnt with the flakk'd plane,

[357] Jackson Mac Low, "Post Victoriam—Neque Dulcem Neque Decorum," *Now* 7 (Feb-Mar 1947), 38.

> dissolved in the oil-soaked sea, who squealed their pain
>
> and cried for Mother, mixing salt with salt,
>
> forgetting at last the Hep! and March! and Halt![358]

The heroic dead, the speaker suggests, were exploited by the "public," spending against their own interests, and the "public" here takes on a spoiled cast, incapable of redemption by the lives of those it would claim as heroes. Put schematically, "Post Victoriam" begins to clarify its terms: the public is the false, communicable, delusory, rhetorically sophisticated realm which turns human lives into abstractions or instruments in its service; the private is the space of genuine mourning, of physical immediacy, of the incommunicability of pain. The poem continues in an attempt to honor such pain, as the speaker demands of himself, "Let me honour here / those who died as cowards screaming Fear!" Instead of speaking of deaths given over to the abstractions of nation or ideal, Mac Low's speaker would honor those who died, ultimately, only for themselves, in fear and cowardice, forgetting the machinic assemblies that had entrained them ("the Hep! and March! and Halt!"). The physical immediacy of pain having overwritten the jodies that had brought bodies into a shared cadence, the individual experiences their suffering at a private tempo. But as the reader passes over this release from rhythm into private suffering, the poem's own song settles into great regularity. Again, the act of giving shape and honor to these others' pain seems to lie out a screen mitigating against feeling.

The effect of this contrast is heightened as the speaker continues by bringing the civilian casualties of total war into the concerns of the poem and the speaker's mourning:

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[358] Ibid., 38.

> And those who died in private and at home
>
> beneath the dinner table in the room,
>
> "secure from all but direct hits"; and those—
>
> —but *each* and *each* and *each* and *each* bestows
>
> a transient garland on *these many*; *each*
>
> no *each,* for *one*, and *one*, escapes all speech.[359]

Where Mac Low begins, "and those—," the line breaks, dashed, and speaking of "those" is shown to be all too complicated: "—but *each* and *each* and *each* and *each* bestows / a transient garland on *these many*: *each* / no *each*, for *one*, and *one*, escapes all speech." It would be possible to speak of "those," but this would elide the "one" of which it is impossible to give voice to begin with. The anonymous mass finds articulation, but the knotted instant of the individual person escapes any public enunciation. The poem announces, as it had in its first section, that it is broaching the inarticulable through a formal break, employing a doubled emdash that it lays across the broken line. What escapes the confines of the poem, what the poem cannot put into speech, it points toward with the half-arrows of punctuation that direct us to the gap in enunciation, the delta of breath and thought. Mac Low demonstrates in the persistence of the couplet form that there are ways of performing a genre of speech and utilizing the genre's limitations self-consciously, calling attention to the ways that what is articulable in a given form always involves a sense of foreclosure, and adumbrating that which lies outside of form as a means of mourning it.

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[359] Ibid., 38.

To this point, it is possible to read Mac Low's poem as a direct response to the crisis of individuals' private lives articulated by Berryman in the introduction of this chapter—the usurpation of the individual by the public, which makes continual and open-ended demands on responsibility. Even within the oppositional context of *Now*, a public is operating to which Mac Low's speaker makes concessions for communicability. Even if it is a public that is able to hear what is being given shape in the gap between dashes, it is a public with which the tensions of the poem's opening are in conversation; it gives representative shape to a contention in editor George Woodcock's essay on "The Writer and Politics" from three years before. Woodcock wrote that "to dissociate from and expose falsehood in writing and thought is an obvious duty of the sincere writer," and Mac Low's "Post Victoriam" seems eager to enact the real difficulties of living that dictate through.[360] But Woodcock also elaborated, "what is not justified is to write obediently, according to some external creed or compulsion."[361] With relatively strict couplets and subject matter coming directly from concerns about public and private life that flowed through the little anarchist magazines to which he contributed, "Post Victoriam" puts two openly "received," or at least "shared," elements of writing in tension with one another. The stodgy, indirect form of the poem seems designed to stifle the "individual decision" while leaving the individual "nominally free," in the language of Berryman's *Partisan Review* response. Finding some way to keep speaking, even though that speech is always already compromised by both the gulf between private and

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[360] George Woodcock, "The Writer and Politics," *Now* 4 (1944), 11.
[361] ibid.

public and the corrupting effect of any organization on the individual voice (to draw out just two of the conflicts being enacted in the poem), seems to be the challenge that "Post Victoriam" poses rather than moving beyond, as Cohn has it in his reading.

When the speaker moves into the next section, he appears to be reflecting on just this challenge, and after several opening lines invoking the public instrumentalization of the war dead enters into a brief parenthetical:

> Now that each dead, each dying, is dying, dead,
> and public alchemists above his head
> turn blood to fluid assets, bones to bonds,
> and flesh and breath—to fame and empty sounds
> (each public voice exuding from its face
> and trickling into every private place,
> like bird-lime binding all into the State
> till freed into anarchic private crates)…[362]

The lures of collective action following from the conversion of "flesh and breath" are figured by Mac Low's speaker as a "public voice" that grasps the private individual like "bird-lime." The tree that should be refuge is instead the State, and every branch is a trap to those who light on it. The only way to avoid this constraint is to be "freed" into the "private crate" of anarchism—in other words, to be isolated in the sanctioned free zone of the intentional community or the periodical, cut off from the public but more or less autonomous in captivity.

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[362] Ibid., 38.

That this is not a favorable situation, or a situation "favorable to writing," is reflected in lines that follow:

> and all begins again 'just as before'
>
> that is to say, continues, peace and war,
>
> the private mourning keeps a public silence
>
> and private tears mean public acquiescence.
>
> (And horror yielded—public celebration!
>
> The street became a place of recreation
>
> where milling jitterbugs killed dissident sleep
>
> with shrill-voiced brass and well-slapped basses deep.)

So long as the tears and mourning of the war's cost are confined to the private individual, there will be acquiescence to the next war, which will also "turn blood to fluid assets," as the speaker had lamented, just above, about the last. That public acquiescence permitted by private tears is dangerous, because as the stanza that follows continues, "the man of business—the man of state / find much to mutually congratulate: / they wish there were more worlds to *liberate*."[363] However, because these forces of business and the state seek only profit and power, both peace and war are equally plausible futures. In a moment of stinging irony, the third section closes with the declaration that:

> …sometimes there's more
>
> in "peaceful" exploitation than in war;
>
> and peaceful trading, now the wiser course,

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[363] Ibid., 39.

does not preclude the use of force!

Then who dare be dissatisfied? Why see:

we'll have both peace and war, in closest harmony![364]

Here Mac Low's speaker proffers a knowing sarcasm for the community of subscribers to a journal devoted to anarchist literature.

It is at this point, after finally making full use of the distance provided him by the poem's heightened artifice of a public to make ironic contact with the limited public reading *Now*, that Mac Low's speaker can turn to the problem of speaking back to that other, broader public more directly. The poem's final section opens on that public's incomprehension of the idioms of private expression in one of its most extended sequences:

We who by addiction and by choice

address the public in our private voice

can, if we reach, but little hope to please

ears that have only heard the public wheeze:

our honesty is queer, our anger mad;

we're sentimental when we dare be sad;

our work shows we're neurotic, and our play—

—shows we're neurotic: who'll hear what we say?

When we're exact, the cry is we're obscure;

the literal word is termed a metaphor;

[364] Ibid., 39.

> the metaphor's a paradox, perverse—
>
> —and when we bless,—the critics say we curse![365]

Even when poems or essays expressing private desire or genuine feeling reach the public, the speaker contends, they cannot be heard for the genuine expression they might contain. Their very publicness seems to condemn them to miscomprehension as the products of neuroses to be psychoanalyzed or as difficult to parse bundles of irony. This is a concern that the first sections of the poem had been self-consciously combatting in composition, but that is only reinforced through the embedding of that self-consciousness in the mesh of artifice.

The above provides a situation in which the final lines of the poem referenced in Cohn's essay appear, a situation in which even irony appears to be inhabited ironically, in a poem whose first gesture had been to reprimand itself for not offering "human feeling...without concealing" it. The speaker explains that

> When taste is formed on corporate prose
>
> the candid protest seems a mannered pose:
>
> by private anger, cloth'd in 'outworn' styles
>
> provokes in private readers public smiles.

Because of the ambiguities of the poem's adoption of a strict artifice, it's not clear how we should understand the "when" of the first line to be delimited. After all, the candid protest lodged by this very poem appears to be making a self-consciously mannered pose against such poses. The poem leaves unclear what satisfaction it is that has provoked the

[365] Ibid., 39.

smiles of private readers' public faces, or what the consequence or truth of that outward satisfaction may be. After all, the previous section had lamented the acquiescence made possible by sequestering mourning and tears in private. It is possible to minimize the consequence of the poem's skepticism about private anger by noting, as Cohn does, the extent to which it plays with an unworkably artificial and corrupted language. However, the entirety of the poem's third and fourth sections seem committed to exposing the inoperability of the promises of private expression, of anarchism's hope to simply live the revolution in private life. As the poem suggests, such private feelings of "horror yielded—public celebration," and the news of Allied victory through terrific bombing campaigns made the streets a place "where milling jitterbugs killed dissident sleep." Such an understanding of "private tears" in the poem makes Cohn's reading of this poem (as predicting a turn toward a less public form for Mac Low's *poiesis*) less than convincing.

The example of Mac Low's "Post Victoriam" seems to demonstrate through poetic experience one of the ways that "private life" can function as a lure, an imaginary space of freedom within an otherwise hostilely figured public. But even if private life cordons off the public, shutting the door to its own "crate," the poem suggests that no manner of genuine individual feeling can excuse an individual from their responsibility for and entanglement in whatever actions the public may take even after the individual takes leave. The writers of "corporate prose" had, after all, been actively cultivating "private life" as an object of desire to be safeguarded since the war's end.

An advertising campaign for Celanese jersey fabrics in early 1946 had featured two groups of women posing in lingerie against a simple fabric backdrop in various states

of ease.[366] Cutting horizontally across the page, between the two rows of posing women, the block letters "PRIVATE LIFE" announce the simple fantasy to which the advertisement hopes to appeal.

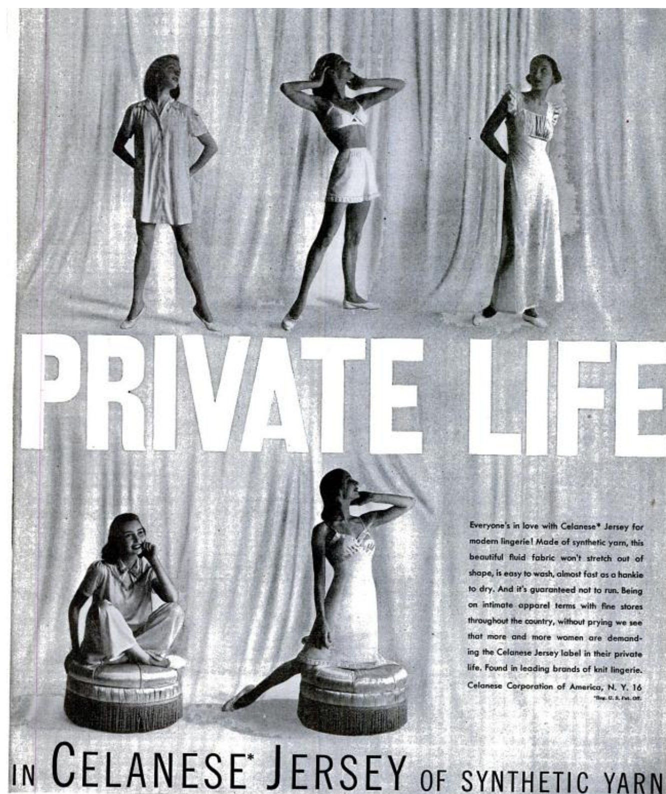

Figure 1. "Private Life" Advertisement, for Celanese Jersey.

Like the Revere advertisement discussed in the previous chapter, the Celanese ad campaign capitalizes on the domestic sphere as a source of happiness, a promise of the good life to come. There is, in this vision of the private life, no mourning or tears. It is a vision of the private that differs from that rendered in Mac Low's poem in every way

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366 *LIFE* (Jan 14, 1946), 97.

except for the one the poem would find most important: it forecloses the relationship between private life and the public sphere.

Both the mass culture of *LIFE* and the elite culture reflected in the anarchist magazine *Now* conceive of a gap between public and private, where the public entangles the private and political action moving from the private into the public has been foreclosed. Holley Cantine, the editor of the magazine *Retort*, would put this foreclosure in the form of a prohibition against political engagement, writing that "an organization which is oriented toward political action…must be highly centralized, and dominated by a hierarchy of trained specialists."[367] The alternative was to simply discover a form of life that was faithful to individual responsibility and liberty, where "the ideals of the revolution are approximated as nearly as possible in daily life."[368] Cantine's proposal was not for individuals to opt out of society. Rather, Cantine's political philosophy wanted the sphere of private life to be the venue in which revolution was realized. In order for this to happen, the private individual must maintain integrity against the onslaught of mass culture in public life. The Canadian critic Marshall McLuhan would frame his 1951 work *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man* as a response to this need.

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[367] Holley Cantine, "Editorials," *Retort* (Winter 1945), 6. The relationship between the two passages of Cantine's writing derives from Andrew Cornell, "A New Anarchism Emerges, 1940-1954," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* (Spring 2011), where each is quoted. Cornell offers a crucial reconstruction of the emergence of wartime and postwar anarchism within periodical culture during this period.

[368] Holley Cantine, "Mechanics of Class Development," *Retort* (June 1942), 13.

A Tombstone for Ideas Going into Action

In 1948, Marshall McLuhan entered into a contract with Vanguard Press to publish a book on what he called the "folklore of industrial man," at the time titled *Typhon in America*, but published three years later as *The Mechanical Bride*. McLuhan had wanted to produce a volume of 'exhibits' in the style of Wyndham Lewis's conspiratorial, homophobic 1932 work, *Doom of Youth*, since at least 1946. In that year, he had just finished hosting Lewis for much of 1944 in St. Louis, then fled conscription into the US military for an appointment at Assumption College, in Toronto—the college where Lewis had also been given a place on faculty while stranded in North America during the war.[369] Lewis's works of cultural criticism in the 1920s and 1930s, screeds against perceived threats to the individual will that famously earned him a reputation as a "lonely old volcano of the right," had been formative to McLuhan as a student. In the same year that Auden assigned Lewis this appellation, McLuhan had gone on something of a Lewis binge, reading *Paleface*, *Time and Western Man*, *The Lion and the Fox*, *The Apes of God*, and *The Art of Being Ruled*, noting his excitement about this oeuvre in his diary.[370] When the opportunity had arisen to open a correspondence with Lewis in 1943, McLuhan seized it and quickly worked to bring him to St. Louis, where the two established a working relationship based largely on McLuhan finding Lewis painting

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[369] On McLuhan fleeing St. Louis, see "To J. Stanley Murphy, C.S.B. (March 9/44)" in *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, ed. Matie Molinaro, Corinne McLuhan, and William Toye (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 156-157. McLuhan pled directly to the department's chair, using Lewis as an intermediary so that his letter would avoid customs inspection: "my point in avoiding the army is partly, and primarily, to be able to support my family and to be with it. Also, my writing and research are at a point difficult to relinquish without permanent loss of momentum."

[370] *Letter of Marshall McLuhan*, 129.

commissions. Meanwhile Lewis offered a living example to McLuhan of how one might "study a hostile environment to see how he might the better accommodate his creative work to it," as McLuhan would put it in a 1944 essay pitching Lewis to a Catholic audience.[371] That such an example would ultimately prove a negative one, I hope to make clear in the pages that follow, but this was an intellectual debt whose shape gave contours to McLuhan's own analyses of media over the twenty years that followed.

McLuhan shared with Lewis an apprehension that the cultural environment served to program the sensibility of individuals in industrial society, as well as an accompanying fear that this increasingly mechanized process was effectively erasing the liberal subject along with their moral and emotional sensibility.[372] Where Lewis feared cultural modes that he claimed "inculcated ideological submissiveness," and worried "a cult is being evolved...living for sensation, around the figure of a mechanical doll," McLuhan wanted to awaken Americans from what he would call a "trance," that "perpetuates the widely occurring cluster image of sex, technology, and death which constitutes the mystery of the mechanical bride."[373] The lures of an industrial culture that mechanized desire, to the extent that advertisements isolated in the book that became *The Mechanical Bride* pitched a kind of mechanical standardization for the bodies of women, ultimately served to turn the contemporary subject into something like a medium or shaman. For McLuhan, when

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[371] Marshall McLuhan, "Wyndham Lewis: Lemuel in Lilliput," *The Medium and the Light: Reflections on Religion*, ed. Eric McLuhan and Jacek Szkiarek (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 192.
[372] For further discussion of Lewis's conception of liberal subjectivity, see Douglas Mao, "A Shaman in Common: Lewis, Auden, and the Queerness of Liberalism," *Bad Modernisms*, ed. Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 206-237.
[373] Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1926), 136; Marshall McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1951), 101.

such cultural programming envelops individuals, to invoke the language of Lewis's *Art of Being Ruled*, democracy as such can only be farce, a consensus achieved through training "in which everything would be effected by public opinion, snobbery, and the magic of *fashion*."[374] Fashion, industrially manufactured through advertising, the press, the radio, and films, serves here as an enchantment, alienating the person from his or herself just as the medium volunteers his or herself to the spirits that communicate through them.

Lewis had used this same language when describing the courses of life available to individuals in the modern state in 1927, writing that "everything in our life today conspires to thrust most people into prescribed tracks, in what can be called a sort of *trance of action*."[375] And when McLuhan works to popularize Lewis's thought in his 1944 essay, he highlights the way that Lewis resists this trance of industrial enchantment, avoiding the lures of shamanism by holding onto the resistant agency of the liberal subject.[376] Douglas Mao points out that Lewis does not heap scorn on the enchantments of aesthetic production, but he nonetheless associates the shamanic with a "deference and glamour...obtained by a relinquishing of the burden of authority as we usually conceive of it [i.e., 'critical thinking' rooted in a self-determined subject]."[377] Lewis even comes to argue with some sarcasm, in *Time and the Western Man*, that "people should be compelled to be freer and more 'individualistic' than they naturally desire to be."[378] As a

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[374] Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, 419.
[375] ibid., vii.
[376] McLuhan writes that Lewis offers "to provide the general reader with the equipment he needs to live rationally in the world today," in "Wyndham Lewis" (183).
[377] Mao, "A Shaman in Common," 214.
[378] Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man* (New York: Harcourt, 1928), 121.

means toward effecting this compulsion, McLuhan suggests, Lewis is forced to "create an audience for himself" by imposing an education on his readers about the "speculative activities that are renewing and transvaluing our world" and which are impossible to avoid in "everyday life" when all "traditional values are repudiated."[379]

McLuhan gives to himself a similar task in the manuscript that becomes *The Mechanical Bride*. Unlike Lewis's critical efforts, which in the late 1920s and early 1930s aimed to resist the alienating speculative abstractions that govern the experience of everyday life by inducting readers in cultural elitism, McLuhan avoided the task of winnowing out his own audience, hoping instead to meet the public where they were. His goal in writing *Typhon in America*, as he would later elaborate it, was to "unweave the spell" of the trance and help the general reader develop the sensibility necessary to resist a commercial hypnosis.[380] But this audience and method would change in important ways between the years of closeness with Lewis (Lewis, who was always a bitter friend, would dissolve their correspondence in inexplicable irritation in mid-1945) and the publication of *The Mechanical Bride.* And the nature of this change, one in which the paradigm as an instrument of cultural education transforms from a magnetic beacon into a gravestone, is illustrative of the way that attitudes about the role of the intellectual and the artist in society were in flux during the second half of the 1940s.

In the winter of 1946, McLuhan wrote from Ontario to his St. Louis University student, Father Clement McNaspy, to say that while "not for a moment do I imagine that

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[379] McLuhan, "Wyndham Lewis," 182; Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, vii.
[380] McLuhan, "To Ezra Pound (June 22/1951)," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 227.

I can frame a course of action which will do good," nonetheless, "it seems obvious that we must confront the secular in its most confident manifestations, and, with its own terms and postulates, to shock it into awareness of its confusion, its illiteracy, and the terrifying drift of its logic."[381] McLuhan's plan, still evolving at this time, was to reproduce "the methods of F.R. Leavis and Wyndham Lewis[,] applied with all the energy and order denied them from faith and philosophy…[to] resist that swift obliteration of the person which is going on."[382] Leavis and Lewis each held up idiosyncratic cultural traditions as exemplary, drawing attention to "the examples of real art and prudence...as paradigms of future effort," as McLuhan put it.[383] His plan, though clearly still evolving, would have been to marshal exhibits as paradigmatic instances of "real art" alongside the most accomplished instances of an industrial culture that functioned to program desire toward secular ends. The nascent project proposed to McNaspy, who would later become an editor of the Jesuit periodical of cultural commentary *America*, suggested that McLuhan wanted to provide a critique that drew out the logic immanent to the cultural environment but also offered an alternative. He may have drawn the lesson from Lewis that an artist must adapt and persist within a hostile environment, but he had not at this point foreclosed on the fantasy of an order derived from oppositional sensibility. The equipment he imagined was not immanent to the critically thinking individual, but lay in the examples of an alternative cultural environment to be assembled from the past.

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[381] McLuhan, "To Clement McNaspy, S.J. (December, 1945-January, 1946)," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 180.
[382] ibid.
[383] ibid.

This is where 1948, the year of his contract with Vanguard, comes into contact with another touchstone of McLuhan's aspirational retread of the 1920s. McLuhan's hope for mounting a challenge to secular culture was paralleled by his efforts to befriend the most conspiratorial and conservative of the high modernists, Ezra Pound, during his confinement at St. Elizabeth's. In the years between 1948 and 1951, McLuhan was preparing his *Typhon* manuscript while in regular correspondence with Pound after visiting him for the first time with Hugh Kenner. In McLuhan's letters to Pound it becomes clear that he is still considerably invested in equipping readers with examples from an oppositional cultural environment, not restricting his efforts to the immanent critique of industrial culture that *The Mechanical Bride* would embody. He brags that in his classroom teaching, he does not "lecture *about* poets. I produce the poems. The ABC of Reading method."[384] He tells Pound of projects that never seem to have gained any traction, such as "a booklet for the young. A bibliography of necessary reading in all the arts and sciences with sufficient commentary on each item to provide a coherent picture."[385] McLuhan sends Pound fragments from his reading that he suggests would have fit alongside the other ephemera of Pound's own *Guide to Kulchur*. In other words, just as he had suggested to the student, McNaspy, whom he had no need to flatter, McLuhan had prolific ambitions for the popularization of a constellation of cultural artifacts that might lead to a more critical programming among the general public. Pound had written in *Guide to Kulchur* of "ideas going into action," and it is this sort of program—moving

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[384] McLuhan, "To Ezra Pound (July 30/48)," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 198.
[385] ibid., 199.

from correctly chosen idea to the naturalization of that idea as equipment for the everyday—that McLuhan finds himself serially inventing.[386] And yet as McLuhan's *Typhon* neared publication as *The Mechanical Bride*, these projects drop away.

When he did discuss the pending publication of *The Mechanical Bride* in his letters to Pound, he would qualify his references to it as "a sottisier among other things" and the product of editorial "castrating and textbookizing."[387] The finished work that he would actually be able to show Pound had to be in some ways disowned ahead of time, failing as it did to advance the sort of critical approach to culture that Pound had favored and McLuhan had flattered. In spite of McLuhan's capacity to write himself an ego as ferocious as Pound's own, he could never hope to impress the author of the *Pisan Cantos* with his compromised attempt at imitating his cultural criticism. But while he described it to his literary hero as something akin to satire, to his mother, he suggested that he had come to think of it as "a new form of science fiction, with ads and comics cast as characters," and that his goal was "to show the community in action."[388] Far from regarding the manuscript uncomplicatedly as a farce, particularly given his testiness about the process leading to its publication, the evidence is compelling that its origins as advocacy had been lost in favor of something far more performative.[389] If the ads and

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[386] See Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur* (New York: New Direction, 1970), 44.
[387] McLuhan, "To Ezra Pound (Jan 5/51)," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 217.
[388] McLuhan, quoted in "1951," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 217. It is worth calling attention to the difference in stress between "ideas going into action" and "the community [of ads and comics and readers] in action."
[389] McLuhan would in fact talk about the book as a satire in interviews late in his life, mirroring his rejection of the book to Pound. However, his letters indicate that he was not only pleased with its initial reception as a serious work, but that he was both mad and distraught over the delays that were keeping it

comics were a cast of characters, the protagonist was the detached narrator who considers each exhibit, moving through the maelstrom as a sort of gallery. The book, as becomes clear on reading against the influence McLuhan took away from Pound, models the poetic process he attributed to Pound's work in a review of Kenner's *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* published in the same issue of *Renascence* in which Rudolph Morris reviewed *The Mechanical Bride*: "an embodiment and projection of the modes of human cognition themselves."[390] His poetic speaker, however, probes the networks of *Life* and *Time* magazine, testing the assumptions of advertisers against an eclectic array of cultural criticism that seems, roughly, to be what has come to hand.

McLuhan's narrator performs the "modes of cognition" of someone with an immense repertoire of criticism and art from which to draw, who finds themselves immersed in the same media whirlpool as the reader and is not quite immune from its lures regardless. Like the protagonist of George Stewart's 1949 post-apocalyptic science fiction, *The Earth Abides*, the narrator's is a sensibility of endurance, not the misplaced heroic resistance that McLuhan would deride in Orwell's *1984*, published the same year.[391] If *The Mechanical Bride* was a new sort of science fiction, the world it modeled

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from press at Vanguard—which had a difficult stretch of years during this period as the subject of a HUAC investigation.

[390] Marshall McLuhan, Review of *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* by Hugh Kenner, *Renascence* (Spring 1952), 217.

[391] McLuhan was not fond of science fiction later in his career, but was apparently ambivalent toward it at the time he was writing *The Mechanical Bride*. He had little tolerance for Orwell, however, who he understood as unable to see the problems of the present clearly enough to project a vision of the future. He writes in 1951, "trouble with duffers like Geo. Orwell is that they satirize something that happened 50 yrs ago as a threat of the *future*! Effect is narcotic" (*Letters*, 219), and in a 1977 interview refers to *1984* as "nostalgia from 1934… 'New Speak', for heaven sake, was *Time* magazine" ("Interview with Professor Marshall McLuhan," *Maclean's* March 7, 1977).

was one in which it would be possible neither to recover an idealized past nor effect utopian revolution. Looking strictly at its structure—a series of vignettes in which the narrator dissects instances of the industrial cultural environment—its fictional predecessors were more forms of encyclopedic criticism than any science fiction novel. But the finished critical work, McLuhan suggests, can no longer hope to stand astride history as Pound's criticism had and his own planned intervention imagined in 1946, but must engage the moment from within—like Pound's poetry. And this effects a revision in the sort of resistance to industrial culture that McLuhan imagines as possible. His concern shifts from the furnishing of equipment in the form of "examples of real art and prudence" and toward the modeling of forms of reception that enable a public to endure as resilient individuals within the cluttered cultural environment.[392]

This shift in concern was mirrored by a similar transition in McLuhan's imagined pedagogy, during which the classroom he described to his correspondents changed dramatically. The emphasis on letting true art stand for itself before students is replaced with scrutiny of what he would describe as "new media" (such as radio, film and television), which is oriented toward what lies within those media. As he would put it in a March 1951 letter to media theorist Harold Innis, "the new media, which are already much more constitutive educationally than those of the class-room, must be inspected and discussed in the class-room if the class-room is to continue at all except as a place of

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[392] To this point it is also worth noting that McLuhan stops writing about literature almost entirely at this point in his academic career, moving toward a thorough investigation of media that would culminate in 1964's *Understanding Media*. *Mechanical Bride* marks a transition away from sustaining attention on 'highbrow' literary works and toward the intellectual work of continuing on as a resilient subject under new media regimes.

detention."[393] Immersing the public or students in the "most confident manifestations" of the culture, such as the new forms of its media, might "shock" an individual into a moment of self-recognition, but by 1951, after spending years in correspondence with Ezra Pound, McLuhan could only figure the imposition of alternatives to that media environment as a kind of coercion.

McLuhan would suggest that pretending there was nothing worthy of consideration in the present cultural situation could only, perversely, make the great thinking of the past seem all the more like a petrified curiosity. He offers a kind of mission statement for the project that *The Mechanical Bride* became in a sequence contrasting his approach with that of the Great Books program launched by Hutchins and Adler at the University of Chicago in the wake of the war. McLuhan notes with some glee that the photograph accompanying *Life* magazine's profile of the Great Books program depicts "indexers" who pose "mortician-like" in front of card files holding tombstone-shaped "great ideas" inserted in them as labels.[394] His own project, he notes, addresses not the great books of the past, but "the only native and spontaneous culture in our industrial world," through which, "or not at all," we "effect contact with...the minds of the past."[395] Rather than perpetuating a situation in which, McLuhan argues, the "baneful effects [of industrial culture] are at present entirely dependent on its being ignored," he suggests that his book should inspire "uninhibited inspection."[396] Here in his

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[393] McLuhan, "To Harold Adams Innis (March 14/1951)," *Letters of Marshall McLuhan*, 227.
[394] McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 43.
[395] ibid., 44.
[396] ibid., 45.

address to the Chicago Great Books program, we can see McLuhan bury the equipment of some more oppositional culture derived from a selection of great works—the Poundian "ideas going into action." In its place, McLuhan embraces the media of commercial culture's monstrous Typhon, which he will contest with the relative passivity of detached study to block out the "swift obliteration of the person" he feared, slackening the senses' resistance to the environment, hopeful that the maelstrom's contours might become visible as the arms stop thrashing.

The Prerogative of Every Listener to Turn His Receiver Off

The discipline needed to preserve the individual, spinning in the whirlwind of mass culture, required a form of exercise analogous to the "aesthetic exercise" described by the critic Gabriel Trop. Trop's 2015 study, *Poetry as a Way of Life*, provides a re-evaluation of the history of the poetic as equipment for assembling forms of life, and takes part in a broader reconsideration of *askesis* in the last decade. Trop differentiates his own concept of aesthetic exercise from the use of exercise found in the work of Peter Sloterdijk by its open-ended quality. Trop translates Sloterdijk's definition of exercise as "every operation through which the qualification of the agent is maintained or improved for the following execution of the same operation, whether it is declared as an exercise or not."[397] There is room for clarifying what exactly Sloterdijk is after by designating that such operations maintain or improve the agent (or in Wieland Hoban's translation,

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[397] from Peter Sloterdijk, *Du mußt dein Leben ändern*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2009), 14; quoted in Gabriel Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 7.

reminiscent of Bruno Latour, "Actor") itself while improving the agent's qualification. However, Trop emphasizes the use of improvement [*Verbesserung*] in Sloterdijk's definition. When he elaborates on it, Trop offers a further translation of Sloterdijk's terms into the language of systems theory, writing that such exercise "constitutes a critical element in the maintenance of the organism, in its optimization, in its ability to secure itself from the threats of its surroundings and in its expansive power over its environment."[398]

Trop wants to set his understanding of the exercise against this process of "optimization," which he understands as antithetical to the "indeterminacy and openness of poetic form." In the place of securing power over an environment, Trop's concept points to the process "by which a sensually oriented activity in the world attempts to form, influence, perturb, or otherwise generate patterns of thought, perception and action."[399] This understanding of the aesthetic exercise rejects the emphasis on "improvement" for the concept it is paired with in Sloterdijk's definition above, "maintenance" [*Erhaltung*]. For Trop, the aesthetic exercise offers "the maintenance of an attraction," uncoupled from "any economy of productivity or immunological functionality." Such maintenance should be construed as the cultivation of a situational stasis, or attendance to the suspension of decision. Aesthetic exercise that resists and withholds the actions or behaviors available to a moment, Trop suggests, offers a way of removing the self from a normative habitus, directing that self instead "toward the

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[398] ibid., 7.
[399] ibid., 9.

sensuous apparatus as that which generates irreducibly idiosyncratic patterns of being."[400] By contrast, construing the work of art through the conceptual lenses of productivity or immunology reduces "the chances that the work will provoke...a thought, a state, or an affect of unexpected novelty."[401] That novelty is important, Trop suggests, for the reasons that thinkers like the 18th century philosopher, Alexander Baumgarten, had suggested during the emergence of new formulations of aesthetic theory during the 1700s: the small changes in perspective provoked by the artwork could stimulate an altered style of being or thinking for the artist or their audience.

McLuhan's *The Mechanical Bride* orients the reader to its project in terms that take up this same discourse of attractions uncoupled from productivity or immunological distance. In his introduction, McLuhan clarifies the outcome he imagines in setting himself the task not of offering tools for heroic resistance to the "programs of commercial education" contained in the cultural environment, but of "set[ting] the reader at the center of the revolving picture...where he may observe the action that is in progress and in which everybody is involved." McLuhan's resistance to resistance was premised on his diagnostic hope that this media landscape offered not only "destructiveness" but also "promises of rich new developments."[402] Readers might enjoy the benefits of an increased standard of living, the book seems to suggest, and let the cultural environment work its programming on them, so long as they are at least conscious of their receptivity and alert to the novel thoughts, states, and affects that programming provides.

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[400] ibid., 9.
[401] ibid., 7.
[402] ibid., v-vi.

In one of the most self-reflexive of the exhibits McLuhan presents of his book's educational program, McLuhan's illustration is an RCA advertisement bearing the headline, "Freedom to LISTEN — Freedom to LOOK." The advertisement's photographic header shows a family sitting around its kitchen table, the quite-a-bit older parents and two young sons inclining their ears toward the radio on the counter, captioned by the pull-quote, "Our American concept of radio is that it is of the people and for the people."[403] Of course, as McLuhan's discussion of the ad points out, the control of media like the radio could only be described as "of the people" in the most aspirational of senses. He writes of the advertising campaign's slogan, "'Freedom to Listen,' in a world where effective expression via newspaper or radio is reserved only for a tiny minority, is freedom to put up or shut up. The ordinary person senses the greatness of the odds against him without thought or analysis, and he adapts his attitudes unconsciously."[404] That adaptation, understood as "adjustment" in the terms of contemporaries engaged in psychoanalytic theory, like Erich Fromm or Karen Horney, was one that shifted "industrial society" into "a huge passivity," according to McLuhan. With frank sexism that would have been at home in the criticism of his hero Lewis, he writes that "society begins to take on the character of the kept woman whose role is expected to be submission and luxurious passivity."[405] But without an alternative on offer, McLuhan's

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[403] McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 20.
[404] ibid., 21.
[405] ibid. It is not entirely clear that McLuhan would have seen the "kept woman" in a negative light to begin with; while his framework is undoubtedly sexist, in a brief response essay published in *politics* in September 1946 and mentioned below, McLuhan argued that one of the dilemmas encountered by discourses of women's "independence" was that the commercial world to which women sought access was

critical fiction can only hope to intervene by modeling his protagonist as kept, but able to engage in submission self-consciously; in an essay published in *politics* in 1946, McLuhan had written, that "a great number of men yearn for the role of feminine dependence and protectedness," imagining that what he was in the moment projecting as a feature of homosexual relationships might be, in fact, a laudable adaptation and self-conscious opting out of the dehumanizing demands of the marketplace. He had concluded the essay by noting that "it may be centuries before any thinking person would care to be called a practical man or woman."[406]

McLuhan's diagnosis of the cultural environment and the grounds which he saw available to intervention was, of course, already a sort of cliché about the postwar moment by the time of *The Mechanical Bride*'s publication in 1951. The increase in the "standard of living" without an accompanying change in the accessibility of creative and engaging work, access to a meaningful public sphere, or the capacity to exercise free will beyond "the prerogative of every listener to turn his receiver off," as the RCA ad copy had put it, was a problem worried over by most of the public intellectuals active from the second half of the 1940s to the end of the 1950s. Such a diagnosis originated in concerns over the rise of fascism and totalitarianism, but often neglected by studies of Cold War culture that begin from the American 1950s is the extent to which this was an anxiety that

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itself thoroughly dehumanizing. He writes that "the problem...needs to be envisaged as a new pattern or mode of being rather than improved doing," rather than the seeking of "recognition...to be given for services to 'them that buy and sell.'" ("Out of the Castle into the Counting-House," 279). Instead of the temple market, McLuhan wants to take seriously Ethel Goldwater's remark that "the man's place is in the home" by valorizing "the wildness of domesticity," and writing that "the housewife is at least her own boss" (278).

[406] Marshall McLuhan, "Out of the Castle into the Counting-House," 278-279.

extended to the wartime and postwar culture and industry of the United States. To cite just one of the otherwise forgotten works of cultural criticism from this moment cited by McLuhan, Robert Payne's 1950 study of the 19th century nihilism and 20th century totalitarianism had suggested that even in those postwar years, "we arrange our lives in accordance with a vast network of mechanical forces which no one can any longer control with any accuracy."[407] What ties the contemporary moment to 19th century nihilists like Sergei Nechayev is mechanization's disinterest in human life, according to Payne—a correspondent of the poet Charles Olson, to whom he would dedicate this book—such that the "Nechayev monster" is there "presiding at every car smash."[408] Payne's study partakes here of a genre of critique, one in which McLuhan had participated in the pages of *politics,* that saw the mechanization of not only labor and commerce but everyday life as a threat to society itself. "Practical men," McLuhan would write, "are now busy about the funeral arrangements of our society," concluding an argument about the polluting effects of the "crippling docility" induced by work, education, and even love under industrial society.[409] However, McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* is remarkable not only for its formally innovative character, but for the way its attention to totalized cultural environments under democratic regimes extends Payne's critique by offering an additional clause to the sentence: if one cannot control the vast network of mechanical forces, then one can at least learn to control the way that they process that network. If individuals were unable to effect any control over the sorts of

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[407] Robert Payne, *Zero: The Story of Terrorism* (New York: John Day Co., 1950), 237.
[408] ibid., 238.
[409] McLuhan, "Out of the Castle into the Counting-House," 279.

things toward which liberal subjects were imagined to aspire, and the media of nominal democracies produced the same sort of programming of their subjects as under more explicitly coercive forms of governmentality, the only reserve of agency resides in learning to endure as a resilient subject under that programming.

McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride*, then, offers a productive starting point for a discussion of the ways in which intellectuals and writers processed the years after the war's end, with its turn away from the equipment of programmed coercion and toward an equipmental sensibility. The years stretching from the war's end to the midpoint of the century were seen at the time as particularly loaded for both intellectuals and writers, with an array of symposia and roundtables on the state of American writing and handwringing essays about the "situation" of literature. In one such essay published in the Catholic periodical *Renascence* in 1951, surveying the apparent loss of a public audience for poetry, C.E. Maguire takes up the same set of concerns that McLuhan had offered in initial letters of the 1940s. He surveys the reasons given for the lack of an appropriate audience for poetry, focusing on F.O. Matthiessen's 1947 formulation of a "cleavage between what we have learned to call mass civilization and minority culture."[410] Maguire notes that it appears "poetry...cannot adjust itself to compulsory education," and concludes that a Christian sensibility might be just the thing to bring poetry back to a mass audience.[411] Aside from the earnestness of Maguire's contention that the public has been waiting for a poet who can embody the New Critical demand for tension at the same

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[410] F.O. Matthiessen, "American Poetry, 1920-1940," *Sewanee Review* (Jan.-Mar. 1947), 24.
[411] C.E. Maguire, "Who Reads Poetry?," *Renascence* (Autumn 1951), 29.

time as they represent a Christian "certainty of truth," his essay has the virtue of refracting McLuhan's project and in the process draws attention to the extent that project weaponizes the New Critical attention to aesthetic experience in transplanting it to everyday life.

Because it is a line of reasoning both idiosyncratic and lost to literary history, it may help to recount some of Maguire's argument. Maguire offers, as a step in the rhetorical project of explaining how a Christian poet might embody the sort of sensibility to heal the cleavage between mass culture and a cultural elite, a brief survey of the way that the New Critics had explained the necessity of that cleavage. The poet, Maguire's summary goes, can only be responsible to his or her own experience and so "analysis of that experience is all that is possible."[412] This is the case, Maguire tells us, because of a "dissociation of sensibility" in modernity; the only form that can be given to aesthetic experience under such conditions is that of the poet groping toward the evaluation of formless experience if the poem is to avoid chaos.[413] But evaluation according to what criteria? This is the point at which Maguire's synthesis points him to the necessity of Christianity as he suggests that we look to Gabriel Marcel's notion of "creative fidelity" as that against which experience is tested.

What Maguire draws from Marcel is that "creative fidelity," as the "active recognition of something permanent," comes ceaselessly back to "the reality we know

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[412] ibid., 32.
[413] ibid., 31.

from Revelation" of "supernatural mystery."[414] But Marcel's concept has a more flexible set of ultimate criteria than Maguire offers in his essay's brief *précis*. The way Marcel actually defined creative fidelity was as a form of "commitment," which as an "active volition not to question something again...bars a certain number of possibilities [and] bids me invent a certain *modus vivendi* which I would otherwise be precluded from envisioning."[415] For Marcel, this fidelity involves "maintaining ourselves actively in a permeable state," but lest this be confused with an explanation for conformity, he clarifies that "it implies an active and continuous struggle against the forces of interior dissipation" and that "it might be a sacred duty for me to deny a principle from which life has withdrawn."[416] In other words, while the aesthetic contemplation of the poetic might constitute an instance during which the self is exposed to some force in the world to which the poet is committed, fidelity should only be understood as extending to abstractions that are fundamentally lively, not ossified or mechanical. For Maguire, what makes the New Critics and the poetry they wrote and championed useful is their insistence on the moment of contact between poetic sensibility and world as that which can lead to truth, setting aside the questions of form or technique by which they claimed to judge the poem. Marcel offers him a map for thinking through the way that a poetic encounter with the "things" of the world could lead back to the "absolute commitment" of belief in God—the guarantor or ground that he imagined the public desired.

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[414] ibid.

[415] Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, ed. & trans. Robert Rosthal (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 162.

[416] Gabriel Marcel, *The Philosophy of Existence* (London: Harvill Press, 1948), 35-36.

But there are other lessons to be drawn from the link between Maguire's sketch of a New Critical consensus on poetic sensibility and Marcel's creative fidelity that can be seen not only in the prism of McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride*, but throughout anarchist and Leftist periodical culture. Returning to Marcel's sketch of the consequences following from the "commitment" of creative fidelity, which Maguire had suggested we can see in the writing of an array of New Critics and poets represented as openness to the aesthetic experience and analysis of a chaotic modernity (the groundlessness of experience offering, then, a path to the mystery of absolute faith), the experience of creative fidelity has consequences for one's form of life. These consequences are productive, because when applied to McLuhan's book, they assert a far more political weight than we might expect from the comparatively aesthete register of reference that the comparison with the New Critics would suggest. To give some shading to their invocation above, one might look to Ransom's essay on poetry and ontology that had originally appeared in 1934 and had been reprinted in *The World's Body* in 1938. Ransom's essay, because of the aerial view it offers to modes of verse that would be replicated throughout the following two decades, can be made to stand in for a New Critical consensus developing in the 1930s that "Victorian" poetry began from an idea that it marshaled into verse and was lesser (his word is "hateful") because of it.[417] However in "Metaphysical" poetry, the better sort and a reference to the "Metaphysical poets" of the seventeenth century, the poet begins from an encounter with the "thick *dinglich* substance" of the world—an encounter

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[417] John Crowe Ransom, "Poetry: a Note in Ontology," *The American Review* (May 1934), 173.

experienced through “the psychological device of the miracle,” to deploy a figure that resonates with Marcel.[418]

This encounter is one of specifically poetic “looking, marvelling and revelling” at that substance’s “strange representation,” and it has the character of an initiation. But it is, Ransom off-handedly notes, an initiation to experience and representation that exceeds those given by “science” (or, we might read, reason or industry), which could challenge “the scientists on what they call their ‘truth’.”[419] This last point highlights what will become a more explicitly political function for aesthetic experience. Even if Ransom’s rejection of Platonic or Victorian poetry is essentially an assault on the sort of “sloganeering” verse that would become associated with the decade of the 1930s, his embrace of a commitment to the “thingly” being of the world rejects the “scientists” that would come to be perceived as carrying a planning function for governance.

In McLuhan’s engagement with contemporary mass media throughout *The Mechanical Bride*, then, the sensibility that the book performs, like that of the poets admired by the New Critics, is one that is interested in remaining open to aesthetic experience. But the “thingly” is absent; the world encountered by the book’s speaker is effectively permeated and dehumanized by mechanical forces. The poem valued by the New Critics may be, because of this paranoiac drapery, impossible. But commitment, the permeability of the subject to be swept up by the sensory data that will offer fleeting access to some object of absolute faith, still hovers throughout the book. From the first

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[418] ibid., 200.
[419] ibid.

exhibit, a discussion of the layout of newspaper pages, there is an emphasis on moments of perception in which it becomes clear that "industrial man is not unlike the turtle that is quite blind to the beauty of the shell on its back," and the chaotic jumble of stories on the front page of the paper "can lead the mind to attend to cosmic harmonies of a very high order."[420] McLuhan's project suggests that unless poets and critics take their commitment to aesthetic experience into everyday life, there is a danger that the 'scientists' of advertising and government agencies will have a monopoly on the forms of life available within the maelstrom of postwar modernity. And McLuhan's shift away from working as a New Critic himself—he published essays on the sensibilities of Pound, Joyce, and Dos Passos in the same year as *The Mechanical Bride*, but turned substantially away from literary criticism after the book's publication—embodies a reconsideration of the way genres of everyday life affected individual sensibility which had been going on for the last decade.

Arguments about the programming effect of the cultural environment had become increasingly visible in the years between American intervention in the European war and 1951, but were often confined to the pages of anarchist periodicals, such as Holley Cantine's *Retort*, George Woodcock's *Now*, or even Dwight Macdonald's *Partisan Review* offshoot, *politics*, of which McLuhan was a reader and contributor. While liberals had taken the anthropologically derived political thought of Committee on Public Morale consultants Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson as cover for advocating wartime interventions of both military force and cultural programming, both reactionary

[420] McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride*, 4.

modernists like McLuhan and former leftists among the anarchists were radicalizing these same ideas.[421] In 1942, Bateson had written the follow-up to an essay by his then-wife, Mead, that suggested their training as anthropologists had prepared them to identify "a basic and fundamental discrepancy" that existed between "social engineering" through media and "the ideals of democracy," or, then quoting Mead, "the 'supreme worth and moral responsibility of the individual human person.'"[422]

This suggestion that "social engineering" was at odds with the "responsibility" of the individual is one that we can see mirrored throughout the development of McLuhan above. However, what follows in Bateson's discussion was also telling regarding the shared concerns that brought reactionaries, liberals, and radicals together. Bateson writes that "the conflict is now a life-or-death struggle over the role which the social sciences shall play in the ordering of human relationships. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that this war is ideologically about just this—the role of the social sciences."[423] In other words, what Bateson and Mead (the writer more frequently cited by McLuhan throughout *The Mechanical Bride*) suggest is that if the war was about democratic ideals, then the combination of propaganda and commercial technique in the media might be incompatible with the ideals supposedly at stake. The coercion involved in everyday

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[421] For an extended discussion of Bateson's thought as relates to Cold War *poiesis*, see Daniel Belgrad, "Democracy, Decentralization, and Feedback," *American Literature and Culture in an Age of Cold War*, ed. Steven Belletto and Daniel Grausam (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012), 59-82. Belgrad makes much of Bateson's discussion of "purposelessness" in social planning, particularly as a means toward fostering democracy, and suggests that this social purposelessness—the replacement of direction toward a specific *telos* with an autopoiesis guided by feedbacks—is reflected in the aesthetic production that would become grouped under the rubric of postmodernism.

[422] Gregory Bateson, "Social Planning and the Concept of Deutero-Learning," in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 161-162.

[423] ibid., 162.

exposure to the mass cultural environment was simply incompatible with maintaining the individual responsibility necessary for democracy.

As if to highlight the long shadow of this suspicion of the social sciences in the postwar moment, McLuhan's introduction clarifies that the social scientists are largely, in the late 1940s, working for advertising agencies and broadcasters: "ours is the first age in which many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind. To get inside in order to manipulate, exploit, control is the object now."[424] McLuhan points here to the sort of applied social science whose goal was to exploit the lures of media in such a way as to steer the public. While not representing the same fields as the 'scientists' whose forms of understanding the world Ransom and the New Critics had opposed to the poetic, they shared their empirical orientation and 'Platonic' processing of sensation: rationality rather than mystery. Opposing this marketing science with the mystery of "cosmic harmonies," McLuhan's approach positioned him alongside those whom Kenneth Rexroth described as the "volumes and volumes of people who sound like John Donne amongst the purple cut glass tigresses and fur lined soubrettes."[425] To the other side of McLuhan were the "socially aware" writers of whom George Woodcock would write, "it was becoming difficult...to reconcile political action with the standards and values [they] wished to observe in the practice of [their] vocation."[426] *The Mechanical Bride*, approached from the political impasse that intellectuals felt confronted by under centralization, modeled a

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[424] McLuhan, *The Mechanical Bride,* v.
[425] Kenneth Rexroth, "Letter from America," *Now* 7 (February-March, 1947), 64.
[426] George Woodcock, "The Writer and Politics," 1.

resilience for the private individual that bridged the sincerity and pessimism of poets like Mac Low in the little magazines and the anxiety about centralization on display in Bateson's cautionary essay.

Conclusions

George Woodcock's diagnostic aside regarding the irreconcilable distance between artistic practice and political action mirrors the contention that Holley Cantine had made in the pages of *Retort* about political action's necessary investment in hierarchy and organization, including the damage it portended for the autonomous individual. And, as Mac Low's "Post Victoriam" dramatized, a turn to private tears could only lead to public silence. The only thing that a turn to a private language, an embrace of personal expression, could ensure was that the gap between the public and private spheres was traversed in one direction. In the face of such an impasse, McLuhan's *Mechanical Bride* presented an approach that hoped to maintain the private individual through a form of exercise. In the face of social science's capture as a propaganda mechanism, the exhibits of McLuhan's book proposed a form of training toward the dis- and re-enchantment of the mass cultural environment: the jumble of the newspaper page revealed as both a form of programming and a harmony of a higher order.

However, if McLuhan's approach to mass culture was intended to serve as a form of training that would hold the space of the private individual intact against a propaganda machine run by the most advanced social science, it also held little hope of either transforming that machine or the messages it transmitted. The only action left open to the

individual, even under McLuhan's training, was not transformation—his was not the exercise of a Sloterdijkian "optimization," but simply the maintenance of an attraction in hopes that a novel effect will appear. Rather, for McLuhan, the hope that remained was not of a reintegration of a public and private that Mac Low had rendered as available only to ironic, affective contact, but precisely the "luxurious passivity" of the radio listener, who could sustain the receptive contact with a mass culture until such time as some idiosyncratic development appeared. Turning against the principle of planning embraced by social science, the path of McLuhan's critical approach permitted contingency and unexpected effects.

This approach carries in it a complicated relationship to what Lyotard called "the Enlightenment narrative, in which the hero of knowledge works toward a good ethico-political end," if only in McLuhan's case because his approach aligns so well with the abandoned expectation that salvation would arise from socio-economic inconsistencies.[427] Even rejecting the faith that knowledge would generate good ends through its own narrative momentum, a premise against which Mac Low's "Post Victoriam" offered convincing counterfactuals, McLuhan's work still carried faith that knowledge might help retain decision for private lives caught up in the whirlpool of mass culture. McLuhan offers the suspension of the present, an engagement with the situation, until another mode of life happens onto the scene. The artists that I discuss in the following chapter ultimately take a different path through an Enlightenment of reasoned

[427] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979/1984), xxiii-iv.

administration of orders to come. Where McLuhan's work evidenced suspicion about the kind of forcing undertaken by social science, as I will argue, the Living Theatre—one of the testing grounds for approaches to performance that would reshape American theater arts and even visual art in the 1960s—adopted a self-consciously administrative aesthetic in their first major performance, a version of Gertrude Stein's libretto *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*.

Chapter Four - "In Darkness and Luminosity:" The Living Theatre's Gertrude Stein

Faust in 1951

No figure more representative than Faust exists, in its ceaseless recyclings and reimaginings, for capturing the cultural conflicts that socially-engaged artists encountered in the postwar United States. Following the second World War, the nation's investments of the enlightenment project had paid dividends in the form of planet-destroying weapons, as well as the rapid expansion of American-style economic programs across the globe, social welfare and opportunity within the United States, and a generalized sense of alienation and dissatisfaction across US society. As Paul Goodman would write in 1951, expressing a sentiment widely held among the artists that would make up the postwar avant-garde in the United States, in spite of the moment's "unexampled general wealth and unexampled civil peace," it also held the sentiment that "the standards of society, in fact, make everyone unhappy."[428] In such an atmosphere, the lament that opens Goethe's Faust must have seemed terribly familiar; from his packed study, Faust cries out,

> This is thy world! a world! alas!
>
> And dost thou ask why heaves thy heart,
>
> With tighten'd pressure in thy breast?
>
> Why the dull ache will not depart,
>
> By which thy life-pulse is oppress'd?

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[428] Paul Goodman and Fritz Perls, *Gestalt Therapy* (New York: Bantam, 1951/1977), 404; Paul Goodman, "Advance-Guard Writing: 1900-1950," *Kenyon Review* 13:3 (Summer 1951), 360.

Instead of nature's living sphere,

Created for mankind of old,

Brute skeletons surround thee here,

And dead men's bones in smoke and mould.[429]

A polymath who has mastered the sciences but still yearned to understand "the force… / that binds creation's inmost energies," in Anna Swanwick's translation, or more literally, "what holds the world together in its innermost," Faust feels "hemmed in by volumes thick with dust," and the dull ache of longing for true knowledge of the natural world.[430] He tries but fails to placate this longing with arcana, poring over old books by Nostradamus. In these texts, he can see glimpses, but he cannot yet know, "How all things live and work, and ever blending, / Weave one vast whole from Being's ample range!"[431]

When Faust reads on, he summons the Earth spirit, a demigod embodying the processes of the macrocosmos. That spirit, however, rejects him. It scolds Faust, "Thou'rt like the spirit, thou dost comprehend, / Not me!"[432] Even as he foreshadows the resemblance his Faust will find with the striving and fallen spirit of Mephistopheles, Goethe sets the events of the tragedy into motion with Earth spirit's rejection of Faust's false belief that there might be some mimetic connection between the Doctor and nature's

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[429] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Tragedy of Faust*, trans. Anna Swanwick, ed. Charles Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier and Son, 1909-1914), Night. 56-64. References are to act and line.
[430] Ibid., Night. 29-30. The translation points to ll. 382-383 in the German, "Daß ich erkenne, was die Welt / Im Innersten zusammenhält." Ibid., Night. 49.
[431] Ibid., Night. 95-99.
[432] Ibid., Night. 167-168.

Being. Faust exclaims, “how near I feel to thee,” but the Earth spirit, who “weave[s] the life-garment of deity,” realizes otherwise. While “nature’s living sphere” was “created for mankind of old,” the contact of semblance between humanity and nature has been lost.

It is only later in Goethe’s drama that Faust makes his desperate bargain with Mephistopheles in order to gain the divine understanding of the macrocosmos that remains inaccessible to him. While this bargain carries the emotional burden of the play’s tragedy, it comes about because the ties between humanity and what the text understands as the natural world have been severed, in spite of the accumulated knowledge about that natural world that has built up around Faust as so many “dead men’s bones in smoke and mould.” Neither Faust nor anyone else caught up in the enlightenment project of casting the thingly world into the light of rational understanding can maintain contact with the Earth spirit, though he imagines that those who wrote the arcane texts lining his study may have, linked as they were to a faith in the rituals of nature. Faust’s discontent comes primarily from his sense that in spite of mastering what knowledge could be gained of the workings of the natural world, he still lacked the fulfillment that would come from true knowledge of Being itself.

Parallels emerge here with the ways in which the middle classes of America processed the fallout of wartime production. Nuclear physicists and engineers, at the explosive end of the Second World War, had harnessed the energetic potential of matter and in the process had described that matter in what seemed to be its fundamental states. As of 1946, nuclear power utopianists, like the Canadian scientist (and Stalin biographer) Dyson Carter, believed that atomic energy was so near to being mastered that it could be

harnessed in the form of miniature artificial suns that would take the place of lampposts and heat whole towns in winter.[433] From more mainstream writers, like the *New York Times* journalist William Laurence, writing that year for the *Saturday Evening Post*, the choicest fruits of nuclear science were not the bombs whose creation he would become famous for documenting, but "the greatest chance [man] ever had to master his material environment, to conquer space and time, disease and old age."[434] Laurence punctures claims like those made by Carter as "fantastic fairy tales," but he nonetheless rhapsodized about the "practically limitless source of neutrons" with which humanity could "gain a mastery over space and time to a degree far greater than any of the ancient alchemists ever dreamed of achieving" as scientists broke matter down to order in cyclotrons.[435]

But for all of the potential held by this "new control...new understanding...acquired over nature," to draw on the language of I.I. Rabi's response to the Trinity tests, it did not bring happiness with it into American culture, or even among scientists.[436] Not the least among the reasons for this was the worry, highlighted in an editorial titled "Atomic Spring" appearing in *LIFE* in April 1946, that the only end for atomic power was destruction. The editors single out the widely disseminated concerns of scientists that atomic weapons would consume the entire planet if nuclear development

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[433] see Dyson Carter, *Atomic Dollars* (Winnipeg: Frontier, 1946).
[434] William Laurence, "Is Atomic Energy the Key to Our Dreams?," *Saturday Evening Post* (April 13, 1946), 9.
[435] Ibid., 10, 39. Laurence's article consists largely of a discussion of the comparative costs of nuclear and other power sources, and in this respect, constitutes one of the more realistic perspectives among the voices predicting atomic energy's "golden age."
[436] qtd in David Rothenberg, *Hand's End: Technology and the Limits of Nature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 170.

continued. Citing the concerns of University of Chicago president and "one world—or none" advocate Robert Hutchins that, as they put it, "mankind has but a slim chance of atomic fission" without achieving an unlikely "world community and a world government," they note of the "average American" that "beneath his calm a latent fear is being fed." The consequence of all of this anxiety was, in the editors' eyes, that "if his political and scientific betters do not conquer their own fear of the bomb before long, the average man may be subject to a psychological stampede."[437] And even as the editors of *LIFE* highlighted the way that the atomic bomb had become "an oversimplified symbol of all the complex problems of the postwar world," the entropy of matter itself would become a symbol for the social disintegration predicated on that psychological stampede.

In one particularly charged example of this rhetoric, the character Leon Levinsky, in Jack Kerouac's *roman-a-cléf* from 1950, *The Town and the City*, would argue for the existence of what he describes as "the atomic disease." Levinsky, an avatar for Kerouac's friend Allen Ginsberg, explains to the novel's protagonist,

> you know about molecules, they're made up according to a number of atoms arranged just so around a proton or something. Well, the 'just-so' is falling apart. The molecule will suddenly collapse, leaving just atoms, smashed atoms of people, nothing at all.[438]

Such a diagnosis of social disintegration largely mirrors that found in the first chapter of David Riesman's classic study, *The Lonely Crowd*, also from 1950. There, Riesman

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[437] "Atomic Spring," *LIFE Magazine* (April 15, 1946), 36.
[438] Jack Kerouac, *The Town and the City* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 371.

argues that in "tradition-directed" societies, social change "is slowed down as the movement of molecules is slowed down at low temperature." It is in these cultures that we can find what he calls "ritual, routine and religion to occupy and to orient everyone." However, in the emerging societies Riesman describes as "other-directed," which he claimed could only describe sectors of American society in 1950, there has been a shift such that "religious and magical views...give way to 'rational', individualistic attitudes." This individualism means the loss of the grounding offered by the "ritual, routine and religion;" while they may still take part in these activities, individuals derive their orientation not from faith in a monocultural tradition but from the variety of signals they receive from others. Riesman writes that in a society like the one he sees emerging in 1950, individuals "must be able to receive signals from far and near; the sources are many, the changes rapid…[and] one prime psychological lever of the other-directed person is a diffuse *anxiety*."[439] While the technical sphere of society may have split open matter itself, the global expansion of the war ushered in an age of anxiety and latent fear.

I draw out this relatively familiar discussion of the relationship that the postwar moment imagined between humanity and the natural world, between postwar society and traditional cultures, only to highlight the ways the Faust figure, in passages leading to a bargain with Mephistopheles, might feel strangely at home in the postwar United States. In spite of mastering atomic power, critics like Riesman and artists like Kerouac and others among the so-called "Beats" imagined the material fabric that stitched the middle

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[439] David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (New Haven: Yale University, 1950), 12-26. Emphasis in the original.

class of American society together undergoing a process of atomization. Individuals had lost the orientation that gave them a sense of place and fulfillment in their society and environment. As Goethe's Faust had discovered almost 150 years before, a fissure opened in the mimetic link between humans and nature that critics and artists imagined existing at some moment in the recent past, or still existing in more traditional cultures in the global South or East. Developed societies have split off from the Being of the planet, even as their capacity to control it has increased. And it is this imagined separation that more pessimistic critics, specifically Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, called the "myth of Enlightenment."

There are essentially two guiding theses to their ambitious, but ultimately fragmentary, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, largely a collection of transcribed conversation from their exile in California during the heights of the Second World War. The first is that, as they write in the book's concept-generating first chapter, "just as myths already entail enlightenment, with every step enlightenment entangles itself more deeply in mythology."[440] Just as myth had served the function of orientation, enlightenment offers to orient individuals within the world. The crucial difference that Horkheimer and Adorno observe is that myth orients through a mimetic approach to the natural world and through proximity, where enlightenment makes a virtue of distance. However, this leads immediately to the second, more damning, thesis. As Horkheimer and Adorno illustrate with the example of Odysseus's passage by the Sirens and the lure of their song, "the

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[440] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 8.

curse of irresistible progress is irresistible regression."[441] In their telling, the separation of labor that occurs in the passage should be read as allegorical for the distribution of labor under enlightenment.

The crew of Odysseus's ship plug their ears and continue to row, maintaining contact with their environment at the cost of their full functioning as subjects, but Odysseus effects distance from the environment, working not directly on the thingly world but as an administrator and rendering himself immobile as a result. As Horkheimer and Adorno read the scene,

> Mind becomes in reality the instrument of power and self-mastery for which bourgeois philosophy has always mistaken it. The deafness which has continued to afflict the submissive proletarians since the myth is matched by the immobility of those in command. [...] The more complex and sensitive the social, economic, and scientific mechanism, to the operation of which the system of production has long since attuned the body, the more impoverished are the functions of which the body is capable. The elimination of qualities, their conversion into functions, is transferred by rationalized modes of work to the human capacity for experience.[442]

Here we can see the cost of the separation from the natural world that enlightenment must pay, though as I've suggested above, we can find this same dilemma in Goethe's Faust.

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[441] Ibid., 28.
[442] Ibid., 28.

The rationalization of labor has separated the mind from the things of the world. The administrative class, into which Goethe's Faust might be made to fit, has removed itself from proximity to the world for the benefit of their contemplation of that world. But the end of this removal has been to make themselves into "the instrument of power and self-mastery," really a self-denial in the interest of self-preservation, and to lose touch with the experience of their own embodiment. Goethe's Faust, who we cannot fail to understand as an avatar for resistance to the regression of enlightenment, discovers this loss of embodiment in the words of the Earth spirit: "thou'rt like the spirit, thou dost comprehend, / not me."

It is with these concepts and figures as context that my focus for this chapter will be the 1951 debut production of Gertrude Stein's 1938 libretto, minimally but significantly adapted as the premiere performance of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. Stein's libretto, which I will discuss in detail below, makes visible the central metaphor of "enlightenment," and its climactic action dramatizes the division of labor in terms of political complicity that Horkheimer and Adorno had understood as rendering the administrative class immobile. It is as an engagement with these concerns that the choices that the Living Theatre made in their staging of the libretto, as well as their guidance of the work's reception, highlight the ways in which the concerns of a postwar avant-garde still taking shape in 1951 were not only oriented toward the critique of enlightenment rationality that enlightenment could not reflexively produce. Rather, the choices that surrounded the Living Theatre's performance make clear a set of choices among experimental artists about how to engage

both the productive process and the politics through which the power to kill others is distributed. One of the things that examining this production makes visible, then, is a continuity of political engagement in the midst of what Alan Wald calls "an atmosphere of cosmic dissent" in postwar literary productions.[443] However, as the significance of the Living Theatre's background in the pacifist anarchism that developed during the second World War will make clear, the framework for that political engagement has remained under-emphasized in discussions of both postwar literary experimentalism and postwar literary radicalism. This chapter will make a partial intervention into this area by demonstrating that the Living Theatre production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* forced a confrontation between pacifist objection to war in Korea and the regressive demands of enlightenment subjectivity.

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights

The period following the second World War is my focus here, as images of the ends of rationalized warfare opened a fissure in society that found its synecdoche in Faust's sacrifice of his soul in search of the innermost workings of the material world. But the period between the wars held just as much claim to Faust. It was during those modernist decades that Oswald Spengler's *Decline of the West* laid claim to a notion of Europe containing a 'Faustian' civilization in the midst of organic decay and dissolution.[444] A

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[443] Alan Wald, *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xiv.

[444] While it would be easy to overstate the pervasiveness of Spengler's thought over the interwar period, reviewers in the United States consistently discussed *Decline of the West*'s translations as part of the

new edition of Jarry's *Exploits and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, `Pataphysician* was published by Phillippe Soupault in 1923, the filmmaker Marcel L'Herbier released his *Don Juan et Faust* in 1922, and Weimar director F.W. Murnau's *Faust* was distributed across Europe in 1926. Gertrude Stein may have in fact drawn some inspiration for her own, much later, Faust production from L'Herbier's 1924 work, *L'Inhumaine*, itself Faust-tinged, and featuring a climax in which the scientist Einar Norsen revives opera singer Claire Lescot from a snakebite.[445]

The idea to generate her own Faust, however, came just in time for Stein to renew her collaboration with the British composer Gerald Tyrwhitt, Lord Berners. In 1937, while war in Spain was laying groundwork for the Second World War, Lord Berners had successfully adapted Stein's 1931 play, *They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife*., as a libretto for his *A Wedding Banquet*. On the heels of that success, Stein would seem to have made the decision to turn the germ of her then-unfinished novel, *Ida*, into material for a Faust libretto. As Sarah Bay-Cheng tells the story in her exploration of Stein's drama, *Mama Dada*,

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common currency of educated conversation. *TIME*'s review of the translation of Spengler's volume 2, for instance, suggests that in "cultivated European discourse" following the publication in German of the book's first volume (in 1917), "it was imperative to read Spengler, to sympathize or revolt." And the *New York Times* review of the first translation in English notes that "of the two German editions, some 90,000 copies have been sold," far out-stripping the sales volume of any of his modernist contemporaries across Europe. See, "Patterns in Chaos," *TIME* (December 10, 1928); William MacDonald, "Doom of Western Civilization," *New York Times* (May 2, 1926).

[445] Stein's Faustus would do the same for the doubly-named character, "Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel." Aside from its Cubist design, *L'Inhumaine* was notable among members of Stein's circle for its inclusion of a riot scene, of which some notables took part. In the film, a recital of George Antheil is included, and the enraged and invigorated recital audience enter into a frenzy. The footage was apparently taken from an actual recital, which Antheil recounts in his 1945 memoirs, where he writes that one could find in this audience, "such illustrious figures as James Joyce, Picasso, Les Six, the Polignacs, the Prince of Monaco, the surrealist group, and Man Ray—although a good many of these remain seated." See George Antheil, *Bad Boy of Music* (New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1945), 136.

> Apparently, Stein decided to shift from novel to drama during the performance of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* on February 23, 1938 at the Académie Nationale de Musique et de Danse. Among the notes she scribbled in her production program that evening were an opening stage direction for *Doctor Faustus*. [...] Also included in the program was a photograph from the Académie's production of Hector Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust* (1846) presented earlier in [January of] 1938, which bears a striking resemblance to Stein's visual opening to *Doctor Faustus*.[446]

It is worth emphasizing that it was in conversation with the Don Giovanni's descent to hell and Faust's confrontation with the rising sun of Easter that Stein takes up the writing of her own Faust, and I will discuss these points below. But it is also important to note that, by way of distinguishing the origins of the libretto from the history given by some critics, Stein comes to the idea of writing a Faust on her own, bringing Lord Berners back into the collaborative fold that Spring.[447] The decision to take on Faust was Stein's, which carries the implication that the time was somehow right for her to adapt so well-

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[446] Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein's Avant-Garde Theater* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 74-76.

[447] See, as a recent reference to the mistaken claim Lord Berners bringing the idea of a Faust opera to Stein, Sarah Posman, "'More Light!--Electric Light!': Stein in Dialogue with the Romantic Paradigm in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*," *Primary Stein*, ed. Janet Boyd and Sharon Kirsch (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2014). As Nick Savato notes, Lord Berners wrote Stein in April of 1938 asking for copies of material she had shown him during a recent visit so that he could begin composing a work based on her existing text. Savato writes, somewhat coyly, that Stein had "seduced Berners into providing the music to accompany her words." See Nick Savato, "Uncloseting Drama: Gertrude Stein and the Wooster Group," *Modern Drama* (Spring 2007), 42.

trodden a figure for her own world—and that it was not quite the right moment for her to engage Faust in the previous decade, when the story had become fashionable.

Rather than understanding the libretto as a closet drama rooted in a quest for psychic unity after a crisis of identity, in spite of the persuasive arguments of some perceptive critics, my argument follows the lead of Sarah Bay-Cheng. Bay-Cheng writes that the text more likely "represents the culmination of Stein's thinking about the modern world."[448] The libretto was certainly a break from form in both the conventionality of its narrative and the straightforwardness of its treatment of the Faust story, which goes some length to explaining the reaction of Stein critics like Ulla Dydo, who writes that "it is astonishing that Gertrude Stein...should have written a Faust."[449] But Stein herself seems to have considered the libretto an opportunity to experiment with the possibilities available in more conventional dramatic narrative. In a letter to Carl Van Vechten from July of 1938, Stein writes "I have been struggling with this problem of dramatic narrative and in that I think I got it."[450] So the libretto is one that Stein acknowledged as having different stakes from those more typically considered in critical evaluations of her work.

If the libretto were one that she intended as a statement on "the modern world," this would suggest that the libretto contains a conscious and explicit engagement with

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[448] Sarah Bay-Cheng, *Mama Dada*, 73. For biographical and psychoanalytic readings, see Richard Bridgman, *Stein in Pieces* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) and Allegra Stewart, *Gertrude Stein and the Present* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968). For a convincing reading of Stein's use of a New Orleans *Blue Book* as source material for the names of her doubled female protagonist, which situates Stein's libretto within the broader queer subtext of her work, see again, Nick Savato, "Uncloseting Drama."

[449] Ulla Dydo, "Introductory Note" to *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, in Gertrude Stein, *A Stein Reader*, ed. Ulla Dydo (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993), 595.

[450] Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 600-601.

history. And for Stein, as Joan Retallack argues, history should be understood as tied up with character, and character has its own entanglements with expression. Retallack writes that in Stein's understanding, history "moves along trajectories created by a number of intersecting forces: the character of eras, and national (cultural) character." In such a telling, even politics are only "a function of intertwined characterological force fields."[451] If this is the case, then in order to understand how Stein understood her own historical moment, a critic must work backward from an evaluation of the "character" of her era or of the national cultures she engages. As Stein herself indicated in a 1930 sequence, "History, or Messages from History," "a history of a country is not a history of the changing of frontiers...the history of the country is why they like things which they have and which they do not exchange for other things for which they do not care."[452] The test, then, of whether or not *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* was expressive of Stein's views on "the modern world" ought to be whether or not it takes as one of its themes "why [people] like things which they have and which they do not exchange for other things for which they do not care," and not the extent to which it comments on current events, however much a lure its date of composition might offer for orienting one's analysis toward such events as the oncoming war.

Indeed, while Inez Hedges complains, in her survey of 20th century Faust productions, that *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* was "at most an oblique response to

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[451] Joan Retallack, "Introduction," *Gertrude Stein: selections* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 56. For more on Stein's interest in the morphology of character, see Michael Hoffman, "Gertrude Stein in the Psychology Laboratory," *American Quarterly* (Spring 1965): 127-132.

[452] Gertrude Stein, *Alphabets and Birthdays*, ed. Donald Gallup (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), 235.

the coming crisis," the setting of the play offers an even more indirect address to current (or future) events.[453] The libretto only details a door, a room with electric lights, a forest, and a countryside. There is nothing to suggest a time or a place other than the broad signifier of "electric light," which is given contrast later in the text by the sun, the moon, and candlelight. The setting, then, only invests the libretto in an engagement with the electrification of light, and the loss of night, both of which offered fundamental changes to the constitution of the everyday during Stein's lifetime. As David Nye argues throughout his history of the decades of America's electrification project (1880-1940), "people do not merely use electricity. Rather, the self and the electrified world have intertwined."[454] In other words, the electrification project undertaken in the 1880s with electrically powered arc lights in street lamps had wrought such fundamental changes in the patterns of life that by 1940, a new sort of self has emerged in congress with those changes. And that electrification project was itself synecdochal of the broader changes happening to the modern self as individuals' lives passed through intercourse the period's many technical evolutions.

Casting what is meant by "the modern world" in this light has some limitations, because as I will highlight, there are also elements of the libretto that do anticipate the eruption of violence, even if the war's arrival would surprise Stein, herself.[455] The

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[453] Inez Hedges, *Framing Faust: Twentieth-Century Cultural Struggles* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 128.
[454] David Nye, *Electrifying America: Social Meanings of a New Technology* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 390.
[455] Stein and Alice Toklas were away at their summer rental in Bilignin when the war broke out, and much has been written of their rushed trip back to Paris to see what could be done to protect their art collection.

completion of the opera by Lord Berners was even pre-empted by news of the war, as he wrote to Stein in December of 1939 to tell her that

> all inspirational sources seem to have dried up: I can't write another note of music or do any kind of creative work whatever, and it's not for want of trying and I don't believe I shall be able to as long as this war lasts. I feel confronted by the breakdown of all the things that meant anything to me.[456]

If it is possible to take the sentiment expressed by Lord Berners here as representative of a crisis held in common across the international scene, we might say that Stein's libretto actually anticipates the crisis of meaning presented by war, even if its punning treatment of enlightenment had been directed elsewhere.

The libretto's opening scene, as Sarah Bay-Cheng notes in the discussion of the text's origins above, has the titular Doctor Faustus holding himself within a doorframe by its lintel, while electric lights shine from the room behind him. The image, Bay-Cheng suggests, finds a compelling palimpsest in the publicity photograph for the January 1938 revival of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*. In that image, taken from the moment in

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That September, all that Stein had to say to her correspondents Thornton Wilder and Carl Van Vechten about the conflict were reassurances not to worry, though, to Van Vechten she writes that "we love France more than ever and they are all sweeter and more wonderful and Alice is nightly proud of being a Pole, and the second day of the war they called me up from Paris to interview me about the World is Round, it was strange having a long conversation about that over the telephone at that moment." Later, she would write ambivalently of a suggestion by the editor of her just-released children's book, *The World is Round*, to leave France for the safety of the US, so that she might lecture and perform readings, but remained in the countryside because she did not want "a strenuous life," but "a nice quiet one." See *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten*, 650-651.

[456] *The Flowers of Friendship: Letters Written to Gertrude Stein*, ed. Donald Gallup (New York: Knopf, 1953), 346.

Berlioz's opera in which Faust is interrupted in his contemplation of suicide by the dawn celebration of an Easter mass and the singing of a chorus, the silhouette of a cross on a mound holds the focus, slightly left-of-center in the frame, while behind the silhouetted incline to its right, the chorus of Easter worshippers is hunched in ascent. The text for this moment in Berlioz's libretto has the chorus singing "Christ vient de ressusciter!" against the rising sun. The image relies on the rhyming association of the rising sun with the rising son, and in the course of the narrative, the celebration it depicts saves Faust from his melancholy. In Stein's transformation of this scene, however, the sun has been replaced with electric light and traditional celebration has been replaced with anhedonia and ambivalence. Stein's Doctor Faustus growls, in the text's opening, "what do I care if the devil is there," and in response to the coaxing of Mephisto, only reaffirms his ambivalence: "What do I care there is no here nor there." Faustus is rudderless, and his lack of direction stems from the discovery of electric light that came from his deal with Mephisto, a deal that happens before the events of the text and which the Doctor is pretty sure he needn't have made, "if [he] had not been in a hurry."[457]

His state of mind mirrors and anticipates the diagnosis of Horkheimer and Adorno in "The Concept of Enlightenment" that "on their way toward modern science human beings have discarded meaning."[458] The loss of meaning Lord Berners found as symptom of the eruption of war was already present in Doctor Faustus, who complains to Mephisto that "there is no hope there is no death there is no life there is no breath, there just is

[457] Gertrude Stein, *Last Operas and Plays*, ed. Carl Van Vechten (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1949), 89.
[458] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.

every day all day and when there is no day there is no day."[459] The Doctor rejects the promise of any *telos* and the orientation of any macrocosmos offered by the devil; punning on the folk saying, he tells Mephisto, "you are red at night which is not a delight and you are red in the morning which is not a warning," and in the same gesture Faustus rejects the superstition of tradition as a means for orienting himself.[460] When he sighs that there "just is every day all day and when there is no day there is no day," he has effectively ruled out the possibility that the things and events of his world might mean beyond themselves. All that remains is a disenchanted world of matter; as Horkheimer and Adorno write, of the passage from magic to science,

> representation gives way to universal fungibility. An atom is smashed not as a representative [as in rituals of sacrifice] but as a specimen of matter, and the rabbit suffering the torment of the laboratory is seen not as a representative but, mistakenly, as a mere exemplar.[461]

It is this state of things that has left the Doctor in such an enervated condition.

The plot's action moves in the barest of sketches from this initial scene, though because it is a seldom-encountered work, I will recount it here. Doctor Faustus, not entirely convinced that he had a soul to sell to Mephisto in the first place, kicks the devil away from his door. He tells Mephisto to go to hell, and apparently in response to his excited state, the lights behind him "begin to get very gay."[462] In the balletic dance of

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[459] Gertrude Stein*, Last Operas and Plays*, 90.
[460] Ibid., 90.
[461] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno*, The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 7.
[462] Ibid., 91.

lights that follows, Faustus sings in his room full of electric light alongside a dog and a boy who enter the scene amidst the musical interlude. The dog, an apparent fusion of elements from Jarry's *Faustroll* and Goethe's *Faust*, with little exception says, "Thank you."[463] Faustus repeatedly asks the boy and dog to leave him alone, singing, "Dog and boy boy and dog leave me alone let me let me be alone."[464] When he hears a woman singing in the distance, the electric lights, ventriloquized by the chorus, tell him the singer's name: Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel.

The scene then shifts to focus on the doubly named Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, who we discover in the midst of "the woods, the wild woods everywhere where everything is wild wild."[465] While wandering these woods, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is bitten by a viper, and a country woman advises her to visit Doctor Faustus, whom she says may be able to cure the snakebite. And so Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel goes to visit Doctor Faustus, whose response is somewhat unsurprisingly that he wants to be left alone; his first lines in response to her arrival are, "Leave me alone / Let me be alone," and he tells the doubled woman that he cannot see her.[466] So Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel implores him to "cure me do but do not see me," and after the

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[463] The dog appears to conflate the poodle of Goethe's *Faust*, which follows Faust home from the tavern and is actually the devil, and Doctor Faustroll's monkey, Bosse-de-Nage, from Jarry's *Exploits & Opinions of Doctor Faustroll, `Pataphysician*. Bosse-de-Nage only says "haha" throughout Jarry's text, and the change to "thank you" seems a particularly Steinian adaptation of this verbal tic, though the dog will have other things to say in Stein's libretto.
[464] Ibid., 93.
[465] Ibid., 96. Ulla Dydo suggests compellingly that Stein returns to these woods in her subsequent children's book, *The World is Round* in the Introductory Note contained in *A Stein Reader*, 596.
[466] Ibid., 100.

interval of a long reflection on the part of the chorus, and just before the first act closes, Doctor Faustus comes to a decision.[467] He sings in the scene's climactic moment,

> Enough said.
>
> Enough said.
>
> You are not dead.
>
> No you are not dead
>
> Enough said
>
> Enough said
>
> You are not dead.[468]

Faustus is joined by all of the other characters on stage, except Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, in the repetition of this healing incantation, and the act closes with Marguerite Ida and Helena whispering the success of the treatment, "I am Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and enough said I am not dead."[469]

As the first act makes clear, Stein has rearranged and recombined elements of the Faust narratives she began with, as well as mixing in elements from films and other operas. Stein takes the snakebite from L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* and gives to it the same narrative function which audiences, Stein included, would be accustomed to seeing for the seduction and duel of the first act of *Don Giovanni*. Unlike traditional Faust dramas, which make of Faust's tragedy the cost of the deal he strikes with Mephistopheles, in Stein's telling, Faust is less upset by the loss of his soul, which he finds a somewhat

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[467] Ibid., 101.
[468] Ibid., 103.
[469] Ibid., 103.

dubious proposition in the first place, than he is by the ends of that deal. He has mastered electrical light, producing "the lightening light" that has revealed to him that everything he saw "was all true," but this has only left him with the revelation of a world that is exactly and simply that which it is for him, drained of its capacity to represent. As Faustus earlier tells the devil, "now perhaps through you I begin to know that it is all just so, that light however bright will never be other than light, and any light is just a light."[470] The mastery of his world has come at the expense of any hope Faustus might have had for the world to be otherwise; embodying the immobilized administrative class in Horkheimer and Adorno's allegory of enlightenment rationality, it will take the participation in extraordinary rites for Faustus to regain access to another realm of experience.

The opera continues, maneuvering through an act centered on Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, who the chorus introduces while she sits in a corner of the stage. The text explains that she has "an artificial viper there beside her and a halo is around her not of electric light but of candle light and she sits there and waits."[471] When Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel does sing, she sings that "I sit and sit with my back to the sun," offering a contrasting image to that of Doctor Faustus which opened the libretto and proposing a different mode of access to the things of the world.[472] Where Doctor Faustus has mastered electric light and canceled out the night, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel has candles and has become associated with the rise of the sun. Her song attracts

[470] Ibid., 91.
[471] Ibid., 104.
[472] Ibid., 106.

a deluge of suitors from all corners, and one in particular—described as a "man from over the sea"—sings of his admiration. However, Mephisto is discovered in his entourage, and a boy and a girl sing eerily behind him, naming him "Mr. Viper."[473] Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel shrinks away from him, but he persists in declaiming "Pretty pretty pretty dear she is all my love and she is always here / [...] I am the only he and you are the only she and we are the only we."[474] Where tellings of the Faust story often place a suitor-Faust with the devil in tow, we find Mr. Viper in Stein's telling: a personification of the animal that bit Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, attempting to woo her with Mephisto's aid. Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, however, remains unmoved by his affections.

Meanwhile, Doctor Faustus has been visited in a dream by a woman claiming that he is not the only one who can turn night into day, because Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, now linked to the sun, has become associated with this power. This news makes Faustus hopeful that he can escape the dreariness of the disenchanted world he has come to inhabit, and he excitedly sings, "Well we will go and see her and I will show her that I can go to hell, if she can turn night into day as they say then I am not the only one very well I am not the only one."[475] In crossing the stage to see her, however, Faustus encounters Mephisto. The devil informs Faustus that, if Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel can really turn the night into day, she must be going to hell herself, because she would have had to make a bargain of her own. So Faustus repeats to the devil that he will

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[473] Ibid., 107-109.
[474] Ibid., 110.
[475] Ibid., 113.

go to hell, and Mephisto supplies him with the somewhat ironic response that Faustus cannot go to hell because he has no soul.

The way that Stein resolves this dilemma offers the point in the text most available to a reading that links its narrative to the escalating political crises of her time. The devil's solution, for Faust, and one of the passages that will come to be most significant to the libretto's later reception, is that Faustus can regain his soul if he commits a sin. When Faustus objects, "what sin, how can I without a soul commit a sin," the devil replies, "Kill anything."[476] The realm of spirit and magic, of a meaning to things beyond one's access to them, can only be renewed for Faustus through rites of violence, of sacrifice. The devil's call to renew the soul through violence, to irrigate one's spirit with the blood of another, rhymes ominously with the language of flows and floods, of breaking through and damming up, documented in Klaus Theweleit's classic study of the emergence of fascist desire in the literature of the *Freikorps*.

As Theweleit writes, fascists evinced a desire to serve both as a tower that could dam the flood of communism and as a cudgel that could usher in streams of redemptive blood. Theweleit notes that a favorite song of German fascists went, "Blood, blood, blood must flow / Thick as a rain of blows."[477] The goal of this bloodshed was the preservation of identity, both national and individual, against the perceived threats of Communism and women, who the *Freikorps* writers believed placed that identity at risk through either political programs or sexuality. The desire to ward off these objects was figured in terms

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[476] Ibid., 116.
[477] Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, Volume One: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. Stephen Conway (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 234.

that drew on a disgust with bodily fluids, and Theweleit suggests their violent fantasies were rooted in anxiety about "the warmth that dissolves physical boundaries (meaning not that it makes *one* body out of a man and woman, but that it transgresses boundaries: the infinite body; the body as flow)."[478] As a result of this anxiety, its objects—principally women and Communism—had to be kept at bay by utilizing "the 'floods' and 'lava' that are capable of erupting from within soldier males." This strategic channeling of the flow of desire through the bodies of soldier males, in the service of preventing a more generalized flood that threatened to dissolve the individual's self-identity, comes to explain the importance of fascist spectacle for Theweleit.

He writes that the many parades and demonstrations of the Nazi party in Germany offered a means by which participants could experience the flooding of desire and its streaming release without self-dissolution. It was by this trick of an internal contradiction between exposure to the flood and the maintenance of the self's integrity that "the fascist came to represent [the participant's] own liberated drives and the principle that suppressed them."[479] In Stein's play, Faustus taps into just such a system of what Theweleit calls "canalization" in order to renew his soul, allowing the viper to kill so that he can gain the bloodied but renewed soul that will gain him access to hell and lead him away from a bloodless and disenchanted existence. But as Theweleit acknowledges, these are psychic traits familiar to "the average bourgeois male" of the era, and the anxiety of contamination through proximity to the sticky and dirty stuff of the material world

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[478] Ibid., 410-411.
[479] Ibid., 430.

(including the bodies of others) was one reinforced by the same power dynamics that Horkheimer and Adorno attribute to enlightenment. They write of the way "the distance of subject from object, the presupposition of abstraction, is founded on the distance from things which the ruler attains by means of the ruled."[480] This suggests that it is not only anxiety of contamination but also the demonstration of power, of one's mastery over oneself and one's sphere, that is at stake in having another do work in one's place. For not only Faustus but for any member of the administrative classes, the maintenance of one's identity comes to be tied to precisely the ability to canalize those actions that expose one to direct environmental contact.

In Faustus's case, however, the contamination of violent contact with another's body and the loss of the distance associated with power is precisely what will gain him access to the hell he desires. To gain relief from the burdensome disenchantment of his electric enlightenment, and by extension his own bourgeois subjectivity, he must allow the viper to kill. So he does just that; the text tells us only that "there is a rustle the viper appears and the dog and the boy die," and in response, Faustus exclaims, "because you die nobody can deny later I will go to hell."[481] Although the Doctor has allowed another to do his killing for him, seemingly employing the "canalization" identified by Theweleit as inhering within participation in fascist spectacle by having another perform this violence for him, the play denies any distance in delegation. What the viper does, it does as the agent of Faustus. And this state of affairs suggests that the capacity for

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[480] Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 9.
[481] Ibid., 117.

representation or sacrifice, even if it is lost to Faustus, is still present to Mephisto, who accepts the act and confirms for Faustus, "now you can go to hell."[482] And so Doctor Faustus goes off to confront Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and ask her to join him in the descent to hell, since she too can make light.

In the libretto's conclusion, Doctor Faustus goes to see Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, who is still beset by her suitor, the man from over the sea, Mr. Viper. However, before he presents himself to her, he asks Mephisto to change his appearance so that he looks younger. When he does appear before Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, she rejects him: "You Doctor Faustus never never Doctor Faustus is old I was told and saw it with my eyes he was old and could not go to hell and you are young and can go to hell."[483] The opera ends with Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel collapsing into the arms of the man from over the seas, as Doctor Faustus descends to hell, the delayed outcome of his contact with the world. As a final contrast to the libretto's opening, as the text concludes, the Doctor "sinks into the darkness and it is all dark."[484]

Only by reference to these concluding events can a reader explore the place that Stein's Doctor Faustus and her *Doctor Faustus* take in relation to the moment of the libretto's composition. When critics have seized on this work in order to discuss some aspect of Stein's writing, they tend either to discuss it as a sort of psychoanalytic or biographical allegory, or as symptomatic of some consistent tendency in her thought, as Michael Davidson does by reading it alongside her earlier essays and poetry about the

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[482] Ibid., 117.
[483] Ibid., 117.
[484] Ibid., 118.

consumption of mass market goods. Davidson's short discussion of the libretto's text, in his *Ghostlier Demarcations*, offers the most compelling, though brief, critical engagement with the libretto read as social commentary. He suggests that in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* we can see that "Stein regards the illumination offered by modern machines as a loss of power from which we will never recover," even if elsewhere in her *oeuvre*, we can see Stein attempting to find a way of "liberating an isolated subjectivity...from the crowd" by way of those same machines.[485] Davidson argues through an examination of Stein's discussions on cinema that, in her understanding, "the instrument that would eliminate the aura of originality becomes, ironically, the vehicle for its recovery."[486] Or, to return as Davidson does to Stein's 1911 essay, "Flirting at the Bon Marché," she suggests that mass production and mechanical reproduction offer the means by which to generate original "ways of living."[487]

The broader argument that Davidson makes is convincing, and he finds that when placed alongside Stein's earlier writing, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* offers evidence that Stein's "representation of modern technology was ambivalent."[488] However, in the specifics of his engagement with *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, there is reason to think that his analysis closes off the possibilities opened by the libretto's climax while forcing its fit within a discussion of Stein's engagements with a commodity society.

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[485] Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 47-48.
[486] Ibid., 47.
[487] Quoted in ibid., 46.
[488] Ibid., 48.

For instance, Davidson argues that the sentient lights of the libretto "[contribute] to the phantasmagoria of commodity society that Marx described in *Capital*, a ghostly reality of the commodity removed from labor and removed from a world of human needs."[489] And certainly one could fill in this argument by reference to the libretto's opening, in which Faustus complains, "what after all is the use of light, you can see just as well without it, you can go around just as well without it you can get up and go to bed just as well without it."[490] But if we read the entirety of the libretto's narrative in these terms, following its trajectory from an anhedonic Faust to a Faust desperate enough to kill so that he might leave the disenchanted and enlightened world behind, finding in it a critique of the mystifications of commodity society makes only an incomplete sort of sense. If Faust's alienation was one reflective of the generalized alienation of the commodity's distance from labor, the emphasis on his ties to the electric light as a product of his labor, however dearly purchased the knowledge to perform that labor was, would seem counterintuitive. His relationship to the "ghostly" light is not one of mystification; rather he yearns for mystification. The issue with understanding the play as a critique of the fetishized commodity, or even with the suggestion that we may "never recover" from the loss of power occasioned by the emergence of modern machines, is that neither claim is encompassing enough. The stakes of Stein's libretto exceed both claims, because her Faustus's dilemma is that of the changes effected in subjectivity by electrification: the perceived disruption of daily rhythms, or of interpersonal ties made

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[489] Ibid., 48.
[490] Gertrude Stein, *Last Operas and Plays*, 90.

closer by the physical proximity required by lamplight. These were symptoms of a changing relationship not only to the process of production, but also to the natural environment itself. The instrumentalization of the world preceded commodity culture and the modern machine, and it is ultimately for that change that the libretto holds electric light out as a synecdoche.

Given this, it is toward an engagement with phenomenology considered broadly that the libretto asks critics to turn. For example, in spite of the lack of any direct exposure to the revival of Hegel in France in the 1930s, the consonance between the narrative's solution for recovering one's soul as a lapsed critical thinker ("kill anything") and that of the reading given to Hegel's *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is compelling. As George Bataille would reflect on Hegel's *Phenomenology* after attending the famous lectures of Alexandre Kojève in the 1930s, in that book and in Stein's text we can find the assertion that "death alone assures the existence of a 'spiritual'...being."[491] And while there are significant differences between the God-wrapped totality of Hegelian phenomenology and the less determined totality of Stein's text, both offer objections toward what Kojève had called the "pseudo-science" of Newtonian thought—an objection Kojève took from his reading of the preface to the *Phenomenology*.

As Kojève argued in his lectures of 1934, this pseudo-science is one that "reflects on the Real while placing *itself outside* of the Real, without one's being able to say precisely where; Reflection which pretends to give an 'overview' [i.e., *Ubersicht*] of the

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[491] Georges Bataille, "Hegel, Death and Sacrifice," trans. Jonathan Strauss, *Yale French Studies*, 78 (1990), 12.

Real on the basis of a knowing Subject that calls itself autonomous or independent of the Object of knowledge."[492] In other words, the enlightened subject that imagines a separation between the rational subject and the chaotic world of matter is laboring under a delusion more fundamental than the mystification of commodity capitalism. Such a subject has always-already emerged in relation to the object, immersed and implicated in the Real itself. Under such a reading, the distance on which enlightenment knowledge and power are premised amounts to an inauthentic and inaccurate accounting of the subject's engagement with the world. Considering Stein's libretto in such a light, the trajectory of Doctor Faustus is actually one of the movement from pseudo-scientific modernity, filled with electric light, to the darkness of the element itself in which the subject is formed but which cannot be assimilated in itself. We can understand the darkening stage of the libretto's conclusion, Faustus's descent to Hell, as the result of a yearning to return to this negative element, that which contains all possibilities but resolves into none, the ends of his confrontation with the boy and dog, having seen through his murderous engagement how "the night of the world hangs out toward us."[493] This night may have terrors, but remaining submerged in it can nonetheless offer relief from the demands of subjective response.

To be sure, we should doubt that Stein herself could be understood as endorsing the bloody solution to the inauthentic and disenchanted engagement with the world offered by her libretto's Mephisto. After all, the Hellish night was littered with corpses,

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[492] Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 172.

[493] G.W.F. Hegel, "Jena Lectures on the Philosophy of Human Spirit (1805-1806)," trans. Leo Rauch, in *Hegel and Human Spirit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 87.

"here a bloody head...there another white shape," and this is what Doctor Faustus yearns. However, lingering in the indeterminate element that exists prior to any image securing one's distance from the object had been an important part of Stein's writing since her early portraits.[494] In her "Stein Talk" titled "Language and Realism," Lyn Hejinian makes a great deal of this facet of Stein's work, arguing of *Tender Buttons* in particular that "putting 'essences back into existence' was the practical work that Stein undertook."[495] Hejinian highlights a passage from Stein's 1935 lecture "Portraits and Repetition" in which Stein makes just this point. There, Stein discusses what she had in mind as she was composing the portraits in *Tender Buttons* some twenty years before:

> I became more and more excited about how words which were the words that made whatever I looked at like itself were not the words that had in them any quality of description. This excited me very much at the time.
>
> And the thing that excited me so very much at that time and still does is that the word or words that make what I looked at be itself were always words that to me very exactly related themselves to that thing the thing at which I was looking, but as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing.[496]

In other words, what excites Stein is the discovery that the essence of a thing could not be captured by what she points to here as "description." To return to the phenomenological

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[494] Ibid., 87.

[495] Lyn Hejinian, *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 98. The internal quotation is from Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[496] Gertrude Stein, *Lectures in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1935/1985), 191-192.

language of Hegel, the limitation of description for Stein is that it resolves into an image a more complicated and intuitive encounter. Her approach is to instead attempt to find the words that "made whatever I looked at like itself," to remain in the negative space of the object for-itself, rather than resolving the encounter with description. The gap between these two ways of accounting for things in language is the gap between the overview of pseudo-science (enlightenment) and the drama of a subject's phenomenal encounter with the Real.

The phenomenological through-line linking the engagement with the world that Stein cultivated in her own language experiments links together with the dramatic apparatus surrounding Doctor Faustus's violence. While other critical accounts are compelling, with Davidson offering a productive connection between the Edisonian premise of Stein's *Doctor Faustus* and her fascination with commodity society and mass production, the libretto's narrative encompasses too many phenomenological stakes not to consider the more broadly philosophical critical position as Stein's route of access to the concerns of her moment. The characterological force that Stein's libretto addresses itself toward is one disaffected by enlightenment, seeking to restore the spirit through contact with a self-annihilating desire. In its premonition of the stakes for this disaffection, and of the consequences that would follow from the instrumentalization of the world, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* opens an escape hatch from the loss of power brought about by modern machines: "kill anything;" blood, blood, blood must flow. This

statement, in the hands of the Living Theatre, a virtual incubator for the nascent neo-avant-garde in 1950s New York, would come to be seen as "a brave declaration."[497]

Receiving *Doctor Faustus*

Under whatever terms contemporary audiences would have received the *Lights* of Stein's libretto, the work was never to be performed or published in her lifetime. The libretto and the circumstances around its aborted opera came to the reading public only with the posthumous publication of Stein's *Last Operas and Plays* in 1949. *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* would not be performed for another two years. The sparse and mixed reviews of that book offer a glimpse at the literary values that Stein's plays challenged, at the same time as they help clarify the appeal of Stein's late work for her champions. In the following I will chart the importance that a 1949 readership found in the extent to which Stein's experiments with language were premised in the purposeful dissolution of subjective control, looking at two representative reviews in popular publications. In discussing these, I will highlight the extent to which reviewers figure this loss of control as embodying, in fact, a kind of relief from the demands of subjectivity, in the hopes that these readers' positions may establish a somewhat incomplete continuum.

One of the most prominent venues offering a review of *Last Operas and Plays* was the *Saturday Review of Literature*, which would later that year occupy the center of controversy surrounding the awarding of the Bollingen Prize to Ezra Pound for his *Pisan Cantos*. The reviewer, Ben Ray Redman, takes the opportunity of a new Stein publication

[497] Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 187.

to litigate against the entirety of Stein's career.[498] In an article tellingly titled "Word-Intoxicated Woman," Redman indicts Stein for failing to "submit her beloved and wayward words to rational discipline."[499] Making an appeal to the prevailing New Critical authority, he writes that "she consistently refused to perform the fully conscious 'critical labor' of which Eliot...speaks, without which words must remain only words."[500] The language of discipline and affection here, while betraying the impulse to feminize Stein's poetics, are nonetheless compelling for the way that Redman actually reproduces the priorities that Stein had established herself for the negotiation of fit between word and world, even as it denies any legitimacy to the discipline that her work clearly evinces in this regard. Recall that in Stein's American lecture discussing her early portraits, she says that she "became more and more excited" by the misfit between things as she encounters them and "what any words would do that described that thing." The poetics invoked in that passage and identified tacitly by Redman in what he called her "refusal" is one where the "rational discipline" of words is self-consciously avoided, because such a discipline would lead directly to words becoming something other than themselves: becoming instrumental, descriptive. Stein could only have agreed with Redman's contention that

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[498] In doing this, of course, Redman is only following a pattern most recently repeated by cultural critics eager to call Stein a Nazi and her work irredeemable after the publication of Barbara Will's *Unlikely Collaboration* in 2011. See Barbara Will's summary article, "The Strange Politics of Gertrude Stein," *Humanities* (March/April 2012). The resultant outpouring of commentary on Stein, centered around an exhibition of Stein's art collection organized by the Met, was capped off by the addition of a wall paragraph asking questions about Stein's Vichy collaboration, which earned the approval of the Anti-Defamation League and a thick rebuttal by Stein scholars in the literary journal *Jacket*.

[499] Ben Ray Redman, "Word-Intoxicated Woman," *Saturday Review of Literature* (April 2, 1949), 19.

[500] Ibid., 18.

her words were "beloved" to her, and that affection permits this resistance to instrumentalization.

While for Stein this interest in language as both medium and material may have been exciting, for Redman it is the sign of losing oneself to language. He writes of Stein that it is customary to understand her work as a sort of experiment, but that "she was happy to let words have their way with her," and that she "gave words their heads, and delighted to watch them run."[501] His sense in encountering Stein's writing is that where we should find a rational subject intervening to shape language into recognizable images, what we see in its stead is a woman laughing as she loses control of a tray full of drinks. When Redman refers to Stein as "word-intoxicated," his implication is that failing to master one's material involves a dangerous submission to the pleasures of proximity to things, with which one risks contamination. Written in a way that foregrounds the sexual connotations, Redmond's critique suggests that to let such a material have its way with you is to become in-toxicated, to bear the toxicity transmitted from a slimy world within you. The distance from Theweleit's characterization of the fascist, and the bourgeois, psyche's concern about contamination to Redman's objection to Stein's poetics is dwindlingly small. Cast in terms more in line with the phenomenological stakes of Stein's poetics, Redman's reviews suggests an anxiety that if one does not overcome the night of the negative, one may be overcome by that night, filled as it is with specters.

To make the turn to a more general cultural consideration, if Redman's objection is representative of a broader consensus in the society of 1949, then we might say that his

[501] Ibid., 19.

review exposes an anxiety about the loss of rational control, of enlightenment mastery, that we can identify with both a postwar resistance to the social consequences of totalitarianism. If one adopts a generous critical stance and assumes that Redman's aesthetic judgment and political consciousness cohere, we should emphasize that his concern about Stein's poetics and its lack of discipline and control rhymes with the way that Karl Jaspers had described the experience of the individual under political dictatorship in the work translated as *The Question of German Guilt* [*Die Schuldfrage*] in 1948. There, Jaspers argues that for the individual living in a dictatorship, "he does not feel that he shares a responsibility; he looks on...works and acts in blind obedience. He has an easy conscience in obeying and an easy conscience about his nonparticipation in the decisions and acts of those in power."[502] This abdication of responsibility is what Redman finds in the realm of the aesthetic when he encounters Stein's work, and in the light that such a sentiment casts, it is easy to find in his indictment of her work as refusing to perform "fully conscious 'critical labor'" the germ of a more political objection to her poetics. After all, in refusing enlightenment rationality, Stein can also be seen as rejecting enlightenment's emancipatory project.

Worse yet in Redman's reading, Stein seems to reject emancipation only to enjoy a sexually charged political irresponsibility. He insinuates that Stein takes a licentious sort of pleasure in the way she has approached language, writing that her work seems to have "afforded her some kind of psychic relief—a relaxation of tensions at which one can

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[502] Karl Jaspers, *The Question of German Guilt*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Doubleday, 1948), 35.

only guess."[503] To accusations of the leave-taking of her social responsibility to exercise will, Redman adds that Stein's poetics seem rooted in the dissolution of the ego through, Redman's euphemistic language suggests, orgasmic release. This layered notion of psychic relief, cast in such a negative light here by Redman, is nonetheless of central importance to understanding the direction of postwar artistic experimentation. And it is, significantly, just this sort of relief that Stein's Doctor Faustus yearns for in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*; in place of the demand that he persist as an agential subject in an enlightened world, the Doctor wants to embrace irresponsibility and descend to Hell. His desire to sin and regain a soul so that Mephisto can lord over him in Hell comes in response to his anguish as a man who thinks himself totally free, without even a soul to sell, and therefore without even a God to answer to. His desire is for just the sort of psychic relief that Redman suspects Stein has taken in producing such a work.

Redman's diagnosis of Stein's own relaxation of tensions, however, anticipates the sort of response that other reviewers suspected audiences might find in her work, suggesting the possibility for another sort of reception for the texts in *Last Operas and Plays*: seeing the works in the book as offering this relaxation of tension and psychic relief to readers/audiences. This is an approach is on evidence in another review from the popular press, by the conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein in the *New York Times*. Bernstein notes that for audiences of Stein's plays, their appeal lies in what he calls their "destructive humor." He writes that Stein's accomplishment in this collection of works for the stage "negates commonly accepted axioms of reality and leaves the perceiver

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[503] Redman, "Word-Intoxicated Woman," 19.

dangling, reeling, and grateful for the urge that enables him to agree with organized chaos by the simple act of laughing."[504] The encounter that Bernstein renders here, between the audience of a work written by Stein and that work's "organized chaos," is one productive of the "urge" toward laughter. The "simple act of laughing" here is not just a complement to but an affective agreement with Stein's abdication of the responsibility to discipline her materials, and it is one that leaves the audience "grateful" for the release from the need to respond.

While Redman's indictment of Stein's writing had suggested a sort of feminized irresponsibility to her refusal to fully master language, taming and shaping it, Bernstein's discussion of the way that Stein's language affects an audience turns that refusal of mastery toward those who encounter Stein's work. In an account like Bernstein's, what Stein performs and offers for audiences is the bursting of a dam, opening the body through an encounter absent the drive toward knowledge and mastery. The result is that audiences experience, however temporarily or involuntarily, the same relieving loss of self that Redman attributes to Stein. A burst, like a puncture, in the respectable exterior that one's posture and bearing have taken as their conformation socially, links the affect of Stein's performance in language with sort of psychosexual release. But what Redman fears as a socially irresponsible intoxication, Bernstein discovers as a sort of rictus.

For each critic, Stein's work for the stage holds the promise of an exposure to the chaotic force of negativity, though each understands that exposure in different terms. In the sections that follow, as I discuss the premiere performance of *Doctor Faustus Lights*

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[504] Leonard Bernstein, "Music and Miss Stein," *New York Times* (May 22, 1949).

the Lights, I will elaborate further on how exactly that exposure was understood by more sympathetic interpreters. But this reception of Stein's *Last Operas and Plays*, even though couched in patronizing discussions of Stein's importance as an "inspiration" to others rather than as significant on her own terms, would bear a family resemblance to that which guided that premiere.

The Living Theatre and Pacifist Activism in 1950

Julian Beck and Judith Malina had conceived of the institution that would be their legacy, the Living Theatre, three years before while under the influence of Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop at the New School. They had married in haste in 1948, and Judith had quickly become pregnant, stifling her acting career and forcing her to continue an unhappy cohabitation with her in-laws, whose presence she found oppressive. When a relative of Beck's had moved out of an apartment nearby the previous March, they had hastily moved in. Malina was still housebound in her care of her infant son, Garrick, and her diaries show her as increasingly unhappy in her marriage. But Beck and Malina showed their affection for one another through a rapidly increasing investment in their shared vision, and she embarked on a reading agenda that winter which would set the course for the first productions of their nascent theater company.

The first time that Judith Malina read Stein's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in late December of 1949, she was taken with it. She wrote in her diary, which would soon become a public and centrally important document of the social circle surrounding the Living Theatre, "I want to do this marvelous play," but was concerned that she would

never get permission from Carl Van Vechten to perform it.[505] It would take her and her husband, Julian Beck, two years, but by December of 1951 they had mounted the show, their first performance as the Living Theatre which Beck would claim "was like a manifesto and would always stand at the head of our work saying take the clue from this."[506] The production established links extending from the Living Theatre to both the constellation of young poets who would become known as the New York School and the eminences of the period before the second World War as various as Kenneth Rexroth and Pablo Picasso. The poet John Ashbery, in an interview that recounts his involvement with the Living Theatre as a younger poet and playwright and distances his work from their later productions, would recall that "the first thing I ever saw them do was a play by Gertrude Stein called *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights,* which I remember as one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen on the stage."[507] Even William Carlos Williams, whose *Many Loves* they would produce in 1959, wrote to Beck and Malina to congratulate them after attending during the second week of the production's run, telling them that what they had accomplished was "an almost impossible shot."[508] And Anais Nin would write of her admiration of the production even while withdrawing as a sponsor of the theater in the month following its run, saying that Beck and Malina had a "gift for design, synthesis, abstraction, [and] stylization," even though she disliked Stein's writing

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[505] Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 93.
[506] Julian Beck, "Storming the Barricades," in Kenneth Brown, *The Brig* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), 8.
[507] John Ashbery and Roger Oliver, "Interview: Poet in the Theatre," *Performing Arts Journal* 3.3 (Winter 1979), 18.
[508] William Carlos Williams, qtd in Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 197.

herself, and would tell the couple not to worry about her withdrawal, as "you have everybody behind you."[509]

The Living Theatre would go on to become an incredibly important incubator for experimental performance and composition in the late 1950s and early 1960s, as well as an imposing institution in their own right following the success of their staging of Kenneth Brown's anti-war play, *The Brig*, in 1964. They were equally important at the turn of the 1950s as one of the groups encouraging the proliferation of poets' theater, such as the Poets' Theater of Maria Piscator at the 92nd Street Y, which opened with Paul Goodman's 'Noh' plays, or the Cambridge Poets' Theater, which staged Frank O'Hara's early plays.[510] However, the context that I want to provide here is one that emphasizes their political activism over their *bona fides* as a central node in the network of artists that would form the postwar avant-garde.

Somewhat appropriately given the emphasis that I've placed so far on the popular press, I want to introduce the political element in Beck and Malina's work by highlighting two moments from Malina's diaries which center on Beck reading her the news. The first occurs on the evening of January 29th, 1950. Beck read from the day's Sunday *Times* to Malina, just a few months into their resettlement in an Upper West Side apartment and the two became enraged and horrified alongside one another. Malina's diary entry for the next day suggests that the article they focused on must have had as its lede, "Senator Tom Connally, Democrat, of Texas, urged the Government today to 'arm

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[509] Anais Nin, qtd in ibid., 205.

[510] See Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 37; also, Olivier Brossard, "Introduction" to Frank O'Hara "The Houses at Falling Hanging," republished in *The Yale Review* 92:1 (Jan. 2004): 1-33.

itself with the hydrogen bomb' as an instrument of peace and security."[511] It was the beginning of a long trajectory that would move Beck and Malina both from anarchist and pacifist discussion groups and toward more full-bodied activism. She writes in horror of the many monikers of the new development in nuclear weaponry: "hydrogen bomb, H-bomb, hell bomb." And while the vantage point of half a century's distance from the *Times* lede dulls its impact, the hyper-extended illogic of arming for peace seems to have come as a kind of eruption in the consciousnesses of Malina and Beck.

Malina writes the next Saturday that she and Julian had gone to the top of the Empire State Building and decided that they "should put [their] energy and imagination to stopping this planetary forest fire," and the following Wednesday, they asked their friend, Paul Goodman, to come discuss plans for stopping the wars.[512] Goodman's advice was to "remove burdens."[513] And in spite of her protestation that "in the forest fire there's no time for splendid projects," this address to the problem of atomic warfare—to remove burdens, to make space for "passionate expression"—might productively be understood as prefiguring the project that Beck and Malina would become known for establishing.

The next scene of reading comes not quite a month later, on February 25th. According to Malina's diaries, Beck read her more about the hydrogen bomb, this time from the January 30th issue of *LIFE Magazine*. A flip through the first pages of that issue would have taken Beck past Gjon Mili's famous portraits of Pablo Picasso, in which he

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[511] Waggoner, Walter H., "Connally Favors Hydrogen Bombs to Protect Peace." *New York Times*, Jan. 29, 1950: 1. The entry from Malina's diary follows the progress of different names for the (then only proposed) thermonuclear weapon in Waggoner's article (*The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 97).
[512] *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 97-98.
[513] Ibid.

paints bulls, figures, and flowers with the unbroken movement of a flashlight.[514] These portraits go unmentioned, although the couple would go on to produce his play of the Second World War, *Desire Trapped by the Tail*, in the winter of 1952.[515] Malina's telling of the evening focused instead on "figures about anticipated deaths in the millions," amid two pages of calm documentation of the destructive potential of the hydrogen bomb ("HYPOTHETICAL DESTRUCTION OF CHICAGO is shown on air view," one illustration's caption begins).[516] In her anger, fear, and frustration, Malina threw the magazine out of their apartment window and saw it "break apart and shatter in the cold river wind."[517] But in the interim of a month that separated these two recitals of the marriage between enlightenment science and nuclear war, Malina had been working her way into a response to the anger and frustration she and Beck felt at "[sitting] calmly and [making] pretty paintings while someone is tugging at us frantically screaming 'Fire!'"[518] Reflecting that evening on Jean Anouilh's *Antigone*, which had famously premiered in Paris in the midst of Nazi occupation, Malina writes:

> [Julian] comes to me and says: What are we to do? And I must answer, nothing, for I know nothing. What is there, then?

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[514] "Speaking of Pictures," *LIFE Magazine*, Jan. 30, 1950: 10.

[515] The poets John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara would both act in the Picasso play, cultivating a relationship with Judith Malina in particular that lasted for at least a decade, when Ashbery gave an extended reading at the Living Theatre in September of 1963 upon returning to New York City from Paris. At that reading he was introduced by Kenneth Koch, another poet whose plays found a venue at the Living Theatre. One of Ashbery's first plays, *The Heroes*, would be produced by the Living Theatre in 1952 with poet and composer Jackson Mac Low acting.

[516] *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 101. "The Hydrogen Bomb," *LIFE Magazine*, Jan. 30, 1950: 23.

[517] ibid., 101.

[518] ibid., 84.

> But now [...] I see another line of Antigone's spoken as she is about to commit the rebellious act of burying her brother under the very nose of the forbidding authority. Willing to die rather than not make the gesture, in spite of the futility of her action, she says, "I know all that. I know it. But that much, at least, I can do. And what a person can do, a person should do."[519]

For a period of several months after this line presented itself to Malina, she and Beck pasted pacifist slogans up around the city on shipping labels, hoping to bring at least someone to the consciousness that pacifism was an option for bringing about peace. Given Beck's work, which he disliked immensely, at his father's enormously successful distributing company, the use of shipping labels referred back quite directly to a form of resistance specific to his and Malina's situation, using the tools of that profession to raise awareness. Recounting a run-in with police during an outing to paste labels up in the middle of the night that August, she reiterates, "it is all that we can think of to do. And in Antigone's words: "What one can do, that one must do."[520] The sentiment from Anouilh's play had not only remained current in Malina's mind, but served as the basis for their consciousness-raising actions.

It is hard not to see Malina and Beck's attachment to *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* in particular as a kind of response to their frustration and anger toward a warmongering political environment and the development of the hydrogen bomb. While

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[519] ibid., 101.

[520] ibid., 120. These labels included slogans like "Answer War Ghandi's Way" and "War is Hell, Resist It."

neither Malina nor Beck ever goes so far as to say that their interest in Stein's libretto was fed by the particularly Faustian logic of atomic warfare and weapons development, the resonance is an obvious one. In one of the only significant discussions of the Living Theatre's staging of the play, Leslie Atkins Durham argues that fears about Russia's motives in a Korean ceasefire would have resonated with audiences as an analog to the sort of "deal with the devil" in the Faust myth.[521] Even granting this link, mediated more by the colloquial phrase than the specifics of the Faust story, there are an array of other reasons for the libretto's appeal that derive from the Korean War, threats of nuclear warfare, and the relationship Beck and Malina felt they had to these concerns.

We might look to the rejection of science in Stein's libretto, for example, in which enlightenment leads only to depression until the release permitted by a murder through complicity. We might see the links between the situation of a public who supports warfare in Korea and the rise of fascism in Stein's own time, emphasizing the similar affect drifting through the societies of 1930s Europe and the United States in 1950. Or we could look toward its narrative, in which we find the subject subsumed by the darkness of the world, the night of the negative, and experiencing this as his liberation from the overview of reason. Even the appeal of Stein's approach to language, which I will discuss below, was for Malina that her "words [broke it] to smithereens,"[522] mirroring atomic violence. But ultimately any discussion of the Living Theatre production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* needs to return, as Durham's account does not, to the sense of

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[521] Leslie Atkins Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 75.
[522] Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 187.

responsibility that Beck and Malina felt as citizens of a superpower developing methods of implausible destructive force. They saw the work of the theater as restoring the immediacy of experience, probing the barrier between individual audience members and their environment, and this work was of a sort that they could not but have hoped, following from Goodman's mentorship, to in a small way turn the climate away from the self-destructiveness of the Cold War. Ultimately, the force of their choice to revive this libretto, given their context, derives its importance from the way that Stein's narrative forces us to take all of these concerns in tandem.

It was a cultural and political moment in the United States when, as the journalist and historian Cabell Phillips reported for the *New York Times* that September, saber-rattling talk by members of Congress about "fantastic new weapons" had become so prominent that Truman's State Department worried it might "possess a sort of self-generating chain reaction that could lead to trouble."[523] Anxiety about the unintended consequences of the Cold War's technical escalation spilling over into an escalation of actual force was widespread, and in 1951, the State of New York had just passed the State Defense Emergency Act, which criminalized non-participation in civil defense drills.[524] Malina felt so strongly about what this sort of participation sanctioned that she would, years later, be among those arrested in refusing to comply with these drills alongside the Catholic anti-war activist Dorothy Day and the poet and composer Jackson

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[523] Phillips, Cabell. "Fantastic Weapon Talk Contains Much Fantasy." *The New York Times*, Sept. 16, 1951: 10E. Phillips highlights the editorializing of Louisiana Representative Overton Brooks in particular in his article.
[524] see, Defense Emergency Act 1951 784/51, New York Code, §101.

Mac Low.[525] Mac Low, on that occasion, would picket specifically for an end to the testing of H-bombs, concerned over the "deadly effects of the preparation for war,"[526] alluding to the dangers of fallout from nuclear testing. The Federal Civil Defense Administration had in the previous month published a pamphlet called "Facts about Fallout," featuring on its cover a cartoon man in a suit flinching in response to a photograph of a mushroom cloud on the horizon behind him. Underneath the bluster of statements like "Americans are hard to scare," the pamphlet concluded on the note that "of course we are worried about the forces we have unlocked. We would not be intelligent human beings otherwise."[527] Recontextualizing the protest in this light, a major component of what resistance to the civil defense drills was hoping to oppose was the fear produced by institutions whose existence was justified in the terms of a rationalization of worry, of nuclear anxiety. It would not be "intelligent" to go about one's daily life without the enlightened worry offered in such pamphlets, and yet this was precisely what the protestors wanted.

In this context, the production of Stein's libretto, which renders the viewpoint of science and of the engineer who masters artificial light as such a disappointment, offers a challenge not only to the valorization of rationality, but also to the affective ends of such

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[525] see, for instance, John Tytell, *The Living Theatre* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 113-116; or, in Malina's *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 367-75. Malina was arrested in June 1955 at a protest attended primarily by the constellation of activists associated with Day's Catholic Worker.

[526] Provisional Defense Committee, "What Happened on June 15?" (New York: War Resisters' League, 1955), qtd in Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 463.

[527] Federal Civil Defense Administration, "Facts about Fallout," May 4, 1955 (NAI 306714). NARA—Record Group 287: Publications of the U.S. Government 1790-2006—Government Publications, 1861-1992.

rationality: the anxiety that attends knowledge. As soon as they were able to secure the rights to Stein's libretto, Beck and Malina pursued a production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights,* trying to convince Carl Van Vechten to allow John Cage to do the music (which Van Vechten refused, saying that Cage would "probably score it all for drums"), working hard to cast the play and arrange its choreography throughout the summer and autumn of 1951.[528] Putting to work several of the personalities from their social circle who had spent time at Black Mountain College, Malina and Beck hired their friend, the dancer Remy Charlip, to both play the role of the "Viper" and choreograph the play. They secured a venue with the help of John Cage, who hoped to use the space at the Cherry Lane Theatre as a performance space and who had planned to schedule prior to the Stein play a performance of a composition by Satie he had found two years prior, called "Vexations," consisting of a short piece played 840 times.[529] And that autumn, they advertised the show to open in December.

From Page to Stage

In reconstructing the details of the Living Theatre's production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, one must rely on very scant documentation. There are no annotated scripts extant, though there is at least one typed script. There is no record of the blocking, no score for Richard Banks's music, and no copy of Paul Johnson's films in the Living

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[528] Judith Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina,* 180.

[529] Ibid., 190. Cage would not pull together a performance of Satie's "Vexations" until 1963. For an account, see Harold Schonberg, "A Long, Long Night (and Day) at the Piano; Satie's 'Vexations' Played 840 Times by Relay Team," *New York Times* (Sept. 11, 1963).

Theatre's materials housed in the Billie Rose Theatre division of the New York Public Library, but one can find promotional photographs and publicity letters. In the normally reliable diaries of Judith Malina, the following note appears: "*Hiatus valde deflendus:* Two lost journals: written during the period November 1 to December 21, 1951. [...] All I have left to record the opening of our theater is a letter from William Carlos Williams."[530] The only other critical effort to reconstruct the production was done by Leslie Durham, and her account has its deficits, as I will explore below. However, there are important details present in the extant archive of the production, and I will explore three of these.

Beck took on the task of designing the set himself. The promotional materials specify the aims he had in his design--an elaborate paneled structure "composed of raw materials"--suggesting "its object is to imply a mechanical structure akin to a brain (without mimicking a brain) and to underline the solid and basic language that Miss Stein used as a medium. The glass, wood, etc. represent the materials composing the cells of a mind and the flashing lights represent the rhythms of thought."[531] This structure stood behind the action of the play, framing the players (sometimes literally, as a production still promoting the company's later productions highlights Mephisto looming over Faustus from an empty panel) and offering the most prominent interpretive decision in the production. While it did not offer a mimetic representation of a brain, it was meant to suggest the structure of a mind in thought, through light and the projection of a film on its surface. The structure foregrounded unfinished materials in its design to emphasize the

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[530] Ibid., 196.
[531] Unspecified archival material, qtd in Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 81.

way that Stein's language foregrounded its own hesitancy toward resolution and completion within the narrative framework of the Faust story. It was a surface of potentials, arrayed in a manner that suggested the contingency of its design, its pliability in the face of changing events.

Beck's promotional note, emphasizing the machinic quality of the mind but resisting mimesis, points an audience toward the mechanical schemata of rationalization. By emphasizing the brain in their set design, Beck and Malina confronted the issue of rationality directly, taking up the libretto's challenge to enlightenment. And much like the libretto would suggest, enlightenment offers the groundwork for visual punning on light and thinking. Rhythmic light played across this structure, rhyming with those moments in the text of the libretto in which we can find the electric lights reacting to the play's action. Stein's text emphasizes this capacity of Faustus's electric lights most directly in the section of the text labeled "The Ballet." For instance, the section begins with direction,

> Doctor Faustus sitting alone surrounded by electric lights.
>
> His dog comes in and says
>
> Thank you.
>
> One of the electric lights goes out and again the dog says
>
> Thank you.
>
> The electric light that went out is replaced by a glow.[532]

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[532] Stein, *Last Operas and Plays*, 91.

The lights frame Faustus, and as he listens, they respond to the address of the dog as Faustus himself might in his processing of the dog's speech. They serve as the technical externalization of Faustus's own responses to events in the play, an offloading of the need for the subject to process the world for himself.

Reviews also suggest that the paneled set was painted by colored light that flashed with a strobe effect when the "the electric lights...get very gay."[533] But both the program guide and the play's reviews indicate that there was little effort made to initiate the audience toward understanding this light in such representational terms. Nothing appears about in the program guide to orient the audience regarding production decisions, and the "Theatre Off-Broadway" feature by *Theatre Arts*'s Aimee Scheff that discussed the production takes Beck at his word, essentially repeating the explanation of the show's publicity letters in her article ("it was designed to express the structure of Faustus's brain").[534] For contrast, the reviewer from the *New York Times* framed his experience at the play as a dive "from the high board," and wrote that the flashing lights of the set "suggest[ed] a gigantic angry pin-ball machine (tilted)."[535] Dennis McDonald, writing in *Billboard*, only suggests of the play that "the real lights are lit up by... a 'light ballet,' which is an electrician's nightmare," offering no indication that the representational content of that "electrician's nightmare" was on his mind.[536]

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[533] Ibid.
[534] Aimee Scheff, "Theatre Off-Broadway," *Theatre Arts* (February, 1952): 96.
[535] J.P.S., "From the High Board," *New York Times* (Dec. 3, 1951): 33.
[536] Dennis McDonald, "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," *Billboard* (Dec. 15, 1951): 46.

Leslie Durham suggests that this absence of mimetic representational content encouraged members of the audience "to participate actively...in the construction of the performance environment and in the production of meaning" and therefore "to resist the temptation to consume passively propagandistic and ideological messages."[537] Durham may be correct that the "abstract visual elements" of the play encouraged "access to perceptual freedoms."[538] But her reading passes over an important component of the company's approach to and interest in Stein, which helps to explain why this production anticipates the discursive framing of experimental works in the following two decades. Such a reading of the play's engagement with the audience, when directed toward claims that the production offered "a new sense of *control* over the forging of *ideas*," reasserts a psychology of art that prioritizes what Paul Goodman had called the "critical consciousness" over "the concentrated sensation," and risks, in its valuing of "control," the reoccupation of the drives by a hostile self.[539]

Goodman was the Living Theatre's first sponsor and wrote the framing essay "Vanguard and Theatre" that appeared in the first pages of the program guide for the group's premiere production as well as those that followed in successive months. In that essay, he suggests that the goals of a vanguard theatre are rooted in effecting "a character-change in the audience, more than all the manifestos can accomplish."[540] However, for Goodman and those who were convinced by his idiosyncratic psychology

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[537] Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 81.
[538] Ibid., 78.
[539] Durham, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, 84 (my emphasis); Goodman, *Gestalt Therapy*, 289.
[540] Paul Goodman, "Vanguard and Theatre," in The Living Theatre, *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (New York: N.p., 1951).

of art, the violence of a self responding to societal imperatives by silencing the creative adjustment arising from the drives (i.e., exerting "control over the forging of ideas") could only hope to reproduce psychological disequilibrium. Meanwhile Malina and Beck, with Goodman as one of the more important interlocutors helping them generate a form of performance that could "remove burdens" for at least a some in their audience, had been working toward a theater that embraced "enacted poetry" and "immediacy." So while Durham discusses the production as having made available "access to perceptual freedoms," one could also argue that the production did far more to provide audiences with an opportunity to immerse themselves in the sensations that played across this brain-structure.

However, if we take Beck at his word that this structure represents a brain, then Durham still falls short of explaining what this sort of externalizing of the subject's processing of the world accomplished. I would suggest that we turn here to the Living Theatre's interest in and anxiety about bureaucratization. As Malina wrote in the Spring prior to the production of *Doctor Faustus*, "there can be a *living* theater only in the work of small groups of people interested neither in effect nor success—except for the successful action." And she makes this argument as the response to a meditation on the bureaucratization of the theater on Broadway and elsewhere, which has led to a situation in which "theater work is so specialized that no one is permitted knowledge of another's activity" and that the only synoptic views of the process are those of the "power-

corrupted director and the nonartist producer."[541] Malina reproduces, here, a lament about specialization that transports the diagnostic work of C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* into the theater, expanding the observations Mills makes regarding the "professions" (composed of what management theorist Peter Drucker would later call "knowledge workers") to include the professional arts. But it's worth looking at the characterization that Mills offers for the social changes occurring under corporate rationalization in the light of the Living Theatre's *Faustus* production.

In his discussion of the pyramidal organization of the massive postwar bureaucracies that housed white-collar work, Mills writes,

> intensive and narrow specialization has replaced self-cultivation and wide knowledge; assistants and sub-professionals perform routine, although often intricate, tasks, while successful professional men become more and more the managerial type. So decisive have such shifts been, in some areas, that it is as if rationality itself had been expropriated from the individual and been located, as a new form of brain power, in the ingenious bureaucracy itself.[542]

Here, Mills suggests that under this sort of pyramidal organization, not only does specialization intervene against the cultivation of self ("has replaced self-cultivation"), a point that in some ways mirrors the emphasis from Goodman's psychotherapy on the need for the "I" of the liberal subject to get out of the self's way, it is "as if rationality

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[541] Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 169.

[542] C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: the American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951/1969). 112.

itself had been expropriated from the individual." While the passive voice speaks to the lack of any single agency behind this expropriation, the language of expropriation emphasizes the transfer of rationality from an individual agency to the impersonal agency of the external bureaucratic structure. The externalization of rationality offers a suggestive rhyme with the set that Beck would produce as the background for *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. And this diagnosis of bureaucracy's effects offers a backdrop for Malina's insistence on "action" (rather than effect) and small size as the necessary components in devising a "*living* theater." If bureaucratic specialization has produced, as one of Mills's reviewers put it, "mass-man incapable of organic action," then we might measure the resistance to that norm by the extent to which a living theater, in Malina's telling, would offer just such action, without regard to effect or success.[543]

This ideal of a theater composed of means without end was clearly on Malina's mind in the choices she made as a director adapting the text itself to the stage. In revisiting the conversations that Malina found influential enough to include in her diaries as the production of *Doctor Faustus* was becoming formalized, the stakes for "successful action" among the Living Theatre's close community begin to materialize. In August, after their well-respected but intimate production of a "Theater in the Room," John

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[543] H.M. Kallen, "The Hollow Men: A Portrait to Ponder," *New York Times* (Sept. 16, 1951): BR3. Much like John Cage (whose interest in Buddhism and other so-called Eastern traditions has been the focus of a great deal of critical attention) and others of the circle of artists and writers associated with the Living Theatre, the Artists' Club, and the many other communities around New York in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Malina had been engaged in a reading of the *Bhagavad Gita* and other ancient religious texts from a variety of traditions. Her investment in the *Bhagavad Gita* arose largely from the importance that the *Gita* had for Mahatma Ghandi, whose pacifism was a model for Malina and other activists, and the ideal of action performed without desire for the fruits of action comes to Malina from Ghandi's reading of Karma Yoga (*The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 174).

Myers, who would earn notoriety as the curator of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and publisher of the New York School poets, advised the Living Theatre against moving to a larger, commercial theater space. Having decided to move forward with the more intimate venue at the urging of the Broadway designer Robert Edmond Jones, Malina and Beck were encouraged by Myers to "strip everything bare. Make it perfect." He opposed this stripped bare approach to commercial theater, which he suggested "is interested in everything but the text" and focused to its detriment on "lights...stars...scenery."[544] Better, Myers suggested, would be to avoid having "actors rave and rant and fall on the ground" or "worry about professionalism," and instead focus on "a perfect representation of the text."[545] This sentiment reappears in the conversations Beck and Malina have with sponsors, like the architect and sculptor Frederick Kiesler, who, Malina writes, "considers the key to production what Johnny Myers considers obligation to the text."[546] Malina writes, too, of her and Beck's increasing distaste for performative gestures in her discussion of other productions that Fall, writing of the premiere performance of the *Schumann Concerto* ballet (choreographed by Bronislawa Nijinska for the Ballet Theatre), "we solace ourselves with the ballet, but the dancers' gestures seem absurd; even Youskevitch and Alonso too forced."[547]

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[544] Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 186.
[545] Ibid.
[546] Ibid., 194.
[547] Ibid., 190. Malina does not specify the performance that they attended, but the date and performers suggest performance. Information for the production is available at the American Ballet Theatre's online archive.

Given these conversations as the context out of which the production emerged, we might look to the way in which its performance was received by its critics to note how this attention to the text, in this case Stein's libretto, was enacted. For example, the critic for *Billboard* highlighted what he called an "approach...fraught with an awesome monotone" among most of the cast.[548] Whereas the critic from *Theatre Arts* suggested that the actors "turned in competent performances capturing the charm of Stein's rhythmic language."[549] In spite of the contradiction in evaluative language, these two observations both note a concerted effort to center the text, rather than the actors' expressions, in the performance. No documentation of the play's choreography, by Remy Charlip, survives, however none of the existing discussion of the performance mentions the actors' movements except to note, as in the *Billboard* review, the apparently stiff tonal quality of the play's action. The emphasis on "rhythm" and monotony implies both a kind of failure of tonal fluency and a sort of formalism suggested by Beck's later reflection on this early period of the Living Theatre's existence, marked as it was by a dependence on verse plays for a repertoire. Beck wrote of verse theater with some anxiety, noting that "we don't know how to do them right...to speak the verse, make it come alive...nor do we know how to make glow the formal structures and theatrical devices of the theatre of verse, that is, a formal theatre, a theatre not of the realist style."[550]

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[548] Dennis McDonald, "Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights," *Billboard* (Dec. 15, 1951): 46.
[549] Aimee Scheff, "Theatre Off-Broadway," *Theatre Arts* (February, 1952): 96.
[550] Beck, "Storming the Barricades," 11.

The artifice and formality that Beck seems to have associated with faithfulness to the text is suggestive of the influence Beck might have drawn from his time in Erwin Piscator's Dramatic Workshop, much as the scaffolded brain structure dominating the set was reminiscent of the design for notable productions of Piscator's, such as his *Hoppla, We're Alive*.[551] Piscator had emphasized the constructedness of theatrical performance, much like his associate Bertolt Brecht, who was becoming known in the US during the 1940s through publications in James Laughlin's *New Directions*. Similar to Brecht's better known theory about epic theatre, Piscator's theory of "objective acting," expanded on by Judith Malina in the recent publication of her *Piscator Notebook*, placed priority on establishing a direct connection with the spectators, unmediated by artifice. Malina situates this "objective" approach, which could be confused with an art that draws attention solely to its medium, against Kandinsky's insight that "the paint was more pertinent to the art than the subject matter."[552] In doing so, she emphasizes what she understood as the "aesthetic political position" that this approach embodied. She highlights Piscator's contribution to Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy's *Actors on Acting* for its attention to what Malina called the "construct" of dramatic fiction. In place of the absorptive performance style prescribed by Stanislavsky and paradigmatic of the dominant "naturalist" style, Piscator encouraged actors to meet the eyes of the spectators:

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[551] The play is by Ernst Toller, and for Piscator's *Hoppla* staging, see *The Routledge Drama Anthology and Sourcebook*, ed. Maggie Gale and John Deeney (New York: Routledge, 2010), 320.
[552] Judith Malina, *The Piscator Notebook* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 149.

"through the directness of that glance a truth establishes itself between the actor and the audience and brings back a vital contact, and a greater reality to the action."[553]

Such a performance style, with its emphasis on interpersonal contact between performer and audience, was intended to emphasize the reality of the situation of performance, to make the theatrical encounter itself present to an audience, over and above an illusory realism confined to the stage. Given that Malina was clearly influenced by Piscator as a student and had hoped to stage a work that successfully prioritizes action without concern for its ends, the appeal of Piscator's method, to the extent that it could be called a method, is clear. And because many of the cast for the Living Theatre's *Doctor Faustus* had received their training in Piscator's workshop, it would have made the direction that much more consistent with the approach to performance Malina knew her actors to be capable of. Critics' attribution of monotony to the performance likely had its origins in a concerted effort to break with the emotional rhythms of naturalistic performance. The company opted instead to highlight the apparatus of the performance itself, leaving actors and text as just the sort of unfinished raw material that dominated Beck's set design.

This emphasis on the apparatus of the performance carried over into one of the only interventions that Beck and Malina made in converting Stein's libretto to a play. While the text of the libretto contains parts intended to be spoken or sung by a chorus, the Living Theater's production made this chorus a much more prominent component of the performance. Its first appearance in their production comes in the first act, when

[553] qtd in Ibid., 150.

following the encounter with Mephisto that opens the play, Faustus sings that he wants only to be left alone by the Boy and the Dog. In the text of Stein's libretto, she has written,

> The dog says
>
> Thank you
>
> but does not look at Faustus
>
> A pause
>
> No words.[554]

However, in transcribing this for the stage, the apparent stage directions, "A pause / No words," have been given voice by the chorus, as acted by a single performer. So during the production, the actor Michael Wright, costumed in a kimono-styled monks-cloth robe which set his role apart from other actors visually, spoke not only choral commentary, as appears often throughout the libretto, but lines such as these, which are oriented toward description of the action itself. This recurs throughout the play, as the chorus figure absorbs and relays much of the stage direction from the libretto's text to the audience. The choice is not only a departure from naturalistic performance, and thereby a means by which to foreground the action of performing over and above illusion, but it is also reflective of the desire to capture as much of Stein's language as possible.

However, when putting aside the appeal of the libretto's language, one last decision that the Living Theatre made in their adaptation of Stein's text needs discussed. Each of the choices that have been introduced so far could be understood in conversation

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[554] Stein, *Last Operas and Plays*, 93.

with the dynamics of relief already present in Stein's work. The brain-wall that dominated the stage both externalized the brain in a manner reminiscent of Mills's figuring of the bureaucratic structure and offered audiences the opportunity to immerse their perception within the non-representational play of light on raw material. The choice to give voice to the apparatus itself and to foreground performance mirrors, in its way, the sort of abdication of authorial responsibility to produce a naturalistic illusion, taking pleasure instead in letting the text speak itself. But most importantly, the Living Theatre production made a decision to frame the libretto's climactic murder in such a way that deflates the force of the violence.

This is all the more of a confusing gesture because of a change in emphasis between Stein's libretto and the typescript for the Living Theatre's performance that pinpoints the narrative and thematic appeal that the libretto held for Beck and Malina: the murder of the dog and boy so that Faustus might enter hell. In Malina's diary, she writes of the claim from Mephisto that in order to go to hell, Faustus could "Kill anything" (which she renders, "kill something"), "what a brave declaration."[555] And in the typescript, the typist has overwritten "Kill" with "KILL," adding force to the line and clarifying the interest that the group had in this facet of Stein's libretto. There is some distance, after all, between the affirmative violence implied by this emphatic "KILL" and the events of the narrative itself.

In Stein's libretto and in the typescript for the Living Theatre's performance, it is not Faustus himself who kills the dog and boy, but the Viper. In Stein's text, this action

[555] Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 187.

reads, "There is a rustle the viper appears and the dog and the boy die."[556] And in the Living Theatre's typescript, this appears in an unspoken parenthesis, not even given voice by the chorus that takes on so much of the other stage direction from the libretto. Instead of foregrounding this moment as textual, as happens with so many of the libretto's other actions, the script for the production actually does naturalize this by asking the actors to play it out with some choreographed violence. While a small choice in a dense play, it is suggestive of the way that the company understood the value of this detail for their moment. We might expect, then, that this would be the pressure point for social critique in the play, particularly given their opposition to the war in Korea and the insistence by Beck and Malina, evidenced in the diaries, that "no one is an isolationist this time...we can't say it's not our battle." For example, in the previous summer, Malina documents their response to a newsreel about losses in Korea while at the movies, writing the scene in present tense: "I accuse the people in the movie house, 'You are crazy to let this happen.' And then Julian cries, 'You are crazy to let them make you kill and destroy and not protest.'"[557] However, the interest of the Living Theatre in the murder by proxy of the boy and dog ultimately highlights the significance that feeling complicit in the far-reaching violence of war held for politically committed artists only through omitting a politically-charged discourse for understanding that complicity.

In the libretto, it is only by his neglect that Faustus takes the life of the boy and the dog. While one could certainly stage the production such that Faustus actually

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[556] Stein, *Last Operas and Plays*, 117.
[557] Malina, *The Diaries of Judith Malina*, 114-117.

controls the viper that kills the boy and the dog through some occult mechanism, Stein's Doctor Faustus makes a more substantial choice within the text when he withholds the care that saved Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. This is not a neglect that the Living Theatre's production framed as passive. Rather, the interest that Malina had in this passage from Stein's libretto suggests that they saw Faustus's actions as affirmative. Against the backdrop of Beck and Malina's pacifist activism, the decision on Faustus's part to reject enlightenment rationality and embrace the possibilities of hell through murder could not merely be understood as a Luceferian descent into a kingdom of night. Rather, Faustus's choice in 1951, just as in 1938, represented an abdication of responsibility both liberating, in its embrace of the flow of desire toward self-negation, and terrible, for the direction that events turn as a result of this abdication.

We can measure the force and availability of this reading of the production by examining the ways in which Beck and Malina worked to advance an alternative interpretation of these events in order to insulate the production against such a reading. In her discussion of the performance in *Theatre Arts*, Amy Scheff suggests the boy and the dog that appear in the Living Theatre's production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* were meant to be understood symbolically, inseparable from Faustus himself. Even Mephisto and Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel are brought into this vortex of identity, as Scheff writes that "the other characters, Mephisto...Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel...the Little Boy who represents Faustus's youth, and the Dog, symbolizing social

amenities, were all projections of Faustus illustrating his struggle."[558] While it's unclear how much of this interpretation comes from Scheff herself and how much derives from her interactions with Beck and Malina (whose promotional materials steer much of the rest of Scheff's discussion of the performance), the gap between this reading of the performance and the language of Stein's libretto, bare as it is of such interpretive guidance, is striking.

A Transitional Experiment

One explanation for including an interpretation of the play that makes it a kind of allegory about the struggle to manufacture a resilient self—killing off "social amenities" and one's youthful ignorance to embrace the free choice of the will, for example—is that Beck and Malina were earnest in promoting it. After all, if the ultimate goal was to help the audience "remove burdens," then the killing of these characters, rendered now only as projections of Faustus's psyche, could serve as a model for eliminating these restricting forces and embracing the individual will. Such a reading of the play would fit it well within the standard narrative of postwar critique's turn toward culture and psychology and away from society. But it would also neglect the way that, in Stein's libretto, going to Hell is figured as both a kind of liberation for the world-weary Doctor and an outcome that Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is not interested in sharing. Put another way, Stein's libretto clearly asks for the sin of Doctor Faustus to be understood as resulting

[558] Aimee Scheff, "Theatre Off-Broadway," *Theatre Arts* (February, 1952): 96.

from the influence of the devil. It is not a heroic gesture, and actually comes about through Faustus's failure to intervene.

So if the promotion of this reading by Beck and Malina leads to explanations that are not entirely coherent, it makes sense to look at reasons that they may have preferred that interpretation to others, and to touch on the implications of that preference. Malina in particular was working through her disappointment in audience complicity in the Living Theatre's early productions, foregrounding the importance of the challenges to the audience for its failure to intervene that concluded Goodman's tragedy, *Faustina*, performed six months after *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*. The audience challenge in that play is ultimately about rejecting the space of performance as representational and therefore artificial; in a melodramatic gesture, the character Isis comes out and condemns the audience for sitting idly by and watching while such terrible things happen. It mirrors Beck and Malina's experience in the movie theater in 1950, haranguing cinemagoers about their shared guilt for the Korean War. By contrast the complicity dramatized in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* is far more complicated, because instead of calling for a generalizable responsibility, it involves the direct choice to take a life by proxy, but this choice is one that brings about the negative outcome that the play's protagonist perversely desires.

If the Living Theatre's audience was to see itself in Doctor Faustus, by way of the interpretation offered through Amy Scheff's review, then the play actually requires the conversion of the boy and dog, the objects of that violence, into phantasmatic projections of the Doctor's psyche. Otherwise, the triumph of the self comes to seem less like relief

from the demands society and upbringing place on the subject and more like a sinner smirking over the abdication of political responsibility for the war's dead. Essentially, the two interpretive outcomes depend on the extent to which the audience is willing or able to produce the appropriate symbols in their viewing of the play, and here as elsewhere, Beck and Malina offered no guidance to their audience through the framing essays of their program. So in guiding the *ex post facto* reception of a production that stood at the forefront of an untested new endeavor, one which they hoped would offer a sustainable venue for poetic theater, they chose to resolve any difficulties by projecting symbols of individual will over the whole. But the performance itself, absent these projections, offered its audience a presentation without this foreclosure. So like a fugitive, the act of killing rears its head to cast blame in the direction of the audience, those whose sin has been to kill by neglect, the complicit. In the face of this accusation, the unburdening of relief is revealed as devastatingly compromised: bringing about the release from the demands of an oppressive subjectivity, such relief is bought at the expense of the emancipatory promise of critique and engagement.

The Living Theatre's *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, then, should be understood as one of the first, and as a representative, experiment in turning the confrontation between aesthetic experience and enlightenment rationality toward more openly political ends in the years following the Second World War. In offering a vision that linked the bureaucratic division of labor to complicity with violence, Beck and Malina called attention to the critique of enlightenment held within Stein's libretto. However, their effort also drew a circle around the way that, to draw one final line from

Horkheimer and Adorno's often-poetic critique, "the proscribing of superstition has always signified not only the progress of domination but also its exposure."[559] Their decisions surrounding the premiere performance for their theater group dramatized the abandonment of enlightenment as both a relief from burdensome subjectivity and a descent into a darkness in which actual political domination remains clouded over and unexposed.

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[559] Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 31.

Conclusion - Survival and Method

The project of this dissertation developed alongside my own realization of the ironic association of the good life with shame in one's survival. The research proceeded through my own anxiety about health, about health care specifically, in the mirror of my own political despair and personal grief. In October of 2012, nine days after my wife had given birth to her, my daughter was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis through a newborn screening test. When we got the phone call from her pediatrician, it was four weeks before a presidential election, and although we did not realize it at the time, in the midst of the major North American conference (NACFC) for researchers, industry, and the physicians that treat people with cystic fibrosis (CF). As we learned later, there was widespread celebration at that year's NACFC that a new drug, ivacaftor, had been approved to treat a small sub-population of people with CF, partially normalizing cellular function. It was the first in a new class of drugs that modulate the production of the protein that is dysfunctional in people with CF.

The drug made news elsewhere for its $300,000/year cost to payors. When we discussed the development of the drug through clinical trials and initial marketing with our daughter's physician, he explained that if it were not for the very specific balance provided by the Affordable Care Act, eliminating lifetime benefit caps and ensuring coverage for pre-existing conditions, but maintaining a system of private insurance, it had not been clear that the drug had a path to market. It has taken additional months and years for each new iteration of this new class of drugs to be paid for by countries that do not have the same extensive system of private health insurance, but my daughter was able to

begin taking a medicine in this new class of drugs within a month of its approval as safe by the FDA. We are acutely aware that our friends in the community of people affected by CF in the United Kingdom and Australia have not been able to convince payors that the drug is cost-effective.

From the first months of my daughter's life, I have had a deep sense of her survival as enmeshed with a deeply exploitative style of American capitalism. Through October 2012, I watched the presidential debates anxious at the prospect that Mitt Romney might win the election and make good on promises to facilitate the repeal of the Affordable Care Act and the restructuring of Medicaid. I felt shame and cognitive dissonance at my investment in the incrementalism of the ACA, with its concessions to industry and maintenance of an inequitable system. It was a terrible feeling to be the recipient of so much good and awful luck, for the timing of things to be so hopeful for my family, only to have that hope threatened from one perspective and made shameful from another.

That Fall, I had begun a different dissertation project than this became. I was trying to think through how changes in the kinds of work prevalent in the US had impacted poetics, and in the course of research on a different vector altogether, I came across George Elliott's 1949 story, "The NRACP." Elliott's short fiction had initially gained my interest for its epistolary form and its thematic investment in bureaucratic military censorship. However, what resonated with me for the better part of a year was the narrator's perseveration at the story's end, which he calls a "lullaby": "I have eaten human flesh, my wife is going to have a baby; I have eaten human flesh, my wife is going

to have a baby." Elliott's narrator had found domestic satisfaction after sacrificing his dimly realized political ideals for the security of work as a censor for a secret concentration camp in the American southwest. His greatest friend in the bureaucracy commits suicide after discovering the reality of the camp. After coming to that same realization, that the masses of African Americans relocated there were being murdered and processed into meat for the workers, Elliott's narrator rationalizes his persistence in the bureaucracy at least in part through the security that this labor earns for his child's future. His lullaby is the conclusion to the story, but also a conversion of the narrator to political acquiescence in the interest of personal security.

Compiling an archive around Elliott's story, and exploring a number of other understudied literary figures of the 1940s, I began to notice how the decade that John Berryman had christened the survival years was marked by representations of the good life over these years—after the political realisms of the 1930s and before a 1950s marked by enclosure and fugitivity—differed from those narratives that would permeate culture in the following decade. Although a good life of equable security that William Whyte would find idealized in the 1950s was certainly present as a lure for the writers whose work I read, it was tempered by a persistent sense of shame—the "anguish" at not living more closely to one's principles described by Leslie Fiedler in his response to a 1948 *Partisan Review* questionnaire about the state of literature. It was an anguish that I found familiar in ways that I was not, at that time, able to articulate fully, other than through the horrible metaphor of Elliott's "lullaby." But the dissertation project that I had intended to make an intervention in poetics began to encompass the poetics of a broader swath of

culture. The personal nature of my engagement with the works of writers appearing in journals like *Partisan Review*, *politics*, *New Road*, *Retort*, *Now*, and *Why?/Resistance* throughout the late 1930s and 1940s suggested the subterranean persistence of the concerns of a neglected decade in my own.

As James Gifford notes in his study of "personalist" writers bridging the generational gap between 1930 and 1950, "between Auden and the Beat Generation…our literary history misses a key contribution."[560] This key contribution is a "transformation of writing in English that occurred immediately prior to and during the war years, and in reaction to which much 1950s and 1960s writing developed."[561] Throughout this project, I have agreed with Gifford's broad claim, arguing that this transformation was guided by an anti-authoritarianism—frequently also an intensely argued pacifism—that rejected not only the state, but also the lures of political action. Where representations of a good life unifying theory and practice rose out of these years, the practices necessary to sustain that good life were frequently visible only through the cracks between false choices—writers opting out of engagement with existing socialist systems, democracies, and fascism (each offering the violence of the state). Such practices might be identified in communities like the Woodstock group associated with *Retort*, or even the CO community of Camp Angel in Oregon. But even these approaches were vulnerable to criticism as irresponsible because disengaged, or as too intentional, authoritarian because planned.

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[560] James Gifford, *Personal Modernisms: Anarchist Networks and the Later Avant-Gardes* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2014), xvi.
[561] ibid.

While some individuals, such as Scott and Helen Nearing, found a balance for their lives that allowed them to live sanely in a troubled world, as the subtitle to their 1954 memoir of life as homesteaders asserted, for far more writers and intellectuals, resistance was more easily achieved than refusal. The position of "resistance" or "opposition" provided a different set of opportunities for engagement with the state, with a different sort of economic security, and with the forms of wartime and postwar society, while still opting out of organized political action.

To the writers of the 1940s, their moment represented an impasse, a situation. As I've argued in adopting Lauren Berlant's use of the term, it was a "situation" in which "an animated and animating suspension…forces itself on consciousness, that produces the sense of something in the present that may become an event," and which carried a decisively antisovereign effect.[562] From the midst of the situation of the 1940s, revolution was a heroic form to be mistrusted, but to embrace private resistance acknowledged and committed one to the total nature of authoritarianism, even within existing democracy. That being said, such private resistance also offered a framework to "deny oneself the ideological misuse of one's own existence," even if that required one, citing again the memorable phrase from Adorno's *Minima Moralia,* "to conduct oneself in private as modestly, unobtrusively and unpretentiously as is required…by the shame of having air to breathe in hell."[563] So the texts that my dissertation focuses its attention on are those that dwell upon the problematic of balancing the good life of security, purchased through

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[562] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 5.
[563] Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life,* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (New York: Verso Books, 1951/2005), 27-28.

the acceptance of authoritarianism, against the political and ethical responsibilities of a good life in which theory and practice are unified.

Methodologically, I have approached all of these texts first through an analysis of the discursive networks in which these writers were enmeshed. I have followed authors' leads where they chose not to differentiate in rhetorical effect between critical and creative work, often repeating passages between iterations of varying form (a paragraph repeated with some small change between a critical essay and a novel, for instance). In the course of such flattening of generic distinctions, I have attempted to tarry in both awareness and clarity about the risks of such a leveling. Although such an approach can result in interpretive forcing, it also has helped to reveal in places the forgotten politics and productivity of literary works from a period often overlooked in the periodization of the twentieth century.

In keeping with an emphasis on recovering what has been forgotten, I have embraced under-studied authors whose work was nonetheless central to the discourse of the period. However, I have also analyzed the reception of those texts that have been more fully received, and I engage with literary works through a phenomenological lens in several places, mindful of the ways that such an effort was revised in political terms throughout the period that I'm studying. While I might generalize to say that my approach draws from cultural materialism, I have been heterodox in my efforts to draw on the interpretive method that will gain the most purchase for my purposes.

There are questions that remain to be asked of this argument and material, and which will form a tentative conclusion to this project. The first is how the texts and

concerns I’ve identified in these 1940s networks might be complicated by texts that highlight the way that the discourses I’ve isolated have blinded themselves to their gendered and racialized character. The writing passing back and forth through the pages of anti-authoritarian journals was certainly clear about the challenges posed by American racism in particular, but the self-consciously literary works that appeared in their pages were largely whitewashed and representative of a very specific set of class concerns. The writing of Alex Comfort presents a significant challenge to a discourse gendered in strikingly masculine terms. The gendered reception and appeal of Gertrude Stein’s *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights*, though already well-studied, might complicate and complement the argument of the dissertation when more fully foregrounded.

The second question I might ask of this material and project has to do with the position this history takes toward other periodizations of the midcentury, or how it positions itself toward recent efforts at the recovery of 20th century anarchist thought. A constructive inquiry may be made along the line of the ways that the New Criticism emerged in conversation with anarchists engaged in the project of reimagining the politics of culture. Or, to give color to a history only sketched in recent recovery efforts, how the movement into anarchist and other radical intentional communities in the 1940s constituted not only a specific casting of the problem of how to live the good life, but also a significant but missing step toward the studies of vanguardist artistic production in New York and California in the 1950s. Such work has already proposed a reconsideration of the way that the anthologization of 20th century American and British literature has frequently de-emphasized the role of communities drawn along the lines of particular

challenges to the good life narratives of the 1950s. To respond more explicitly to that reconstruction effort might activate a different constellation of texts, or throw the compromises of survival into a different sort of relief.

The last question I might ask of this material and project connects more explicitly to the familiar affects and emotions brought out in my initial engagement with "The NRACP." The challenges posed to the Left after the financial crisis of 2008 and the rise of authoritarian politics in the years since have reinvigorated the same discursive coordinates that were traversed by the writers I discuss in the pages above. Whether to refuse political action in response to the compromises of such engagement remains a living question, and the arguments playing out across small magazines in the 1940s about compromise and power can be made to provide some contribution to the answer that question receives. To refuse participation in a lesser of two evils politics today—loudly and entirely, as did the writers whose convictions I find myself most drawn toward in the 1940s—seems an embrace of utopian thinking that I cannot fathom; to compromise seems like a more limited betrayal. But it is a betrayal marked with an anguish that would be familiar to the writers whose work occupies the pages above.

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