

Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America

by

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## INTRODUCTION

### The Critical Condition of Depression-era Poetry

*And what age has not thought itself at the death-bed of poetry?*  
—Francis Gummere, *Democracy and Poetry* (1911)

On December 10, 1929, poet and publisher Harry Crosby was found dead in a New York studio with his lover Josephine Rotch Bigelow. The event garnered attention for a moment: daily newspapers speculated about a suicide compact, the upper-crust Boston community where Crosby was born was scandalized, and fellow artists offered tributes both ridiculous and heartfelt (*Exile's Return* 283-84). But all was just as quickly forgotten, and Crosby—that rake who epitomized the disillusionments of the Lost Generation and the excesses of the Roaring Twenties—fell into the dusty vault of literary history as the stock market faded to black. As Malcolm Cowley recounts in *Exile's Return: A Literary Odyssey of the 1920s* (1934), Crosby's death was “crowded out by other news” as stocks continued to fall.<sup>1</sup>

Cowley suggests that the story of Crosby's suicide “carries us outside his [Crosby's] own story, that of a minor poet, into the history of an era about to end” (273). Indeed, Crosby's lavish bohemian lifestyle was at variance with the changes in everyday

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<sup>1</sup> In 1951, Cowley revised *Exile's Return* to downplay his political conclusions; this is the edition I refer to here.

life being brought on by the Wall Street Crash. Panic be damned, Crosby bought and sold stocks only to “make up for certain past extravagances” and so that he might “enjoy life” while he could. One night in 1929, he drunkenly cabled his father, demanding: “Please sell \$10,000 worth of stock. We have decided to live a mad and extravagant life.” When his father said no, Crosby reiterated his refusal to “take the question of money seriously” because “for the poet there is love and there is death and infinity and for other things to assume vital importance is out of the question” (*Exile’s Return* 280). But by that time, major historical and aesthetic shifts were underway. The realities of economic crisis changed how upper- and middle-class intellectuals like Crosby could live and, at the same time, prompted a re-conceptualization of art’s relationship to those very realities. Beyond the fact that his lifestyle was too extravagant for hard times, Crosby’s belief in the “hallucination of the word” and his endorsement of the dictum, “plain reader be damned,” seemed puerile, at best, given the increasing visibility of the impoverished masses and the felt need to incite them to political action. For Depression-era poets, there would be more than love and death and infinity. There would be scarcity and strikes and May Day parades.

It was for this reason that Cowley suggests that Crosby had died “at the right time,” for as the economic downturn continued:

... a new conception of art was replacing the idea that it was something purposeless, useless, wholly individual and forever opposed to the stupid world. The artist and his art has once more become a part of the world, produced by and perhaps affecting it; they had returned toward their earlier and indispensable task of revealing its values and making it more human.

But the changes in aesthetic ideals and in manners of life were merely the symptoms of a vaster change. Behind the religion of art was the social system that made it possible—the system that encouraged false notions of success and a mistaken form of reaction against them; the system that uprooted artists and workers from their homes, that produced the Wall Street boom and financed the



middle-class migration to Europe. Now the system itself was threshing about in convulsions like those of the dying. A financially bankrupt world had entered the age of putsches and purges, of revolutions and counterrevolutions. Harry Crosby, dead, had thus become a symbol of change. It was not so much that he had chosen the moment for suicide as rather that in his disorganized frenzy the moment had chosen him. In spite of himself he had died at the right time. (287-88)

Perhaps, too, when Hart Crane leapt to his death 275 miles off the coast of Havana in 1932 he died “at the right time”: plunging into the Gulf of Mexico as “[t]he Great Depression had quashed the little magazine culture that had fostered literary innovation” and put poets like Crane who were of the “Eliot-Pound-Williams cohort” in financial distress (*Hart Crane: After His Lights* 2). While suggesting that Crosby and Crane died at the “right time” runs the risk of merely caricaturing literary figures and moments that were, of course, much more complexly related, for better or for worse, both poets became symbolic figures at the moments of their deaths. The bloodstains on Crosby’s silk sheets marked the end of extravagant bohemianism, and Crane’s sunken skull (as Walter Lowenfels imagined it) held “the fractures of the world” and “nightmares of our time” at the bottom of the ocean while “stocks are moving” and “states are building” (21). The deaths of the two poets signal the end of an age, and they prompt a narration of broader literary and historical transformations—of the death of a way of life as well as a horizon of aesthetic possibilities.

“Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression in Depression America” begins where *Exile’s Return* ends: at the onset of the Great Depression and at the presumed deathbed of an art form. Reckoning with the complex historical, cultural, and aesthetic transitions happening in the wake of the 1929 stock market crash, Cowley loads Crosby’s (and, more subtly, Crane’s) suicide with symbolic importance, reducing the “vast changes” in “aesthetic ideals” and in the “social system that made them possible” to a

straightforward narrative of life and death. By treating the death of a poet as tantamount to the death of a set of ideas about poetry, the close of Cowley's book exemplifies how, during the 1930s, writers made sense of the state of U.S. poetry—and attempted to re-conceptualize its forms and functions—through an imagination of its death. In *Exile's Return*, for example, the literal death of a poet becomes symbolic for the figurative death of a condition for poetry as well as the social order that had sustained it. That is, Cowley suggests the death of early-twentieth-century modernist conceptions of poetry, and he outlines how, in the 30s, poetry takes on a “new life” by renewing its connection to the social world.

Cowley's life-and-death narrative is but one example among many. As I trace in what follows, in the 30s, facing the vast transformations brought on by the historic events of the Depression and fascism, a diverse range of poets and critics imagined that poetry was dead. Such imaginations of poetry's death took various forms and held multiple meanings, as artists grappled with the problem of poetry's role in processes of historical change as well as contemporary social life. On one hand, the increased predominance of politically committed writing during the 30s caused conservative critics and traditionalists to fear the end of poetry, and they claimed that the art was in danger of being reduced to mere propaganda. On the other hand, poetry, especially as modernists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound (and, to some extent, Crosby and Crane) had shaped it, was increasingly seen as the refuse of the crumbling capitalist system and a defunct bourgeois literary order. Its associations with high culture and individual achievement—or, perhaps even worse, the early-twentieth-century incarnation of the poet- genius who glowed with “an aura of illegible authority” (Perelman 1)—were antithetical to the

realities of breadlines and union meeting halls, and so its death was something to be celebrated.

Imagining poetry as dead enabled politically committed writers, especially, to imagine new futures for the art form via its rebirth. Thus, despite the grim, yet pervasive, images of its death, poetry was actually on the rise in the 30s: renewing its engagement with the social as it attempted to articulate the despairs and hopes of a world in transition. That the Depression era marks a critical turning point for understanding poetry's social function has not been lost on literary scholars. As Cary Nelson remarks in his influential *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory*, "the wide dissemination of political poetry in the 1930s substantially redefined the cultural function of poetry, the cultural space it occupied, and its relation to all the other discourses of the day" (125-26). And yet, in the quest to prove the viability of popular poetics, to restore to view forgotten poets and their works, and to deconstruct binaries opposing the traditional and the modern, most scholarship on Depression-era poetry has taken for granted that the category "poetry" is a more or less stable one. In such studies, one finds a principle at the heart of poetry studies today: a relentless quest to pluralize "poetry" into "poetries" in order to maintain its distinctive humanism (across genres both populist and elite).<sup>2</sup> Attempting to counter W.H. Auden's oft-cited (and just as often misused) claim that "poetry makes nothing happen," the question of what poetry was, and thus made happen, at different times and in different place remains unanswered.

Through an examination of Depression-era narratives of poetry's death and life, "Red or Dead" suggests quite the opposite. Surveying a wide range of poems, critical

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the Heidi R. Bean, Mike Chasar, and Adelaide Morris's introduction to a special issue of the *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* on "Poetries" and Maria Damon's recent monograph *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries* cited above.

essays, editorials, public debates, and archival materials, my project evidences a pervasive anxiety in the 30s about what forms poetry should take and, in consequence, the roles that it might play at a time of wide-scale economic crisis and political upheaval. But it also does more than offer symptomatic readings of images or narratives of poetry's life and death. I take seriously the suggestion that poetry died. That is, I find that, at a historical crossroads, there is a moment in which poetry does not exist in conceptual form, as its meanings and uses are being worked out.

As my opening epigraph suggests, claims that U.S. poetry is on its deathbed are commonplace, appearing in various forms across the twentieth-century. Interrogating this commonplace, I argue that the conceptual framework of poetry's life and death should be read as a symbolic response to specific literary and historical crises. Poetry's death is no mere "hoax" (Bean, Chasar, and Morris 3). Rather, it signals a productive disruption, one that opens a discursive space for imagining poetry's utopian functions. As each of my chapters attends to, albeit in different ways, the death of poetry in the 30s signaled the death of bourgeois individualism and, with hope, the creation of a community that would, to borrow from a 1936 poem by Genevieve Taggard, "sing" with the voice of a plural "you."

### **From Dead Poetry to Red Poetry**

While "Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America" considers a wide sweep of poetry from the interwar period, it focuses especially on the canalization of U.S. radical movements into the Communist (in the early thirties) and Popular Front (in the

later thirties) movements.<sup>3</sup> During the 30s, the political urgencies attending the widespread economic crisis at home and the buildup to the Second World War abroad, lead to a consolidation of Left movements that heavily influenced poetic production—in terms of both personal commitments that affected individual compositions and broader movements that shifted networks of publication, circulation, and exchange.

“Go Left, Young Writers!” Communist literary critic and *New Masses* editor Mike Gold commanded in 1929, urging: “The best and newest thing a young writer can do now in America, if he has the vigor and the guts, is to go Leftward.” And by “Leftward” he did not mean “the temperamental bohemian left, the stale old Paris posing, the professional poetizing, etc”; rather, he meant “a knowledge of working class life in America gained from first hand contacts, and a hard precise philosophy of 1929 based on economics, not verbalisms” (3). Many 30s poets, in various ways, heeded Gold’s call to “Go Left.” And while many politically committed artists never officially joined the Communist Party, CPUSA-sponsored institutions like the John Reed Clubs and the *New Masses* gained a wide influence. As Alan Wald explains: “Communist institutions, ideology, and committed cadres ‘gave voice’ in variously effective ways ... to a large number of diverse writers radicalized by the inequities of capitalism” (*Writing from the Left* 71). Even though most of the writers and periodicals I study were affiliated with the CPUSA in some way (Harriet Monroe being the major exception), my focus is not on the literary ideologies of the Party at the time. Nor do I attempt to define the contours of “proletarian” or “revolutionary” literature. Rather, I am concerned with how what

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<sup>3</sup> In his introduction to the Morningside Edition of Daniel Aaron’s path-breaking 1961 study *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism* (New York: Columbia UP, 1992), Alan Wald emphasizes Aaron’s argument that: “the Depression and the Communist Party did not *create* literary radicalism; it *focused* and *canalized* an indigenous tradition that had, and has, its own roots and *raison d’etre* (xvi).

Michael Denning defines as the Popular Front “structure of feeling”—a shared commitment to working class solidarity that was anti-capitalist, anti-racist, anti-fascist, and anti-imperialist—is dialectically related to anxieties about poetry’s definition and its social function (*The Cultural Front* 26).

Even if only considering literary production, the 30s earns the moniker “red decade.” As *New Masses* co-editor Stanley Burnshaw wrote in his review of the “Revolutionary Literature of 1934”: “Before 1934 it required some understanding of literary and social processes to recognize the promise of revolutionary literature, but now even a daily book reviewer has to blindfold his eyes to ignore its achievements and potentialities” (36). However, as Denning has pointed out, “[t]o name a period—the ‘depression,’ the ‘thirties,’ the ‘New Deal,’ the ‘age of Roosevelt,’ ‘modernism,’ the ‘streamlined years,’ the ‘age of the CIO’—is already to argue about it” (*The Cultural Front* 21). While Denning’s initial quibbles are with how period boundaries are determined, my concerns with the poetry of the era are much more qualitative. In *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968*, John Lowney explains that “1930s poetry contests the social role that poetry can and should play,” and he describes how the stark realities of the Depression caused a “crisis of representation” for artists. Politically committed poets, especially, worked “to develop new formal strategies to comprehend at once the elusive promise of revolutionary change and the disorienting disruption of cultural continuity” (2-3).

Lowney is certainly not wrong in his assessments, but his characterization of Depression-era poetry might suit any number of literary-historical periods. What is more compelling to me is how the historical and political events of the 30s effected a crisis in

the category of “poetry” and how, in consequence, that category was re-constellated. While the influence of Old Left political and cultural formations extends beyond the Depression, the 1930s is a crucial moment for understanding not just the history of poetry, but also the roles that poetry plays in understandings of historical change. The perceived failure of capitalism (that is, capitalism’s inability to sustain itself) was a part of the social realities of the 1930s and, as a result, Left cultural workers were able to respond on a grand scale to crises that had been sustained over a period of years. This sense of crisis allowed the Left to emerge as a force in unprecedented ways. Moreover, as a transitional period between the World Wars and in U.S. international policy, a deep knowledge of 1930s poetic productions has implications for understanding poetry’s relationship to global formations.

Especially relevant, at least in terms of the history of poetic forms, is the history of the “lyricization” of poetry—that is, the process whereby “the stipulative functions of particular [poetic] genres” were “collapsed into one big idea of poems as lyrics” (“Who Reads Poetry?” 183). The poetic production of the 30s Left is crucial to understanding this process of “lyricization.” First, many Depression-era poets did not write lyrics, trying their hand at a range of popular verse genres so that they might speak with the voice of the impoverished masses and incite them to political action. And second, conventional views of the lyric subject were counter to the Left’s vision of a revolutionary collective, and so they attempted to reform the lyric from within in order to imagine, and perhaps constitute, a new social order.

Over the course of four chapters, I demonstrate how the development of Left poetics during the 1930s cuts across various political and literary registers and, therefore,

offers a historical means to formulate and explore important questions pertaining to the forms of poetry and its social function. Examining debates about poetry's life and death on the Left, I relate anxieties about poetry to specific cultural and literary problematics, including: the tension between modernist aesthetics and Left verse culture, the crisis of representation sparked by the rise of documentary forms, debates about poetry's capacity to represent political communities and their potential for utopian coordination, and the place of art in efforts to rethink global networks. While literary historians of the Great Depression have addressed these topics in various ways, with the exception of studies of canonical "late modernists," very few have given attention to the poetic culture of the era. Even as scholarship on the early-twentieth-century U.S. literary Left has continued to flourish, Left poetics has garnered limited consideration.<sup>4</sup> For instance, Denning's oft-cited tome, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth-Century*, which discusses 1930s literary and cultural artifacts from John Dos Passos's

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<sup>4</sup> In the past two decades, a number of monographs have reinvigorated the study of the 1930s. See especially: Rita Barnard, *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (1995); Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture* (1998); Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (1993); Andrew Hemingway, *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956* (2002); Walter Kalaidjian, *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (1993); Bill V. Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935-46* (1999); Paula Rabinowitz, *Labor and Desire: Women's Revolutionary Fiction in Depression America* (1991) and *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary* (1994); Alan Wald, *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Magnan* (1983), *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (1987), *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (2002), and *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (2007). While, as I detail below, there is still a good deal of work to be done in Left poetry studies, a significant foundation has been laid by such studies as: Nancy Berke, *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (2002); Milton Cohen, *Beleagured Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams in the 1930s* (2011); Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material World* (1997); Alan Filreis, *Modernism from Right to Left: Wallace Stevens, The Thirties, and Literary Radicalism* (1994) and *Counter-Revolution of the Word: The Conservative Attack on Modern Poetry, 1945-1960* (2008); John Lowney, *History, Memory, and the Literary Left, 1935-1958* (2006); Cary Nelson, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1989) and *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (2001); James Edward Smethurst, *The New Red Negro: The Literary Left and African American Writing, 1930-1944* (1999); and Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the Wars* (2001).



*U.S.A.* trilogy to Walt Disney cartoons, pays little to no attention to the decade's poetic production. In fact, Denning goes so far as to title a section of his book "The People, Yes?"—but he never makes mention of the widely read Popular Front poem by Carl Sandburg that surely inspired it.

This is not to say that 1930s Left poetry has been ignored altogether. The publication of Alan Wald's *The Revolutionary Imagination: The Poetry and Politics of John Wheelwright and Sherry Mangan* (1983) and Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* (1989) not only restored to critical view previously overlooked Left-wing poets but, more importantly, used a sustained focus on Left writers both to reveal the forces shaping critical views of literary periods and aesthetic movements and to establish new paradigms for understanding them. Combined with the fact that difficult to access Left poetry was made more easily available in anthologies such as Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz's *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930-1940* (1987), Wald's and Nelson's monographs inspired a number of new studies that critically reconsidered the relationships between Left poetics and predominant literary movements.

Writing about the literary-historical repression of politically committed poetry, Nelson writes in *Repression and Recovery* that:

[t]he myth that has facilitated the elimination of much of this poetry from our cultural memory holds that the resulting literature was always formally conservative, thematically monochromatic, and rhetorically wooden. My argument here is that, to the contrary, this diverse and highly interactive period of political poetry is one of the real treasures of our literary heritage. Even at the time the sheer variety of socially engaged poetry astounded writers on the Left. (102)

Nearly twenty years after Nelson's influential book, Charles Altieri exemplifies his point, framing the 1930s as a decade of "disappointment" after the 1920s "liberation" of writers by formal experiment (*The Art of Twentieth-Century American Poetry* 3). Most studies of Left poetry, while they resist Altieri's simple conclusions about the differences between 1920s and 1930s poetries, also fail to further complicate Nelson's arguments. Some such studies, notably Nancy Berke's *Women Poets on the Left: Lola Ridge, Genevieve Taggard, Margaret Walker* (2001) and Michael Thurston's *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars* (2001), bluntly claim to "add to and flesh out" previous recovery work through sustained attention to specific poets (Thurston 16).

In recent years, scholars of twentieth-century poetry have countered claims like Altieri's, illuminating the complex ways that the aesthetics emerging from the Communist and Popular Front Left merged with and diverged from modernism.<sup>5</sup> Even though in his recent *Beleagured Poets and Leftist Critics: Stevens, Cummings, Frost, and Williams in the 1930s* (2011) Milton A. Cohen bluntly states that the 'thirties was a time when, "Modernism is out; proletarian literature is in" (1), as scholars such as Lowney, Nelson, Wald, Alan Filreis, Barbary Foley, Walter Kalaidjian, James Edward Smethurst, and William J. Maxwell have shown, the divide between the two movements is not so cut-and-dry. As Paula Rabinowitz has aptly demonstrated, the "many and proliferating modernisms" emerging from recent critical studies "relocate modernism onto American soil with, in Michael Denning's terms, a 'plebeian' flavor" so that "modernism is reinvigorated through the stirring figure of working-class solidarity" with "[t]he Depression and fascism forming its background" (*Black and White and Noir* 6).

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<sup>5</sup> See especially the works cited above by Filreis and Wald

However, it is not my intention in this project to add another modernism to the list. Rather, I hope to put debates about modernism and literary radicalism on a different ground. From a historical standpoint, the felt sense of a divide between modernism and other potentials for revolutionary poetry was a very real one. From our current critical standpoint, while proliferating new modernisms might provide useful critical lenses for interrogating twentieth-century literature, such a strategy also runs the risk of avoiding deep antagonisms through addition. The U.S. Left reconfigured—perhaps even, as Rabinowitz and Denning suggest, reinvented—modernism on American soil. But Left artists also re-encountered continuing problems for poetry and, by announcing that it was dead, they idealized its cultural work. Considering such an idealization enables a literary-historical re-examination of the function of Left poetry—both apart from and in relation to modernism—and it provides a means to interrogate the very category of poetry itself.

The literary-historical narrative that reads all U.S. poetry vis-à-vis the presumed triumph of modernism has, no doubt, obscured much of the literary Left's poetic production. In his study of 30s Left poetry, *Making Something Happen*, Thurston attempts to shift evaluative schematics for reading U.S. poetry in order to reveal the politics behind different aesthetics. According to him, the “partisan political poetry” he analyzes in his study “invites us to reflect not only on how we evaluate poems but also on what we value in poems and, on that basis, what kind of poems we value” (37). He aims to “denaturalize” tacit assumptions commonly used to evaluate poetry as well as to change criteria for evaluation by changing reading habits (38-9). Such a focus largely considers contemporary evaluative practices, namely the ways in which the rise of New Criticism and Cold War anticommunism obscured the achievements of thirties Left poets.

While this approach has its merits, it also tends to occlude the more nuanced historical landscape where the politics of form were debated and determined.

In “Red or Dead,” I take a different approach. Rather than focus on the evaluative criteria that has governed the reception of politically committed poetry, I analyze the very historical conceptions of Left poets’ ideas about political art. While studies in the vein of Thurston’s might provide a new means to consider the politics of form and, to some extent, the hidden politics of poetry criticism, such studies also treat the category “poetry” as a stable one, and they often rely on easy distinctions between traditional and avant-garde poetics. The wager of my dissertation is that exploring the multiple valences of “death of poetry” rhetoric, especially as Left poets used it, leads to a re-conceptualization of the category of poetry, itself. The pervasive notion that, in the 1930s, poetry might—indeed, should—die marks a shift in discourses about the category of poetry. It reveals the ways that poetry began to be put to different uses at a moment of economic crisis and political upheaval.

Thus, the phrase “states of poetry” in my title is meant to evoke multiple interpretive valences. On one level, the noun “states” plays on the idea that the state of poetry—both its critical predicament and its ontological state (i.e., whether it was dead or alive)—was continually in question during the interwar period. On another level, the phrase refers to the fact that poetry’s cultural status was up for grabs, as Left poets debated if poetry was the dreck of high culture or the language of revolution. And finally, because the actual “state” of poetry during the 1930s was unstable—occupying a liminal space between its (figurative) death and life—my title plays on the notion that re-

imagining poetry's definitions and uses was also a potential means to comprehend the world beyond the temporal and spatial boundaries of the nation-state.

### **Turn Funeral to Fete**

Genevieve Taggard's 1936 poem "Funeral in May," first published in *Partisan Review* and then collected in her volume *Calling Western Union* (1936), evinces the multifarious ways that radical poets mobilized the trope of poetry's death in order to figure how poetry might be re-formed to serve new political functions. Taggard's own body of work exemplifies the leftward migration of poets after the 1929 stock market crash. While her early poems demonstrate a "Marxist sensibility" (*Exiles from a Future Time* 230), Depression-era volumes like *Calling Western Union* document "a revision of her radical self to meet the demands of the increasingly radicalized environment of the 1930s" (Berke 88). By the mid-30s, Taggard had already become an influential poet and critic on the Left: in addition to publishing poems in radical journals and acting as a contributing editor of *New Masses*, in 1934 her biography of Emily Dickinson (originally published in 1930) was reprinted. "Funeral in May" appears in the same volume as some of Taggard's most widely read social poems documenting Depression-era struggles, including "Up-State—Depression Summer" and "Mill Town." What makes "Funeral in May" unique is not just that it employs the trope of poetry's death, but that, in doing so, it begins to formulate a rubric for Left poetics. "Funeral in May" therefore demonstrates how the trope of poetry's death provided a rhetorical means to critique, and even do away with, the poetry of earlier periods as well as to imagine new forms and functions for the art form.

“Funeral in May” imagines the death of an anonymous poet. This dying poet is a Christ-like figure (he calls out, in the first lines, “Metaphor metaphor why has thou forsaken me”) who believes he and those of his guild are “the mouthpiece of the divine” (*Calling Western Union* 33-34). And yet, he has been “eluded” by god and “forsaken” by metaphor; in his last gasp he cries out: “Lovely metaphor redeem me from sin / and deliver us from meaning” (35). Taggard’s dying poet epitomizes the sort of bourgeois poet-figure that she believed had no place in the literary culture of the Depression. As she writes in “Note Book I,” the short prose passage preceding “Funeral in May”:

For more than a century poets have been bred on the romantic notion that the individual is capable of godlike perfection. This is poison food, and those who eat it die a lingering and pallid death. But before he dies the poet repeats the doctrine that has poisoned him. He feeds his audience on the gigantic fiction of a *Free Personality*. (*Calling Western Union* 31)

Taggard suggests that the political realities of the Great Depression will ultimately lead to the “lingering and pallid death” of the poet who continues to emulate “romantic notions” about the poet’s ability to transcend such realities via his “godlike perfection.” In both “Note Book I” and “Funeral in May” the figure of the poet’s death is a productive one: through the imagination of a death, Taggard is also able to imagine the birth, or creation, of a revolutionary poetry that casts off old fictions about a poet’s “individual” entitlements, namely his freedom to be removed from social life (that is, his “free personality”). More specifically, “Funeral in May” begins to enact the creation of a new revolutionary poetry when, shortly after the announcement that the metaphor-ridden poet has died, the “voice of the infidel” enters and orders that the poet be buried “deep in his words.” The poem then continues not as a lamentation, but as a process of “turning funeral to fete,” as the “infidel” gives instructions for a celebration (35). The dead poet is

nothing but an “effigy”—a “straw puppet” and a “hollow doll made by the rasp of dry words”—and he is ultimately replaced by those who are “skilled” at “singing” (36-37).

As early as 1921, in his manifesto “Towards Proletarian Art,” Mike Gold insisted that “old” cultural forms must die so that writers could imagine and create a revolutionary order. “We cling to the old culture, and fight for it against ourselves,” he writes:

But it must die. The old ideals must die. But let us not fear. Let us fling all we are into the cauldron of the Revolution. For out of our death shall arise glories, and out of the final corruption of this old civilization we have loved shall spring the new race—the Supermen. (62)

There are confluences between Gold’s vision of a “new race” springing forth out of the “death” of the “old civilization” and Taggard’s idea that poets who believe in individual transcendence will be “poisoned” by their own “doctrines” and replaced by revolutionary singers. In the death of this old culture—and the poetry that it produces—dwells the possibility for a new poetic culture. In Gold’s words: “bright forms” will “rise out of the debris and cover the ruins of capitalism with beauty” (“Towards a Proletarian Art” 62). “Funeral in May” gives instructions for turning a “funeral to fete” and, in so doing, it begins to sketch the outline of such “bright forms” as well as help to set up the various ways Left poets used the trope of poetry’s death to conceptualize a future radical poetics.

The “dead poet” in “Funeral in May” is a citizen of what Gold referred to as the “old civilization.” Moreover, this “straw puppet” is, in many ways, the representative early-twentieth-century modernist poet. Thus, the poet’s burial by a crew of “infidels” illuminates a broader tension between high modernist poetics and the developing poetics of the literary Left, indicating how Left poets reacted against the poetry of the previous generation. As Wald explains in *The Revolutionary Imagination*, during the interwar period:

Stalinist theoreticians peremptorily categorized 1920s modernism as the bankrupt outlook of disoriented middle-class intelligentsia, modernism's characteristic literary techniques—complex symbolism, myth, abstruse argumentations, stream of consciousness, abstraction, mixture of genres, literary allusion, montage, and a problematic mood—were politically coded as expressions of a reactionary ideology that reproduced the fragmentation experienced in bourgeois society (*The Revolutionary Imagination* 3).

As my chapters will bear out, various accounts of poetry's death on the Left insisted that modernism had to die in order for revolutionary poetry to thrive. Though he met some disagreement, Communist poet Edwin Rolfe went so far as to call the earlier revolution of the word an "abortive poetry revival" (32), and many poets and critics on Rolfe's side deemed the experiments of modernism "dead" and radical poetry "alive." As I detail in what follows, the exact qualities of this "live" poetry were the subject of intense debate among Left poets and critics.

Taggard's "Funeral in May" helps to demonstrate how 1930s radical poets were in a continual dialogue with modernism, sometimes incorporating its formal strategies and sometimes vehemently reacting to it. Moreover, Taggard's poem outlines key general characteristics of interwar Left poetry. First and foremost, the process of turning a funeral into a festival marks a shift in mood. The abandonment of what Gold called the "old moods" and a turn from pessimism to optimism, despair to hope, was a key criteria for Left poetry during the thirties ("Towards a Proletarian Art" 65). The infidel's command in "Funeral in May" that the death of the poet be celebrated joyfully comes not just from the fact that radicals should rejoice at the end of the old culture; it is also an indication of the general optimism of the masses.

In addition, the poet's funeral in "Funeral in May" represents the death of the poet as well as the death of a bourgeois poetic subject. As Taggard suggests in "Note Book I,"



poets have falsely been seen as “godlike,” and it is up to “earnest readers of literature to reject the tacit assumption of the godlike poet-self” (31). This solitary figure, the poet who believes that he is not part of social relations and assumes that his art should transcend political realities, is ostensibly erased in “Funeral in May” when the “infidels” craft his gravestone. The poem instructs to use the dead poet’s mirror to mark his grave, but they write in the space where his image would have appeared:

Take from the darkened room the ghost-haunted glass—  
 Give him this mark for his grave. Set here for his grave-stone  
 His perfect companion the mirror. Put it here out of doors,  
 In its blank write his epitaph out. *Newsreel our day*.  
 Let windy leaves toss in its flash.  
   When we gather fresh laurel  
 Blow blasts on the factory whistle. Ring loud early bells.  
 Dance in the meadows  
   young and old  
   stalwart and swarthy. (36)

Using the mirror for a gravestone is, at first, a bit of a joke. Calling the mirror the poet’s “perfect companion,” the poem pokes fun at his narcissism and solipsism. But this gesture takes a more serious meaning when the “voice of the infidel” gives the command to write out “*Newsreel our day*” in the mirror blank. The act of writing over the mirror blank—of filling in the blank space where the dead poet’s image would have appeared—effectively replaces the figure of the individual poet with the very historical ground he tried to avoid and transcend. The insertion of the possessive pronoun “our” is significant here as well, marking the shift from a poetics based in a singular “I” to one that embraces a plural “we.” This “we” gathers “fresh laurels,” but, rather than weave wreaths, they “Dance in the meadows” to the sounds of the factory’s “whistle” and “early bells.”

Thus, the new poetry being formed at Taggard’s “fete” will not be rooted in individual egos or achievements but rather in collective action. This poetry will be

grounded in present-day social and cultural life, and it will incorporate the sounds of the field and the factory. This vision culminates in the poem's last section, when the "voice of the infidel" once again issues the command, "Turn funeral to fete":

Turn funeral to fete.

Here we inter folly

Gluttonous villainy stupidity the vanity of man.

Again and again we must dance on the grave of this death

Beating down with determined feet what is already dead;

Weeds growing here will wear to rags where we step.

Dance

it is May

of all Mays the gayest with promise.

You who are skilled with the songs lead the way with your singing. (37)

These last lines of "Funeral in May" encapsulate how, during the Depression-era, the imagined death of poetry provided a productive inter-space for crafting a radical poetics. This is especially apparent in line, "Here we inter folly." Using the word "inter," the poem suggests a state of transition, of being in between the death of one paradigm and the birth of another. The poem also reiterates the literal act of interring (of placing in a grave) the dead poet and thus the follies of an irrelevant poetic culture. "Folly" here might not just refer to the senseless practices represented by the dead poet (the "Gluttonous villainy stupidity the vanity of man"). It might also be evoking a second definition of "folly"—"folly" as an ornate structure serving no practical purpose—in order to emphasize how, in burying the old poet, the "infidels" also bury the notion that poetry cannot serve a practical political function.

That the funeral-turned-fete takes place in May is especially significant considering that month's association with the popular May Day parades that both demonstrated and celebrated working-class solidarity. The poem ends with a vision of this solidarity by insisting that, "Again and again we must dance on the grave of this

death.” Especially significant is the command: “You who are skilled with the songs lead the way with your singing.” This closing line suggests not only a new collective voice (what seems to be a plural “you”) but also a new form for poetry. Poems that drip with “metaphors” and “gaudy decoration” and that are spoken by a presumably “godlike” “I” are replaced by “songs.” Taggard’s reference to the genre of the song suggests the ways that Left poets idealized popular verse genres because, in their view, these genres could do immense political work.

### **What’s the Use?**

The uses of American poetry have been of increasing interest to poetry scholars, especially those responding to the marginalization of poetic forms within Americanist cultural criticism.<sup>6</sup> One of the distinguishing methodological contributions of my dissertation derives from putting poetry studies in contact with the interdisciplinary methodologies of American Studies. Bringing these two fields into conversation, I contribute to both in original ways. In this sense, my dissertation goes beyond similar recent studies like Joan Shelley Rubin’s cultural history *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of American Poetry* (2007) because it historicizes not just cultural locations and ideological circumstances for poetry’s production and circulation but also the historical development of the category of poetry itself.

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<sup>6</sup> This has been especially the case in nineteenth-century poetry studies. See especially Michael Cohen’s doctoral dissertation *Cultures of Poetry in Late-Nineteenth-Century American Poetry* (2008), Max Cavitch’s *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (2007), and Angela Sorby, *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917* (2005). In twentieth-century poetry studies, such considerations have tended to manifest as a dialogue between poetry and cultural studies. See especially Maria Damon, *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries* (2011) and Mike Chasar, *Everyday Reading: Poetry and Popular Culture in Modern America* (2012).

The tensions and intersections between these two fields engender questions about different modes of historical practice. Projects fitting under the rubric of the “new American studies” often employ a comparative cultural and political historicism that work in concert with, and are often antagonistic to, some of the broader paradigms of new historicism that tend to be apolitical and that preserve notions of “high literature.” If, as Joseph Harrington and others have suggested, the status of American poetry within American literary studies hinges on employing methods like reception history or textual studies, among others, these methods are only provocative under the horizon line of a more radical historicism. Of course, the landscape of American Studies has changed since Harrington explained, “Why American Poetry is Not American Literature.” Refocusing Harrington’s claims, I engage more recent concerns within American Studies scholarship related to transnationality and globalization as well as efforts to rethink spatial and temporal models. In this sense, I take up Russ Castronovo and Susan Gillman’s call in *States of Emergency: The Object of American Studies* to “put pressure on the object of American Studies” (3).

In my dissertation, claims about poetry’s transcendence and universality provide a means to explore these questions anew. This entails, in part, rejecting the notion that the goal of historicizing poems and related cultural practices is to strip poetry of its “transcendent literariness.” Each of my chapters makes contributions on multiple scholarly fronts: re-considering the literary-historical divide between nineteenth- and twentieth-century verse cultures; challenging studies of Left poetry that blur the lines between radical poetics and predominant narratives about literary modernism; and adding to current studies interested in how the mediations of print, visual, and sound

technologies expose the twentieth-century idea that poetry is, in Virginia Jackson's phrase, "ideally unmediated" (*Dickinson's Misery* 7). Across my chapters, I read the work of well-known poets like Muriel Rukeyser, Langston Hughes, and Carl Sandburg, and I suggest the importance of less-studied figures like Martha Millet and Jacques Roumain. I also make use of a range of archival materials, including writings by amateur poets, unpublished manuscripts and correspondence, and personal scrapbooks and snapshots. While many studies of Left poetry have brought to light previously overlooked archives, my project incorporates original—and what might even be seen as offbeat—materials, adding new pieces to the subterranean puzzle of Left poetics.

"Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America" begins with a chapter on how *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse* founder Harriet Monroe's views of poetry were in tension with the political landscape of the 1930s. This chapter challenges predominant conceptions of literary modernism by examining narratives about poetry's death from the turn-of-the-century to the mid-1930s, especially in relation to Monroe's editorship of *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*. I link three specific sites where such rhetoric emerges: Monroe's imagination of the "death of poetry" in her unpublished manuscripts and early editorials; commentary on *Poetry's* financial struggles and its resistance to publishing radical verse during the Depression era; and the poetic response to Monroe's own death in September 1936. Using extensive archival research, I show the confluences between Monroe's views of poetry and the response to her death, which includes memorials by famous poets, newspaper verse, and elegies written by *Poetry* subscribers. Contextualizing this response with the proceedings of the 1936 PEN Writers Conference in Buenos Aires (where Monroe was traveling when she passed away), my chapter argues

that the ways in which professional and amateur writers mourned Monroe reveals deeper anxieties about poetry's definition during this era of historical transition and political turmoil.

Chapter 2, "The Left Needs Rhythm: Poetry Speaks the Depression," focuses on debates about poetry's life and death in Left periodicals, arguing that, when these debates turned to form, poetic rhythm was idealized as a political tool and, more specifically, as the ideal medium for representing workers' speech. Analyzing nursery rhymes and ballads published in the Communist children's magazine *New Pioneer* as well as Carl Sandburg's Popular Front tome *The People, Yes* (1936), this chapter reveals how rhythm acts as a flashpoint for thinking about different registers of the relationship between poetry and politics. Sandburg's book, especially, demonstrates the tension on the Left between the use of popular poetic genres and the desire for new forms that could represent nascent political communities. Ultimately, discourses about speech and rhythm reveal an anxiety about poetry's capacity to represent the new multitude of "the people."

In Chapter 3, "Langston Hughes's Snapshots of Haiti: Radical Poetry Meets the Photograph," argues that the growing cultural relevance of documentary photography in the '30s reshaped discourses about poetry's cultural function and utopian potentials. Drawing on Langston Hughes's overlooked archive of scrapbooks and photographs from his 1931 trip to Haiti, I show how Hughes's experience of photographically documenting Haitian people and landscapes mediates how he grapples with notions of lyric subjectivity, authenticity, and temporality in his interwar poetry. Hughes's scrapbooks provide an important pretext for analyzing other Popular Front works that approach the intersections between poetic language and photographic technology, such as Muriel

Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938), James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), and Archibald MacLeish's *The Land of the Free* (1938).

My fourth and last chapter, "Haiti to the Universe: Jacques Roumain's 'Death of Poetry' and the Radical Politics of Form," takes Haitian communist poet Jacques Roumain's 1941 *New Masses* essay "Is Poetry Dead?" as a starting point for considering transnational networks—especially between the U.S. and Haiti—that were integral to the development of African-American Left poetry. I argue that the supposed "death of poetry" imagined in Roumain's essay does not signal a decline in Old Left versions of political radicalism; rather, it constitutes an important inter-space for the development of black radical poetry. Chapter 4 opens up the previous chapters' discussions of 'thirties poetics to broader temporal and geographic shifts, as it considers interwar U.S.-Haiti relations as well as what Roumain called the "immediately internationalized" global political reality produced by the coming of World War II.

"Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America" is at once a formal and historical study of interwar political poetry and a cultural history of the idea of poetry. Similar to Guyatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline*, it ruminates on how new disciplinary practices might be formed out of the death of the old. My project concludes with a brief epilogue outlining some of its methodological stakes—especially at a time when financial panic has, once again, put the roles of art in crisis.

## CHAPTER 1

### Here Lies Harriet Monroe: The Death of *Poetry* and the Death of Poetry

On a manuscript of her unpublished “Modern Tendencies in Poetry,” Harriet Monroe used a pencil to cross out the typewritten title and scrawl “Victorian Poets” above it. Likely written in the late 1800s,<sup>7</sup> the first pages of the manuscript (which Monroe also made a note to cross out) conceptualize the passing of an earlier age of poetry—described by her as “that century of contrasting motives and ideas between 1750 and 1850” —as a matter of life and death. She writes,

A brave light is flickering out, a great king is yielding up his throne, and the minstrels watching around his couch chant soft monotonous lays, and dare not startle him with thrilling music. Manifestly old things are passing away, and of the new things there are only signs and tokens. We are stifled in the perfumed chamber of death, with the rows of tapers in our eyes and the changeless chanting in our ears. Surely there is something theatrical in this pomp; it is not thus that a hero should be lulled to his long sleep. The future is not here, nor the past; this is merely a robed procession and a ritual. We can not find our signs and tokens here. Let us seek them rather among the prophets whose rich voices still echo in our ears though their forms have vanished, until we can meet the fulfillment of their hope in that mighty era which has not yet looked upon the world. (“Modern”)

I will return to this passage later, but it is worth noting here how Monroe’s story about a dying king follows a familiar narrative about U.S. poetry at the turn of the nineteenth century: after the passing of the eminent Victorians, a period of decline is necessary before another great age can come about. In his 1900 *An American Anthology*, Monroe’s

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<sup>7</sup> The fact that Monroe discusses the turn-of-the-century in the present tense (she writes, for example, that “we see them now soothing the nineteenth century to sleep”) suggests that it was probably written in the late 1800s.



friend and mentor, American literary critic Edmund Clarence Stedman, famously dubbed this period an “interval of twilight” (xix). Similar to Monroe’s hope for a “mighty era” of poetry “which has not yet looked upon the world,” Stedman’s interregnum awaits the inauguration of a “second epoch of poetic achievement” (xiii). From the perspective of subsequent literary criticism, this “mighty era” turned out to be the triumph of modernism; and the poetry of the interregnum has consequently been read as either unsuitable for modernism or it is subsumed within narratives of modernism’s achievement. This chapter entertains the possibility that the “mighty era” Monroe references is not, in fact, the “mighty era” of modernism. In Monroe’s figuration, it is only on the manifest level that “old things are passing away.” Below the surface—and underneath the metaphor of the king’s eminent death—is a complex negotiation of the political and cultural aspects of the anxious space between the Victorian and the modern, the “old” and the “new.”

Monroe’s unpublished manuscript re-introduces a basic problem: that is, that twentieth-century critics have tended to read the narrative of U.S. poetry’s turn-of-the-century decline all too literally.<sup>8</sup> Those who have attempted to restore to critical view the poetry produced during the so-called “twilight interval” have read (or mis-read) this supposed “interregnum” as a sign of progress toward modernism. A different approach might move beyond simply disproving assumptions about poetry’s twilight and, instead, understand these narratives as strategic fictions that idealize, preserve, and even re-

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<sup>8</sup> For example, in their *A History of American Poetry, 1900-1940* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1942), Horace Gregory and Marya Zaturenska basically follow Stedman’s schematic, picking up where his *An American Anthology* leaves off (20). In many ways, Frank Lentriccia’s *Modernist Quartet* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1994) also replicates this narrative about modernism, as each of its chapters (on Pound, Frost, Stevens, and Eliot) “evoke[s] the genteel environment as cultural origin of modernist reaction” (xiii).

circulate the poetry of an earlier period. For instance, one might read Monroe's and Stedman's claims above not as proof that either thought American poetry before modernism was on its deathbed, but rather as attempts to keep the poetry of the earlier tradition alive, perhaps even immortalize it, through an imagination of its death. The literary-historical shift this chapter proposes does not merely complicate the fiction of the interregnum via a discussion of any number of its high points (that is, a positivist complication of the Victorian/Modern binary). It works against viewing the transition from the Victorian to the modern through a focalization of the latter. Although Monroe crossed out "Modern Tendencies in Poetry" in favor of "Victorian Poets," as Virginia Jackson suggests, American literary scholars have tended to do the opposite: "British poetry of the nineteenth century may remain Victorian," Jackson argues, "but, as literary criticism since Stedman seems to have decided, American poetry was destined to be Modern" (159).<sup>9</sup> Scholars have nuanced the previously accepted notion that modernism was an iconoclastic movement that radically broke from earlier traditions, but such studies tend to reinvent modernism from alternative perspectives and, as a result, fail to fully account for the dialectical relationship between the "old" and the "new."

Building on the groundwork established in the introduction, this chapter argues that Monroe's life's work, as well as the legacy of her death, illuminates the literary-historical and political connotations of narratives of poetry's life and death. Thus, my

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<sup>9</sup> For some salient examples of this tendency see Joseph Harrington's *Poetry and the Public: The Social Form of Modern U.S. Poetics* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002) and Sarah Wilson's *Melting-Pot Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). Also see John Timberman Newcomb's *Would Poetry Disappear? American Verse and the Crisis of Modernity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2004), discussed below. In some ways, while it restores to view the importance of nineteenth-century U.S. women's poetry, Bennett's *Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women's Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) also follows this trend. Bennett's book culminates in a reading of the "proto-modernist" qualities of later-nineteenth-century verses that ironize sentimental and genteel conventions.

chapter title's assertion that Monroe "lies here" puns on the two sides of the chapter's argument. First, it points to the lies, or fictions, Monroe told about the conditions for poetry in the U.S.; and second, it suggests that Monroe's death is a significant event for interpreting such conditions. The state funeral Monroe envisions in her turn-of-the-century manuscript on modern poetry (or, really, modern poetry crossed out) reveals how Monroe did not narrate the conditions of American poetry in terms of decline and resurgence. Rather, she conceived a story of the art of poetry along a continuum of life and death. When Monroe died in September 1936, the stories she told as the nineteenth-century came to a close—and in 1912 when she founded *Poetry* magazine—were taken up by well known and amateur poets, friends, journalists, eulogists, and former editors. Focusing on these two moments, this chapter establishes a context for thinking about the "death of poetry." In using the figure of Monroe to challenge the supposed divide between the Victorian and the modern, it also shifts the literary-historical perspective from which we view the production and circulation of the poetry of the first half of the twentieth century. As future chapters will make clear, rethinking the relationship between these two periods and traditions shifts the ground for scholarly work on Left poetry—and, in questioning what poetry supposedly died in the slip between the Victorian and the modern, it illuminates the contemporary scholarly anxiety that "American poetry isn't American literature."<sup>10</sup> More specifically, as we will see, the contemporary critical reception of Monroe's life and work is, itself, symptomatic of a broader critical tendency to recuperate all late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century poetry in the name of modernism. But Monroe's investments in earlier traditions continue throughout her

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<sup>10</sup> This phrase is the title of Harrington's *American Literary History* essay, "Why American Poetry Is Not American Literature," cited above.

lifetime and, importantly, provide the foundation on which *Poetry* magazine was built. Looking at Monroe in this way is not a look back that establishes a new telos toward modernism; rather, her work acts as an interruption that reconfigures the relationship between the “old” and the “new.” Out of joint, out of the archive, Monroe’s words are an anamorphic stain within our critical view of modernism. She calls attention to the ways in which modernism might just be “making it old.”

Just as Monroe’s literary activity exists in the tenuous space of poetry’s twilight, the response to Monroe’s death stands at the intersection of battling accounts of what poetry means and how it should be valued. In what follows, I map the way the multifaceted responses to Monroe’s passing reveal a generalized anxiety about the status of poetry in the United States. Indeed, if Monroe positioned herself and her magazine as responsible for breathing life into twentieth-century American poetry, then it makes sense that so many would fear it had died with her. The continuation between the two scenes outlined above—the scene of Monroe resuscitating poetry and the scene of her death—reveals the political and literary-historical ramifications of Monroe’s views of poetry, especially as these views were dialectically reshaped by the social realities of the Great Depression and the growing force of revolutionary poetry during the 30s. The first section of this chapter explores how Monroe negotiated the shifting ground for poetry at the beginning of the twentieth century by employing metaphors of life and death. The subsequent sections detail how the stories Monroe told about American poetry through her magazine were taken up at her death. On one hand, a previously ignored archive of unpublished letters and poems from lesser-known artists appear to be the return of a repressed earlier tradition. On the other hand, in the echo chamber where old ideals of

poetry and modernist ideals of experiment and newness bounce back to be heard in the 1930s, the complex relationships between political and aesthetic movements might be understood on new ground. While mainstream newspaper articles and more traditional poets attempted to resurrect Monroe's spirit and continue her vision for poetry, poets on the Left were less reserved about listing her magazine—as well as many of her prized poets—among the dead. The context of 1930s radical movements situates Monroe's ideals of poetry more fully in their historical moments, both revealing deeper political antagonisms and creating a more complex landscape for interpreting the work of Left poets than many scholars have allowed. In this way, the last two sections of my chapter work together to attend to the related, but also disconnected, antagonisms associated with the politics of the life and death of poetry in the dynamic 1930s.

### **The Decline of American Poetry, 1891-1914**

The landmark events in Monroe's career as a poet and editor—the commission and performance of her “Columbian Ode” and the founding of *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*—were built on the story of poetry's turn-of-the-century decline and its perceived marginalization. In 1891, Monroe pleaded with the Committee of Ceremonies for the World's Columbian Exposition (the Chicago World's Fair) to commission her to write a poem because “the neglected art of poetry” had been left out of the upcoming “gala season of beauty” (*A Poet's Life* 116-117). A dedicated Chicagoan and aspiring poet, Monroe was friendly with architects, painters, and sculptors who were receiving commissions for their work. It seemed “unjust and ill-advised,” she observed, not to include poetry (116). Monroe's plea for poetry resulted in one of her crowning

achievements as a poet, “The Columbian Ode,” which was performed at the Fair’s Dedication Day ceremonies in October 1892.

Despite the rhetoric of Monroe’s plea, the performance of her “Columbian Ode” suggests the ways in which the art of poetry wasn’t marginalized after all. The performance of the “Ode” is historically embedded in the practice, widespread in the nineteenth-century, of using poems for commemorations and other civic ceremonies. Such a practice not only works to place poetry at the center of national life, but it also uses poetry to codify American ideals of democracy, unity, and equality.<sup>11</sup> In the specific context of the Chicago World’s Fair, the recitation of the poem would also demonstrate, Monroe hoped, that the fast-growing industrial city could be a center of culture and progress.<sup>12</sup> Well-known actress Sarah Cowell LeMoyne recited the ode during the ceremonies, and certain passages embodying the unifying spirit of the Fair—like “Lo! clan on clan, The embattled nations gather to be one”—were sung with the accompaniment of an orchestra and military bands (*The Columbian Ode*). After the performance Monroe and LeMoyne were crowned with laurel wreaths by then-Vice Presiden Levi P. Morton.<sup>13</sup> The form and function of “The Columbian Ode” combines public pomp with Monroe’s own vision of poetry’s future quoted above: “Let us seek them [our signs and tokens] rather among the prophets whose rich voices still echo in our ears though their forms have vanished, until we can meet the fulfillment of their hope in that mighty era which has not yet looked upon the world” (“Modern Tendencies” 1-2).

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<sup>11</sup> For an explanation and example of this see Rubin’s reading of Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright” at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration in *Songs of Ourselves* (166-67).

<sup>12</sup> See Ann Massa’s essay “‘The Columbian Ode’ and *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*: Harriet Monroe’s Entrepreneurial Triumphs” (*Journal of American Studies* 20.1 (1986): 51-70).

<sup>13</sup> For descriptions of the opening ceremony and performance of “The Columbian Ode” see Monroe’s *A Poet’s Life*, Rubin’s *Songs of Ourselves*, and Massa’s “‘The Columbian Ode’ and *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*: Harriet Monroe’s Entrepreneurial Triumphs.”

The passage following the chorus “Lo! clan on clan” cited above, for instance, assures that if the “banner” held up by the unified nations was ever struck down, “A nobler knight than ever writ or rhyme” would come through bearing “a light that cannot die” (16-17). The poem stresses that visions of the future contain within them “dead centuries” and, it seems, pasts that ultimately “cannot die” (9).

In the years following the commission of the Ode, Monroe made a modest living out of her journalism—she travelled through Europe and the American West, publishing magazine stories documenting her experiences—but she still aspired to be a poet. It was a difficult endeavor: at every turn, she found “evidences of indifference toward poetic art” that “brought me constantly against a stone wall” (*A Poet’s Life* 181). Monroe records in *A Poet’s Life* that, during these “middle years,” she would typically send out twenty-five poems and prose articles and only three would be accepted. Of course, she rationalizes these difficulties by reasoning that her troubles only illustrated “what a desperate fight for recognition poets had to make” (188-89). In late 1911, when Monroe returned to Chicago after an “around-the-world” trip that took her to Honolulu and Peking, she found herself “facing the same old problems”—that is, that the art of poetry was getting “slight attention” (*A Poet’s Life* 240). Such problems led to the idea for *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, and the first issue was published in October 1912, when Monroe was 52-years-old.

Monroe was not the only one who felt as if poetry had been marginalized. The roughly twenty-year span between the performance of “The Columbian Ode” in 1892 and the first issue of *Poetry* magazine in 1912 was filled with rumors of poetry’s decline. This landscape might be conceptualized in two separate, but related, ways. From one vantage point, the perceived decline was a result of the failure of the once-popular “fireside

poetry” to respond to the new conditions of modernity; in this account, poetry ceded its ground to the realist novel, which better captured the effects of urbanization and industrialization. As well, Americans increasingly engaged with new forms of entertainment and cultural production that took place away from the domestic hearth. John Timberman Newcomb looks again at the ways in which “[b]y the 1890s the complexity and variety of American poetry had been mostly reduced to a single canonical narrative” centered around popular poets like Whittier, Longfellow, and their company (*Would Poetry Disappear?* 4). Newcomb argues that, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the fireside poets “paradoxically remained so dominant in the nation’s literary culture that their great age registered as an obsolescence of the entire genre of poetry. By 1900 these converging evaluative circumstances had thrown poetry in America into a crisis so severe that many felt it could not recover but simply wither away in the baffling crosscurrents of modern times” (4-5). Newcomb makes an important observation about the predominance of canonical fireside poetry; indeed, the passing of the popular fireside poets registered as a dramatic change to the poetic landscape. But his over-arching argument treats the antagonism between genteel antimodernists (associated with Victorians both British and American) and a burgeoning modernist tradition as too clear cut, reading a codified modernist moment and aesthetic back into the moment of its becoming. Such an argument is largely made on aesthetic, not social or cultural grounds, whereby the vitality of U.S. poetry during the last years of the nineteenth-century is tied to how much it reads like the beginnings of modernist experiment.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bennett addresses this in “Not Just Filler, Not Just Sentimental: Women’s Poetry in American Victorian Periodicals, 1860-1900” in *Periodical Literature in Nineteenth-Century* (Ed. Kenneth M. Price and Susan Belasco Smith. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1995. 202-279).



Noticing—and perhaps attempting to deny—such changes, genteel critics like Stedman, at one time the “Dean of American poets,” lamented in an 1885 *Century* article as well as his 1900 *An American Anthology* that the United States had entered an “interval of twilight” for poetry, and he looked backward nostalgically to the eminent Victorian period (*An American Anthology* xix).<sup>15</sup> While Stedman used the rhetoric of poetry’s “twilight” to describe an anxious liminal space between the passing of one tradition and the longing for another, such an attempt to preserve poetry’s “universal value” did not necessarily mean that poetry was marginal.<sup>16</sup> Despite the predominance of such anxieties, contemporary scholars have pushed beyond the rumors of poetry’s turn-of-the-century decline and productively explored the wealth of poetic activity during the early 1900s, showing how, as Joan Shelly Rubin puts it, “the scenarios of turn-of-the-century decline had origins and functions apart from the actual record of poetry’s production and distribution” (39). Indeed, asserting the marginalization of poetry is an attempt to preserve and re-circulate the poetry of the past. Rubin’s historical perspective provides a counter-narrative to the story of poetry’s decline by illuminating the importance of poetry in various aspects of national life.<sup>17</sup> Monroe’s “Columbian Ode” is

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<sup>15</sup> Stedman was not the only literary critic weighing in on poetry’s decline. See Newcomb’s *Would Poetry Disappear? American Verse and the Crisis of Modernity* and Rubin’s *Songs of Ourselves: The Uses of Poetry in America* for exhaustive lists of additional examples.

<sup>16</sup> A *Dial* review of Stedman’s 1895 *A Victorian Anthology*, “The Victorian Garden of Song” (*The Dial*. 1 Nov. 1895: 237-239) suggests that, as a result of such anxiety, many critics were eager to close the Victorian period off. The reviewer used the anthology to look back on the Victorian tradition with fondness, romanticizing it in order to fix it as a moment that lives in memory but is already past. Stedman’s anthology provides, in this account, a means to “close off” the Victorian period and “regard it as concrete” (237).

<sup>17</sup> Also see Elizabeth Renker’s “Poets in the Iron Mills” (*American Literary History* 20 [Fall 2008]: 521-29), Angela Sorby’s *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917*, and Mary Loeffelholz’s *From School to Salon: Reading Nineteenth-Century American Women’s Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004). Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s 1890 short story “The Poetess” (*A New England Nun and Other Stories*. Ed. Sandra A. Zagarell. New York: Penguin, 2000. 34-47) is a contemporaneous example of how uses for poetry were shifting at the turn-of-the-century and, therefore, causing anxiety about poetry’s value. In Freeman’s story, Betsey Dole’s role as the town “poetess,” who

an early example of how poetry existed in the tenuous space between these two perspectives. Stedman himself read a draft of the Ode and liked it, but he also instructed Monroe to pick up her Tennyson and Longfellow again (Letter to Harriet Monroe).

Stedman's interest in Monroe's Ode continues to complicate received narratives about the genteel elite who lamented the dusk of poetry. While publishers might have found poetry a hard sell at the turn-of-the-century, the art continued to hold a place of significance in national life and was a central part of pedagogical practice, civic celebrations, and domestic life.<sup>18</sup> Whether it was influenced by one of Stedman's Victorians or not, the "Columbian Ode" became a central part of the World's Fair opening ceremony, where thousands of stratified local voices joined together for the common purpose of celebrating the discovery of America and Chicago's importance to the nation's growth. In the former context, poetry's vitality necessitates a return to the past; in the latter, the presence of poetry is heard loudly and clearly as a chorus of voices lift to the future. Such a view of poetry's place in national life is not, as is generally thought, out-of-line with how Stedman viewed the importance of American poetry at the turn-of-the-century. As Michael Cohen has recently pointed out, Stedman understood poetry to have a great deal of cultural power, and he searched out poetic genres that would "speak to and for the people" (172). As Cohen illuminates, Stedman held fast to

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writes poems commissioned by members of her community, is called into question by the town's minister, who has published poems in magazines. In a way, Betsey's death at the end of the story signals an anxiety that poetry like hers (written for specific occasions and circulating in local contexts) are being overtaken by a new cadre of elite critics.

<sup>18</sup> Sorby's focus on the reception and circulation of poetry in schools and related cultural sites like museums, theaters, newspapers, and children's magazines in *Schoolroom Poets: Childhood, Performance, and the Place of American Poetry, 1865-1917* responds to narratives of poetry's decline by revealing how widely poetry (especially fireside poetry) circulated in the U.S. during the postbellum period. For instance, Sorby points out that while poets like Henry Wadsworth Longfellow became "less popular" in the postbellum period, they "became *increasingly* well known, because by 1900 [their] work was taught at every school in America" (3; original emphasis).

the Whitmanian fantasy that the United States is, itself, a poem, and he sought to “produce a genre” that would maintain the relationship between the future of American poetry and the future of “the land and the people abstracted in the world ‘*America*’” (178).

One can see how the narrative of poetry’s declension or degeneration is, in many ways, a productive fiction. On one hand, there was much to gain from placing poetry in grave danger: the fear of poetry’s disappearance created an opportunity to exalt the art and thus preserve an “ideal of poetry” that, while present in everyday activities and public spaces, would also transcend the clamor of modern material realities. Such an ideal was wrapped up in a national project whereby an “ideal poetry” is metonymic for an ideal national community like the one imagined in the “White City” at the 1892 World’s Fair. But this “declension narrative” has ultimately served the story the modernist movement—with its focus on “newness” and invention—wanted to tell about itself. (And, I would add, that contemporary criticism still tells about modernism.) As Rubin points out, when the “declension narrative” could be “paired with resurgence” it “served to entrench a particular definition of poetry’s ‘higher forms’: one that equated evolution toward modernist with artistic investment” (38). Scholarship examining the nuanced and variegated landscape of verse culture during the so-called “interval of twilight” has also challenged the accepted narrative that the modernists won the day over their genteel predecessors. Moreover, recent work on Stedman has argued for his importance in defining British Victorian poetry as a field, restoring the transatlantic impulse to

Victorian studies and, at the same time, re-evaluating the nationalist and literary projects of turn-of-the-century genteel critics and their influences on modern literary criticism.<sup>19</sup>

The figure of Monroe occupies the anxious “twilight space” between periods and traditions. Despite attempts to firmly situate Monroe within a particular literary movement, her legacy remains a confused one. Robin Schulze notices such confusion, describing how “Monroe struck many of her charges as prudish, provincial, and backward—a strangely unmodern champion of the modernist verse she worked so hard to bring to the unsuspecting American public” (50). Perhaps this is why—as a reporter for the *Providence Journal* put it after her death—one only called her “Harriet” behind her back. “When met, she must have been Miss Monore” (W.T.S.). As if to exemplify the point, the same article that acknowledges Monroe’s role in the “poetry renaissance” would also aver that her first name had the “significance of that queenly vocative—as one would say, Victoria” (W.T.S.). While critics like Schulze attempt to situate Monroe’s confused identity in her cultural context, I want to suggest that there is something to Monroe’s seeming out-of-sync—to her never quite fitting in. It is not always Monroe’s identity that is confused, but rather our own sense of literature and history.

Monroe reveals herself as a symptom of the conceptual and political concepts of modernism’s becoming, thus complicating contemporary revisionist accounts that try to signify Monroe’s importance by situating her within the legacy of a codified modernist movement. For many scholars, Monroe’s relationship to Ezra Pound, or *Poetry*’s patronage of the Imagist movement, or her championing the “new poetry” qualifies her for a place in the standard narrative of a progressive literary modernism. This is the

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<sup>19</sup> See Cohen’s “E.C. Stedman and the Invention of Victorian Poetry” and Loeffelholz’s “Edmund Clarence Stedman’s Black Atlantic” (*Victorian Poetry* 43.2 [Summer 2005]: 189-204).

argument of Ann Massa's early analysis of the correspondence between Monroe and Pound<sup>20</sup> as well as Newcomb's recent essay, "*Poetry's* Opening Door: Harriet Monroe and American Modernism," in which he argues for *Poetry* magazine's "forceful engagement of modernity" (7). But Monroe does not have to be at the service of modernism in order to be recuperated as an important figure.

And while it is not my intention to "recover" Monroe by making her work central to my argument here, this very caveat calls attention to the fact that the critical inclination to recuperate late-nineteenth-century U.S. poetry in the name of modernism is especially prevalent in studies of women's poetry. The old binary that makes the Victorian the enemy of the modern, and Victorian women "literary spinsters" to innovative modernists<sup>21</sup>, makes it nearly impossible to speak of the women poets who write out of this transitional space as anything but modern for fear of damning them. This is an especially problematic bind for Monroe, whose biography is interpreted in terms of her resistance to gender conventions at the same time that she's cast as, as one *Poetry* editor put it, "a strong-minded literary spinster" (Hine and Parisi xxxv).<sup>22</sup> Assuming that making Monroe modern will save her from literary spinsterhood (if it cannot presumably save her from actual spinsterhood) suggests the derogatory terms in which American Victorian poetry as a whole has been cast. Indeed, what does such logic signal about our

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<sup>20</sup> See Massa's "Ezra Pound to Harriet Monroe: Two Unpublished Letters" (*Paideuma* 16.1-2 [Spring and Fall 1987]: 33-47).

<sup>21</sup> In "*Poetry's* Opening Door," Newcomb argues that "it is long past time to discard the image of 'literary spinster' which continues to hover around Monroe, and to see her instead as a full-fledged, pioneering modernist" (8). Such an argument evidences the very mis-readings I point out here.

<sup>22</sup> In "Form Follows Function: The Construction of Harriet Monroe and *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*," Ann Massa describes the "complex familial and sexual conditioning" that shaped Monroe's life and work, namely that she strongly favored her father over her mother and had "curious heterosexual relationships" with Robert Louis Stevenson, her brother-in-law John Root, and an "unnamed third man" (115). Monroe meditates on these relationships throughout *A Poet's Life*.

current conceptualization of the relationship between Victorian and modern poetry—or of the shape of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century poetry in general?

My next section considers these questions by tracing the development of Monroe's views of poetry, revealing the complicated foundation on which *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse* was built. The ground for *Poetry* was the same convenient fiction as Monroe's idea for "The Columbian Ode" commission: that the art of poetry was getting "slight attention"; that poets were deprived of the public and institutional support given to painters and sculptors; and that magazine editors marginalized poetry in favor of "stories, pictures, [and] journalism" (*A Poet's Life* 240; "Motive" 27). According to Monroe, while other arts seemed to have patrons and audiences, poetry was relegated to "a Cinderella corner in the ashes" ("Motive" 27). So, she conceived a new periodical that would act as a veritable gallery for the best poetry. The magazine, which began in 1912 and is currently in its ninety-eighth year of publication, was intended to provide an institutional home for poetry to rival Chicago's Art Institute as well as seek out a public for poetry and assist poets by paying them for their work. Newcomb has noted how early-twentieth-century little magazines aided in the development and canonization of modernism. Using *Poetry* as an example, he has productively shown how a new perspective on such magazines and their cultural work might give a new shape to the canon and proffer a more expansive definition of modernism ("*Poetry's* Opening Door" 7-8). It is important to consider, however, the ways in which *Poetry* magazine was first shaped, and continued to be shaped, by Monroe's early affinities with critics like Stedman. Monroe's motto for her magazine—Whitman's line that "To have great poets there must be great audiences too"—is an offshoot of Stedman's turn-of-the-century

poetic project that equated a public for poetry with national ideals. Reading the evolution of Monroe's ideas about poetry through this lens challenges received notions of how heavily she was influenced by Pound—and that *Poetry* was, at least in its first years, primarily a patron of a burgeoning American modernism.<sup>23</sup>

### **A King and His Son**

In the spring of 1888, Harriet Monroe's good friend, poet and humorist Eugene Field, introduced her to Stedman with a letter penned in verse. An envelope carefully addressed "I pray you, Postman, take this ditty / To E.C. Stedman, New York City" arrived safely East with more rhymes inside:

My dear Mr. Stedman—you're busy, I know  
But I must introduce my fair friend, Miss Monroe;  
She hails from Chicago, that king among kings—  
The center, the polestar of culture and things!  
She's read all your poems, she knows of your fame,  
She thinks you the princeps—and I think the same.

There are times when the bird in her own heart takes wing,  
When it rises to heights empyrean to sing;  
What wonder, I ask, that this singer should turn  
To the best of our poets, to hear and to learn?

And I? Why, the magpie that's kept behind bars  
Fain echoes the nightingale's song to the stars;  
So I, in this prison of commerce and clatter,  
Attempt the sweet songs which you sing; and I chatter. (Field)<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ellen Williams's *Harriet Monroe and the Poetry Renaissance: The First Ten Years of Poetry, 1912-1922* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1977) is a salient example. Williams narrates the beginning years of poetry primarily through Monroe's relationship to Pound, with a bias toward Pound's eventual criticisms of Monroe's editorial practices.

<sup>24</sup> Monroe describes the outer envelope and quotes the first six lines of Field's letter in *A Poet's Life* (83). The complete letter is in Box 1, Folder 6a of the Harriet Monroe Personal Papers, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago. The final stanza of the poem/letter reads:

But I see that I've come to the end of my sheet  
And it's plain I must pocket what's left of my feet;  
The next time I write you a versified letter  
(Since I cannot do worse) I shall likely do better.

Field's letter was, of course, meant to be playful. (Stedman did describe him as a "clever fellow," after all [*Poet's Life* 84]). But maybe Field was cleverer than Stedman gave him credit for. Field's verses—perhaps unwittingly but with a good deal of wit—highlight important questions and contradictions related to the status of late-nineteenth-century poetry. Stedman's own 1885 essay "The Twilight of the Poets" criticizes the latest poetry for "plac[ing] decoration above construction, the form of verse above its motive—thus missing the impulsive cadence, the more ethereal structure, to which the evasive spirit of poetry mysteriously inclines" (787). And it is this latter inclination that Field praises in Monroe when he describes how her poetry "rises to heights Empyrean"—heights that he, a mere magpie to the poet's nightingale, cannot feign to reach. These heights seem to transcend not only form, but also the dichotomy between formal convention and innovation, to arrive at poetry's proper spiritual summit.

Field is behind bars—both the metaphoric bars of his "prison of commerce and clatter" and the metrical bars of his verse—and Monroe sings from the "center ... of culture and things." The distinction between commerce and culture highlights the anxious place of poetry in a growing modern capitalist society that, in the eyes of many critics, had no use for the poet's "sweet songs," preferring "chatter" instead. It is in this sense that the joke might be on Stedman. What if the magpie was winning the day after all? Indeed, the notion that other forms or genres might exist in opposition to "high" poetry—"chatter" among them—indicates a broader tension between the elite and popular, the high and the low, that was a source of cultural anxiety during the 1870s and '80s. Field

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In the meantime, permit me, dear sir, to commend  
To your favor and friendship my worthy young friend.



writes Stedman an amusing “versified letter” at a time when genteel critics were skeptical of cultural amusements; and from this point of view, Fields’s rhymes shouldn’t dare aspire to the category of “poetry.”

But Stedman took Field’s letter, and thus Monroe, seriously. Monroe wrote in a letter home to Chicago that “Mr. Stedman took Eugene Field at his word and introduced me in all seriousness as a poet” (qtd in *A Poet’s Life* 84). The two socialized in New York and exchanged letters when Monroe returned to Chicago. She sent Stedman manuscripts of her poems, which he commented on briefly and enthusiastically, usually addressing her as “laureate” or “Sybilla.” Stedman selected five of Monroe’s poems, including an excerpt from “The Columbian Ode,” for *An American Anthology*. These meetings and exchanges took place during what Stedman dubbed a “twilight” and an “interregnum” for U.S. poetry. As I’ve already shown, whether or not this twilight was real or imagined depends on one’s perspective, and Monroe sometimes shared Stedman’s. The confluences between Monroe’s and Stedman’s accounts of poetic activity during this period helps to reveal the political and conceptual groundwork on which *Poetry* magazine was built. This groundwork did not, as some scholars have suggested, pit “stale formal convention” against the inventiveness of new modernist aesthetics. Indeed, given the variety of poetry written during the nineteenth century, it seems naïve to assume that “experimental” poetry written late in the century could only be modern. Rather, Monroe’s vision for *Poetry* involved re-working the definition of poetry and its status by positing a relationship between “old poetry” and the “new.”

Despite some skepticism about her role in the “new poetry,” Monroe has been credited as a patron of early modernist experiments like *vers libre* and Imagism. What

such accounts might miss, however, is Monroe's deep investment in preserving a particular definition of poetry and its attendant cultural functions. A working poet and writer herself, Monroe hoped that her magazine's policy of paying contributors would provide poets with the time and space to concentrate on their compositions; but she also held that the art of poetry transcended the material realms of economics. These investments have roots in the perceived crisis for poetry at the turn-of-the-century. I want to suggest that Monroe was conscious of the very tensions illuminated by Field's above verses and that this knowledge, which was exacerbated by her own frustrations as a struggling poet, shaped Monroe's developing definition of poetry and its cultural function. Such views would effectively structure *Poetry* and conversations about the magazine for years to come. Furthermore, Monroe helps to illuminate how the most pressing questions surrounding the supposed fall and rise of U.S. poetry at the turn-of-the-century are political ones. How could conservative nationalist views be maintained through a poetry that also responded to conditions of modernity? If, as Ann Massa argues, Monroe adhered to the dictum "form follows function," what functions did the forms of poetic innovation serve for her?

This question returns us to the excerpt from Monroe's "Modern Tendencies in Poetry" (or "Victorian Poets," if we go by her editorial markings) with which the chapter began. As mentioned, Monroe figures the passing of one great age of poetry, presumably one that took place between 1750 and 1850, and the waiting for another as a matter of life and death. Stedman makes a similar concession in *An American Anthology* when he assumes it would be "too much to expect that subsequent to the Victorian prime and the going out of its chief luminaries there should not be an interval of twilight" and puts forth

the hope that poetry will again “return to dignity and favor” (xix; xxxii).<sup>25</sup> Ostensibly, Monroe, Stedman, and other like-minded commentators are most concerned with the height and soul of poetry. Such concerns are, of course, politically charged: registering a resistance to the conditions of modernity and attempting to preserve cultural hierarchies in which poetry is the provenance of the elite and academic. The king, a monarch, becomes a stand-in for this elite; and the attempt to idealize the king—and thus poetry—is an attempt to maintain particular idyllic views of art and its transcendent status through the American ideal that culture would offer a “democratizing influence.”<sup>26</sup> The forms of Monroe’s commitment to Chicago as a growing metropolis exemplify this point. Massa cites Monroe’s “commitment to ‘the people’ [of Chicago] through her work at Hull House, her agit-prop poems ... and through her support for such populist poets as Lindsay, Masters, and Sandburg” (“Form” 118). But such a perspective relies on too narrow a conception of Monroe’s social and artistic investments. The view of poetry underwriting all of these activities was an ideal of poetry contains within it a certain idea of poetry in public—one equating the ideal of American democracy with the ideal poem.<sup>27</sup>

Monroe’s metaphor of the “king yielding up this throne” also constructs an “ideal of poetry” par excellence. The voices of the past are still present—it is just their forms that have vanished. Moreover, it is only on the manifest level that “old things are passing

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<sup>25</sup> If Monroe didn’t learn this story from Stedman, she certainly shared some of his views. In addition to the affinities between Monroe’s initial opening for “Modernist Tendencies in Poetry” and some of Stedman’s criticism, at one of Stedman’s gatherings in New York, the two took the same side in an argument about the merits of Robert Browning. Monroe insisted that she only “liked” Browning and wouldn’t even couple his name with Shelley’s. Stedman agreed, for “Shelley soared higher into the Emyprean” (qtd in *A Poet’s Life* 85). This defense of the Romantic poet capped off Monroe’s first published poem, a sonnet full of lavish praise titled “With Shelley’s Poems.”

<sup>26</sup> See Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Hill and Wang, 2007) (43).

<sup>27</sup> See Cohen’s “E.C. Stedman and the Invention of Victorian Poetry.”

away.” Below the surface—and underneath the metaphor of the king’s eminent death—is the supposition that the new forms of the next “mighty era” will fulfill the hopes of the past. Even if Monroe doesn’t seem to cling as tightly to Tennyson or Longfellow, Emerson or Arnold, as critics like Stedman, she does hold on to the same view of poetry’s purpose and status. That is, she continues to value poetry as a high cultural ideal that would cover over social hierarchies even as it maintains them. But she finds a way to make such ideals suitable to changing social realities. Monroe’s commitment to this definition of poetry complicates received narratives about *Poetry*’s position within the development of modernism.

The dying king returns in the inaugural issue of *Poetry, A Magazine of Verse*, published in October 1912. Even *Poetry*’s first guarantors would use palatial images to describe the potential impact of the magazine. With “much pleasure and satisfaction,” Arthur T. Aldis sent Monroe his first check for 50 dollars on July 18, 1912, “to found a home for American poetry—not, I hope, a ‘poor farm,’ but rather a ‘palace of delight’” (Aldis). Monroe’s first “Editorial Comment,” titled “As It Was,” tells the story of a man who, through wisdom, “strange cunning,” and leadership, becomes a great king. The king grows old and the people mourn his ill health while he mourns that his laws and deeds will vanish. “Yea, all these things have I done . . . and they shall perish with me,” the king tells his son, “My death is upon me, and I shall die, and the tribes I have welded together shall be broken apart, and the beasts shall win back their domain, and the green jungle shall overgrow my mansions” (20-21). The king’s son assures his father that his work will last, for he “will string thy deeds together in jeweled beads of perfect words that thy sons shall wear on their hearts forever” (21).

This king is recognizable as the “great king” from the first pages of “Modern Tendencies in Poetry.” And the metaphors for poetry—and for *Poetry*—are fairly obvious, especially when one keeps Monroe’s earlier manuscript in mind. Monroe’s idea for *Poetry* magazine was the product of rhetorically strategic narrative about the neglect of poetry, and she conceived it as “a modest effort to give to poetry her own place, her own voice” (“Motive” 27). But what conception or definition of poetry governs this venture? In “The Motive of the Magazine,” also included in the first issue of *Poetry*, Monroe posits that, of all the fine arts, poetry has been “left to shift for herself in a world unaware of its immediate and desperate need of her, a world whose great deeds, whose triumphs over matter, over the wilderness, over racial enmities and distances, require her ever-living voice to give them glory and glamour” (26). In this passage, Monroe provides a reading of “As It Was.” It was the old king who conquered the wilderness and “welded” all of the “tribes” together; it is the king’s son who continues this work by fitting his “speech to music” (20; 22). Both are the work of poetry—the former the work of poetry past, the latter the work of poetry present and future. These suppositions about poetry have their roots in an earlier tradition that viewed poetry as providing spiritual and moral guidance. Even the son’s work of stringing the king’s efforts together “in jeweled beads of perfect words” recalls the affective logic of nineteenth-century poetry anthologies, which often referred to the poems inside as jewels, gems, or treasures. Moreover, the fantasy that poetry could “weld tribes together”—that is, that it could close the distance between races and quell antagonisms—is the same fantasy conditioning Stedman’s desire to imagine “America” as a poem.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> The context of Monroe’s “Modern Tendencies in Poetry” manuscript and “As It Was” provides a different reading of “The Motive of the Magazine” than Newcomb’s in “*Poetry*’s Opening Door.”

Importantly, by 1912, Monroe's narrative now contains the story of a generational shift (the king will die and must yield up his throne) as well as a continuation (the king's son will keep his laws and deeds in place through song). Several literary scholars assume that by the time Monroe was seeking out contributors for the inaugural issue of *Poetry* she was far removed from Stedman's circle and almost wholly invested in Ezra Pound and Amy Lowell and in promoting Imagism and free verse. Such a narrative does fit with Monroe's own frustrations at the time.<sup>29</sup> During the first part of the twentieth century, she was disappointed at not being able to publish her own free verse poems, and she also seems to sublimate this frustration through her admiration of Pound. When Monroe read Pound's *Personae* and *Exultations* in London in 1910, she was "outraged that an American poet of such promise was not published at home" ("Monroe's Entrepreneurial Triumphs" 64). When Monroe began distributing her circular for *Poetry* and seeking subscribers and contributors, she contacted Pound and asked for his cooperation. In his reply letter of August 1912, Pound set Monroe on the task of keeping poetry alive, asking: "But? Can you teach the American poet that poetry *is* an *art*, an art with a technique, with media, an art that must be in constant flux, a constant change of manner

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Newcomb reads "The Motive of the Magazine" as evidence of Monroe imagining a poetry that would respond to the complex conditions of modernity. As I see it, even if this is the case, Monroe's vision of a poetry that responded to modern conditions is wrapped up in the turn-of-the-century ideals for poetry she shared with Stedman. Moreover, I tend to disagree with the notion that responding to the technological developments of modernity necessarily constitutes a "modernist" poetics. See, for example, Yopie Prins's reading of the relationship between Robert Browning's Victorian poetics and the mechanisms of the railroad and the phonograph in "Robert Browning, Transported by Meter" (*The Traffic in Poems: Nineteenth-Century Poetry and Transatlantic Exchange*. Ed. Meredith L. McGill. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2008. 205-230).

<sup>29</sup> The first years of the twentieth century were generally uncomfortable for Monroe—she called them "dark days" in her autobiography (186). Monroe found that her teaching and reading styles did not fit the expected style, observing that her "style as a reader, always simple, rhythmical, and observant of the line, was too diametrically opposed to the melodramatic 'elocutionary' methods which were still debauching public taste." But at the same time, Monroe's poems were sent back to her because, as one editor explained, they weren't "progressive" and were too "graceful and delicate" (*A Poet's Life* 186-88).

if it is to live?” (*Letters of Ezra Pound* 9; original emphasis). Can you teach them, in other words, that poetry is a living thing.

Considering the metaphors of life and death Monroe uses in the examples above, it appears that this was the task she also set for herself. But not in the way Pound would have had it. Pound’s interest in *Poetry* magazine seems related to his increasing investment in making certain poetic texts available.<sup>30</sup> In his 1933 “Praefatio” to the *Active Anthology*, Pound would write: “If you propose to have any live literature of the past kept in circulation, available (flat materialism) in print at prices the eager reader can pay, there has got to be more attention to the best and to the basic” (23). That certain works from the past are “live literature” and therefore should be kept alive in the culture through reprint and circulation resonates with Pound’s dictum that “[l]iterature is news that STAYS news” (*ABC of Reading* 29). Pound hopes that Monroe will select the best poetry, in order to educate readers that poetry can be alive. Monroe would refer back to Pound in editorial comments about the aesthetic and political functions of poetry, quoting his maxim that “[i]f poetry is to be alive and not dead, there must always be a revolution going on” (qtd in “Poets as Leaders” 331).

Reading Monroe against Pound is one way of illuminating the cultural work Monroe has in mind and her own tenuous status in relationship to dominant historical narratives of the time. On the surface level, Monroe’s relationship to modernity is marked by anxiety about the relationship between the present and the past; in this reading, her cultural work is to sustain the still-living corpse of poetry’s past glories. This is where Monroe aligns with the trajectory of Stedman’s narrative of the “twilight” of poetry.

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<sup>30</sup> This is evidenced by pedagogical texts like “How to Read” (1929) and *ABC of Reading* (1934) as well as anthologies like *Des Imagistes* (1914), *Catholic Anthology* (1915), *Profile* (1932), and *Active Anthology* (1933).

Here, Monroe's narrative of the declension and coming death of the king fits with conservative anxieties about the decline, or even death, of poetry. However, as discussed, the parameters of Monroe's own narrative, which marks a dying king's transfiguration into a dutiful son, makes an important amendment to perspectives like Stedman's. While the terminus of Stedman's narrative is located at the end poetry's current form, Monroe's fantasy passes through this closure (what we might consider a historical break) and into a new realm. I argue that this shift in emphasis within the traditional fantasy space of poetry's death is not merely a teleological extension from the "death" of nineteenth-century verse culture to the inevitable beginning of modernism because it extends past the death of the king. Monroe does seem to be moving toward Pound's camp. But unlike Pound—with his dictum "make it new"—she does not imagine this shift in emphasis as a historical break nor as a direct reaction against nineteenth-century verse culture. Rather, she is looking toward a rebirth of the past within the new. In Monroe's story, the king *must die* so that a new kingdom can be resurrected from his remains and so that an ideal can be created in the birth of the new. In other words, she idealizes the past and she creates a new way to idealize poetry (and, by extension, *Poetry*).

It is this very move, in my view, that effects the rather tenuous status of Monroe's relationship to the development of modernism. While Monroe aligns herself with contemporary poetic movements, something is askew. Monroe's seeming out-of-joint stems from the fact that her fantasies about poetry operate on different levels. More specifically, her later emphasis on transition through death (that is, from the king to the son), as opposed to death itself as an end, dialectically changes the meaning of her



original fantasy about the king's death. Monroe's narrative of the son continuing the work of the king does not just stress the doom and gloom of the demise of life; it also opens up the more ambiguous space where the son carries on the work of poetry. While such work might not go as far as Pound's "new," it does emphasize the life of the old in the new. The moment when Monroe rewrites her story of the king's death—the inaugural issue of *Poetry* magazine—becomes the groundwork off of which Monroe not only idealizes the past but also synthesizes it into her vision for poetry's future.

So far, Monroe's stories about the life and death of poetry have provided another look at the relationship between the Victorian and the modern, the old and the new. But how will the stories Monroe tells about the life and death of poetry play out after her own death? And who will claim the right to tell them? In the next section, I draw on archival materials from Harriet Monroe's personal papers in order to explore these questions. While it might seem a bit elliptical to move from Monroe to those who mourned her, such a move illuminates the contours of my arguments in an original way, showing how anxieties about the status of poetry travel across the century but also change slightly in the context of different literary historiographies and reading cultures.

### **Monroe Gets What She Wants**

In 1936, at age 76, Harriet Monroe travelled to Buenos Aires as one of the U.S. delegates to the international P.E.N. writer's congress. Once the conference sessions were over, she impulsively changed her plans, delaying her return home to trek through the Andes. "I am all of a tremble before confessing my latest extravagance," she wrote in a letter to the *Poetry* office, "I am going to take the Inca trip along with a nice English

author, a P.E.N. member, Norah Rowan Hamilton!” She hoped the other editors could “carry on a little longer without her,” as “the Inca ruins are the one thing, after the Andes, I have most wanted to see on this big continent” (“Her Last Letters” 167). Monroe suffered from a cerebral hemorrhage on her journey through the mountains. She died at a clinic in Arequipa, Peru, on September 26, 1936.

In newspapers and letters alike, many commented on how “poetically” Monroe died: during a trip to a poetry conference, at the top of a mountain, and at the “summit of her career,” as the *Chicago Daily News* punned (North). But Monroe had been imagined dead before. In 1926, Marion Strobel, one of *Poetry*’s associate editors (1919-1924) and eventual co-editor (1943-1949), wrote an article about Monroe for a *Chicago Herald and Examiner* series featuring “Chicagoans Doing Great Things.” Strobel’s article praises Monroe’s service to poetry, poets, and Chicago and laments that her work is seldom appreciated. To illustrate the point, at the close of her piece, Strobel reprints her poem, “To a Friend, which she wrote about Monroe after noticing how she sat “overlooked” in a corner at a *Poetry* party.<sup>31</sup> The poem is meant to reiterate the article’s point that Monroe is “taken for granted” by poets—that “[s]he is like the sun—whose beautiful course they are aware of, but too frequently ignore” (7). And yet, the poem is actually a bit eerie: it renders Monroe out-of-date and out-of-place, imagining the living Monroe in a funerary setting.

You have been in this room too long. You sit  
Forgotten on the old rococo chair  
In the dim corner. Candles should be there,  
Candles and dusty censers should be lit,  
Should throw a faded light upon your bloom

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<sup>31</sup> Strobel’s projection of Monroe’s feelings fits Monroe’s own characterization of Strobel’s verse. In her essay “Voices of Women” she classifies her as a member of the “objective” group that prefers to express “the emotions of others” as opposed to “their own emotions” (*Poets and Their Art* 125).

Of damask and your weariness of face.  
Oh, you have lived too long! There is no place  
For such as you within this crowded room  
Where people come to bicker and drink tea,  
And sometimes dare, between a bandied word,  
To tell of you—as though you'd come to be  
Another fable, lovely and absurd,  
Without much meaning or reality;  
As though you were not here, and had not heard. (7)

Monroe deserves attention, but such attention is paid with the accoutrements of a memorial service; her weary face should be illumined with candles and circled with the smoke of burning incense. If the impetus for Strobel's poem is the feeling that Monroe is too often ignored, it's conceit is that there is "no place" for the *Poetry* editor at the proverbial party, amidst the bickering and banter. She is almost like a corpse propped up in the "dim corner"—the party's attendants "daring" to speak *of* her but never *to* her.

Morton Dauwen Zabel, another of *Poetry*'s associate editors and Monroe's successor, also acknowledged Monroe's not fitting in to the poetry scene when he penned the last chapter of her posthumously published autobiography. Reflecting on the last fifteen years of Monroe's life, Zabel writes: "Her enthusiasm for the poets of a new decade never waned, though she found the post-war spirit a far more difficult one to accept than that of the years of poetic revivalism and experimentation that had followed the publication of *Poetry*'s first issue in October, 1912" (*A Poet's Life* 429-30). Perhaps this is what Strobel meant when she wrote: "There is no place / For such as you within this crowded room" (7). Like Zabel's biographical account, Strobel's poem suggests a sense of Monroe's separation from the poetry scene—or it's gradual separation from her—and so it lights candles around Monroe's tired face and puts a rococo coffin where her corner chair would be.

Somewhat ironically, Strobel uses the imaginary scene of Monroe's death in much the same way that Monroe employed metaphors of poetry's death (that is, the king's death) in the examples above: to codify a particular moment or idea about the art of poetry by infusing the present with the spirit and vitality of the past. While Strobel's and Zabel's suggestions that Monroe is out of place because she belongs to an earlier moment might seem to intimate that they—and the rest of the poetry scene—are progressing while she merely grows “too old,” perhaps their descriptions exonerate the very past Monroe ostensibly belongs to and therefore represents. Strobel even commemorates Monroe using a traditional sonnet form; and she places this “God-Parent to All U.S. Poets”—as she refers to Monroe in the article's title—on a throne made in the ornate rococo style. The prose that frames the reprint of Strobel's sonnet for Monroe continues to emphasize the ways in which Monroe is not out of place or time but actually vital to contemporary poets and poetry. And the last line of the article reiterates how the fantasy of Monroe's death keeps Monroe's service to poetry from becoming merely “another fable”: “But if she were no longer here, how keenly the poets would be aware of it!” (7).

The funerary images and exclamations that close Strobel's 1926 article prefigure the ways in which Monroe's September 1936 death would be used to project more generalized anxieties about the status of American poetry in the 1930s. In a way, it was easy to conflate Monroe's death with the death of poetry because she was such a great patron of the art, and because she represented one of the most well known mechanisms for its production and circulation. The figure of Monroe was used in the service of a traditional view of poetry, one that elevates the art to an idealized and transcendent status.

In a strange twist, when Monroe dies, she gets what she wants. First prefigured as an imaginary funeral (in Strobel's poem) and then as the death of *Poetry* magazine (in the worried discourses of the 1930s), Monroe's actual death acts as a *mis en scene* that allows old fantasies about poetry to be sustained amidst the social and economic crises of the 1930s.

In 1933, the World's Fair returned to Chicago. At the same moment, Monroe herself was struggling to reconcile poetry with the contemporary conditions that she framed in terms of "power" and "progress." Her February 1933 editorial, "The Age of Power," expresses her confusion about the new and complex web of relationships between "mechanics," "esthetics," and "ethics" (269). She grapples with the question of what the basic conditions will be for the poet and for poetry itself, especially as it relates to changes in labor conditions and "leisure." In June 1933, in her editorial for the "Century of Progress" issue of *Poetry*, Monroe approaches related questions, this time attempting to delineate modern material realities and the imaginative realities of the poet. At the same time she laments that many poets are forgetting "the larger aspects of the modern world," she differentiates between the physical manifestations of that world and "the spirit" (155). As ever, Monroe believes that a transcendental realm of the spirit and imagination lives above and supersedes the progress of the so-called "machine age" or "age of power." This is evidenced in her evaluation of the "Century of Progress" issue's prize poem, Paul Engle's "America Remembers," which Monroe praises for acknowledging something about "this age we live in" as well as for containing "passages of high poetic beauty" (157). Despite her call for poets to develop a greater awareness of

their age, Monroe's assessment reiterates the idea that poetry belongs in the "heights empyrean."

Monroe explored these tensions in her own poem, "Chicago 1933," which she wrote for the return of the World's Fair to her hometown. Significantly shorter than "The Columbian Ode," the poem reiterates how Monroe continues to sustain a consistent ideal of poetry by inserting that past ideal into new forms. The old edifice of the 1893 fair is rebuilt to accommodate new dreamers and singers:

Down the long avenues of change  
The spoil of centuries they [the nations] bring  
Into a palace brave and strange  
Where the new era's dreamers sing.  
Keen be our ears to hear that song  
Through the loud crash of toppling years—  
Faint is the sound that will be strong  
When the armed world forgets its fears.  
Now while the hero-mind of man  
Is venturing through the dark unknown,  
You light the paces of his plan  
Where the towers gather for his throne. (147)

Even the metaphor of an old king and his singing son returns, but this time it is displaced onto the image of Chicago constructing exhibitions and opening its doors to the world again. The song that one strains to hear "through the loud crash of toppling years" seems to be the great song of the past, echoing in the new, strange palace of the present and sung by "the new era's dreamers." Once again, Monroe narrates a quest through a "dark unknown"—a wilderness, to recall her earlier example—that is ultimately ordered by a king, on his throne. The poem ends with a more overt indication of this continuation of the past and present with a reference to the star Arcturus, whose light was used to open the 1933 fair; Arcturus is symbolically significant because fair organizers believe that the star began its journey about the time of the 1893 fair.

Monroe believed that the excitement of the 1933 World's Fair "seemed to shout a gay challenge to the Depression" (152). But this is not to forget that during the Depression years *Poetry* magazine was threatened by financial collapse. *Poetry* and its struggles created an opportunity for mainstream commentators to weigh in on the general presence and vitality of poetry in the United States. No commentator wanted *Poetry* to die the "little death." And yet, the possibility of the magazine's death also created the space to praise, and even exalt, the magazine and the art it supported. For instance, a newspaper clipping titled "Poetry and Calamity," saved in Monroe's personal papers, explains how a certain number of new *Poetry* subscriptions are necessary "if the magazine is not to die," and it continues to frame the magazine's fate in life or death terms. The brief article reports that: "One critic said that the death of the little magazine would be a national calamity." A 1932 guest editorial in the *Chicago Daily News* by Horace J. Bridges, leader of the Chicago Ethical Society and author of *On Becoming an American* (1918), reiterates this point while also drawing a connection between the fate of poetry and the actual national calamity of the Depression. The title of the editorial—"Shall 'Poetry' Disappear?"—is not only ominous; it also equates the potential end of *Poetry* magazine with the disappearance of the art of poetry itself. Bridges's editorial begins by admitting that "[n]obody really enjoys a depression" because "[i]t forces us all to economize." According to Bridges, however, the real danger of current financial worries is that they put everyone at risk of forgetting what is most important, and he suggests that: "the worst of the trouble is that in our economies we generally lose our heads and start to save on the wrong things." In Bridges's estimation, the "wrong things" to save on are the arts—which provide for "the life of the mind and the spirit." *Poetry* is

the example that makes this argument. To allow the magazine to cease publication “on the eve of our celebration of the first Century of Progress would be little less than tragic,” Bridges writes. “It would be almost a confession to the world that Chicago is less concerned about its cultural life than about the material things it produces and the economic wealth arising from them.”

The obvious fallacy of Bridges’s argument is the assumption that cultural life and economic life exist on separate planes. But doesn’t such a separation also help to maintain a fantasy about poetry—that it exists on a “higher plane” than the toils of everyday life? In this sense, one function of imagining the potential death or disappearance of poetry (or *Poetry*) might be an attempt to, using Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, keep the literary plane away from the economic plane. In “The Field of Cultural Production,” Bourdieu posits a chiasmic relationship between the field of literary and artistic production and the field of economics. As cultural life changed in the United States first as a result of modernization and industrialization, then because of the horrors of the First World War, and then as the Great Depression brought economic issues into sharp relief, fantasies about poetry were refocused to consider these contexts. One way of maintaining poetry’s transcendent status seems to be to keep it from crossing into economics. Thus, even when commentators state that they want poetry to be seen as a dynamic part of social and cultural life, this desire is a very specific one—for, in this view, poetry should maintain all of the cultural and symbolic prestige it enjoys as separate from economic and social realities. It is in this way that, even though commentators like Bridges ostensibly don’t want *Poetry* to die, they can mobilize the fantasy of the magazine’s death to preserve old ideals of poetry. As the Depression



dramatizes, Monroe's magazine circulates in the literary marketplace and relies on the financial contributions of guarantors and subscribers. It is, in short, a business. If new readers are consumers participating in that very marketplace—and “buying” modernism's new aesthetic—then purveyors of the old, like Bridges, reject the market in toto, which includes fantasizing about the death of the magazine. In Bridge's terms—which were also Monroe's in the 1890s and early 1900s—poetry is a cultural symbol of a city's progress, and *Poetry* the vehicle for that progress, but it is also must be somehow separate from the “racket” of that progress and its politics.<sup>32</sup>

Monroe's death generated responses from mainstream commentators that were structurally similar to commentaries on *Poetry* magazine's financial woes. While many larger newspapers focused on the facts surrounding Monroe's passing and the quantifiable successes of the magazine she founded, including that *Poetry* survived the Depression, many articles and obituaries took Monroe's death as the opportunity to once again weigh in on the status of U.S. poetry. This time, however, the outlook was less grim. For example, Geoffrey Parsons wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune*: “Poetry is not the stepchild of America that it was when Miss Monroe founded her rash venture in 1912.” And Martha Spencer wrote in the *Hartford Times* “Poet's Corner” that *Poetry* “probably helped more poets to find public appreciation than any other one person has ever done.” Smaller local publications tended to be even more dramatic about the effects of Monroe's passing. A *Kansas City Times* article included a fictional scene in which Morton Zabel looks around the empty *Poetry* office repeating the refrain “a Godmother of poets gone” and reflects on how it was harder to get poetry printed before Monroe

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<sup>32</sup> “Racket” is Bridges's term; he writes that if *Poetry* ceased publication, it “would add to the unfavorable impression the world has formed of our city from what it has read of our rackets and criminal gangs, and our unsavory politics, the odor of which remains, unfortunately, after its causes have been removed.”

founded her magazine 24 years ago. Richmond Anthony, who penned the *Niagara Falls Gazette*'s "Poetry Promenade" column, praised Monroe's life's work: "A great many of her years were dedicated to the restoring of poetry to its proper place and dignity in the life of the nation," he wrote, adding that "American poetry owes much of its contemporary development, broad recognition, and high status to her militant, unceasing efforts." Broadly speaking, these were the stories Monroe coached *Poetry*'s followers to tell: that her magazine of verse provided a space and public for an art that was too often neglected and that her idea spurred the "poetry renaissance" in America.

As I have already argued, Monroe's conceptualization of the relationship between the "old" and the "new," mapped onto a continuum of life and death, reveals a more complicated and disjointed landscape than Monroe's progressive narrative allows. Indeed, Anthony's editorial note on Monroe's death, written for a local newspaper, takes one of Pound's statements on poetry's life and death—"If poetry is to be alive and not dead, there must always be a revolution going on"—as an epigraph for its remembrance of Monroe. But it is difficult to discern what Anthony and others found "revolutionary" in Monroe's legacy. Monroe's friend Inez Cunningham Stark wrote for the *Herald Examiner* that Monroe

fought valiantly for the life of that oldest branch of the literary tree, in grave danger of being cut off to make room for the building of that great structure of science and commerce which is our modern world. It was a critical endeavor of no mean size to make the world accept the new paths the poets were taking—this she accomplished almost single-handedly in America. (Stark)

In this account of Monroe's legacy, the *Poetry* editor supported and promoted "new paths" for poetry, but these new directions are framed as continuous with a long-standing tradition, a fight for "the life of that oldest branch of the literary tree." Here, Monroe's

accomplishments rest on the fact that she “saved poetry’s life” because she managed to procure some distance between the art and the modern world. Such a reading of Monroe’s career contributes to an understanding of poetry as somehow transcending material reality—or, at least, as separate from the realities of “science and commerce” and, if we take Stark’s comments to their end, modernity. In Stark’s formulation, the category or definition of poetry remains stable despite historical change; it is merely up to patrons of verse like Monroe to fight for it. Monroe’s obituary in the *Chicago Daily News* makes a similar suggestion, framing *Poetry* magazine as a vehicle for transmitting and thus preserving the work of the past. *Poetry* and other “magazines of verse” are imperative because they act “as flying fields for the testing of wings.” While not all of the poetry published will be remembered, “here and yonder may emerge an ace whose flight of song will stir the soul of the nation and leave its echoes on the ether of the centuries.” In other words, the magazine is an empty vessel that elevates and preserves the art of poetry; and for this reason, “‘Poetry’ survives its founder; its work unfinished should go on in her spirit.”

In the articles and obituaries cited above, Monroe’s death creates an occasion to revivify a traditional view of poetry that preserves the art’s traditional status. The appeal to such a definition of poetry is further evidenced—and made more apparent—by a piece of newspaper verse, a sonnet “To Harriet Monroe,” published in the *Chicago Tribune*. The sonnet commemorates Monroe as a brave pioneer who made the high art of poetry visible and available to poets and audiences alike, but it also frames her as an amateur (“a volunteer”) more than a professional:

The rhythm'd words she loved came from her heart.  
Parnassus scaled, she threw a saving rope

To those who blindly stumbled, gave them hope,  
Revealed to them the glistening peak of Art.  
When worthy cause arose she took a part;  
A doughty volunteer when called to cope  
With dragons that beset the slope;  
Completing anything she chose to start.  
No monument escapes the hand of time  
Save that abiding deep within the soul.  
She lives again in love-inspired themes.  
Perhaps new heights are given to her climb;  
Perhaps beyond the silence lies her goal—  
“Hush me, O slumbering mountains—Send me dreams.” (Marquart)

This sonnet’s octave contains a few overt assumptions about the art of poetry: that it is metered (composed of “rhythmed words”); that it is rooted in individual expression (“comes from the heart”); and that a poem or person evincing or recognizing these qualities illuminates the high plane on which poetry exists. Monroe reveals the high art of poetry to those who would follow her to Parnassus’s summit—and she fights the dragons along the way. These assumptions about poetry are carried into the sestet in order to suggest the ways in which Monroe’s death does not rupture the poetry landscape; rather, it allows for a continual climb up to “the glistening peak of Art.” Monroe’s spirit continues to live in poems-in-progress and poems-to-be-written, and these works might aspire to reach beyond Monroe’s silence. In the meantime, the ghost-editor scales new heights.

In recent years, poetry scholars have recuperated and studied amateur verses, like the above sonnet by Margaret Marquart, in order to reveal a more complex and variegated landscape of U.S. poetry. Many such studies take up the historicizing impulse of the “new American Studies”—oftentimes in the vein of scholars of the American novel like Jane Tompkins, Cathy Davidson, and Janice Radway—in order to re-frame the history of American poetry along the lines of popular taste and alternative sites of

reception like the home, the civic ceremony, or the schoolroom. In a similar way, U.S. newspaper reports on Monroe's death, coupled with responses by poets and appreciators of poetry that have been banished to archival obscurity, might seem to complicate current understandings of the development of American poetry by showing how Monroe's legacy functions differently in the context of diverse reading cultures. Indeed, at the same time that modernist giants like Pound and Wallace Stevens penned remembrances for *Poetry's* memorial issue to Monroe, the Martha MacLear Poetry Group of the American Association of University Women "gave [an] afternoon to a review of Miss Monroe's notable service to the cause of poetry." One member read aloud from Monroe's editorials and poems and then read a poem by Emily Dickinson that "expresses . . . the poignant and personal loss we can have in the death of one we have never met in the body." Another member read from Vachel Lindsay (with credit to Monroe for discovering him, of course), and Ruth Evelyn Henderson, who submitted the letter, closed the meeting by reading the poems of Monroe's that she'd selected for inclusion in her *The New Poetry* anthology.

The sense of personal connection to Monroe conveyed by the proceedings of the Martha MacLear poetry group demonstrate how poetry often functioned locally to create bonds between members of a group or a community. Another *Poetry* subscriber expressed a similar connection to the *Poetry* editor, writing to Zabel that it "shocked" her to learn of Monroe's death. "H.M. supplied what I could not see. When she spoke of Vachel Lindsay (a household name of ours) I saw a tender smile steal over her face . . . She has gone and her works do follow her. I didn't know I cared so much!" Such readers often held up poetry as a cultural and national ideal; and the imagined bond to Monroe

and her magazine is metonymic of the broader idea that poetry could meld local and national communities. This facet of the response to Monroe's death shows how unknown poets and readers of poetry were working out ideas about poetry—both in relationship to and apart from the earlier modernist movement. Indeed, many “amateur” or “middle class” readers discerned Monroe's legacy differently than other mainstream or literary commentators. O. LeRoy Walter, Pastor of the Van Brunt Boulevard Presbyterian Church in Kansas, City, Missouri, sent the *Poetry* editors a copy of his presentation to the local Quill Club. While Walter, like several other columnists and reporters, mentions that Monroe's magazine first published Pound, he is more boastful of that fact that the sentimental “‘Trees’ by Joyce Kilmer first saw the light of day” in the pages of *Poetry* magazine.

Several admiring comments about Monroe's person and her legacy were never published, but filed away at the *Poetry* office. “Another ‘obscure writer’ now takes pen in hand,” Clara Williams Smith wrote Morton Zabel, in a letter dated roughly two months after Monroe's death, “to add one more expression of regret and appreciation to those that have, undoubtedly, been deluging the office of *Poetry* since the announcement of Miss Monroe's death.” Letters by now unknown contributors expressed a deep sense of sadness, often including anecdotes about Monroe's response to submitted poems. They recall deep excitement over acceptances and a sense of her keen but kind editorial eye when remembering rejections. Sometimes over the top—Miriam Allen deFord wrote that Monroe was often “my last barrier against complete despair of myself”—the letters paint Monroe as a great encourager but also a shrewd teacher, always full of youth and verve.

Perhaps one of the most poignant and telling of the letters and poems sent to *Poetry* in the months following Monroe's death was submitted by Sister Thomas Aquinas, an occasional contributor. The poem is a sonnet, like several of the amateur verses I've read above. But it is also different: not only is Aquinas's sonnet not as neat—it is fully of ellipses and enjambed lines—but it also takes the reading of Monroe's life and death to another literary plane. The poem was inspired by a memory from Monroe's 1934 visit to Rosary College. "She had been remote and cool about the art treasures we have," Aquinas remembers, "but as we passed the swimming pool where a girl was diving from the spring board, Harriet Monroe gave the one involuntary word I heard her speak during her visit." This moment, rendered in sonnet form, provides a way of linking Monroe's death to larger transformations and ruptures in the literary-historical landscape of the 1930s. The poem reads:

A mountain was the place for you to die.  
Now savor to new depths those moments rare  
Then your true eyes and ears exultingly  
Caught from swift joy and held for sense to share  
Delight with words...Once, glancing, you paused by  
A swimming-pool. The sunlight glistening where,  
Clearing the board, a girl was diving high,  
Made one with you that bright, poised body there....  
And even now I hear your sudden cry—  
"How beautiful!" That moment has no past;  
It deepens with your life, while urgently  
Your spirit measures full delight at last  
And, poising beyond peaks where airplanes fly,  
Plunges to Beauty. Words, not you, have passed. (Aquinas)

As the sonnet reveals, the "one involuntary word" Monroe spoke that day was "How beautiful!" This anecdote in mind, it is difficult to discern what words have passed—the words from the memory or poetic language itself. What is striking about this particular poem, especially in relation to those above, is that, in the end, language dies while

Monroe lives. Evoking Monroe's heavenly body, where her "spirit measures full delight at last" and "pois[es] beyond peaks where airplanes fly," Aquinas's sonnet opens a space for the transformation of language through its passing. While other mainstream commentaries on Monroe's death sustain a particular vision for poetry that allows the art to maintain a certain type of imaginary space in the present, the words passing at the end of Aquinas's sonnet foreclose such a space. Death, in this sense, does not provide the opportunity for exaltation but opens up a space for transformation.

Of course, poetry had already been undergoing significant transformations during the 1930s. Along with these multifarious local and personal responses and the responses of critics loosely affiliated with *Poetry*, there was another horizon of poetry (and life or death, for that matter)—one Monroe seemed resistant to in the last years of her life. The emergence of new social poetics and their publication in Leftist magazines like *New Masses*, *Dynamo*, and *Partisan Review* during the 1930s provides a very different political and literary ground on which to consider Monroe's and others' narratives about poetry's status. Broadening the historical and literary framework of the first three sections of this chapter by considering Monroe's relationship to burgeoning Left movements further illuminates the forms and functions of Monroe's ideal of poetry. While Monroe was often antagonistic to Left poets and critics during the 1930s, in something of a twist, her life and death reshapes the ground for interpreting the work of Left poets that also provides something of a critique of current critical tendencies.

### **Who's Left?**



Imagine Monroe in a very different New York City than the one where she attended Stedman's famous dinner parties in the 1880s. When Monroe was en route to South America as one of the U.S. delegates to the International P.E.N. Writers' Congress in the summer of 1936, she met George Dillon in New York. During the stopover, the two attended a performance of "Injunction Granted," a living newspaper presented by the Federal Theatre Project. Dillon described the play as "an attempt to dramatize the history of capital-versus-labor," and it spurred a conversation between Monroe and him about "art-versus-propaganda, and that led to a conversation about communist poets and poets in general, which she continued, later, over a glass of orange-juice in a little bar across the street from the hotel" (Dillon). I open this section with Dillon's letter because it helps to begin telling Monroe's story again—and the story of her death again—this time through the lens of the emergence and influence of radical politics and culture during the 1930s, what Michael Denning describes as the "cultural front that reshaped American culture" (xvi).

Monroe's travels from the "Hog Butcher for the World" to South America amount to more than a romantic climb to an Andean summit. As mentioned, Monroe travelled to South America to represent the U.S. at the International P.E.N. Writers' Congress in Buenos Aires. In letters home to her family and the *Poetry* office, she conveys her interest in South American literary life as well as excitement over planned events. But her letters also intimate that she was less than pleased with the conference's actual proceedings. Her primary and repeated complaint was that "poetry's time was stolen by metaphysics." Or, as she put it in a letter to her family: "politics and split-hair metaphysics have run away with scheduled programs and nothing much literary has been

done.” Monroe’s successor and associate editors might have tempered the tone of her letters when they were included in the memorial issue of *Poetry* magazine. In a letter to Zabel, dated September 11, 1936, from Buenos Aires, she follows complaints about “flabby chairmen” (the chairmen are described in the *Poetry* reprints as “inefficient”) with this report:

This morning was to have begun with speeches on the future of poetry, for which I wrote a brief oration to tell the ignorant world about our renaissance. But did poetry get a chance against a hold-over discussion of the which-and-whatness of reason and intelligence? Never a minute, and I doubt if we are squeezed into the final over-crowded session. (Letter to Morton Zabel)

These complaints are reiterated in another September 11 letter:

Our literary Congress is almost over—only one more session on Monday. The chief need of such an affair is good chairmanship, and ours, changing at every session, has been flabby to the last degree since the first two or three sessions, so that politics and wordiness have wasted most of the time, and literary topics scheduled for discussion will be left high and dry. (Letter to Family)

Monroe’s complaints from the P.E.N. conference have a familiar ring. Once again, poetry is pushed to the side; the art doesn’t stand a chance against other forms of discourse.

Literature, too—which we might read here as poetry—is “left high and dry” for “wordiness” and political discussion (or wordy political discussion). Monroe’s notes indicate that she did get a “word in” at the last session on the “Future of Poetry,” but she doesn’t elaborate on the specifics of the conversation. She only notes that the New Zealand delegate “wants the old forms” and that the delegate from India “speaks for unwritten poetry.”

Monroe’s complaints about the conference proceedings are surprising given the debates and conversations she records in her P.E.N. Conference notes and her South American diary. For instance, Monroe summarizes German delegate Emil Ludwig’s

report for one of the sessions in her diary: “Emil Ludwig says German authors are prisoners or emigrants. Liberty of speech forbidden—some of Goethe banished from schools. His own books burned. 90 P.E.N. German—mostly in jail, tho only 6 or 8 are communists.” *La Razon*, the Buenos Aires newspaper that covered the congress extensively, quotes Ludwig as expressing what “luck” it was to “escape Europe” (“Es una suerta” 7). In another set of notes, Monroe records that H. Levick, listed in the program as the Yiddish delegate, speaks of how “lit has been degraded in many countries—keeps quiet when Hitlerism burns books & c. terrible situation in Poland.” Looking at Monroe’s notes and reports published in *La Razon*, it appears that specific discussions of political crises, like the terror in Europe, were linked to broader discussions about the relationship between art and politics, the role of the writer in times of crisis, and the relationship of literature to “the masses.” At several points during the conference, delegates called for renewed freedoms of expression as well as an official peace resolution. One of the most outspoken delegates (at least according to Monroe), the Italian futurist F.T. Marinetti, was challenged by several other delegates and, at one point, asked to denounce his writings praising war. The nearness of the P.E.N. conference to international politics is visually apparent on the front page of *La Razon* for September 7. The lead story reports on serious incidents in San Sebastián and the continuing violence in Spain; across the bottom of the page, three photographs depict three moments with the P.E.N. Club (“Tres Momentos” 1).

Despite this, Monroe’s thoughts—and complaints—turn mostly to poetry and to whether or not she’ll have the chance “to tell the ignorant world” about a poetry renaissance that had already passed. After pages of notes that included reports on the

impact of war, imprisonment, and Hitlerism on international literary life, Monroe writes that, in one of the last sessions, a Brazilian delegate talked “on help to writers—at last!”—as if such help would be tantamount to paying poets several dollars for their contributions to their magazines. While such accounts from the archives cannot reproduce Monroe’s exact feelings and positions, they do paint a portrait of the *Poetry* editor that is borderline absurd: a frail woman with bright eyes, almost a laced-up ghost of an earlier time, quietly complaining to a world at war that poetry can’t get a word in edgewise when politics and metaphysics are on the table. But even if it is absurd, this picture of Monroe begins to illuminate how Monroe viewed poetry’s status in relation to actual political conflicts and transformations. In fact, her problems with the P.E.N. Conference probably would not have surprised some of her own poets who became disillusioned with the magazine during the early-to-mid 30s.

However happily Monroe sipped juice and talked poetry and politics with George Dillon before she embarked on her trip to Buenos Aires, these very topics of conversation had caused some controversy around her and her magazine throughout the 1930s. As scholars like Alan Filreis have shown, during the 30s Left poets—many who had published in *Poetry*—decried the magazine’s editorial stance. For example, Filreis quotes a letter Communist Party member and poet Orrick Johns wrote Monroe in 1932, so vitriolic and revealing that it is worth quoting again in full:

I think the poetry published in POETRY including my own lately is tripe. I think POETRY ought to end its career. Why? Because it cannot see the turn. The turn has come. In what direction is this turn? In the direction of positive social necessity . . . . My poetry, all my life, has at least been incitation to action. The men of fame of my time have always been Professors of Triviality, masters of false gods, seekers of cold, passionless finesse, Yeats, Eliot, whoever. They are dead. And well dead. And dead with Pound on top of them . . . . You have tried to destroy me. You have sabotaged me with cheap, low faint praise. I will outlive you all. Why?

.... Because I am still young and can sing the working class!!! (qtd in *Modernism from Right to Left* 189)

Filreis points out that Johns once wrote Monroe in praise of her magazine; but by the 1930s he was one of several poets who felt the editor's pencil was too quick to strike radical content out of *Poetry* (189). Johns's accusing Monroe of not seeing that "the turn has come" for poetry is somewhat consistent with Zabel's more sympathetic account of Monroe's place in the poetry scene later in her life. When, after Monroe's death, Zabel attempted to explain her difficulty "keeping up" with the changing poetry climate in the United States, he cited the "renewed spirit of social criticism" that "was to instruct a new generation of American poets" in the 1930s (*A Poet's Life* 430). The difference between the two accounts stems from the different political positions out of which they were written. Indeed, at the same time that U.S. newspapers opined that the dissolution of *Poetry* would be tantamount to a national calamity, self-consciously political writers like Johns lambasted the magazine for rendering itself irrelevant in the face of large-scale social changes and movements. Johns and Zabel both describe Monroe's not fitting in, but they see her separateness from the poetry scene as having varying degrees of consequence. As I will describe in more detail in my next chapter, for Johns, a new ideal of poetry emerging from the revolutionary potential of the working class replaced Monroe's. While *Poetry* and its masters are dead, Johns and other radical poets "will outlive [them] all."

In 1934, these tensions came to a head in the pages of *Poetry*, when Monroe and Stanley Burnshaw, then an editor for the *New Masses*, debated poetry's role in political efforts. Monroe's July 1934 editorial comment, "Art and Propaganda," expresses distaste for the "half-baked efforts at class-conscious poetry as *The New Masses*, *The Anvil*,

*Partisan Review*, *Dynamo*, *Blast*, and other enthusiastic organs of the Left groups” (212). Her criticisms stemmed from letters she received from *Poetry* subscribers who were troubled by the content of lectures Burnshaw delivered in Chicago and nearby cities. One correspondent was upset that Burnshaw labeled Edna St. Vincent Millay, Robert Frost, and Edwin Arlington Robinson “bourgeois” (qtd in “Art and Propaganda 213). Another lamented: “Poetry cannot be quiet any more, and talk about fields and streams and meadows, or gallant gentlemen and ladies, or the spots on a butterfly’s wings. It must concern itself with Stalin and its strikers; it must be very much like the blaring red posters of the Soviet” (qtd in “Art and Propaganda 214). Monroe herself complained that a portion of revolutionary poetry was low quality, and she bitinglly accused Burnshaw of daring to “strike out of the modern picture not only *Poetry* but all the poets, living or dead, on our records who are not ‘aware of this changing world’—that is, who are not idealizing the Russian system and anathematizing our own” (212-13). On the heels of her efforts to save *Poetry* (and poetry), Monroe makes it a veritable martyr to Burnshaw’s cause. In a letter published in the September 1934 *Poetry*, Burnshaw responded in kind, calling Monroe’s “Art and Propaganda” editorial a “useful exposure of [her] bias” and detailing the ways in which it was so (351).

The feud between Monroe and Burnshaw reveals the tenuous ground on which poetry was defined and evaluated during the 1930s—the “turn” Johns evokes in his letter to Monroe. As Filreis puts it, borrowing from Max Eastman: for many artists “October 1929 was a window through which one saw one’s earlier poetic self as narcissistic, too anxious about forms both traditional and broken, over-committed to the ‘Cult of Unintelligibility and the Tendency toward Pure Poetry,’ inadequately aware of the

extrinsic pressures that had been shaping—and distorting—poetry all along” (*Modernism from Right to Left* 51). As I have already shown, still others—traditionalists, amateur poets, genteel-minded readers and critics—held fast to the inherently ideological notion that a realm for poetry exists above the materials of history and politics. The story of Monroe’s relationship to the literary Left during the 30s adds a wrinkle to the narratives explored in the section above. Keeping with the impetus of this project, a consideration of Monroe’s relationship to radical poets and her reaction to revolutionary poetics reveals the antagonisms that existed underneath the mainstream account of Monroe’s legacy and her death. The ideal of poetry Monroe came to stand for at the moment of her death is strikingly similar to the ideas she espoused in her debates with Burnshaw and others, and her criticisms of the new social poetics appearing in *New Masses*, *Partisan Review*, and the like are couched in the rhetoric of poetry’s universal qualities. “On the esthetic side, I would go with these crusaders so far as to admit that not only such art as they sanction but all art of all ages is propaganda,” she writes in her July 34 editorial, but the artist’s “message” must come from “the center of his inmost being,” from “the artist’s spirit and not from his will” (210-211). Monroe privileges the spiritual over the material and individual expression over group politics. Indeed, she closes her essay by borrowing from Yeats, who once said at a *Poetry* banquet: “It is not the business of a poet to instruct his age ... His business is merely to express himself, whatever that self may be” (qtd 215; my ellipses).

Perhaps on purpose, Monroe’s poem sequence “Every-day Types” appeared in the same issue of *Poetry* as Burnshaw’s scathing rebuttal to “Art and Propaganda.” The sequence of six dramatic monologues documents six “types” of U.S. citizens—the

American, the Hitch-Hiker, Communist I and II, and Capitalist I and II—and recalls the poems that comprise Edgar Lee Masters’s *Spoon River Anthology*. While the sequence initially seems like an effort to record the effects of the Depression and the ensuing social and economic crises (perhaps in the style of Genevieve Taggard’s “Up-State Depression Summer” but not as successful), the various personae largely function to mouth political and, ultimately, artistic ideologies. The sequence begins in the voice “The American,” a man who lost his farm and, having no other job prospects because of the Depression, lost his wife and his car, too. “I’m just a hobo now, a bum, a wop, / Floating around and hanging onto the edge.” The man expresses hope that his situation will improve, but he is “tired” of all of the “reds” shouting for revolution:

... They shoot their mouths  
Yelling for revolution—what the hell!  
They can’t make over the world—nobody can.  
They can’t give me back my flivver and my home,  
Or show me a better chance than I useta have  
And sure will have again. Lord I ain’t scared!  
There’ll be an end to this—my turn’ll come. (322)

The opening poem is an opportunity for a downtrodden, ordinary “American” to voice a critique of Communism. The “American” isn’t necessarily against the “reds”—he just doesn’t find their political objectives to be practical or feasible. “The Hitch-hiker,” the second poem in the sequence, is another manifestation of this basic American type. He isn’t particularly likeable or loathsome as he explains how he thumbs his way across the country, especially because the Depression years don’t present many other alternatives. “It’s just too easy,” he concludes, “and in these dry days / Of unemployment what can a fella do / Better to fill his time than seeing the world” (324).



The next three monologues—“Communist I,” “Communist II,” and “Capitalist I”—take a relatively ambiguous stance, at least insofar as all of these three characters’ political viewpoints seems flawed. The first communist is essentially a freeloader, using political ideology as an excuse not to pay rent. The second communist portrait is somewhat redeeming, depicting a man with “heart” who fights for suffering workers. This communist’s downfall isn’t that he doesn’t truly believe in his cause, but that he holds that cause above all else. “What do I care what happens to me—or you—,” his poem ends, “Or the whole sorry scheme that makes men slaves!” (326). Of course, given contexts outlined above, one would expect Monroe’s portraits of communists to be unflattering. But her portrait of “Capitalist I” is no more sympathetic. This monologue casts “dreams of doing a lot of good” as boyish because the current system is an inevitable product of human nature; all that remains to believe in are machines and inventions.

The tone of Monroe’s sequence doesn’t change until the final poem, “Capitalist II.” The second capitalist is a character who follows in his father’s footsteps by becoming a lawyer. He spends his time travelling and collecting “Matisse and Cezanne and Chinese bowls” and having a “lively time” with various women (328). The second capitalist is wistful, and the entire sequence seems to hinge on his “If”—his turn to the conditional—that closes the whole:

... If I could write,  
Or paint, make music, plan a skyscraper—  
There’d be some fun in that; perhaps I could  
If I half tried. But even as it is  
I get a lot of fun. It’s a grand game,  
This life, though most of the players are fools, or worse.  
I hold a few good cards, and keep my head  
To play them prettily till the heavens fall. (329)

If “The American” is the resonant political voice in “Every-day Types,” then the “Capitalist II” espouses the poem’s main views about art and its functions. Hope for this capitalist lies in a turn to the arts: to writing, painting, music, or architecture. In a way, “Capitalist II” seems to be Monroe’s projection of her own views on art and politics. As Monroe’s “Art and Propaganda” essay reveals—and as the close of “Every-day Types” further suggests—it was Monroe’s blind faith in the transcendent power of art that shaped her political agenda. In this and other ways, the motive of Monroe’s magazine never changed with the times. Monroe’s allegiance was to a beauty that rose above material reality and to an ideal of poetry that privileged individual expression. Thus, she closed her “Art and Propaganda” editorial with an attempt to place all poetries in the service of one muse: “But since all poetry is propaganda, it is for the individual poet to choose the kind of propaganda he prefers,” she writes. “Will he be inspired to ‘instruct his age,’ or to celebrate the spots on the butterfly’s wing? Whichever way he turns, may the muse go with him” (215).

No allegiance—even if it is to beauty—transcends politics. And before sending the muse in multiple directions, Monroe draws a line between two sides: “So the issue is drawn, with *The New Masses*, Mr. Burnshaw, Mr. Cowley, *et al.*, speaking up vociferously on one side, and *Poetry*, Mr. Yeats, Mr. MacLeish, Mr. Tate (these two in recent essays) holding their ground more quietly on the other” (“Art and Propaganda” 215). Monroe echoes her 1934 criticisms of Left poetries in similarly focused editorials. In a July 1936 editorial, “Present-day Tendencies,” a follow up to the “Social Poets Number” guest edited by Horace Gregory for the May *Poetry*, Monroe’s skepticism about politically conscious poetry, and communist poetry in particular, is apparent. She

mentions that readers might be “surprised” to find some of *Poetry*’s poets in the “Social Poets” issue, referring to some (as she had referred to Burnshaw) as “recent converts,” and she suggests that communism or socialism has become “almost an epidemic” (218-19). But whatever Monroe’s political stance, she casts her opinions in anti-political terms, closing her essay with a list of what she doesn’t “care about” or want to argue: the “justice or injustice of their cause” as well as poetry’s ability to “inspire political changes” (221). The central question of the editorial is “how much poetry have the political-minded poets written?” That is, do their poems have the aesthetic and spiritual qualities that constitute Monroe’s view of what “poem” or “poetry” mean?

The divisions Monroe sets up are familiar ones that might be cast in various terms: Left versus Right, radical versus traditional, conservative versus revolutionary. Scholars like Filreis have already begun to consider Monroe’s anticommunist stance, and my above analyses only further suggest how unsympathetic Monroe seemed to the radical poetry emerging from the Left. But the conceptual landscape for poetry during the 1930s cannot be sufficiently understood if it is framed in terms of such simple antagonisms. Editors from either side of the proverbial line, like Burnshaw and Monroe, did confront one another directly. But such confrontations also leave a gap open because they are operating from within different conceptions of what the category “poetry” means. In other words, the two sides are not always fighting their battles on the same ground. Thus, diachronic and spatial (that is, the spectrum of right and left) narratives fall short in illuminating the historical realities of this age and the debates surrounding the cultural work of poetry. For this reason, Monroe—the editor who freely used phrases like “Russ-minded Communists” and “recent converts” to describe poets on the Left—provides a

means to think about the self-consciously political poetics emerging in the 1930s and to consider the cultural and political functions of poetry at this particular moment. Monroe provides a surprising locus for considering the complex negotiations between different sides, thus revealing the tenuous political ground on which battles over the meaning of poetry were fought during the Great Depression and in the era of the Popular Front.

As I've already shown, Monroe's life's work and her death act as interruptions that reveal the complicated landscape of U.S. poetry at the beginning of the century. Returning to the scene of Monroe's death also reconfigures the current critical tendency to build arguments about twentieth-century poetry on the tenuous dividing line between the Right and the Left. For example, in *Modernism from Right to Left*, Filreis uses a statement from Malcolm Cowley—"It is the fashion now to jeer at such phrases as 'poetry renaissance'"—to buttress his argument that commentators' associating Stevens with Monroe's renaissance left the poet feeling "vaguely compromised" (n344; 191). It is worth noting here, in the body of this text, that Filreis's footnote only partially supports the arguments of his chapter. In fact, the line he quotes is from the first sentence of Cowley's tribute to Monroe in an issue of *Poetry* dedicated to her memory; the sentence continues: "... but there was really something of the sort in 1912, and Harriet Monroe and POETRY had a great deal to do with it" (158). Cowley is kind to Monroe, and he praises her service to poetry, writing that, at one time, her magazine was the only in America "that would print intelligent poetry and give the authors of it the idea that they were not singing in a sound-proof room entirely cut off from the world" (158). While Cowley might have been unusually kind to Monroe in his memorial —after all, never speak ill of the dead—here, again, Monroe's death emerges as a moment that forces us to

reconsider received narratives about literary-historical relationships and political antagonisms. Treating Monroe as an ideological subject whose life and death allows for a new historicization of sites of anxiety and crisis is, as I have shown, more revealing than attempting to enroll her in one party or another.

Indeed, despite the epithets Monroe uses to describe radical poets like Burnshaw, she seems rather ambiguous about party politics, and not all radical poets decried her editorial policies. Communist poet Martha Millet found Monroe to be rather sensitive to poems written about social ills and admired her for publishing other radical woman poets, like Lola Ridge (*Counter-revolution of the World* 6). When Monroe posits that communism and socialism are “almost epidemic,” her political perspective isn’t totally clear. As poems like “Every-day Types” suggest, Monroe’s social and political views are deeply embedded in her continuing vision for the art of poetry. And, as this chapter has argued all along, this vision for poetry is expressed through the strategic rhetoric about poetry’s death on which Monroe build her career—indeed her legacy—as a poet and editor. From Monroe’s point of view, what seems most dangerous about radical politics is that they threaten her ideal of poetry—and, by the mid-1930s, the legacy of *Poetry* magazine as well. Part of Monroe’s eventual problem with Left poets, and with editors like Burnshaw and publications like *New Masses* and *Partisan Review*, is that their “turn” usurped her renaissance. Monroe suggests as much when she turns to Pound in her September 1936 editorial “Poets as Leaders,” which might be read as a follow up to the opinions she expressed in June. “If poetry is to be alive and not dead,” she quotes, “there must always be a revolution going on” (331). For Monroe, poetry continues to live through an aesthetic revolution, a revolution that, as I’ve argued, Monroe re-functioned to

suit her more traditional notions of poetry's definition and socio-cultural role. Indeed, if Monroe was not interested in Pound's variety of revolution in the early 1900s, by the 1930s his conception of an aesthetic revolution afforded her the opportunity to critique poetries that consciously aligned themselves with radical political changes.

And so, shall we visit our dead again? Many Left poets had no problem leaving the poetry of the early renaissance—and, by extension, *Poetry* magazine—to die. In his fiery letter to Monroe, Johns unreservedly lists the dead: Yeats, Eliot, Pound, and *Poetry* by association. In a similar fashion, in Edwin Rolfe's 1935 *Partisan Review* statement on poetry, he denounces the very "poetry renaissance" Monroe boasted was her life's work, writing: "The hope for a renaissance in American poetry has been expressed continuously ever since the abortive poetry revival of 1910-1920." Rolfe later adds: "Let there be no mistake. There has been no renaissance in American poetry: the time is not yet ripe" (32). Following this pronouncement, he, like Johns, rattles off the names of the dead: "Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie and Vachel Lindsay are dead. Wallace Stevens is remembered by *Harmonium*; he is no longer a living poet" (33).

Monroe's friends placed her among a similar company of the dead. Alice Bidwell Wesenberg wrote to the *Poetry* office that, while she was saddened by Monroe's passing, she took great comfort in imagining "what a lovely contributor's party she would have ... with Amy Lowell, Vachel Lindsay, Hart Crane, and Elinor Wylie, for instance" (Wesenberg; my ellipses). The fantasy of poetry's death, here told through the deaths of poets, functions differently for Monroe and others in her cohort than it does for radical poets like Rolfe and Johns. Rolfe's dead are the same as Monroe's friend Wesenberg's; however, their notions of what that might mean are based on disparate ideals of poetry

and its cultural work. As this chapter has shown, poets and critics in the United States used Monroe's death to erect an elaborate gravestone for a lost editor—a grave for Monroe that, displaced, became a way to preserve their own versions of American poetry. In the next chapter, I will explore in detail how poets on the Left determined which poetries were dead and which were living, and I will analyze how they mobilized metaphors of poetry's life and death. These poets paid no respects to Monroe's legacy. But her burial spot in the General Cemetery (Cementerio Laico) in Arequipa, Peru, presumes she had no enemies. She lies there under a stone that simply reads:

HARRIET MONROE  
POET  
FRIEND OF POETS.

## CHAPTER 2

### The Left Needs Rhythm: Poetry Speaks the Depression

In May 1933, fourteen-year-old Martha Millet published a poem titled “Pioneer Pied Piper” in the *New Pioneer*, the Communist children’s magazine she also eventually helped to edit. Her poem, like most all of the poetry and short fiction published in *New Pioneer*, is meant to appeal to children while also outlining important social and political issues.<sup>33</sup> Millet’s narrative poem tells a tale about “Children’s Town,” a community of children who are “infested by a band / Of things that should not be” (4). At the poem’s start, Children’s Town is taken over by Boy Scouts who force the town’s child-citizens to work under unfair conditions. Paralleling the divide in capitalist society between workers and bosses, the original citizens of Children’s Town “slave and toil” in mills and on farms and have barely enough to live on, while the new Boy Scout mayor and council grow fat on rich foods like oysters and butter (4). The workers are finally saved when the “Pioneer Pied Piper” comes to town. Clad in a blue uniform with a hammer and sickle sewn on the shirt pocket and a bugle “hanging calmly by his side,” the Piper informs the mayor that he only wants “[t]o set these wretched children free” (5). Using his bugle to call them together, the Piper organizes the child workers against the mayor and his council. As the Boy Scouts flee town, the bridge they are crossing collapses and they all

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<sup>33</sup> This assessment of the *New Pioneer*’s aesthetic and political principles is a very brief summary of Mickenberg’s more sustained analyses in Chapter 2 of *Learning from the Left*.



drown in a river. Finally free, the children rebuild their community as a “Pioneer Commune.”

During the 1930s, poets on the literary Left determined that poetic rhythm could have important political functions. Through the medium of children’s poetry, “Pioneer Pied Piper” stages the Left’s emphases on rhythm that I explore in this chapter. On one hand, the figure of the Piper represents rhythm as an ideal form for speaking to a political community or, as in the case of Millet’s poem, calling a revolutionary community into being. With a hammer and sickle stitched on his chest and a bugle posed at his lips, the Piper uses rhythm to empower Children’s Town’s working class. The poem underscores this quality of the Piper—when he enters the scene, the beat literally picks up. The Piper blasts his bugle and before anyone knew

What was happening  
There came a tapping  
Of torn shoes flapping  
And loose heels rapping,  
And down the street, the people’s feet  
Leaped with an unceasing beat. (5)

The beats of these lines also reiterate the importance of the Piper’s rhythm, as do the closed couplets that form his subsequent speech to the crowd that gathers around him. The fact that the poem telling the Piper’s tale has rhythm is itself important—even if its rhythmic qualities are sometimes inconsistent. The long poem switches between simple four-line rhymes (most rhyming *abab*), couplets, and tercets and it never establishes a predictable metrical pattern. It does, however, establish sound patterns within individual lines and stanzas through alliteration and internal rhyming.

Millet’s “Pioneer Pied Piper” opens up a discussion of how Left writers understood poetic rhythm as an important tool, and her children’s poem acts out aesthetic

and political agendas. Like Millet in her “Piper” ballad, many Left poets rejected modernist experiment, instead drawing on popular verse forms and attempting to write poems that established discernible rhyme schemes and metrical patterns. This chapter’s title—“The Left Needs Rhythm”—is taken from a 1938 letter to the *New Masses* by Millet, herself, in which she suggests that “the Popular Front needs rhythm in all its implications” (21). Millet’s sentiment serves as a tagline for Left writers who were hostile to modernist poetry. In various ways, these poets and critics posited that poetry with “rhythm” supplanted modernist experiment.<sup>34</sup> Their notions of rhythm thus emerge as a significant flashpoint for thinking about different registers of the relationship between poetry and politics. The rhythms of popular verse genres not only eschew modernist aesthetics, but they come to enact a cultural imaginary, or what Yopie Prins has termed a “metrical imaginary,” that brings individuals together to form a political community.<sup>35</sup>

Left writers’ ideas about poetic rhythm have profound implications for understanding 1930s poetry and debates about it, especially because exploring these ideas uncovers fantasies about poetry’s cultural work that were circulating on the Left. As the first part of this chapter elucidates, when centering the notions of poetic rhythm that emerge in debates about modernist poetry, a different literary-historical narrative comes to light. This literary-historical reconsideration sets the ground for a nuanced historical

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<sup>34</sup> I am not suggesting that rhythm was not a principle concern in modernist aesthetics. Indeed, one only has to go back to Ezra Pound’s influential statement in “How to Read” that poetry should be composed “in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome” to understand that this is not the case. Put simply, the importance of rhythm in the development of modernist poetry is not my concern in this chapter; though, an interesting alternative study might examine how Popular Front notions of poetic rhythm influenced the composition of modernist poetry during the 1930s.

<sup>35</sup> See Yopie Prins, “Metrical Translation: Nineteenth-Century Homers and the Hexameter Mania” in Sandra Bermann and Michael Woods’s *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005 [229-256]).

and textual analysis of the definition and function of poetic rhythm and its relationship to meter and metrical verse forms. After marking out the complex functions of poetic rhythm on the literary Left, the chapter moves to two specific sites where this manifests. First, I analyze the verse published in the communist children's magazine *New Pioneer* in order to consider the relationship between ideals of poetic rhythm and the traditional metrical forms employed in the composition of radical children's poetry. Then, I consider how the quintessential example of "living" poetry from the 1930s, Carl Sandburg's 1936 *The People, Yes* to open up questions about how and where the plane of poetry and the plane of politics intersect.

### **The Rhythms of Living Poetry and the Debate Over Modernism**

Foregrounding rhythm has stakes for conceptualizing the perceived divisions between a supposedly elitist and overly complicated modernist poetry, on the one hand, and a newly direct and accessible poetry, on the other. The terms of this debate are sharpened by the historical context of the Communist Party's shift from its Third Period policy to its Popular Front policy. Announced at the Comintern's Seventh World Congress in 1935, the new strategy created a broad "People's Front" that, in the U.S., allied the communist Left with New Deal liberalism in the fight against fascism. Popular Front politics were pro-union, antiwar, and antiracist. Moreover, the shift in policy correlated to a shift in rhetoric—replacing the "worker" with the more abstract and amorphous "people," and opting for more "cheerful" expressions of revolutionary hope over the feelings of despair and displacement that characterized much Depression-era art (*The Cultural Front* 124-125).

While, as Michael Denning points out, the Popular Front's turn to populist aesthetics was not tantamount to an embrace of populist politics (*The Cultural Front* 125), a good deal of subsequent criticism effectively writes off Popular Front-era art as overly simple, politically limp, and desecrated by the growing culture industry. As scholarship on critics and artists around *Partisan Review* has clarified, many intellectuals involved with (or at least sympathetic to) the Communist Party felt disillusioned by the effect of the Popular Front policy and the views and types of art created in its wake.<sup>36</sup> While the announcement of the Popular Front strategy does not necessarily constitute a literary-historical break, where attitudes about poetry suddenly change, the notions of poetic rhythm I explore go hand-in-hand with the rhetoric and aesthetics of the Popular Front. This political and aesthetic shift helps to further illuminate the myriad forms of poetry circulating on the Left as well as the different forms of the antagonism between communist and modernist poetries. Exploring why certain Left critics believed that radical poetry needed rhythm changes narratives about literary modernism and its relationship to the literary Left. Indeed, the Popular Front era is a time when the very meanings of modernism were reconfigured.

The rhetoric of poetry's life and death emerging in Left periodical culture are symptomatic of these changes. As Andrew Hemingway explains in his recent study of

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<sup>36</sup> For important literary-historical considerations of how the shift to Popular Front policies, as well as the growing disillusionment with the Communist Party caused by the Moscow trials, caused rifts and debates among Party members and those closely aligned with its art and politics see: Denning's *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth-Century*; Hemingway's *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926-1956*; Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth Century Literary Left*, *Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left and the Antifascist Crusade* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2007), and *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1987). For related takes on the tenuous ground between political art and mass culture during the 1930s see Rita Barnard's *The Great Depression and the Culture of Abundance: Kenneth Fearing, Nathanael West, and Mass Culture in the 1930s* (New York: Cambridge, 1995) and Walter Kalaidjian's *American Culture Between the Wars: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

Left artists, the Party's new emphasis on the "people ... as the embodiment of political agency in Communist discourse" led to "marked changes" in the content of communist publications. "Party writers showed a new sympathy with mass sports, popular music and mainstream cinema" and "[a] new style of Communist book appeared, intended to be 'clear,' 'simple and appealing'" (10-11). This ideal of an accessible and popular literature that could also serve as an effective appeal for communist politics was tied to an ideal of poetic rhythm. Traditional and popular forms were idealized because their rhythm was framed as the key to their accessibility and appeal. But rhythm was also seen to transcend form, for it was believed to capture the spirit and speech of the People's Front.

In a December 1937 issue of *New Masses*, editors asked readers to weigh in on the question "Is Poetry Dead?" The discussion surrounding the editorial seems to replicate the binary between traditional poetry and modernist poetry by framing the debate in terms of life and death—by positing, in other words, that traditional poetry is alive and modernist poetry is dead. A closer look at the terms used in such debates, however, enables us to move beyond such generalized categories and simple quibbles about modernism. "Rhythm," in particular, as well as related terms like "meter" and "melody," were used frequently in critiques of modernist poetry and discussions of which styles of poetry are most effective for the current revolutionary moment. Focusing on the ways Left critics emphasized the importance of rhythm helps to not only reframe debates about modernist poetry, but it also illuminates fantasies about poetry's cultural work circulating in Left publications during the mid-to-late 1930s. While poetry's rhythm is closely associated with the Popular Front's penchant for traditional forms like the folk

song and the ballad, rhythm is also used in more general ways to denote poetry's potential usefulness for the growing People's Front.

The *New Masses* "Is Poetry Dead?" query came from a public debate on the topic "Poetry: Dead or Alive?" that had recently taken place in Toledo, Ohio, between English professor George Gulette and CIO field representative Albert Shepard. Gulette pronounced poetry dead. "It has no mourners," he posited "because nine out of ten persons never knew it was alive, and the other one refuses to recognize its demise ... American civilization is active, virile, and extravert; poetry has no place in it" (qtd "Is Poetry Dead?" 9; original ellipses). Shepard countered that Gulette's "premature obituary" was based on a narrow view of American poetry, declaring that "[t]he rebirth of the labor movement has accompanied a rebirth of poetry in the tradition of Whitman." As the *New Masses* summarized Shepard's arguments: "the only dead poets were those who were obsessed with images of death and decay because they had lost all touch with the vigor of the American people" (9).

For Shepard, the problem with poetry is not that it is dead; rather, the task is to separate the living from the dead. Communist poet Edwin Rolfe makes a similar point in his 1935 *Partisan Review* statement on poetry, when he determines a tradition and future trajectory for revolutionary poetry by separating the death from the living. "Amy Lowell, Elinor Wylie and Vachel Lindsay are dead. Wallace Stevens ... is no longer a living poet," he writes, and he asserts that Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Edwin Arlington Robinson, the Benets, and Robert Frost are "deadwood." Rolfe reaches farther back to find a live tradition, wanting to "claim all that is worth salvaging in the American tradition of struggle, revolt, progress" as well as "everything that is vital in the culture of

the ages” (34). He looks to Marx and Lenin, Tom Mooney and Joe Hill, seeking out “the peculiar and personal aspect of their lives, experiences, personalities, which find a responding chord in ours: a contact which, when touched off, produces poetry” (35). Rolfe and others learned how to be revolutionary poets from the “speeches” of influential proletarian writers like Joseph Freeman and Mike Gold, he continues, not from Pound, Eliot, or Hart Crane (37).

“Deadwood” (as opposed to “dead poetry”) signifies only the death of a part. By positing that certain branches of the literary tree are dead while others are alive, commentators like Rolfe and Shepard do not kill off poetry *in toto*—nor do they unequivocally defend its life. In terms of the split between traditionalists and modernists, this new vocabulary suggests that modernist poetry is lacking something that would give it life. But Shepard’s ideas about the life and death of poetry also begin to move away from this basic opposition between the traditionalist and modernist camps. Shepard’s arguments help to shift the conceptual mode for thinking about the life and death of poetry. Rather than framing metaphors about poetry’s life and death in terms of living and dying traditions (as Harriet Monroe did in the previous chapter’s discussion of the relationship between the Victorian and the modern), Shepard defines poetry’s life by its social and political effectiveness and by how it is used by “common people” in their “everyday lives.”

This is further evidenced by a snippet of the Gulette-Shepard debate that was reprinted in the *New Masses* “Is Poetry Dead?” editorial in which Shepard defines what he means by a poetry that is “alive.” According to him, the Carl Sandburg of *The People*, *Yes* is alive. So are Langston Hughes, Paul Engle, and Genevieve Taggard. Their poems

equal to the vitality of current revolutionary movement; they pulse through the crowded union halls with “the rhythm” and “vivid imagery” of the everyday. Shepard states:

The workers, who made America so ‘virile’ and ‘active’ a country, feel that poetry does have a place in their civilization. But it must come out of its wastelands and its tired intellectual towers; it must wander into the factories and the movies and the hamburger joints; it must know the sorrows and joys of the picket lines; it must learn the rhythm and vivid imagery of everyday conversation. (qtd “Is Poetry Dead?” 9)

Manifestly, Shepard’s arguments continue to pit modernist poetry against the poetry emerging out of political struggles. His reference to “wastelands” is a jab at T.S. Eliot, and the “tired intellectual towers” producing dead poetry are, no doubt, the homes of the high modernists. The contrast between ivory towers and factories and hamburger joints does more than repeat debates about the problems of literary modernism. Such a contrast also represents the continuum of poetry’s death and life: in order for poetry to live, or to keep itself alive, it must operate on the plane of experience of factory workers and the “everyday” people crowding movie theaters and chatting at hamburger joints.

Shepard’s position here shifts the ground for thinking about poetry’s life and death. Shepard does more than posit something about poetry in an ontic sense (that is, he does not set up a rubric for poetry’s existence or non-existence); he redefines poetry in terms of how it is used by the people. Poetry that is alive is entwined in the lives of factory workers and movie goers. This shift in the meaning of poetry’s life and death is centered on an ideal of poetic rhythm. Shepard suggests as much when he says that for poetry to be viable “it must learn the rhythm and vivid imagery of everyday conversation.” Here, the notion of rhythm emerges as a flashpoint for considering the imagined cultural function of poetry on the literary Left. We might examine this flashpoint through the common and previously cited critique leveled against modernist



poetry: that it is too difficult and/or too despairing. The constellation of ideas surrounding these two categories of critique might illuminate the valences of rhythm's meaning and import for the Popular Front.

One way of considering the relationship between the importance of poetic rhythm and Left criticisms of modernist poetry is to look at how the *New Masses* editors framed the significance of Shepard's debate with Gulette in their "Is Poetry Dead?" editorial. The editorial asked readers what kind of poetry they preferred and why certain poetry reached larger audiences than others; they asked poets who they were writing for and if they were conscious of the audience to which Shepard refers (9). The subsequent response only reproduced the opposition between ivory towers and hamburger joints and repeated common critiques of modernist poetry. As Alan Wald points out in his account of the debate in *Exiles from a Future Time*, the editorial "could hardly do less than elicit the most anti-intellectual sentiments; who, after all, would wish to join the bourgeois professor against the idealistic worker, or stand on the side of 'death and decay' against the language of the people?" (128). A salient example is a letter by Albert Pezzati, a CIO organizer "who took the parachute jump out of the rarefied ether of the ivory tower down to the union hall," aligns the modernism of Pound, Eliot, Gertrude Stein, and F.T. Marinetti with "the stench and decay given off by the fruits of despair and retreat" (21). These artists lament that poetry is dead because their poems, "ravished by a well-turned phrase from which every suspicion of meaning has been carefully scraped," rely on a "benevolent depotism" and have nothing in common with the realities of American social and political life.

On one hand, the supposed difficulty of modernist poetry is related to issues of accessibility. Many readers who responded to the *New Masses* editorial pitted a “difficult” or “cerebral” modernist aesthetic against a more straightforward or populist one, and these attacks were more specific and pointed than Shepard’s initial condemnation of “wastelands and tired intellectual towers.” Their letters do this largely by positing that poetry that works for the people is accessible, and they thus reiterate Pezzati’s attack on modernist difficulty. For example, folksinger and songwriter Lee Hays wrote to the *New Masses* asking for “Communist poetry.” Hays lodged complaints against some of the magazine’s own, attacking the presumably elitist and out-of-touch poetry of Muriel Rukeyser, James Agee, and the like (21). In the same issue, reader R.W. Lalley agreed: he admitted to liking “simple, direct little verses” and disliking “the amorphous type such as M. Rukeyser submitted in your literary supplement” (21). For these readers, difficult poetry does not approximate people’s lives. Hays writes that he’d “worked in many a cornfield and I wonder if Muriel Rukeyser ever came near one,” and he complains that poets like Rukeyser and Agee only give “regurgitations of their own lives, slim fare for those who on the earth do dwell” (21). In the context of Shepard’s arguments, then, the poetry Hays and Lalley dislike lacks rhythm not necessarily because it doesn’t have a melody or a beat, but because it does not resonate with their particular tastes or experiences.

The *New Masses* was not the only Left-leaning publication in which such rhetoric surfaced. In a February 1938 issue of *The New Republic*, for instance, reader W.J. Dudgeon of West Branch, Michigan, complained about the “modernistic” poetry that was compromising the magazine’s “otherwise high standard of thought and expression”

(369). He, too, called for clarity, especially at a time when so many people “are seeking truth, inspiration, courage, to live and carry on in the midst of our present world insanity” (369). A few responses were published in the April 1938 issue under the subheading “The Perils of Poetry”—and all firmly agreed with Dudgeon’s sentiments. *The New Republic* was wasting space on a modernist poetry that lacked the cogency, and to some the sincerity, of the magazine’s social, political, and economic writings. One letter writer, Mildred H. Clark, went so far as to suggest that most of the recently published poems seemed more symptomatic of “maladjustments in the writers” and recommended “treatment” rather than publication. “I do sometimes feel a little hungry for a few neat lines from someone with a gift for expression and something to express that falls within the range of my own experience,” she writes. “Does no one now feel an urge to express in words some of the rich emotions a passably normal individual may have even while men are blowing each other’s brains out in the next block?” (361). The “normal individual” Clark references here is opposed to the spoiled ego of the “maladjusted” modernist poet. And, as in the *New Masses* readers’ responses, a more simplistic poetry both speaks to and represents the experiences of the “normal individual.” “Neat lines,” which might be a description of rhythmically regular lines (either because they employ a metrical pattern or a rhyme scheme) are accessible because they resonate with people’s lives. Modernist poetry lacks such qualities and is therefore ineffective not just in terms of the individual reader, but also in the context of a world where “men are blowing each other’s brains out in the next block.”

The *New Republic* was not aligned with the Left or the Communist Party in the same way as the *New Masses*, but the similarities in their readers’ opinions illuminate the

reach of the modernist debate over poetry. While the *New Masses* editors did, as Wald suggests, set their readers up to attack modernist poetry, these opinions were shared in multiple reading communities. Moreover, and important to my arguments about the death of poetry, both publications framed such debates by putting poetry in danger: with the *New Masses* suggesting its potential death and the *New Republic* asserting that it was in peril. On the surface, poetry's endangerment seems related to how difficult it is—which is also, in these debates, related to how modernist it is. If poetry is difficult, it doesn't reach an audience, and it is therefore dead. But the responses suggest something more. For instance, readers also posit that modernist poetry fails to respond to current conditions—whether such conditions are explicitly named as the threat of fascism and the promise of the revolutionary labor movement (in *New Masses*), or if they are more generically referred to as “world insanity” (in *The New Republic*). In this sense, the problem with modernist poetry is not necessarily the qualitative aspects of its difficulty. The problem is also the message.

In addition to complaints about its difficulty, a common criticism of modernist poetry was that it was too invested in images of “death and decay.” The aesthetic turn prompted by the announcement of the Popular Front policy only intensified this critique, as radical writers attempted to leave the stark images of the Depression behind and focus instead on the hope and promise of the labor movement. The prevalence of this critique and its relevance to thinking about poetic rhythm can be seen in Granville Hicks's 1937 *New Masses* review of the first volume of Horace Gregory's *New Letters in America*, which he titled “Those who quibble, bicker, nag, and deny.” Hicks does his fair share of quibbling in the review, but the subsequent debate between the two critics helps to reveal

the important place of poetic rhythm in mediating and understanding debates about modernism. Hicks's distaste for the modernist writers Gregory supported (such as the oft-vilified Rukeyser) come out in the review, and he accuses Gregory's volume of taking its place in the "pessimist tradition" (22).<sup>37</sup> To Hicks, the writers collected in Gregory's volume wander down aesthetic "blind alleys" like symbolism, stream-of-consciousness, and the fable (23). But contrary to the *New Masses* and *New Republic* letters quoted above, Hicks did not assume that the larger reading public was turned off by modernist literature. Rather, he complained that the "intelligent reading public" much more readily accepted literature that "communicate[s] a mood of disgust and despair" over affirmative literature bearing the "good news" of Communism. Hicks thus calls for a literature in which "confusion and weakness yield to clarity and strength"; such a literature is capable of conveying the "essential hopefulness of Communism" and "inspir[ing] a confidence that is capable of changing human lives" (22).

Though Hicks does not discuss it at great length, poetry is an obvious sticking point in his dislike of Gregory's volume. Hicks's complaints about the poetry collected in *New Letters* link the so-called "pessimist tradition" in literature to the formal qualities, or effects, of poems themselves. He observes that the poetry in *New Letters* is not pleasurable to listen to, and he wants to know "why most of the younger poets are so determined that what they write shall not be pleasing to the ear." "I am not sure that this is important," he wavers, "but it is puzzling" (23). Hicks's commentary is both important and puzzling. And not just because it lays the ground for Gregory's rebuttal, but also

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<sup>37</sup> For a full account of the debate between Hicks and Gregory, including the debate's relationship to their personal quibbles and the "Is Poetry Dead?" editorial, see Chapter 4 of Wald's *Exiles from a Future Time*.

because it intimates how rhythm and melody were idealized as integral to Popular Front aesthetics.

When Gregory responded to Hicks's review in a subsequent *New Masses* symposium on "'Good News' in American Literature," he attacked Hicks for being a poor reader of poetry and criticized him for trying to apply realism to poetry criticism, for "poetry is reviving under the stimulus of more than one literary tradition" (18). Gregory accuses his colleague of defending realism too staunchly—of, in his words, "trying to flog dead horses back to life" (17). Those like Hicks who promoted the Popular Front aesthetics of simplicity, cheerfulness, and mass appeal, however, seem to have reframed realism so as to emphasize its usefulness in people's lives. Perhaps this was tantamount to flogging the supposedly dead horses of realism back to life; but, more likely, the "dead horse" here is being reincarnated as the mass of men and women hanging around the hamburger joints. As Hicks's analysis of Gregory's poetry selections attests, his concern with poetry had little to do with realist aesthetics. It was, rather, about rhythmic pleasures.

The back-and-forth between Hicks and Gregory reveals how notions of accessibility and content (that is, the "good news" of Communism) come together under the rubric of poetic rhythm. While Hicks might have been, as he wrote, confused as to why Gregory placed so much importance on "the paragraph I wrote on poetry," that paragraph is indeed important—but perhaps not for the reasons Gregory, Hicks, or any other *New Masses* contributors realized. Hicks and others insist that radical poetry should be simple and direct and that it should convey the utopian hopes of communism. In order to achieve this, however, such poems must also please the ear. Hicks insists on this when

he insists that the question of rhythm or melody isn't necessarily a significant one. In his reply to Gregory's rebuttal, which was also published in the "Good News" symposium,

Hicks writes:

I asked, in all sincerity, a simple question. Why, I inquired, is there so little in contemporary poetry that can be called melody? I did not say there ought to be melody. I did not say that poetry without melody was valueless. I did not even say that I disliked poetry without melody. I merely said that much modern poetry seemed to beat rather harshly on the ear, and I wondered why. (19)

Manifestly, Hicks suggests that poetry does not necessarily have to have melody for it to be successful or effective. But, at the very same time, he complains that modernist poetry doesn't have melody. We might consider these contradictions in Hicks's evaluation of contemporary poetry in two related ways. On one hand, Hicks protests too much. Despite his caveats about the relative importance of melody, he nonetheless suggests that poetry should be pleasing to the ear, for poetry that is pleasing to the ear best conveys "good news." In this schematic, formal elements like melody (or rhythm or meter) have a direct relationship to a poem's effectiveness. On the other hand, the term "melody" might mean for Hicks what "rhythm" means for Shepard. That is, terms such as melody or rhythm do not reference the specific formal features of a poem; rather, they more generally describe either the likelihood that a poem will be enjoyed by large audiences or the poem's ability to communicate the hopes of communism. In this schematic, rhythm does not connote anything about a poem's form; it is abstracted from the actual form of the poem itself.

### **Why the Left Needs Rhythm**

The nuances of the way these registers operate together can be seen in Millet's aforementioned response to the *New Masses* "Is Poetry Dead?" editorial. In Millet's

letter, the landscape for poetry that Shepard imagined—where poetry’s proximity to people’s lives indicates whether or not it has rhythm—comes to a fruition. But her more generalized discussion of rhythm also hints at how rhythm operates as a formal element in a poem, and she links this meaning of rhythm to the Popular Front’s need for poetry to be “popular.” In this way, Millet’s letter also underscores some of Hicks’s arguments about communist poetry, and it raises questions about the terms employed in Left critiques of modernist poetry.

During the 1930s, Millet published poems and stories, including poems on the Spanish Civil War, in *The Daily Worker*, *New Masses*, and *New Pioneer*. Written on behalf of her New York City Poetry Group, Millet’s letter begins like most of the others: she suggests that for poetry to stay relevant it has to “mean more to more Americans” and, therefore, it “should, even when representative of the Left, not be confusedly ornate, pretentiously intellectual, and ‘cerebrally dull.’” Millet also makes a snipe at Rukeyser, but hers is more veiled, accusing *New Masses* editors of falling “too readily and too often for some mixture of colons, hard-working imagery, and chewing-gum lifelessness” (20). Out of these criticisms, Millet makes a more general argument for poetry’s potential effectiveness while sketching out the contours of a politically viable poetry. On the surface, Millet seems to stay on the same safe ground as several other poetry readers; however, the views of poetry she expresses provide a foundation for a more complicated examination of the definitions of poetry circulating on the Left in the era of Popular Front.

At their most basic level, the arguments of Millet’s letter stem from an opposition that pits poetry against fascism. “Further, we think that real poetry is an opponent of that



bad formal prose at its worst, which in politics, is fascism,” Millet writes, “Fascism is against the life of man. Poetry has always been for it. And it can be today, more than ever” (20). For Millet, “bad formal prose” is on the side of fascism and fascism is against humanity; therefore, poetry, which is opposed to formal prose, is also opposed to fascism and is “for the life of man.” This statement is brief and fairly straightforward; however, a closer look at what Millet means by “poetry” reveals a constellation of ideas about the nature of poetic rhythm and its relationship to political life. More specifically, Millet’s reasoning for why poetry is “for the life of man” rests on her equation of poetry with rhythm. “Poetry is rhythm,” Millet posits, “and rhythm is at the basis of the lives of all men and women” (20). Millet’s logic here raises some fundamental questions first about the nature of poetry, and second about how and why poetry—indeed, the rhythm of poetry—is an instrument in the international fight against fascism. As Millet herself puts it late in the letter: “The popular front needs rhythm in all its implications, in order to combat the profit system in its latest manifestation, the totalitarian state” (20). But this formulation still does not quite approach what rhythm means—or, for that matter, what poetry means.

While Millet’s letter never specifically references the talk or speech of the people, it does root effective poetry in many of the same locations as Shepard, such as the picket line. Millet focuses on rhythm as outside of or beyond everyday speech, though she does equate rhythm with human life by positing that because rhythm is useful it must meet a basic human need. Rhythm enables people to assimilate powerful ideas because, as she puts it, an idea presented rhythmically “permeates the reader and becomes part of himself and his actions” (20). To make this point, Millet asks her audience to consider the rhythm

of a phrase like “Workers of the world, unite” or May Day parade refrains like “Wages up and hours down / Make New York a union town.” While both are presumably catchy, these phrases don’t necessarily share significant formal commonalities. What they do share, according to Millet, is rhythm, and “rhythm is an aspect of power, including political power” (20). As opposed to “fascist prose,” the rhythmic elements of these phrases help to convey powerful political ideas and empower the people who read or say them (20). Even if it seems a bit romantic or humanistic, Millet’s understanding of the relationship between rhythm and human life is fairly easy to grasp. In her formulation, rhythm is not just constitutive of poetry; it aids in the development of a politically active, socially conscious self. The equation of rhythm and poetry is, however, a bit more complicated. Millet does not merely suggest, a la Shepard and Hicks, that poetry should have melody or be rhythmic. She posits that poetry *is* rhythm. Indeed, in finishing her reading of the power of May Day parade refrains like the one quoted above, she deliberately equates the two, writing: “One of the important reasons that these eleven words [the parade refrain] ... hit joyfully and strongly the ears and minds of some hundreds of thousands of persons on the streets of Manhattan was the rhythm, or, put otherwise, its poetry” (20).

Millet’s conflation of poetry and rhythm goes hand-in-hand with her ideal of poetry—to the point that when Millet writes “poetry” it does not seem as if she means poems or verses. In her estimation, everything from a picket line to a pamphlet to a human life is poetry. From this perspective, it seems that Millet’s letter is not about poetry per se but about experience. Poetry isn’t alive because its rhythms have an effect on the people. Poetry is alive because it *is* the people. Moreover, when Millet argues that

poetry can be used in the fight against fascism, she mobilizes poetry as an art that intervenes in immediate political situations. Poetry, Millet writes, can “fight Franco, Girdler, and Weir” and be used to “combat the profit system in its latest manifestation, the totalitarian state” (20). Such immediacy is also related to Millet’s call for the Popular Front, and consequently its poetry, to be “popular.” The point here is not to make Millet into a naïve young poet by using her letter as just another example of a trans-historical or transcendent notion of poetry’s sameness. I do see Millet’s letter as a symptom of a certain idealization of poetry that this chapter gets underneath. In this way, Millet’s letter creates an opportunity to explore what poetry meant in the context of the *New Masses* debate over poetry’s life and death and, consequently, in other similar discussions of radical poetry’s vitality and usefulness.

Millet defines rhythm as an abstract or ephemeral quality of a poem that is associated with human need and experience. But—especially when she suggests that Popular Front poetry should be straightforward, direct, and draw on popular forms—Millet also intimates that rhythm is a formal element that structures a poem’s composition and the experience of reading. In a way, this recalls Hicks’s earlier critique of Gregory’s *New Letters* volume: poetry that is melodious or rhythmic (“pleasing to the ear”) affirms the “good news” of communism, whereas the harsh beats of modernist poetry undermine it. Both Millet and Hicks gesture toward a definition of rhythm that is somehow rooted in a poem’s form or technique. Indeed, when Millet references the powerful rhythm of “Workers of the world, unite” or “Make New York a union town,” doesn’t she also prompt the reader to scan these phrases like poetic lines—to follow not just their message but also their arsis and thesis? Encouraging *New Masses* readers to

potentially consider the technical elements of these slogans, Millet suggests a potential relationship between rhythm as an experiential ideal and rhythm as a formal function.

In this section, I've primarily analyzed how Left poets and critics used rhythm as an abstract category for describing a poem's accessibility and/or appeal. But this twist on Millet's argument provides an opportunity to shift registers and think more about rhythm as a formal element. Looking at rhythm as a significant formal feature also puts the *New Masses* defense of a "simple" or "straightforward" poetry in a different light. When the *New Masses* editors and readers pitted their versions of revolutionary poetry against the modernist aesthetic symbolized by Pound, Eliot and Rukeyser, they might also have been defending verse forms that rely on rhythmic or metrical patterns. While Left writers might have idealized traditional forms (like the ballad or the folk song), creating an aura of hope and good news around them, such an idealization also restores to view the plurality of poetic genres circulating on the Left during the 1930s.

In particular, a 1934 essay by Edmund Wilson titled "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" adds another wrinkle to Popular Front-era ideas about how poetry's definition and status is related to the formal aspects of its rhythm. When Gregory replied to Hicks's review of *New Letters*, he accused his *New Masses* colleague of forming "a united front with Edmund ('Poetry-is-dead') Wilson" (17). In this quip, Gregory is likely referencing Wilson's "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" Gregory, however, makes a mistake in this snap-judgment of Wilson's position. Wilson's essay does not propose that poetry is dead or dying; rather, Wilson takes the seeming decline of metrical verse forms in the 1930s as a starting point for thinking about what poetry means at that moment, especially in relation to prose. Attempting to revive poetry by positing a new set of terms, Wilson's

assessment of the poetry scene is actually quite different from Hicks's—and potentially more radical. Indeed, his essay mediates the debate between Hicks and Gregory and, in its own way, rattles the foundation on which their disagreements are built.

Wilson's essay begins by stating that current poetry criticism "is proceeding on false assumptions," and he accuses both sides of not thinking clearly (15). Wilson figures that distinguishing between "verse," "poetry," and "prose," might solve some "basic confusion" and, as a result, quell some of the bickering between various schools of poetic thought (15). Tracing the historical uses of these terms, Wilson observes that, starting in the nineteenth century, *poetry* had become a more capacious term, often used to describe an intensity of feeling or experience that can be expressed in prose or verse (16). In this sense, it is relatively easy to distinguish between poetry and verse. Determining just what poetry means at a given moment is, however, a bit tricky, for the definition of poetry is in flux. Wilson writes:

What I want to suggest is that 'poetry' formerly meant one kind of thing but that it now means something different, and that one ought not to generalize about 'poetry' by taking all the writers of verse, ancient, medieval, and modern, away from their various periods and throwing them together in one's mind, but to consider both verse and prose in relation to their function at different times. (16)

This observation leads Wilson to try out his own method, as he questions the presence and function of verse in the 1930s moment of his essay. He determines that most poets have abandoned metrical verse forms, and he attempts to figure out why. Arguably, in doing so, Wilson's essay establishes its own sense of which poetry is "deadwood." That is, by cutting off verse from the literary tree, he might be, even if inadvertently, promoting modernist prose and free verse poetry. But, perhaps more to the point, Wilson

proposes that expanding the definition of poetry to include prose and verse forms will open up possibilities for modern literary criticism.

In many ways, “Is Verse a Dying Technique?” extends the survey of debates about poetry and prose in Francis Gummere’s 1901 *The Beginnings of Poetry* (London: MacMillan, 1901). In a chapter titled “Rhythm As the Essential Fact of Poetry,” Gummere traces historical arguments about the relationship between poetry and prose, including the status of the prose poem, by examining their use of rhythm. Gummere’s survey supports his chapter’s initial definition of poetry: “poetry is rhythmic utterance, rhythmic speech, with mainly emotional origin” (30). Gummere asserts that poetry is a rhythmic utterance, not a “sublime experience,” and posits that the manner of experience associated with poetry can be applied to both verse and prose (58). Gummere and Wilson thus agree that poetry and prose might elicit similar experiences or emotions. Gummere, however, emphasizes poetry’s rhythmic qualities in a way that Wilson does not.

In Wilson’s figuration verse does not have rhythm; it has meter. He writes that: “Verse is written in lines with a certain number of metrical feet each; prose is written in paragraphs and has what we call rhythm” (15). While this chapter’s concluding section will address the question of how rhythm is related to both poetry and prose, my current focus is on the complex interplay between rhythm and meter as it relates specifically to verse forms. Children’s verse is an apt site for such an exploration, for it simultaneously draws on metrical verse forms and dramatizes Left idealizations of poetry’s rhythm.

## **Pioneer Poets with Rhythm and Meter**

The ideal of rhythm Millet invokes in her 1938 letter to the *New Masses* is enacted in the figure of the “Pioneer Pied Piper” with which this chapter began. Because one of the preconceived notions about children’s poetry is that it is rhythmic in a technical sense (that is, it has a rhythmic/metrical pattern and it rhymes), studying this body of verse dramatizes Left poets’ idealization of poetic rhythm at the same time that it helps to get underneath of it.

Before moving on to a more nuanced consideration of the relationship between radical children’s verse and the need for 1930s Left poetry to have rhythm, it is important to contextualize the place of children’s literature within the larger body of U.S. radical literature. In their editor’s introduction to a recent special issue of *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*, Julia Mickenberg and Philip Nel suggest that “children’s literature has articulated the particular concerns of the left in ways that reflect the evolution of the left itself” (350). The historical work of Mickenberg’s book-length study *Learning from the Left: Children’s Literature, the Cold War, and Radical Politics in the United States* demonstrates this through an original and wide-ranging study of radical children’s literature. While Mickenberg’s book does a great deal to bring to light the significance of children’s literature for understanding Left cultural formations, it often treats the multifarious forms of children’s literature as one in the same. Treating children’s poetry like children’s prose poses some methodological problems, for the histories of forms and genres and historical sites of production and reception are not mutually exclusive. In terms of studies of the 1930s Left, children’s poetry fills out the landscape of literary

production and reception; but it is also a complex site with its own forms and codes. As such, this body of verse illuminates historical ideas about various poetic genres and their relationship to radical politics.

Radical children's poetry, because of the verse traditions it draws on, enacts Left writers' fantasies about poetic rhythm. While the modernist movement in poetry caused sharp divides among *New Masses* or *Partisan Review* readers, traditional and simple verses were completely permissible in the pages of *New Pioneer*. Nursery rhymes, ballads, and simple rhyming poems could be published without question or debate. Significantly, these familiar verse forms meet the aforementioned criteria for the "living" poetry evoked by critics like Shepard and Hicks. Nursery rhymes offer a salient example: they are widely accessible, large audiences enjoy them, and they circulate in various cultural locations. In all of these respects, nursery rhymes have rhythm. This is, perhaps, why one of the first poems published in *New Pioneer* was Harry Alan Patamkin's (who wrote for *New Pioneer* under the penname "Hap") "Mother Goose on the Breadline." The poem communicates the problems of capitalism through the accessible and familiar patterns of well-known rhymes like "Simple Simon" ("Simple Simon / Is a why-man"), "Sing a Song of Sixpence" ("Sing a song of six percent / Ten percent and more"), and others. The cartoonish drawings by Otto Soglow that surround the rhymes recall these familiar verses but with a twist. For instance, the "Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe" is depicted poking her head out of the top of her boot, looking astonished by a sign announcing that her bank is "Closed for Repairs" (7).

From the perspective of the Popular Front criteria for an effective poem, nursery rhymes become, in Potamkin's revisions, effective vehicles for conveying lessons about



the ills of capitalism. The continuity between the effectiveness of nursery rhyme rhythms and the rhythms of the picket line come to fruition in the final section of “Mother Goose on the Breadline,” a new take on “Little Miss Muffet.” Potamkin follows the formula of the original nursery rhyme, but he adds two lines to the end:

Little Miss Muffet  
Ate such vile stuff, it  
Made her feel rotten inside  
Black coffee, stale bread—  
Miss Muffet saw Red!  
She joined with the workers and cried:  
“Don’t Starve, Fight!  
Don’t Starve, Fight!” (7)

The addition of these two lines to “Little Miss Muffet” suggests the relationship between traditional verse forms that rely on rhythmic techniques and the appeal of political songs and chants.

Children’s verse on the Left also helps to reveal how the idealization of poetic rhythm was a strategic fiction that aided in the defense of traditional forms against the onslaught of modernist experiment. As we’ve already seen, the poems published in *New Pioneer* were hardly modernist. If traditional forms were seen as the best way to educate and empower Young Pioneers, then these forms were also seen as the best ways to reach a wide audience and communicate political messages to “the people.” In most every issue of *New Pioneer*, historical fiction and series like “American History Told in Pictures” retold important historical events from a Left perspective.<sup>38</sup> Significantly, in two different 1938 issues of the magazine, Martha Millet briefly told the history of U.S. poetry. In this venue, one can see how one of the goals of the Popular Front was not just creating a

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<sup>38</sup> Mickenberg describes how “the *New Pioneer*’s stories and articles tended to be more factual than fanciful, with a heavy emphasis on historical and scientific themes” (68). She cites the series “American History Retold in Pictures,” along with other examples of biographical sketches and historical vignettes, to further illustrate this tendency.

“usable past”<sup>39</sup> in terms of important historical figures like Abraham Lincoln, it also hoped to create a “usable past” of poetry that would uphold particular forms.

Millet’s presentation of the history of U.S. poetry history for the *New Pioneer* audience is telling in light of the debates about modernist poetry outlined above—debates that she entered when she wrote her “Is Poetry Dead?” letter to the *New Masses*. (This was not Millet’s first foray into historical or biographical writing for *New Pioneer*. She also published a two-part retelling of Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L’Ouverture.) In the October 1938 issue of *New Pioneer* Millet published a short biographical sketch of fireside poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Millet’s article is an interesting retelling because it never mentions Longfellow’s popularity as a domestic poet; instead, it highlights his interest in the “impoverishment and oppression” of people in Spain, his “deeper awareness” of Native American culture, and his antislavery poems. After painting Longfellow as a poet fully aware of the historical and politics of his age, Millet praises his formal choices:

At all times he wrote simply and understandably. He will be remembered as the ever-musical poet of simplicity who could make people see the traditions and folklore of the much-abused Indian through his poetry, and who dealt with life and people in a manner that *all* could enjoy. (19)

Millet’s assessment of Longfellow and his importance echoes late-1930s prescriptions for revolutionary poetry, including her own. She highlights the fact that the political message of Longfellow’s poetry—its ability to “make people see” that Indians were not, as she explains elsewhere, “barbarians who spent their time war-whooping and scalping people” (19)—is conveyed through simple and musical verse. Moreover, his poetry was understood and enjoyed by “*all*” people.

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<sup>39</sup> I take this notion of the Popular Front searching for a “usable past” from Hemingway’s *Artists on the Left* (104).

This is the same goal poets and critics set for revolutionary poetry—for its rhythm, or music, to make it accessible and help to circulate its political message. Millet herself points out how important it is for Popular Front poetry to have such qualities. In her *New Masses* letter she argues that Popular Front poetry has to be popular, writing: “Since the popular front needs poetry, poetry too has to become popular. And it can become popular only when it attains a rich and accurate simplicity and directness” (21). Millet detects such “rich and accurate simplicity” in Longfellow’s poetry. A subsequent *New Pioneer* essay, on U.S. Revolutionary War poet Philip Freneau, reiterates the importance of poetry being of and for the people. Millet subtitled the biographical sketch “An American Poet of All the Peoples,” and she intimates that Freneau reached a large number of citizens because he addressed important issues of the time. According to Millet, he wrote about slavery and oppression “almost a hundred years before the slave issue grew into Civil War” and penned “fierce poetry with which he lashed out against the oppressive rule of the British king” (20). Through his poetry, which Millet describes as “fiery songs,” Freneau gave “new power to popular issues” (20).

Poets like Freneau and especially Longfellow gained popularity, and therefore effectiveness, through popular forms with distinct rhythmic or metrical patterns. As if to emphasize this point, Millet closes her article on Longfellow by quoting from his epic “The Song of Hiawatha,” which is written in trochaic tetrameter. It is on purpose that Millet chose lines that are addressed to children: “O my children; my poor children,” she quotes, “Listen to the words of wisdom / Listen to the words of warning” (19). *New Pioneer* poetry suggests that words of wisdom and warning are best imparted through simple and direct, but also metrical, forms. This suggestion, however, is not unique to

children's literature. It is the very same type of poetry that Left poets and critics idealized, especially when they registered complaints against modernist poetry.

This aspect of radical children's verse can be seen in Alice Hayes's "Old Father William," a take on "You Are Old Father William," one of Lewis Carroll's nonsense poems from *Alice in Wonderland*. Carroll's verse is, itself, a parody of another children's poem, Robert Southey's didactic poem "The Old Man's Comforts and How He Gained Them." All three poems begin with the same line—"You are old, Father William"—and all three portray a dialogue between Father William and a youth. In Southey's version, the youth learns important lessons about aging from the elder. In Carroll's poem, however, Father Williams is portrayed in his conversation with the youth as greedy and rather ridiculous.

Hayes's poem forgoes Carroll's nonsense and turns the didactic poem back into a didactic poem. Whereas Southey's Father William was able to preserve his youth, Hayes's Father William lost his youth to work. Replying to the youth's questions about his age, this Father William for the 1930s replies:

"In my youth," the old fellow replied to the lad,  
"I slaved every day for the boss  
And while I turned out some perfect machines  
My own health is totally lost." (7)

In the dialogue that follows, the youth slowly loses his ideals about the world of work. At first, he assumes that Father William must have been paid a "handsome wage" because he worked so efficiently. When he learns this was not so, the youth figures that "surely the boss has given a dole" to the old man. But Father William closes the poem with a more difficult truth:

"Well, to tell you the truth, I've been working right on

Till a stronger man for less pay  
Has come to the factory to end up like me  
And I just got kicked out today.” (7)

Hayes’s version of “Old Father William” reverses the moral of Southey’s poem. In the nineteenth-century original, Father William shows the youth that, if one takes care of oneself and thinks always of the future, then he can be comfortable in his old age.

Hayes’s Father William never had such luxuries, and he has been prematurely aged by the oppressive conditions of the factory. The lesson the end of the poem imparts is that these conditions are bound to continue and that, unless there is a fundamental socio-economic change, youths like the one the old man dialogues with will suffer his same fate.

Left poets and critics evoked an idealized notion of rhythm in order to suggest that certain types of poetry had utopian possibilities. Such possibilities are rooted in its proximity to the people. Truisms about children and about children’s poetry dramatize such idealizations. As Richard Flynn points out, “unexamined assumptions about poetry often go hand-in-hand with unexamined assumptions about adulthood.” Just as childhood is posited as the “other” of adulthood (for children are innocent, genuine, sincere, authentic), “[t]he language of poetry is thought to be ‘other’—grounded in rhythm and play” (37). While the association Flynn points out between childhood and poetry’s “rhythm and play” might have more recently served to marginalize children’s poetry and poetry in general, the peculiar case of proletarian children’s poetry functions differently because of the literary and political milieu described above. From a historical standpoint, the perspective of 1930s Left poets and critics shows that poetic language was not always classified as “other” so that it may be, as Flynn argues about contemporary poetry,

“nostalgically cherished and simultaneously diminished” (37). In fact, my arguments above suggest quite the opposite. Many Left poets and critics put poetry’s rhythm front and center, lauding it as the most significant means to mobilize political communities and convey the message of revolutionary hope. Indeed, Flynn’s related point that “[l]ike childhood, poetry is thought to signify universal, even inarticulate truth” is akin to Hicks’s notion above that poetry that is “pleasing to the ear” is best able to express the “good news” of Communism. In both of these instances, the idea that rhythm is an archaic and natural—and thus widely accessible—force perpetuates the notion that poetry, itself defined by this rhythm, transmits utopian possibilities. For the 1930s Left, the “rhythmic other” of poetry was virile and active, intensely present and alive. It would—like the lyric to “March in the Pioneer Parade”—“Beat, beat, heart and feet / On the road and on the street.”

Returning to Millet’s “Pioneer Pied Piper,” we can see how radical children’s poetry might cut through these received notions about childhood and children’s poetry alike. The children in Millet’s poem are not innocent vassals: they are ideological subjects who have been interpellated by a socio-economic system, whether they are the rulers of that system (Boy Scouts) or oppressed by it (Children’s Town’s workers). When, at the end of the poem, the child-workers become revolutionary subjects, it is not because their youth makes them capable of expressing or living out a Utopian vision; rather, it is because they develop an awareness of their material conditions. In this way, Millet’s poem reveals how childhood as a concept or category is artificial and socially constructed. It certainly is not—as the image of gluttonous capitalist Boy Scouts suggest—innocent. The “work” of her poem only underscores this point. Its heavy-

handed rhyme schemes and sound patterns evidence how the rhythm of the poem does not represent or express a natural state either.

In this way, children's poetry also complicates the ideals of poetic rhythm that circulated in debates about Popular Front poetry. That these ideals were linked to nineteenth-century verse cultures (which were also idealized) also challenges the debates about modernism adult poets, critics, and readers engaged in. Left writers were not just reacting to the tenets of modernist poetry, they were also reworking earlier influential claims. For example, while many poets on the Left adopted the ideas about poetic rhythm outlined by Gummere in *The Beginnings of Poetry*—especially the notion that rhythm was the essence of poetry and gave poetry its emotional force—they idealized rhythm for a different end. As the archive of 1930s children's verse reveals, Left writers suggested that the political function of rhythm was to enact a communist revolutionary community.

Finally, it is important to note the ways in which children's verse sometimes dramatized the Popular Front notion that poetry should have real uses in people's lives. This is, perhaps, rather comically portrayed by a set of Halloween verses Millet wrote for the October 1934 issue of *New Pioneer*. Millet penned two verses to accompany Halloween masks (Fig. 3—to be included). The first mask is a black cat face; the cat wears a small plumed cap and dangling swastika earrings. It is a mask of then-U.S. Labor Secretary Frances Perkins. The accompanying verse begins: "Frances Perkins speaking for the N.R.A."—and then goes on to detail Perkins's wrongdoings in her own voice. "For every strike that I break," the poem ends, "They give me another raise." A similar verse, also written in the first person, accompanies a moustached pumpkin face that is a mask of J.P. Morgan. To wear one of these masks and recite the accompanying verses is

to play with the idea that poetry can be “socially alive.” Such play locates poetry in a specific human experience, even if it is just a child’s game. On a broader scale, however, the relationship between the masks and verses and the humans wearing and reciting them, respectively, calls up the complex underside of the notion that living poetry is poetry grounded in people’s lives. These simple masks reveal how poetry is an artificial construction (a paper cut-out).

### **The People at the Edges of Poetry**

Carl Sandburg’s *The People, Yes* provides a means to further explore the implications of the assumption that poetic rhythm had something to do with human life, pointing out the tensions between poetry’s uses and poetry’s artificiality. The mass suffering of the Depression years was the catalyst for Carl Sandburg’s 1936 “memoranda” on the people, his book-length poem *The People, Yes*. Sandburg biographer Penelope Niven describes the impetus for the book: “At first he watched helplessly as the Depression threatened to destroy the American Dream. Then he took a deliberate ‘detour’ from the Lincoln biography to write a transcendent anthem to ‘the plain people,’ his ultimate affirmation of faith, *The People, Yes*” (491). As Niven tells it, writing the book-length poem was an urgent task for Sandburg, as the drama of the Depression pulled him out of the past he had been dwelling in by writing folk songs and toiling away at his Lincoln biography. In the 1930s, the poet felt the need to document people’s struggles and provide them with hope. The center and hero of the poem is, of course, “the people.” “The people is a myth, an abstraction,” the poem quotes. But then it asks: “And what myth would you put in place of the people / And what abstraction would



you exchange for this one?” (30). Difficult as it is to comment on *The People, Yes* as a whole, one might say that the various sections negotiate the “myth” or “abstraction” of “the people” and concrete material realities, moving back and forth between the indefinable “people of the earth, the family of man” (3) and the particular histories, anecdotes, and dialogues of one individual after another.

*The People, Yes*, is, perhaps, one of the quintessential poetry documents of the Popular Front. As we have already seen, Left cultural workers like Shepard touted the book as an example of “living poetry” at a time when so much poetry was “dead” or “decaying.” The book’s focus on the “common people,” its accessible style (it is filled with proverbs and anecdotes), and its hopeful tone are all in line with the aesthetic preferences of much of the late-1930s Left. Section 16, for example, is a litany of definitions of hope, and Section 22 begins by asking: “The people is a lighted believer and / hoper—and this is to be held against them?” (41).

*The People, Yes* was also touted as having many of the same qualities as the children’s verse discussed in the section above, for it was instructive of a political position. In his *New Masses* review of the book, Archibald MacLeish wrote that *The People, Yes* should be “required reading” for anyone who thinks of themselves as a radical. The book has much to teach such a person: “It will teach him that the tradition of the people is not dead in this republic. It will teach him, further, that that tradition is the tradition upon which he must build if he wishes to build a social revolution that will succeed” (25). MacLeish’s review extrapolates the Popular Front vision for poetry this chapter has so far explored because it points out how the poem might be useful for people’s lives and in the current political moment. Calling the book “required reading”

that has much to teach, MacLeish also recalls the prevalent Popular Front argument that “living poetry” is a poetry that exists in close proximity to the lives the people. He

develops this point when he writes:

We hold in our hand the growing thing, the true shelter for a great people, and yet it will neither grow nor shelter until it is grafted to the green wood of the people’s lives ... He [Sandburg] points out the one great tradition in American life strong enough and live enough to carry the revolution of the oppressed. That tradition is the belief in the people. (26)

By describing *The People, Yes* a “growing thing” that could be “grafted” onto the “green wood of people’s lives,” MacLeish affirms and exemplifies the assumption, circulating in Left publications, that poetry that is most “alive” touches and represents the tradition of the American people. At the same time, he stresses the importance of the Popular Front rhetoric that replaced the earlier rhetoric of the worker with that of the people. The tradition of the people, like Sandburg’s book, is not only “not dead”—it is “alive enough” to carry out revolutionary work. But this work is not complete, not fully grown—it is a “growing thing” that holds, even awaits, the unfinished revolutionary potential of the people it documents.

While contemporary critics like Brian Reed have cited MacLeish’s review as an example of Left critics ignoring the fact that *The People, Yes* is “bad poetry”—Reed writes that the review never once discusses Sandburg’s work as “poetry *qua* poetry” (182)—this chapter’s focus on rhythm suggests something else about MacLeish’s commentary. As I have already begun to outline, during the 1930s, many Left poets and critics equated “rhythm” with lives and speech of the “the people.” In this context, when MacLeish compares *The People, Yes* to a “living” or “growing” thing that upholds “the tradition of the people,” he does, indeed, intimate something about its poetic. This

concluding section considers just how *The People, Yes* had the rhythm Left poetry seemed so desperately to need, and in so doing, it unravels the relationship between rhythm, poetry, and people. This section continues to think about notions of poetic rhythm historically: by attending to the notions of rhythm used to analyze *The People, Yes*, it shows how the book itself is a revealing case study for thinking about the Left's idealization of poetic rhythm explored above. In a strange twist, the rubrics for Popular Front aesthetics provide potential answers to one of the central questions of Sandburg's poem: What abstraction would you put in place of the people?

To recall: In 1935, Edwin Rolfe wrote that Sandburg was a dead poet. Just a couple of years later, Albert Shepard claimed that the Sandburg who wrote *The People, Yes* was alive. This difference of opinion is not surprising. Sandburg's early work is of two disparate kinds: oscillating between poems that express socialist commitments and modernist, Imagist-inspired lyrics like "Fog." Amy Lowell comments on the tension between these two strains in Sandburg's work in *Tendencies of Modern American Poetry* (1917). Lowell values Sandburg's Imagist lyrics over his more overtly political pieces, and she sees the contemporaneous political concerns at the heart of Sandburg's early poetry as a hindrance to the original achievements of his other poems. "He has not grasped the fact that the world needs his lyricism, his vision of beauty, far more than it needs his concrete suggestions of material fact," she writes. "He is a poet who constantly flings away the guiding star of a new order to grub a lump of coal" (211-12). In his look back on Sandburg's career in his 1936 *Partisan Review* review of *The People, Yes*,

Harold Rosenberg also comments on Sandburg's "split poetic personality."<sup>40</sup> He notes that while Sandburg's earlier poems aspired to Whitman's technique, such aspirations were combined "with certain new deficiencies of his own day"; these poems might "without warning ... break into some super-fancy writing of the American-in-Paris type" (23). One of Rosenberg's main praises of *The People, Yes* is that it foregoes these attempts to integrate the high modernist aesthetic of the previous decade. When Rosenberg writes that "[o]ne had almost forgotten that Sandburg was so modern," it seems to be a compliment.

Rosenberg's assessment of *The People, Yes* in terms of Sandburg's career provides further insight into how Left poets and critics negotiated the earlier modernist "poetry renaissance." His evaluation of the 1936 book is almost a distillation of 1930s arguments against modernist poetry. According to Rosenberg, the emergence of the "new poetry" around World War One subverted populist traditions and supported a "new kind of aristocratism in verse." Poetry was "no longer the 'medium' of the masses of the people," and it was defined by "a sort of pessimistic anti-plebianism based on the refurbishing of plebian forms" (23). The publication of *The People, Yes* marks not only a development in Sandburg's work but a change in the poetry scene. If during the 1920s "the emphases of the times were against him" (23), then the 1930s turn to radicalism and people's movements looked to poetic voices like Sandburg's. "Sandburg had rediscovered the purpose and the origins of the kind of poetry he writes," Rosenberg's review begins. "*The People, Yes* is the best thing he had ever written, because it is the only legitimate thing he could have hoped to write" (21). The converse of Rosenberg's

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<sup>40</sup> Mark Van Weinen uses the term "split poetic personality" to describe Sandburg's different aesthetic propensities and their critical reception in his article "Taming the Socialist: Carl Sandburg's Chicago Poems and Its Critics" (*American Literature* 63.1 [March 1991]: 89-103).

definition of modernist poetry is a prescription for the new poetries emerging from the onset of the depression and the subsequent rise of the American labor movement. As a result of these historical changes, poetry is once again “attempting a statement, an affirmation, a pledge” (23). Rosenberg’s take on *The People, Yes* affirms the views of 1930s radical poetry described above: that it should reach a wide audience; that it should address concrete material realities; and that it should be positive or affirmative in its message. These qualities are centered around an ideal of poetic rhythm—what Shepard described as the “rhythm and vivid imagery of everyday conversation”—an ideal that Sandburg’s book-length poem takes to its endpoint. In this ideal, poetic rhythm is equated with the speech of the people.

So far, this chapter’s formal considerations of poetic rhythm have referenced traditional forms (like children’s verse, folk songs, or ballads) that employ specific rhythmic or metrical patterns. *The People, Yes*, however, draws on and was consistently compared to a different tradition of poetic rhythm that originates in Walt Whitman’s expansive free verse lines. Whitman is a significant progenitor for Sandburg given the historical context of *The People, Yes* because he was heralded as an exemplary poetic and historical figure in Popular Front discourses about art. Whitman’s poetry represented the ambitions of Popular Front poetry—especially because of his belief that the “genius of the United States” is the “common people” and that their peculiarities are “unrhymed poetry” (617). Despite some important differences, *The People, Yes* echoes the forms of *Leaves of Grass*. Sandburg’s book is written entirely in free verse. While line length varies from section to section, nowhere is there the suggestion of metrical patterns. Throughout, Sandburg uses anaphora, lists, and catalogues to describe landscapes and

weave together dialogues and anecdotes, aphorisms and proverbs. These were the very similarities between Whitman and Sandburg that Rosenberg noticed in his review—and it was Whitman’s assertion that the “manners, speech, dress, friendship” of the “common people” were “unrhymed poetry” that he cited as resonant with the form and content of *The People Yes* (Rosenberg 22; Whitman 617)

The application of Whitman’s idea that the behaviors of the common people are unrhymed poetry to *The People, Yes* resonates with the above analyses of Popular Front ideas about poetic rhythm. Across the critical sites this chapter has explored, rhythm has emerged as a flashpoint for examining how Left writers expressed their shared desire for a poetry that could be used in the “real world” (i.e., the factories and hamburger joints) and capture the lives of working people (“the rhythms of everyday conversation”). Such abstract notions of rhythm come to a fruition in Millet’s equation of poetry, rhythm, and human experience—and also, in a way, in *The People Yes*. According to the abstract notions of rhythm explored above, Sandburg’s book has rhythm because its project is to document the lives of “common people,” catching their manners and speech in the prose-like rhythms of free verse. For example, many sections of the poem purport to communicate such manners and speech in an unmediated form: section 45 begins with the pronouncement “They have yarns,” and then records a long list of stories (88-89); all but the first line in Section 55 is a long quotation that reproduces a prayer people said on a plantation (127); and section 62 intersperses descriptions of the “daily chores of the people” with records of dialogues and everyday conversations.

But, while *The People, Yes* does share these previously mentioned concerns with approximating the lives of the “common people,” one the central questions of the book is,

“Who shall speak for the people.” In section 20, this question leads to a critique of the “panderers and cheaters” who presume to speak for everyone. And when the refrain returns in Section 24, the presumptuousness of speaking for the people is considered from another angle:

Who shall speak for the people?  
who has the answers?  
where is the sure interpreter?  
who knows what to say?  
Who can write the music jazz-classical  
smokestacks-geraniums-hysterical-biscuits  
now whispering easy  
now boom doom crashing angular  
now tough monotonous tom tom  
Who has enough split-seconds and slow sea-tides? (44)

Sandburg questions who, if anyone (or any poem), can speak for the people or represent the complex rhythms and music of their lives and speech. Asking this question, the poem shifts the register of Popular Front concerns, such as Millet’s, that conflate poetry and the body of the people. Rather than posit that any interpreter could capture “music jazz-classical” or the rhythms of a whisper in writing, Sandburg interrogates the assumption that anyone could have “the answers” or “know what to say.” While I am not positing a strict bifurcation between Millet’s (and others’) ideas and Sandburg’s, centering Sandburg’s questions about representation open up new ways of thinking about Millet’s equation of the rhythms of poetry with human experience. In other words, the specific historical way in which Sandburg thinks about issues of representation changes the scale of Millet’s ideas. Millet locates the importance of poetry’s rhythm in specific events such as May Day parades and picket lines; for this reason, rhythm must have immediate and particular uses. Sandburg, however, shifts to the future tense: he does not ask who speaks for the people, but who *shall* speak for them. He opens up the poem to a broader mass

and time, and in so doing, leaves the question of the people an open one. Thus, the few lines from Section 24 quoted above attempt to capture a complex landscape of rhythms (“jazz-classical”), objects (“smokestacks-geraniums-hysterical-biscuits), and temporal realities (“split-seconds and slow sea-tides”).

It is perhaps because Sandburg is anxious about presuming to speak for the people that a centralized poetic authority is conspicuously absent from *The People, Yes*. At one point early in the book, Sandburg questions the vocation of poetry when he tells the story of a “champion heavyweight poet” who “flung his medal far out on the sea bosom.” “And why not,” the poem asks, “... Who of the poets equals the music of the sea?” (8). But it is not just that the poet must inevitably bow to nature. The ills of capitalism and the ongoing class struggle seem to have caused the poet to distrust anyone saying “I.” In section 50, Sandburg suggests that those saying “I” are dangerous for they forget the needs and desires of the people:

From what graveyards and sepulchers have they come,  
these given the public eye and ear  
who chatter idly of their personal success  
as though they flowered by themselves alone  
saying, “I,” “I,” “I,”  
crediting themselves with advances and gains,  
“I did this, I did that,”  
and hither and thither, “It was me, Me,”  
the people, yes, the people, being omitted... (108)

If the ominous figures saying “I, I, I” omit “the people,” then a poem that attempts to render their experiences cannot speak as an “I” or a “me.” Manifestly, it seems that Sandburg’s poem might be resisting or subverting the traditional authority of a lyric “I.” When read in light of the passage from Section 24 quoted above, however, this passage also suggests the ways in which questions about representation are not simply questions



of who is speaking (i.e., the lyric “I”). Representation is also, in Sandburg’s poem, a form of political action. Even when the “I” in this section attempts to omit the people, the rest of *The People, Yes* points to a broader plane of representation where utopian coordination is possible. Sandburg hints at this possibility up front when he dedicates the book “to contributors dead and living.” In so doing, he intimates that the contents of the book are collectively written and the product of an ongoing process of collaboration.

Such a possibility returns us to MacLeish’s description of *The People, Yes* as a “growing thing” that has the potential to provide “the true shelter for a great people” (26). As I’ve already hinted, MacLeish’s review casts *The People, Yes* as an open space where the utopian potentials of a “people’s tradition” are nascent but not fully formed. This openness suggests some sort of revolutionary possibility—but it inevitably creates an anxiety where the form of the poem is concerned, for how does one formally or generically categorize such empty space? Sandburg’s attempts to characterize *The People, Yes* suggest that this very real anxiety marked the composition of the book. Early on, he confessed to MacLeish that the poem “has such length and windings . . . that I would have doubts about it had I not lived so long with the authorities inside me who say I will not handle this particular theme any better until I hit flither and yon in reincarnated flesh and feathers” (*Letters* 309). When Sandburg wrote about *The People, Yes* to Malcolm Cowley in January 1935, he attempted to communicate the always-shifting, perhaps uncertain, form of the poem by rattling off a long list of categories. He described the project to Cowley as: “a ballad pamphlet harangue sonata and fugue titled ‘The People, Yes,’ standing now somewhat over 100 typed sheets, an almanac, a scroll, a palimpsest, the last will and testament of Mr. John Public, John Doe, Richard Roe, and

the autobiography of whoever it was the alfalfaland governor meant in saying, ‘The common people will do anything you say except stay hitched’” (*Letters* 309-310).

Similarly, in a subsequent letter, Sandburg told his close friend Brenda Ueland that *The People, Yes* was “quite something else again, a saga sonata fugue with deliberate haywire interludes and jigtime babblings” (*Letters* 312).

In all of these instances, Sandburg attempts to describe the book in several registers. This need to express the various levels and categories at play in the long poem are finally evident in the preface to *The People, Yes*, which is, again, an attempt to lay bare its contents through a litany of terms and descriptive phrases:

Being several stories and psalms nobody  
would want to laugh at

interspersed with memoranda variations  
worth a second look

along with sayings and yarns traveling on  
grief and laughter

running sometimes as a fugitive air in the  
classic manner

breaking into jig time and tap dancing  
nohow classical

and further broken by plain and irregular  
sounds and echoes from

the roar and whirl of street crowds, work  
gangs, sidewalk clamor,

with interludes of midnight cool blue and  
inviolable stars

over the phantom frames of skyscrapers.

According to these definitions, *The People, Yes* contains contradictions. It tells “stories ... nobody would want to laugh at” at the same time that it is composed of “sayings and yarns traveling on / grief and laughter.” Its music is “in the classic manner” but it is also “nohow classical,” and it moves between the “broken” sounds of “sidewalk clamor” to the “inviolable stars” of “midnight cool blue” skies. This series of contradictions is inherent to the life of the poem, as evidenced by the fact that these myriad descriptors hinge on one word, “Being,” which suggests that the poem’s ontology is continually open and shifting. Because of the many and competing ways the poem can “be,” it remains, in the end, indefinable.

Sandburg’s suggestion that *The People, Yes* is “being” several things at once is akin to MacLeish’s calling the book a “growing thing” and comparing it to a “shelter” for the people that is not yet built. In this way, *The People, Yes* is not the quintessential poetic document of the Popular Front because it exemplifies the ambitions of Popular Front aesthetics and fulfills the need for poetry to have rhythm. Rather, it is significant because it reveals larger anxieties about what poetry is and does on the People’s Front. Sandburg’s own anxieties about how the category of poetry is related to its potential use are encapsulated in his lament that the book “would have gone to a larger audience had it been cast in a form indicating it had no relation to poetry” (qtd Nivens 505). In simple terms, Sandburg might be thinking about poetry’s potential audience in the same way that Shepard and Millet do when they insist that poetry needs to get out of the “tired intellectual towers” and be “popular” so that it can reach as many people as possible. But, as we have seen, Sandburg’s conception of his audience went beyond the immediate political situation. Thus, his question of audience indicates a future audience, a mass of

people and ground for political action that is still being worked out. For this reason, Sandburg also struggled with the potential usefulness of the category of poetry to describe such a project and its vision.

Sandburg's grappling with the category of poetry indicates the problem of the overall lack of distinction between various poetic genres in the twentieth-century. But it also evidences the significant tension on the Left between a need for the old forms, genres, and traditions and the desire for a previously undefined revolutionary space where the utopian potentials promised by the "good news" of communism will come to be. As we have seen, the supposedly "new" experiments of modernist poetry did not fit the bill. But while Left writers critical of modernism called for popular and traditional poetic forms and genres, their constant invocation of poetic rhythm as an abstract (rather than formal) quality shows that they, like Sandburg, were unsure about the category of poetry itself. This is evident in the reception of *The People, Yes*, as critics tried to evaluate the long poem as poetry, but could only do so in uncertain terms. In *Partisan Review*, Rosenberg pointed out that *The People, Yes* incorporated "prose rhythms" (21). Another review in the *Nation* described it as "negligible poetry and confused preaching" (Belitt 216). And, in "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" Wilson described the book as "a queer kind of literature which oscillates between something like verse and something like the paragraphs of a newspaper column" (30). Perhaps most strikingly, in a 1951 review of Sandburg's *Collected Poems*, William Carlos Williams referred to later works like *The People, Yes* as "just talk" (345).

Williams, of course, meant to suggest that if a poem only "talks" it is not art. From the perspective of the 1930s Left, to say that Sandburg's poems are "just talk" is

nothing if not a compliment. But pushing *The People, Yes* into the realm of talk illuminates the fantasies undergirding the notions of poetic rhythm circulating on the Left. Ultimately, what Popular Front poets and critics most hoped for was a pure expression of the tradition of the common people; and they imagined that such an expression would find real and immediate use in those very people's lives. But, as Sandburg's book reveals, this imagined use for poetry also raises questions about what poetry is and does in the first place. If poetry is defined by its rhythm, and if this rhythm only indicates poetry's potential usefulness, then why does one need the borders of genre and form?

With this question in mind, we might read Williams's quip that Sandburg's poetry is "just talk" with Wilson's 1938 discussion of the relationship between verse and prose. Wilson wondered if "verse was a dying technique" because so many poets had abandoned its musical qualities. He points out that the Greek name for prose was "bare words," meaning "words divorced from music" (28). In light of Sandburg's poetic project, we might take the labels "just talk" and "bare words" as a way to explore how fantasies about poetry and its rhythm operate on the political plane. Might we, then, re-read "bare words" in terms of Giorgio Agamben's notion of "bare life"? In Agamben's discussion of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer*, "bare life" refers to the basic parameters of the political human subject, and he interrogates the ways in which "bare life" (or "natural life") are integrated into the political realm. As he explains, "the inclusion of bare life in the political realm constitutes the original—if concealed—nucleus of sovereign power" (6). The question arises, then, of how human life can be defined apart from the political parameters of the state. This same structural schematic might help to understand the

political questions and anxieties that Left writers attempted to work out on the plane of poetry. As Sandburg's book ultimately reveals, a key concern for Left poets and critics were questions about what human life would mean in a new political realm. That is, how will the individual be defined? And will that individual be defined in terms of the new multitude of the people? In my next chapter, I take the intersections between lyric representation and the attempts to photographically document the political situation of the 1930s as a way to explore the implications of these questions in greater detail.

## CHAPTER 3

### Langston Hughes's Snapshots of Haiti: Photography and the Formation of Radical Poetics

In the first pages of James Agee and Walker Evans's photo-textual document of the lives of Alabama tenant farmers, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1938), Agee fantasizes an alternate form for their book that would include no writing:

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs; the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odor, plates of food and excrement. Booksellers would consider it quite a novelty; critics would murmur, yes, but is it art; and I could trust a majority of you to use it as you would a parlor game.

A piece of the body torn out by the roots might be more to the point. (10)

The ways in which Left poets approached the problem of representing political subjects cannot be fully understood without a consideration of the ubiquity of photographic representations during the 1930s. In order to provide a radical critique of the Depression, photographers associated with the Farm Security Administration (FSA) and the Resettlement Administration (RA) attempted to render visible subaltern populations by harnessing the camera's power to unequivocally prove "that the thing has been there" (*Camera Lucida* 76). Just as Agee faced the incontrovertible evidence captured by Evans's camera eye, poets had to find an answer to the photograph's ability to capture, in Agee's phrase, the "cruel radiance of what is" (9). The notion that a book might contain "no writing" and, instead, become an amalgamation of photographs and personal objects helps to demonstrate how the photograph reshaped discourses about poetry's cultural

function and utopian potentials. The photograph and the poem alike come to be associated with actual bodies (with actual lives) and with how those bodies look or sound. As I show, however, an analysis of Left poets' engagements with the photograph ultimately expose the fantasy that poems are persons or, for that matter, can act as scraps of their clothes or records of their speech.

Chapter 2 closed with a discussion of how Left poets negotiated the relationship between poetry and personhood, connecting anxieties about representing the new multitude of "the people" with anxieties about the status and definition of poetry. By taking up the tenuous relationship between poetry and photography in the 1930s, this chapter builds on the historical and formal work of the previous chapter, and it provides new ways of thinking about the roles and forms of interwar radical poetry. Communist and Popular Front poets did not simply copy the generic features of documentary photography so as to more readily convey their message and garner wider appeal. As Michael Thurston points out, during the 1930s, poetry was not merely adapted to "perform the critical function of documentary" (188). What observations like Thurston's leave out, however, is an analysis of what writers imagined poetry's critical function might be in relation to the documentary.

This chapter approaches how the widespread use of the documentary image during the Depression-era affects the status and definition of poetry and mediates the forms it takes. In his landmark study of documentary expression in the United States, William Stott suggests that the 30s "produced so many counterfeit Walt Whitmans . . . in part because no other time so prized the Whitmanian 'I'—able to see, incorporate, and give voice to all human experience" (36). However, the photograph's ability to capture an



immediate political reality seems to have caused poets to become self-conscious about representing historical subjects and their situations.<sup>41</sup> These writers' contemplation of the photographic complicates Stott's assumptions about a "documentary" or "Whitmanian" poetic "I," as the technology and ontology of the photograph poses productive theoretical and formal problems for radical poets.<sup>42</sup>

In what follows, I explore these issues through an archival photo-textual document from the early 1930s: Langston Hughes's scrapbook from his 1931 trip to Haiti. Hughes's engagement with the photographic in Haiti might be seen to dialectically change our understandings of the formal strategies Hughes employs in his subsequent political poetry. More specifically, analyzing Hughes's political verses from the early 1930s in the context of his Haiti scrapbooks reveals how the photograph's ability to evidence a historical reality affects the ways in which Hughes constructed the speaker of his lyric poems and dramatic monologues. Confronted with the photograph's power to capture subjects and landscapes, Hughes develops new ways of representing the revolutionary classes and their potential for utopian coordination.

While a rich body of scholarship has explored the connections between Hughes's travels in Haiti, his imagination of the country and its history, and key moments in his artistic and political development, Hughes's visual archive from his trip has remained

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<sup>41</sup> In a related way, Miles Orvell has argued that early-twentieth-century realist writers were anxious that their prose was unable to equal the accuracy of the camera. See his essay "Reproduction and the 'Real Thing': The Anxiety of Realism in the Age of Photography" in *The Technological Imagination* (Ed. Teresa De Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward. Madison: Coda, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> In many ways, this thesis goes against arguments about the relationship between poetry and mass media forms like the photograph forwarded by critics like Terrence Des Pres. In his *Praises and Dispraises: Poetry and Politics, The Twentieth Century* (New York: Viking, 1988), Des Pres argues that the "technological expansion of consciousness" has made it impossible for us to "know the extent of political torment," and he holds up poetry as the antithesis to such "failures of progress" (xv-xvi). While Des Pres's points about how the "miracle of modern communications" have led to a "twentieth-century sense of reality" that is essentially vapid (xv), one must ask what idealization of poetic language is buttressing his claims about the cultural and political work of poetry.

obscure. His personal archive includes picture postcards featuring Haitian landscapes and people, several contact sheets of photos, a bound scrapbook of photos, and loose pages from a Haiti scrapbook containing several snapshots with handwritten captions. Considering Hughes's practice of documenting Haiti—and then arranging and captioning his pictures in albums and scrapbooks—this chapter demonstrates how Hughes's engagements in the 1930s with the Communist Left and his experiments with a “proletarian aesthetic” were informed by the possibilities of documentary photography as a resource for his work.

Hughes is uniquely situated for a study of the relationship between poetry and photography during the “red decade.” While Hughes would become more directly involved with photographic projects during the 1950s—collaborating with Roy DeCarava for the photo-text *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955) and with Milton Metzler for *The Pictorial History of the Negro in America* (1956)—he was deeply interested in documentary photography early on, even writing an introduction to a brochure for his friend Henri Cartier-Bresson's and Manuel Bravo's exhibition at the Palacio de las Artes in Mexico (Rampersad 304). Given what Sara Blair describes as Hughes's “canny use of images” in later prose pieces like his Simple sketches (*Harlem Crossroads* 52), it is not far-fetched to posit that the experience of photographing and collecting snapshots of Haiti had a profound effect on Hughes's interwar poetic transformation.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, considering the importance of documentary visual culture for understanding Hughes's interwar poetry provides a means to revive the study of Hughes's 1930s poetry, which

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<sup>43</sup> In *Harlem Crossroads*, Blair demonstrates how the literary technique of Hughes's Simple sketches participates in the *Chicago Defender's* “canny use of images,” and she shows how Hughes's collaborations with DeCarava and Meltzer evidence his “belief in the power of the image—particularly the photograph—to render visible and to dignify its subjects” (52-53).

has been largely dismissed in favor of his modernist-inflected Harlem Renaissance lyrics of the 1920s or the blues- and jazz-inspired experiments of the 1950s.<sup>44</sup>

In general, Hughes's efforts from the thirties are seen to have "largely sounded over and over the same ham-fisted didactic note, lacking the lyric humanism and folk wit of his work in the 1920s, 1940s, and 1950s" (Smethurst 92). Helen Vendler, for example, draws a line between Hughes's "topical" or "propagandistic" poems and those that "withstand historical vicissitude," suggesting that Hughes's thirties poetry does not represent his "best work" (42; 37). Vendler effectively writes off Hughes's interwar years as those in which the poet was "doing his most pedestrian Soviet flag-waving" (37). Critics such as James Edward Smethurst, Michael Thurston, and William J. Maxwell who work against Vendler's assessments have often appealed to the "vernacular" or "folk" elements of Hughes's 1930s verse, showing how it attempts to represent "popular voices" (as in Smethurst) or capture the speech of black workers (as in Maxwell). Assessing how Hughes grapples with complex notions of subjectivity, authenticity, and temporality through and against the thoroughly modern medium of photography, this chapter neither argues that Hughes's 1930s poetry is an extension of his modernist-inflected 1920s lyrics, nor does it cite Hughes's vernacular practice in order to protest the reduction of his interwar poetry to "pedestrian Soviet flag-waving."

Hughes's photographs and scrapbooks from his travels in Haiti register the tenuous reconstruction of his poetic persona and his political and aesthetic concerns. The

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<sup>44</sup> The studies by Maxwell, Smethurst, Thurston, and Wald cited above go against this critical tendency. Also see John Lowney's *History, Memory, and the Literary Left: Modern American Poetry, 1935-1968* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2006), Mark Naison's *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2004), and Cary Nelson's *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory* (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1989) and *Revolutionary Memory: Recovering the Poetry of the American Left* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

potential tension between words and images in Hughes's scrapbook anticipates the tenuous relationship between poetry and photography evinced in later works emerging out of the Communist and Popular Front Left, and it provides a new context for understanding more oft-discussed documentary poems like Muriel Rukeyser's *The Book of the Dead* (1938) as well as other hybrid works like Agee's and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and Archibald MacLeish's *The Land of the Free* (1938). Taking Hughes's scrapbook as a focal point, I argue that his practice of photographing Haitian people and landscapes—and then assembling and captioning those photographs—provides a significant new context for understanding both the forms of Hughes's 1930s poetry as well as more general historical conceptions of the forms of interwar political poetry and its perceived cultural work and critical function. As an amateur documentary photographer, Hughes is confronted with the camera's remarkable ability to render a previously invisible subject visible. But, as Hughes's scrapbook captions suggest, during the 1930s, this power of the photograph seems to have caused a compositional crisis for the poet who set out to accomplish the same task.

### **Paradise for a Kodak**

For Hughes, the “red decade” began with a trip to the Caribbean. In the spring and summer of 1931, Hughes and his friend Zell Ingram traveled to Cuba and Haiti. Feeling the emotional effect of what he would dub his “personal crash,” Hughes sought escape and anonymity as well as a regenerative space to “sit in the sun awhile and think” (*I Wonder* 3; 5). Hughes was already well known in Cuba, so it was Haiti that would offer

just such a respite.<sup>45</sup> Whether or not they specifically reference his travels to the Caribbean, Hughes's readers generally mark the early 1930s as a significant moment of personal and artistic transformation. Of course, Hughes had been politically and artistically involved in the Left prior to the 1930s. As a high school student he supported the Russian Revolution, and he began writing for Communist Party publications before the 1929 stock market crash. Yet, as Smethurst points out, "Hughes's participation in the Left increased astronomically during the 1930s and had a marked impact on the form and content ... of Hughes's poetry" (92). Though probably never a member of the Communist Party, starting in the early thirties Hughes was associated with the John Reed Club in New York and he regularly published poetry and prose in the *New Masses*. In 1934, he served as president of the Communist-affiliated League of Struggle for Negro Rights (Rampersad 286). Upon his return to the States from Haiti, Hughes embarked on a reading tour of the South, "taking poetry, my poetry, to my people" (*I Wonder* 41). At the same time that Hughes established such political affiliations and gained a new awareness of and dedication to his audience, there was a marked change in his aesthetic. In terms of content, Hughes penned poems, plays, and journalistic essays addressing specific events—such as the Scottsboro trial and the Spanish Civil War—and he wrote broadly about the problems of racism in the U.S. and the importance of interracial solidarity for winning the class war. Hughes's writings from the 1930s demonstrate how formative his experience of Haiti was, both creatively and intellectually, for crafting his poetic response to racism and economic imperialism. Poems like "Always the Same," for instance, evoke the "coffee hills of Haiti" in their articulation of the international oppression of blacks,

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<sup>45</sup> Rampersad details how Hughes's trip to the Caribbean met his need to escape to "a quiet sunny place where he could rest and examine his life," especially in the wake of his devastating break with longtime patron Charlotte Osgood Mason. In Cuba, Hughes found that he "was too popular to be left alone" (202-03).

and his 1936 play *Emperor of Haiti (Troubled Island)* evidences his connection to Haiti's history of rebellion and revolt.<sup>46</sup>

While staying in the Haitian coastal city Cap-Haïtien, Hughes climbed nineteenth-century slave rebellion leader Henri Christophe's mountaintop fortress, the Citadel, three times. One might imagine that on each climb he paused at Christophe's burial spot and stopped to read his epitaph: "Here lies Henri Christophe, King of Haiti. I am reborn from my ashes" (Rampersad 206). It would be fitting, indeed, for Hughes had come to Haiti seeking to be reborn from the ashes of an old self. In Hughes's imagination, Haiti was an opportune space for abandoning an old self and staking out a new path. What the poet "did not know, and needed to discover, was the form the future would take: to heal himself Hughes needed nothing less than a temporary erasure of his identity" (Rampersad 202). Once in Haiti, Hughes refused to use his letters of introduction from prominent African-American intellectuals like Walter White and James Weldon Johnson, preferring instead to spend his days in "a distinctly nontourist hotel near the port" where he immersed himself in "the folk life of the Haitian people" (*I Wonder* 15-16). There is a way in which this immersion in Haitian folk life was one of Hughes's strategies for disappearing. Explaining his hesitancy to be introduced to members of the Haitian upper class, Hughes recalls that he was "afraid then that someone might recognize my name or know my poetry, for I did not want to be lionized in Haiti, nor have my days filled with invitations to dine with people who could not play drums. I wanted to be lazy, lie on the

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<sup>46</sup> In his preface to *Langston Hughes in the Hispanic World and Haiti* (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1977), Edward J. Mullen points out that Hughes's experience in Haiti was important from "both a creative and intellectual standpoint. It seems to have intensified his outrage at the treatment of blacks, a feeling reflected in articles published in *New Masses*, *The Crisis*, and *The New Republic*" (33). Hughes also wrote poems such as "To the Little Fort of San Lazaro on the Ocean Front, Havana" and "Broadcast to the West Indies" that describe the political and economic struggles in the Caribbean and connect them to the exploitation of African Americans. In addition, Hughes celebrated Haitian people and landscapes in his 1932 children's book, co-authored with Arna Bontemps, *Popo and Fifina: Children of Haiti*.

beach as long as I liked, talk with whom I pleased, go to cockfights on Sundays, sail with the fishermen, and never wear a coat” (*I Wonder* 25).

Rampersad suggests that Christophe’s epitaph “was perhaps an augury for Hughes and the black race” (206). Hughes’s felt need to somehow disappear in Haiti in order to reconstruct his future political and artistic self is prefigured in the poems he composed before his trip and that were collected in the privately printed volume *Dear Lovely Death* (1931). Several poems in the volume fantasize about death as a transformative event in which the speaker casts off an old self and offers himself up to an unknown future. The title poem, for example, defines death as an agent that changes men “[i]nto some other thing” (*Poems* 121). The poem ends with the assertion that the synonym for death is change—“Dear Lovely Death / Change is thy other name”—thus suggesting the importance of its transformative power. This view of death evidences Hughes’s need, in the late 20s and early 30s, for an inter-space where he might transition into a new way of being. Such a conception of death is reiterated in “Two Things,” where death and another nameless “thing” are “full of wonder” and act to “cast off all shame” (*Poems* 121-22). In related ways, in poems like “Drum” the poet moves to the edges of death in order to newly awaken to life. “Drum” figures death as both a void and call—an eternally beating drum that plays until “time is lost / And there is no air / And space itself / Is nothing nowhere” but that is, simultaneously, a harbinger “Calling life / To come! / Come! /Come!” (*Poems* 120).

The speaker in all of these poems seeks death because he seeks a radically transformative experience. Such an experience is, however, temporally and spatially suspended by the traditional “high” lyric mode. Even poems in *Dear Lovely Death* that

address racial issues largely remain historically and politically unspecific. In “Afro-American Fragment,” for instance, drum music is heard “through some vast mist of race” as a song “from an atavistic land, / Of bitter yearnings lost, without a place” (*Poems* 122-23). While the poems collected in *Dear Lovely Death* help to set up Hughes’s trip to Haiti as a threshold moment of personal and artistic transformation, Hughes’s experience and documentation of Haiti restore historical and geographic particularity to what seemed lost.

The prevailing narrative that Hughes traveled to Haiti to “escape” or to be “erased” is complicated by that fact that, when he climbed the Citadel, he also lugged the Kodak camera Amy Spingarn had given him as a graduation present (Rampersad 206). The Citadel is perhaps the most photographed location in the scrapbooks. In addition to a smattering of photos throughout, Hughes dedicates an entire page to “Views of the Citadel.” The photographs collected and arranged in his Haiti scrapbooks counter the notion that what the poet most sought in Haiti was a “temporary erasure of identity” or the type of symbolic death imagined in *Dear Lovely Death*. Perhaps Hughes did entertain the fantasy etched on Christophe’s grave. The images Hughes captured and collected in Haiti, however, evidence how preoccupied he was with spatially and temporally locating himself. This impetus to locate himself is evident on the first page of Hughes’s Haiti scrapbook. Between two photographs—one in which Hughes stands waist-deep in the ocean and another in which he poses with a woman in a white dress—he pasted a typed caption (“Langston Hughes in Haiti”) and penciled in the year (“1931”) (see fig. 1). Hughes’s act of captioning the first page of his scrapbook is a common practice. It seems significant, however, that he decides to include his full name. Though this might be



gleaned from narrative accounts like his diary, reportage, and autobiography, the photograph accentuates



Fig. 1. First page of Haiti Scrapbook, from Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

his historical and political situatedness in a different way. The subject of the photograph is affixed to the moment and to the landscape, and the photograph acts as a “certificate of presence” (Barthes 87) and it evidences both a personal and a public history.

Rampersad explains that Hughes experienced the Citadel as both a tourist and “as a prodigal son who, having wasted his birthright in a foreign clime, had now limped home for forgiveness” (206-7). It was as an awed tourist that Hughes snapped

photographs and collected picture postcards of the landmark that he would remember as “one of the lustiest ruins of the world,” a monument he described as “majestic, graceful in every proportion” (*I Wonder* 26-7). But it was also as a “prodigal son,” deeply concerned with the conditions of black life in the U.S. and the Caribbean, that Hughes documented his pilgrimages to Christophe’s fortress. As much as Hughes identified with the revolutionary history of the site, he was also well aware of the conditions surrounding the Citadel at the time of his arrival there. In his May 1932 *Crisis* essay “White Shadows in a Black Land” Hughes writes of “that Citadel today” (*Essays* 52). In this syntactic construction, the deictic “that” distances the historical Citadel from the oppressive conditions of present-day Haiti. In a way, the misty and scenic photographs of the monument collected in Hughes’s scrapbooks capture *that* Citadel—that is, the Citadel as it would have been at the time of the nineteenth-century revolution. But the photographs are also flat; the context of their placement in the 1931 scrapbook makes Hughes keenly aware of their historical time. “After Christophe’s death in 1820, misfortune set in,” Hughes writes in “White Shadows,” ending his article with the reminder that “today, the Marines are there” (52-3). In *I Wonder* he reiterates the fact in more personal terms: “When Christophe died, Haiti became a republic ... But in 1915 the American marines came to Haiti to collect American loans and were there when I came” (27).

The relationship between these two ways of experiencing and therefore documenting Haiti comes out in one of Hughes’s 1931 diary entries, in which he urges, “Go to the Black Countries.” Frank Andre Guridy extrapolates this quotation in order to highlight the significance of travel networks for African-Americans between the U.S. and the Caribbean in the middle part of the century, pointing out how cross-cultural

“exchanges” like those Hughes describes were made easier by the fact that one did not have to secure a passport or visa to visit Cuba or Haiti (151). But equally compelling in light of my arguments here is that in his diary Hughes refers to the Caribbean (along with South America and Africa) as “a paradise for a Kodak camera.” In the diary, Hughes lists various observations about traveling to the “Black countries” and the various advantages such travel might offer:

Go To The Black Countries  
Cuba – Haiti – West Indies, Brazil, Africa  
Rates and Means  
No passports to C. & H.  
Hotels  
South by Car  
Spanish & French at your very door  
Cultural & racial advantages  
Invaluable contacts – to see one’s own people in banks, shops, fine clubs, high positions  
Negro artists – Exchange of ideas  
musicians & painters, new rhythms, new colors, and faces. Poets and writers – new backgrounds & basis for companions.  
A paradise for Kodak camera ...  
Sunrise in a new land – a day that will be full of new brownskin surprises, strange dark beauties, and hitherto unknown interesting contacts in a world of color.  
Beer, wine, & liquors  
Tropical fruits you’ve never heard of before (“Log Book”)

The camera, like the act of seeing “one’s own people” and meeting other “Negro artists,” is a way of establishing contact with a place and its people. Hughes does include the exotic element of the “unknown” by naming these other places a “paradise” with “strange dark beauties”; but, when contextualized with the above, one also understands that Hughes’s own Kodak was a necessary instrument for grounding himself in the “world of color.”<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> In this context, Hughes’s photographic documentation of Haiti resists what Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson describe in their introduction to *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (New

Thus, on one level, the scrapbook can be read as a vacation album. Indeed, Hughes experienced Haiti as a tourist, collecting pictures and postcards and crafting them into a narrative of his travels. On another level, however, Hughes's scrapbook might be seen as a narrative of his "becoming" as an artist. Indeed, Hughes referred to Haiti as the place where he "began to puzzle out how I, a Negro, could make a living from writing" (*I Wonder* 4). Hughes's scrapbook of photographs suggests that Haiti was significant for more than figuring out how he would "make a living from writing." He also sought to understand himself as a politically committed black writer. Hughes begins documenting this journey on the first page of his scrapbook described above, where the photographs and the accompanying caption constitute both a private gesture—that is, the beginning of a personal narrative—and a public one, where he situates himself in the context of a particular geography and history when he inscribes the place and date. The photographs of Haiti that follow act to create a point of origin from which Hughes narrates a new subject: "Langston Hughes in Haiti 1931." As many of the photographs evidence, this subject is always positioned in relation to larger social realities and the body of people he documented over the course of his travels. Put in the terms of the diary entry: the Kodak establishes invaluable contacts that newly ground him in a world of color.

The scrapbook blurs the line between Hughes's private experiences and his developing interest and involvement in socio-political struggles at home and abroad. Read as a tourist's vacation album, a "souvenir," the collection of photographs in the scrapbook "moves history into private time" (*On Longing* 138). But, read as documentary reportage, the scrapbook evidences public commitments and attests to Hughes's new

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York: Routledge, 2004) as "the pervasiveness of the symbolic and scientific uses of photography for the verification and justification of colonial rule" (2).

thinking about the amorphous category of “the people.” This time of mediation has import for understanding the confluences between the high lyric poetry included in volumes like *Dear Lovely Death* and Hughes’s growing concern with the political during the 1930s. In terms of the former, photography mediates—and dialectically changes—understandings of the historical lyric subject. The lyric subject in *Dear Lovely Death* is, for the most part, constituted around the fate of the romantic individual.<sup>48</sup> The content of Hughes’s scrapbook might be seen to restore social contingency to such a subject. One can see, by way of a simple example, how Hughes’s snapshots might prompt a consideration of questions related to the authenticity and agency of the lyric speaker, one that informs understandings of the poetry Hughes wrote after he left the Caribbean. A photo labeled “Street Scene” depicts a house- and tree-lined street (see fig. 2). The focal point is a young person standing with their back to the camera. The view captured in the snapshot appears to show two perspectives: the anonymous person standing in the middle of the street and the photographer himself. While the photographer establishes the parameters of the scene, his view is deferred onto the person standing directly in front of him. The person being photographed is given agency (one potentially sees the scene through their eyes) and, at the same time, that agency is erased by the presence of the photographer and his camera. As subsequent sections will detail, the photographs collected in Hughes’s scrapbook suggest that his documenting Haitian people and

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<sup>48</sup> Smethurst argues that *Dear Lovely Death* presents “a solution to the modernist crisis of romantic individualism” and that “[t]his solution involved a polyphonic process of dialogue and rapprochement between the individual intellectual-poet and the folk” (101). As I explore in more detail below, Hughes’s Haiti scrapbooks complicate any attempt to analyze his poems for their incorporation of “dialogue” or vernacular speech. Moreover, while I might agree with Smethurst that the poems collected in *Dear Lovely Death* “shared far more with Hughes’s ‘revolutionary poetry’ of the 1930s than has generally been allowed” (101), Hughes’s Haiti scrapbooks mediate the lyric subject of his subsequent political poems in significant ways that ultimately distinguish the later “revolutionary poetry” from the poems collected in the 1931 volume.

landscapes may have led him to contemplate the social and political purchase of the lyric, evidenced by his continued experimentation with other modes and forms.



Fig. 2. Loose page from Haiti Scrapbook, from Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Hughes's scrapbooks also correlate to his growing interest in "the people"—both the people of Haiti and the broader notion of "the people" that was emergent for him as a black writer affiliated with the Communist and Popular Front Left. Hughes's photographs have a distinctly proletarian flavor. Indeed, as Paul Gardullo points out, Hughes's choice to "travel as a 'local'" in Haiti allowed him to both understand and "stage his encounter" with the country from a "proletarian perspective" (58). Hughes's photographs of barefoot children, fishermen, workmen, and young girls selling wares in a marketplace depict the very scenes he would describe in his reports from Haiti for the Left Press. As has been well documented, Hughes reported on the plight of the Haitian peasant class, a group he dubbed the "people without shoes." In his previously mentioned *Crisis* essay and his October 1931 *New Masses* article "People Without Shoes" Hughes addresses the deep class divide in Haiti; the oppressive effects of the U.S. occupation; and the complicated intersection between the class and color lines, including their long history and the more recent impact of the American occupation. "All of the work that keeps Haiti alive, pays for the American Occupation, and enriches foreign traders," he writes in the *New Masses*, "... is done there by Negroes without shoes" (*Essays* 47); and he describes "Haiti today" as "a fruit tree for Wall Street, a mango for the Occupation, coffee for foreign cups, and poverty for its own black workers and peasants" (48). In *Crisis*, Hughes frames the problem of the occupation more in terms race oppression: describing how the bars are filled with marines, the banks are controlled by New York, and white Americans and Europeans own the stores and newspapers (51-2).

The images Hughes uses in his reportage from Haiti participate in—and even anticipate—the larger culture of documentary expression and, at the same time, they bear

a resemblance to the subjects he photographed. For instance, in his *Crisis* essay, in pointing to the larger effects of various forms of the occupation, Hughes imagines Haiti itself as a body or a person, writing: “The dark-skinned little Republic, then, has its hair caught in the white fingers of unsympathetic foreigners, and the Haitian people live today under a sort of military dictatorship backed by American guns. They are not free” (52). The scrapbooks contain several pages documenting the scenes Hughes describes in his journalistic essays. From the perspective of scholarship on the 1930s, there is a familiarity about these images. His scenes of Haitian life and labor have many of the same qualities—or might be read in light of—the Farm Security Administration’s (FSA) and Resettlement Administration’s (RA) images of southern tenant farmers featured in works like the previously mentioned *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Land of the Free* as well as Margaret Bourke-White and Erskine Caldwell’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (1937), Dorothea Lange and Paul Taylor’s *An American Exodus: A Record of Human Erosion* (1939), and Richard Wright’s *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941). Across these disparate images and contexts, one might find the same political impulse to render visible a forgotten population.

Hughes’s Haiti scrapbook is thus an important source for reading his interwar political poetry. Critics have explored Hughes’s growing interest in international politics from various angles. Oftentimes, however, such readings skip the trip to Haiti altogether, attributing Hughes’s new radicalism to his investment in the Scottsboro Trial. As Maxwell argues, this narrative only gives a partial account of Hughes’s political commitments. Citing Hughes’s early involvement with Communist organizations and publications, Maxwell posits that “it is somewhat facile, then, to conclude that Hughes’s



verse or politics was overhauled by the [Scottsboro] case; the settling on a Scottsboro conversion is one sign of the general desire to isolate the 1920s from the 1930s” (134).

The literary historical narrative that Maxwell challenges also fails to fully account for the forms in which Hughes’s political commitments would be represented and expressed.

Considering the formal purchase and effect of the photographs in Hughes’s scrapbooks provides a fuller account of the complex process by which Hughes is trying to refigure how his poetry functions (and how poetry, in general, works) to represent a person or group and to speak to complex political problems. In their own way, pages of Hughes’s scrapbooks return to the zero-level of what he imagines poetry to be, with the photographs mediating the form and function of the poetry Hughes would write in the wake of his travels “south of the south.” Critics have not yet accounted for this mediation and have thus missed the opportunity to consider complicated questions of authenticity, agency, and temporality that enter into Hughes’s interwar political poems.

Hughes’s postwar involvement in photo-textual projects like *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* and *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America* as well as his collaborations with *Ebony* photographic stringer Griffith J. Davis evidence his “belief in the power of the image—particularly the photograph—to render visible and dignify its subjects” and his “efforts to promote African American visibility via the image” (*Harlem Crossroads* 53-54). Certainly, this impulse can be seen in the Haiti scrapbooks. But Hughes’s investment in documentary imaging also helps to illuminate formal developments in his poetry writing. In an unpublished 1935 piece, “Pictures More Than Pictures: The Work of Manuel Bravo and Henri Cartier-Bresson,” Hughes describes how a picture that is

“more than a picture” does more than reproduce an image or a person or object; it also reveals the “social order” that shapes their existence. He writes:

Anyday, one can walk down the street in a big city and see a thousand people. Any photographer can photograph these people—but very few photographers can make their prints not only reproductions of the people taken, but a comment upon them—or more, a comment upon their lives—or more still, a comment upon the social order that creates these lives.

As Blair notes, Bravo’s and Cartier-Bresson’s work prompted Hughes to think about “the power of documentary imaging” to create pictures that are “at once aesthetically arresting and capable of ‘comment upon the social order that creates’ the imaged lives” (*Harlem Crossroads* 53).<sup>49</sup> Hughes Haiti scrapbooks, which predate the composition of “Pictures More Than Pictures” by roughly four years, reveal how, even though “Hughes’s technical knowledge [of photography] was limited to [his] little Kodak camera” (Rampersad 304), the peculiar ontology of the photograph resonated with Hughes. Documentary photographs begged questions of political poetry: How can new social and political realities be represented in a poem? How does poetry do cultural work in relation both to these new realities and in attempts to mediate these realities? If, “a picture, to be an interesting picture, must be more than a picture,” then how could a poem act like more than a poem?

The difficulty and complexity of such questions can be seen in Hughes’s impulse to caption the photographs in his scrapbook. For the most part, the subject or action of most of Hughes’s photographs is apparent. Even still, he affixes rather obvious—and

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<sup>49</sup> It seems that Hughes had often thought about how artistic reproductions might enhance understandings of a social situation or milieu. In a passage from his “Loose Pages and Journal Notes” (Box 492, Folder 12434, Langston Hughes Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University) dated August 12, 1929, he writes: “Some people are so dull that often an artistic reproduction of themselves via poetry, prose, or painting by some one else is of more value to the world than they are themselves. The reproduction, if at all a good one, shows some conscious reaction to their conditions – which of this they themselves do not show. That’s why sometimes a picture or a book or a poem is better for company than some people.”

very generic and non-descript—labels to each. He scrawls in captions like: “workmen,” “children bathing,” “fishing boats,” and “sun on water” (see fig. 2). At first thought, this might seem to be a typical act of captioning a vacation album in order to create a simple narrative of one’s travels. From the perspective of the poet, however, these captions evidence a grappling with the relationship between text and photographs and with how two different media act to capture and represent historical realities. Critics and theorists have considered how an “image/caption model” of reading tends to value either the image or the text, thus subordinating the other form to mere illustration or narration (Bryant 12-13).<sup>50</sup>

Considering Hughes’s investment in the political and cultural function of poems, the captions in his scrapbook might be read as attempts to make words act like the subjects or scenes they represent. The photograph already clearly represents and makes visible the “workmen” and the “fishing boats.” However, by fastening the word to the photographic representation of the object, Hughes seems to be trying to figure out how to restore a materiality to language that enables it to stand up to the photograph’s power to evidence and represent people and places. This relationship between the supposed realism of photographs and the attempt to render similarly realistic scenes in language is one that Agee explores in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*. For Agee, one of the dangers “against the good use of the camera” is that it is able to speedily and with great subtlety convey the immediacy of a scene—something language has not yet accomplished (208). But language should not set out to accomplish such a task because that would be against its

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<sup>50</sup> Drawing on the work of theorists such as Roland Barthes, Bryant explains that “when *caption* functions as the valued term, photography is subordinated to the role of ‘illustration.’” Conversely, “when ‘image’ functions as privileged term, then language occupies that most physically marginal of verbal forms, the photo caption” (13).

nature. As Agee puts it: “words like all else are limited by certain laws. To call their achievement crippled in relation to what they have tried to convey may be all very well: but to call them crippled in their completely healthful obedience to their own nature is again a mistake: the same mistake as the accusation of a cow for her unhorsiness” (209). Moreover, music and poetry represent a different plane of “reality” than that which the “naturalist” or the documentarian attempts to record. “[B]ut the documentation is not of itself either poetry or music and it is not, of itself, of any value equivalent to theirs,” Agee writes:

So that, if you share the naturalist’s regard for the ‘real,’ but have this regard for it on a plane in which your mind brings it level in value at least to music and poetry, which in turn you value as highly as anything on earth, it is important that your representation of ‘reality’ does not sag into, or become one with, naturalism; and in so far as it does, you have sinned. (210)

In this light, one can see how the relationship between image and text is not necessarily contested in Hughes’s scrapbooks. Rather, the tension between the two suggests the process through which Hughes contemplated the roles and forms of his political poetry. Like Agee, Hughes ultimately seems to glean the importance “of the breakdown of the identification of word and object.” Thus, the interplay between caption and image might be understood as the beginning of Hughes’s attempt to, in Michael North’s terms, seek out a new method of representation in the utopian space between the linguistic and the pictorial (4). Read this way, the scrapbooks complicate the ways in which Hughes’s subsequent political poetry is commonly understood.

### **Kodak as You Go**

Before examining how Hughes's experience of photographically documenting Haiti affected the composition of his subsequent political poetry, it is important to contextualize his work with other relevant intersections of photography and radical poetry from the 1930s. As my chapters have demonstrated thus far, during the thirties poetry's viability was continually debated, and writers consistently speculated about its death. At the same time, photography emerged as the go-to medium for documenting Depression-era struggles and providing radical social critiques. As Paula Rabinowitz notes: "[a]nyone with even a passing interest in the [1930s] references it through the images of hungry migrants caught by the Farm Security Administration's (FSA) photographers" (3-4).

The way the status and definition of poetry shifted in relation to the emergence of documentary image culture is apparent in two photo-text collaborations from the 1930s: Agee and Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and MacLeish's less discussed *The Land of the Free* (1938). *The Land of the Free* combines MacLeish's poetry with eighty-eight photographs taken under the auspices of the FSA and RA; his free verse provides what he calls the "soundtrack" for documentary photographs by Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, Arthur Rothstein, and Ben Shahn. As mentioned in Chapter 2, when MacLeish reviewed Carl Sandburg's *The People, Yes* in September 1936 he treated the book-length poem like something alive, calling it "the growing thing" that, when read, would be "grafted to the green wood of the people's lives" ("Tradition" 26). But just two years later, in the "Notes" to *The Land of the Free*, MacLeish seems to have reversed this

position. As he explains, what began as a poem to be illustrated by photographs ultimately became its opposite:

“Land of the Free” is the opposite of a book of poems illustrated by photographs. It is a book of photographs illustrated by a poem. The photographs, most of which were taken for the Resettlement Administration, existed before the poem was written. The book is the result of an attempt to give these photographs an accompaniment of words. In so far as the form of the book is unusual, it is a form imposed by the difficulties of that attempt. The original purpose had been to write some sort of text to which these photographs might serve as commentary. But so great was the power and the stubborn livingness of these vivid American documents that the result was a reversal of that plan. (89)

Whereas in 1936 it was Sandburg’s poetry that “lived” and “grew,” by 1938 it is the photograph that MacLeish bestows with such aliveness. The power of the photograph, according to MacLeish, is its “stubborn livingness,” a quality he over-emphasizes when he reiterates how “vivid” the FSA and RA documents are (Kaplan 29). As Louis Kaplan points out, MacLeish finds the “livingness” of photography in the “direct and indexical connection of these images to their referents in lived reality” and thus “downplays their status as representations and their artificial and constructed nature” (29). But this reading is complicated by MacLeish’s earlier appraisal of *The People, Yes* and surrounding discourses about poetry’s life and death. To describe a work as alive—to call it “growing” or “vivid”—also acts to idealize the cultural work that it can do. So, when MacLeish insists on the vivacity of the photograph, he not only calls attention to its indexical relation to its referent, he also grants it the power to effect change and provide social critique. To paraphrase his review of *The People, Yes*: it might provide shelter for the people that need it. Moreover, while MacLeish seems to newly idealize photography over poetry, he still idealizes the poem by calling it a “soundtrack” and assuming it provides music or documents a voice where photography can only conjure an image.

Agee's consideration of the relationship between his text and Evans's photographs in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* brings these issues into sharper relief, complicating and exposing the ideal of poetry that is undergirding MacLeish's view of poem-text relationship in *The Land of the Free*. The quotation that began this chapter—where Agee disparages writing's inability to capture the human subjects and conditions he set out to document—is, at the same time, an indication of what he believes that writing, and especially poetry writing, might do or be in the first place. One might read Agee's desire to turn his text into photographs, found objects, and “records of speech” alongside his later assertion that “the Gudgers' front bedroom *IS* importantly, among other things, a great tragic poem” or his imagining of Mrs. Gudger as “such a poem as no human being shall touch” (179; 252). In each of these instances, physical material realities (both rooms and bodies) are conflated with the idea (or ideal) of the poem itself. While photography might seem to challenge the authority of the written word to document lived experience, for Agee photography and poetry become twinned, both bestowed with the power to bear the trace of a room or provide an outline of a person.

The examples of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* and *The Land of the Free* are instructive on two levels. First, both approach how the increasing popularity of documentary photography shaped discourses about poetry. Second, both texts show how this re-shaping of discourses about poetry—told through its relationship to photography—fed fantasies about poetry's cultural function and, ultimately, its utopian potentials. But perhaps the most salient example of the interface between poetry and photography at the time is Muriel Rukeyser's long poem *The Book of the Dead*, included in her 1938 volume *U.S. I*. A “hybrid work” that “erases the boundaries between art and

document, lyric and epic, pen and camera” (Wechsler 226), *The Book of the Dead* combines the rhetoric of Depression-era documentary culture—and notably documentary image culture—and the techniques of the experimental modernist long poem, inviting comparisons to such modernist and Popular Front tomes as Ezra Pound’s *Cantos* and John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A.* trilogy.

Significant to the arguments of this chapter, *The Book of the Dead*, perhaps more straightforwardly than Hughes’s interwar poetry, draws on “the best possibilities of photography” in order to imagine new ways of writing revolutionary poetry (Minot 266). At first glance, Hughes and Rukeyser might seem an odd pairing: Hughes was lauded by Left critics for writing in a seemingly accessible style that drew on “folk” or “people’s” traditions, while Rukeyser was blasted for writing “difficult” or “intellectual” poems in the style of high modernism. Despite their different approaches, however, the photograph is integral to analyzing how both poets shaped their responses to major historical-political events and articulated the anti-racist, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist vision of the Communist and Popular Front Left. Both Hughes and Rukeyser draw on and question the reality produced by the photograph, and their engagements with the photographic mediate the forms of their revolutionary poetics.

In March 1936, Rukeyser traveled with friend and documentary photographer Nancy Naumburg to Gauley, West Virginia, to visit the site of one of the worst industrial accidents in U.S. history. In 1930, under the auspices of the Union Carbide Company, construction began on a tunnel that would divert water from the New River in Fayette County, West Virginia, to a hydroelectric power plant that would provide energy to a metallurgical plant in the nearby town of Alloy. The tunnel was also mined for silica, a



compound valuable to the production of steel. To save time and money, the engineers overseeing the mining of the tunnel did not take basic precautions to protect workers from inhaling silica dust and, as a result, more than 700 men died the lung disease silicosis (Cherniack 39; 105). While lawsuits were filed on behalf of the workers as early as 1932, it was not until the mid-1930s that the incident received national coverage. Articles and stories published in Left periodicals like *New Masses* and *People's Press* brought the events at Gauley Bridge to the attention of New York congressman and member of the subcommittee on labor Vito Marcantonio, who arranged for hearings on the dangers of silicosis in the winter of 1936 (Cherniack 75). Rukeyser reproduced or adapted statements from those hearings in *The Book of the Dead* along with reports, stock market quotes, interviews, and personal observations from her experiences in West Virginia. Incorporating these various materials, the poem employs the strategies of “radical documentary reportage” as it “weaves together the events at Gauley Bridge and the techniques of documentary culture” and the culture of the Communist Popular Front (Thurston 172; 175).

According to Shoshana Wechsler, *The Book of the Dead* stands out as a “quintessentially 30s text” because the presence of the photographer’s camera eye presents “an essentially empiricist paradigm of objective vision” at the same time that it “complicates a traditional unitary perspective” (234-35). Wechsler’s observation might be translated to a statement about the presence of the lyric in Rukeyser’s “hybrid work.” The evidence produced by the camera eye controverts the traditional authority of the lyric “I,” for the reality of the events and scenes the poem seeks to depict is rooted in the incontrovertible evidence of photographs and other pieces of documentary evidence

rather than the individualized or subjective experience of the lyric subject. Just as Hughes's "Street Scene" photograph might, however inadvertently, provide a means to reconsider the authority of both the witnessing "I" and the "I" that speaks through an art object, *The Book of the Dead* proffers what Wechsler calls a "polyperspectival vision" because, while the "camera does the viewing, the reader witnesses its act of observation" (235). It is in this way that the intersections between poetry and photography in *The Book of the Dead* might be seen to share in Hughes's concerns about the social potential of lyric. Michael Davidson quotes Rukeyser's "Poem Out of Childhood"—"Not Sappho, Sacco"—to schematically describe a major aesthetic shift from the 20s to the 30s. "The distance covered" between Sappho and Sacco is, he writes, "from an austere lyricism, for whom Sappho was the model, to forms of documentary history and photojournalism that blur generic terms" (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 138-39). While, as Davidson suggests, new hybrid forms did provide a narrative alternative to lyricism, the move between the two is a complicated one. Not unlike Hughes's scrapbook, in *The Book of the Dead*, the presence and function of the camera eye—and the evidentiary photographs it produces—becomes a means to question the traditional function of the lyric speaker as well as the capacity of poetic language to represent the people of Gauley Bridge. It seems apt, then, that in the very same poem that Rukeyser contemplates the shift from "Sappho to Sacco," she also begins to organize her experiences as a series of photographs—to, in her phrase, "Kodak as you go" (*Collected Poems* 5).

From the start of *The Book of the Dead*, the poet often plays the role of photographer, and the photographer's "presence as recorder is represented in [the poem] as a locus for acts of looking, hearing, and observing that parallel the documentary form

of the poem” (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 143). The first section of the series introduces the photographer as a co-author: as the scene “telescopes down” from a map of the U.S. to the New River Gorge, “the photographer unpacks camera and case” (*Collected Poems* 5). The function of the photographer and her camera is especially salient in the fourth section of the poem, “Gauley Bridge,” where a Romantic notion of place is weighed against the realistic scene captured by the camera. The camera, not the poet, is given the first word of “Gauley Bridge,” as its “eye” replaces the “I-witness” and provides a picture of the town:

Camera at the crossing sees the city  
a street of wooden walls and empty windows,  
the doors shut handless in the empty street,  
and the deserted Negro standing on the corner. (77)

Here, the camera’s viewpoint replaces the expression and thus the agency typically accorded a lyric speaker. It provides a snapshot of the town and, at the same time, participates in the sequence’s broader project of rendering visible the population of exploited mine workers. The camera’s depiction of the street in Gauley Bridge acts to undercut the romanticized version of a street scene one might expect to find in a poem about a rural landscape: “What do you want—a cliff over a city? / A foreland, sloped to sea and overgrown with roses?” the poet asks at the close of the section. The section ends by returning to the immediacy of the scene the camera “sees” at the crossing by reiterating that, “These people live here” (78).

The camera’s ability to produce documentary evidence, along with the other forms of non-literary documentation incorporated into the poem, provide a critique of “poetry’s more traditionally universal and timeless humanism” (*American Culture Between the Wars* 163). Importantly, however, the power of the camera to capture an immediate reality is undercut in “Gauley Bridge.” In the second stanza, a “little boy”

running up the street with his dog “blurs the camera-glass fixed on the street” (77). In the stanzas that follow, images of glass serve similar functions as the literal camera-glass, and they suggest the myriad other ways of reflecting or representing a scene. For example, the “night eyes” of a person “in the beerplace on the other sidewalk” watch a waitress in a “beerglass” (78). The multiple scenes reflected in windows and other “panes of glass” intimate that the scenes captured by the “naked eye” or the “eyes of the tourist house” are just as subjective and ideological as those captured by the supposedly objective “camera eye” (78). As Walter Kalaidjian notes, in *The Book of the Dead* “camera work” serves as “a key metaphor for ideological representation”; it “at once projects a visual image of middle class American prosperity *and* exposes it as the inverted ‘other’ to Gauley Bridge’s particular historicity of class conflict and ruthless labor relations” (167; original emphasis). Kalaidjian’s argument is rooted in the first section’s description of the image the photographer sees after she unpacks her camera: in “surveying the deep country,” the photographer views on the camera’s groundglass “an inverted image” (74).

Kalaidjian reads the cultural and political effect of the camera and the photographic in *The Book of the Dead* in terms of inversions or distortions. One might usefully apply his schematic to the ways in which the poem combines the lyric and the documentary. That is, the documentary materials incorporated into the poem might be seen to distort the ideology of the lyric by opening the poem up to non-literary source materials. What results is not a traversal of the lyric mode—or, as Davidson would have it, a shifting away from lyricism—but rather a reconfiguration of the lyric’s purpose and value in relation to the photograph. In this sense, Rukeyser’s use of the lyric mode

anticipates Walter Benjamin's meditations on the lyric in his 1939 essay "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire." Benjamin's observations about twentieth-century lyric poetry are predicated upon a sense of loss: the essay opens with that which is lost—an audience for lyric poetry—which leads to a contemplation of the loss of "long experience" and the disintegration of an artwork's aura. Benjamin's notion that the modern experience of the crowd is not fit for the reception of lyric poetry begs the question of what the adjective *lyric* means. Could it be that the lyric is the counter to the photograph in that it demands sustained attention?

In Rukeyser's poem, it would seem that the lyric mode creates the opportunity to harness a transcendent power of humanity that cannot be captured by the photograph. This can be seen in subsequent sections of *The Book of the Dead*, when accounts centered on visual evidence are woven together with lyrical refrains. One of the most striking examples is the section "Absalom," which turns social worker Phillippa Allen's testimony about Emma Jones, whose husband and three sons worked in the tunnel and contracted silicosis, into a monologue written in the first person from Jones's perspective. On one level, this section, like surrounding sections that present lung X-rays as valuable courtroom documents, demonstrates the significance of having visual evidence that the workers contracted silicosis. On another level, "Absalom" restores individuality to these various pictures by foregrounding the X-ray's real-world referents. After recounting how her youngest son did not go to the doctor to have "lung pictures" made, Jones remembers how "he lay and said, 'Mother, when I die, / I want you to have them open me up and / see if that dust killed me'" (84-85). This request might be read as a political act—one that proffers a critique of visual evidence like X-rays. In a way, Jones's youngest son is

asking that his life not be reduced to an image of the death inside of him, and he resists being captured by the scientific knowledge produced by a “lung picture.” Jones’s son resists being photographed and, at the same time, his request draws attention to the trauma of the photograph and its potentially wounding effects. One might relate this to Barthes’s observation in *Camera Lucida* that one of the distinguishing features of photography is that one can “never deny that the thing has been there”; however, this quality of photographs is often “experienced with indifference” (76-77). Of course, the technological modality of the X-ray is different from that of the camera. And yet, Barthes’s point helps to demonstrate how the son’s refusal to have X-rays and instead be “opened up” eschews such indifference.

Between Jones’s stories of visiting doctors and X-ray technicians are italicized lyrical refrains adapted from passages from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*. While all of the refrains seem to be spoken in Jones’s voice, it is unclear if the speaker of the final refrain is Jones or her youngest son. Because of their references to death and rebirth, it is plausible to attribute these last lines to the dead son:

*I open out a way, they have covered my sky with crystal  
I come forth by day, I am born a second time,  
I force a way through, and I know the gate  
I shall journey over the earth among the living. (85)*

The lines of “Absalom” attributed to the youngest son—the request to be “opened up” and this final refrain—suggest the ways in which Rukeyser reconceived of the position of the lyric speaker in relation to the ontology of the photograph. In the case of the young boy, it is not photographic evidence (that is, X-ray evidence) that is the source of his political power. Rather, his power derives from the insistence on his universality conveyed in the italicized passage above. His existence exceeds the temporality of the

photograph because he is always moving forward: he “open[s] out a way”; he “force[s] a way through”; and his “journey over the earth among the living” is cast in the future tense. Such lyric transcendence is, however, shaped by the historical and material realities of the industrial accident, for his sky is covered with “crystal,” a possible reference to the silica dust that he breathed into his lungs.

It is in this way that Rukeyser seems to recalibrate the political possibilities for the lyric by weighing the political significance of photographic evidence against subjective human experience. The inability of photographic evidence to provide a human portrait re-emerges in the section “The Disease: After-Effects.” In this section, Rukeyser proposes a different function for the “map and X-ray” than providing evidence or facts:

No plane can ever lift us high enough  
to see forgetful countries underneath,  
but always now the map and X-ray seems  
resemblent pictures of one living breath  
one country marked by error  
and one air. (103)

In this passage, the “facts” provided by the map and X-ray come to resemble a larger portrait of the nation and the human community that suffered as a result of the events at Gauley Bridge. These documents do more than represent the geography of Gauley Bridge and the silicosis-infected lung; they resemble and stand-in for a larger body—the “one country marked by error” and the “one living breath.” We know, however, from “Absalom” that the map and photograph alone do not have such power. It is the poem that accomplishes the work of, in Rukeyser’s phrase, “extending the document.”

It is in this context that we might understand Rukeyser’s notion of the relationship between poetry and photograph, or what she refers to in *The Life of Poetry* (1949) as the dynamic between writing and “the arts of sight” (133). Rukeyser explains this

relationship via an anecdote from her brief stint at the Office of War Information's (OWI) Graphics Workshop. Though she does not deem the story of the Graphics Workshop to be necessarily "important," she emphasizes how it taught her that words and images could make an impact when used in combination (137). As evidence, she describes one of the projects resulting from the workshop:

The exhibitions using poems and prose, enlarged to wall displays and used on the walls of the New York Public Library before they were sent about the country, were another proof of the value in reinforcement of paintings—Goya, Daumier, Orozco—and words from T.S. Eliot and Edith Sitwell to Roosevelt, S.V. Benét, May Sarton, Whitman, Langston Hughes. Any single contribution might have stood alone. In juxtaposition, they were all set in motion toward each other. (138)

This small recollection carries great conceptual weight. In *The Life of Poetry*, as in her 1943 *New Republic* essay "Words and Images," Rukeyser finds in the combination or juxtaposition of words and images the potential for a dynamic representation that neither can accomplish alone. That is, a "third meaning" emerges that is both inseparable from, and irreducible to, constituent parts. Moreover, Rukeyser shifts our thinking about poetic practice to the world of images, perhaps even unwittingly asking us to consider what poetry (words alone) can or cannot accomplish or imagine in such a world. Visual objects and textual objects do not merely "reinforce" a message through some sort of shared communicative work. Their co-presence also calls attention to their respective failures to fully convey the message at hand.

Both Hughes and Rukeyser attempt to write revolutionary poetry out of the space of this failure. Rukeyser's thinking about the dynamic relationship between words and images, especially in *The Book of the Dead*, provides a context for understanding Hughes's engagement with the photographic in Haiti, and it sets up the chapter's remaining arguments about how the photograph mediated the forms of his subsequent



political poetry. *The Book of the Dead* does not just use metaphors of camera work to render visible the victims of the Gauley Bridge tragedy. In sections like “Mearl Blankenship” and “George Robinson: Blues,” Rukeyser attempts to both record and grant speech to the population of exploited workers. In so doing, she conflates the visibility made possible by photographic representations with the task of rendering a person or population visible by giving them a voice. Indeed, at the close of “Absalom,” Emma Jones promises that she will “give a mouth to her son.” Here, the idea that the dead might be represented by the voices of the living is described in terms of the physical make up of a face. Perhaps more to the point, in the last section of *The Book of the Dead*, the “urgent need” to resurface repressed histories is described in terms of the photograph and the voice:

Carry abroad the urgent need, the scene,  
to photograph and extend the voice,  
to speak this meaning.

Voices to speak to us directly. As we move.  
As we enrich, growing in larger motion,  
this word, this power. (110)

Rukeyser’s call to “extend the voice” might be read in two ways. On one hand, the poem suggests that the photograph is a means to extend the voice. But, on the other hand, the work of extending the voice and speaking to the “meaning” of a scene takes place beyond the boundaries of the photograph.

These lines from *The Book of the Dead* raise questions that help to analyze Hughes’s interwar political poetry. How might a poem speak for a forgotten population? And how does the poem represent speech? The last chapter raised similar questions in its analysis of the relationship between poetic rhythm and the rhythms of human speech.

Here, notions of speech or voice in the poem are mediated not just by meter but also by the rhetoric of documentary image culture and the ontology of photographic images. Rabinowitz concludes her study of documentary culture by highlighting the importance of voice to documentary projects, writing that “[a]fter having explored the various forms of visualization that have been the core of the documentary project for at least one hundred years, the question of voice now appears central to me” (219).<sup>51</sup> Paired with Rukeyser’s call to “extend the voice” through or beyond the photograph, Rabinowitz’s closing gesture might suggest how the image creates the opportunity to idealize the poem as a medium for circulating the voice. For instance, photo-textual documents like MacLeish’s *The Land of the Free* hope that, if poetry can’t do the work of the photograph, it can provide a “soundtrack” or “voice” to accompany the image. And for Agee, as for MacLeish, the power of the poetic, especially when compared to the photograph, is its sound. Even though Agee tells the reader in the book’s Preface that the “immediate instruments” of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* are “the motionless camera, and the printed word,” he also informs the reader that “[t]he text was written with reading aloud in mind” (xi), an intention often associated with poetry composition. The sound of the words captures what the photograph misses, “for variations of tone, pace, shape, and dynamics are here particularly *unavailable to the eye alone*, and with their loss, a good deal of meaning escapes” (xi; my emphasis).

Poets like Rukeyser and Hughes, however, call assumptions like MacLeish’s and Agee’s into question. Their engagements with the photographic help to expose the

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<sup>51</sup> Indeed, an important part of interwar documentary image culture was recording the voices of “the people.” For example, Benjamin Appel’s *The People Talk* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1940) collects and records various anecdotes and conversations. At the beginning of *Documentary Expression and Thirties America*, Stott reminds the reader that Hallie Flanagan’s 1931 play *Can You Hear Their Voices?* preceded photography books like Caldwell and Bourke-White’s *You Have Seen Their Faces* (3).

fantasy that poems are “soundtracks” or that they can act or talk like people. Nonetheless, many critics read both Rukeyser’s and Hughes’s poetry as an attempt to represent political subjects and communities by giving them speech. Thurston, for example, argues that in *The Book of the Dead*, “Rukeyser constructs, through the testimony of individuals, a community of individual speakers within the poem” (179). Using the multiple “resources of poetic form,” the poem “speaks to various audiences by speaking as them, in a language marked somehow as their own” (182).

The poems Hughes published after his return from Haiti complicate readings like Thurston’s and, more broadly, provide a different lens through which to consider how Left poets combined the conventions of documentary with the use of dialect and vernacular speech. The poems Hughes published after his return from Haiti, like those collected in *Scottsboro Limited* (1932) and *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* (1931), are conventionally linked to the poet’s new desire to write in a “popular” or “vernacular” style that would appeal to the audiences he interacted with on his reading tour.<sup>52</sup> Many readers understand these poems as attempts to express an “authentic voice” through the use of vernacular speech. However, in such readings, the various voices of the poem are always imagined to be attached to specific persons.<sup>53</sup> As the next sections illuminate, a consideration of Hughes’s engagement with the photographic challenges the impulse to interpret his and others’ poems solely as

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<sup>52</sup> Rampersad describes how, during the Depression Hughes “was altering his aesthetic to accommodate social reality. Unlike most white artists, however, he faced a paradox: to reach the black masses, his writing had to be not radical but genteel, not aggressive but uplifting and sentimental.” As a result, Hughes “was becoming at least three different writers”—“radical, “commercial,” and “genteel” (221).

<sup>53</sup> There seems to be a general critical tendency to read 1930s partisan poetry in terms of voice or vocality. This is perhaps in part because the questions of genre that surface when writers like Hughes move away from the modernist lyric, coupled with the 1930s Left’s interest in “the people,” easily make for Bakhtinian arguments about the “novelization” of poetry, whereby the monologic lyric opens up to more dialogic possibilities. For example, see Smethurst’s analysis of Hughes’s interwar poetry in Chapter 3 of *The New Red Negro*.

representations of speech, and it offers new insight into how Hughes negotiated the abstraction of the poetic voice through post-Haiti experiments in drama and in the visual medium of print.

### **Talking Poetry**

Hughes's practice of labeling or captioning his photographs resurfaces in an undated snapshot of the Scottsboro Boys in a Birmingham Jail (see fig. 4). Hughes visited the Scottsboro Boys during his reading tour of the South, encouraged by their chaplain to share his poetry in case that it "might cheer the boys up" (*I Wonder* 61). Whether or not this particular archival photograph is from that visit is unclear. What is important is the way in which this photograph, read in the context of the Haiti scrapbook, calls attention to the very real way in which Hughes's documentation of his experiences in Haiti influences how he conceived the relationship between the form and content of the political poetry he wrote upon his return to the States. As with many of the snapshots



Fig. 3. Scottsboro Boys in Jail at Birmingham, from Langston Hughes Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection in the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

collected in the Haiti scrapbooks, Hughes affixes a caption to the photograph of the Scottsboro Boys: “The Scottsboro Boys in jail at Birmingham.” This marker seems unnecessary for remembering the content of the photo; and yet, it is as though the scene needs words, even if they constitute the most basic statement of fact. But the scene is also marked by the potential inefficacy of the written word—and, by extension, of the poem—in the face of a grave circumstance. Between the photograph and the caption lies

Hughes's own self-consciousness about his poetry's ability to help the Scottsboro Boys—to “cheer them up” or change their situation—and to represent them as historical subjects.

Despite the success of his reading tour of the South (including the controversial publication of his “Christ in Alabama” in *Contempo*) in an article manuscript, “Kilby Prison: Scottsboro Boys,” Hughes recalls how his visit with the Scottsboro Boys made him doubtful of poetry's ability to speak to human and political problems:

As I read my poems, standing at one end of the corridor opposite the guard, I could not see the dark faces of those condemned to die peering at me from the narrow cells on either side. But I felt their presence. And my poems seemed futile and stupid in the face of death. I spoke about the past of our race, and how I had tried to put its glories and sorrows into poetry—but with the feeling that what I was saying meant little to men doomed never to mingle with the living world again.

Hughes's attempts to respond to the Scottsboro Trials are collected in his 1932 booklet *Scottsboro Limited*, which includes four poems (“Justice,” “Scottsboro,” “Christ in Alabama,” and “The Town of Scottsboro”) as well as the one-act play from which the volume takes its title. Hughes's captioned photograph of the Scottsboro Boys calls attention to the difficulties of speaking of these subjects and their situation. The photograph seems to have been taken from inside the cell, a perspective that gives the feeling of both entrapment and freedom: while the picture is of eight black prisoners, it is the white warden that is depicted behind bars. The men's various engagements with the camera—some look at it directly while others look away—reflect Hughes's own feelings that his visit and his poetry were of little matter to the situation he was attempting to document.

I have already suggested that, during the 1930s, the widespread use of photographic images to provide radical social critiques caused a compositional crisis for

political poets like Hughes. On a broader scale, one might see how this relates my dissertation's broader argument that doubts about the efficacy of poetry are dialectically related to moments of political crisis. These contexts are relevant to any discussion of Hughes's interwar poetry, and they are especially important to a consideration of how Hughes's developing views of poetry intersect with his writing about the Scottsboro Trial. Hughes's photograph of the Scottsboro Boys registers the failures that inhere in any poetic attempt to write these men out of jail. But there is a way in which such a failure is potentially productive for an analysis of Hughes's writings about the Scottsboro Trial. Specifically, Hughes's one-act agit-prop play *Scottsboro Limited* contains a metacommentary about the forms of Hughes's interwar poetry, one that is mediated by Hughes's experience of photographing Haiti.

As I have argued, the photograph seems to have called into question the poet's ability to represent a political and historical reality. And yet, the photograph cannot really claim to represent reality; rather, it alters how reality is perceived. This is, perhaps, a version of Barthes's famous claim that "[i]t is the advent of the Photograph ... which divides the history of the world" (88). Or, as Sara Blair has more recently put it: "particular photographs ... can make sharply visible the elusive experience of history, the irreducibly felt realities of belonging or unbelonging to one's time, as well as the effects of a critical accounting for the place of the subject in time" ("About Time" 162). If the advent of the photograph alters one's experience of history or reality, then the idea of the poem is altered as well. In this sense the photograph productively mediates—and dialectically changes—the ways in which 1930s partisan poets like Hughes approach the

problems and questions of how to represent a subject and her/his social reality in their poems.

Reading Hughes through this interpretive lens also prompts a reconsideration of how poetry's claims to multiple media—that is, as Susan Stewart would have it, both “sight and hearing” are “the media of poetry” (*Poetry* 252)—have been grafted on to human subjects themselves. Stewart suggests that poetry “is a force against effacement” for individuals and communities throughout time because it gives form to the “oblivion of darkness”; but the photograph quite literally makes subjects visible by writing with light (hence the etymological origin of the word photograph as “light writing”) (2). The fact of the photograph not only restores historical contingency to the supposedly transhistorical or universal cultural work of poetry, it also exposes the idea that the “senses” of poetry are, in Virginia Jackson's words, “ideally unmediated” by such contingencies. As Jackson points out, the fiction that lyric poetry is “ideally unmediated” “is still very much with us” (*Dickinson's Misery* 7). Michael North makes a structurally similar argument, suggesting how, in the early twentieth century, “mechanized sense impressions could hardly have presented the challenge they did if they had not conflicted so obviously with what had come to be accepted as unmediated experience” (vii). North is referring to supposedly unmediated experiences like eyesight and hearing. In the context of Jackson's arguments about lyric, however, one can see how poetry has also come to be accepted as an “unmediated experience” akin to the human senses. In this context, the photograph and the poem alike come to be associated with actual bodies (with actual lives) and how those bodies look or sound.



This is made clearer through a consideration of how Hughes incorporates verse into the drama of *Scottsboro Limited*. The play begins as a dialogue between a “White Man” and the eight “black boys.” The sparse setting (only “one chair on a raised platform,” with no other effect necessary [*Plays* 117]) and the “4<sup>th</sup> Boy’s” opening invitation to “watch this play for our misery” sets up *Scottsboro Limited* as didactic rather than realistic. The drama reenacts the story of the “Boys” fated encounter with the white women who accused them of rape. The play then moves to the scene of a trial and then to the Scottsboro Boys in their prison cell, awaiting death. Despite their deep despair, and in the face of mob voices shouting for their death, the “Boys” battle the injunction that they must die in the electric chair. The “8<sup>th</sup> Boy’s” assertion that he is “not humble” and “not meek” and should be heard even from the “death house” is eventually supported and joined by “red voices” from the audience (126). These “red voices” urge on the “Boys” as they refuse “death in the chair” and they eventually meld so that one of the “Boys” declares that “[t]he voice of the red world / Is our voice, too” (127). *Scottsboro Limited* ends with a vision of white workers and the black victims of injustice joining together to fight for “new life” under the banner of a red flag and, if the audience chooses, the singing of the “Internationale” (128-29).

Readers of Hughes’s 1930s political poetry have made much of how the dialogue in *Scottsboro Limited* combines verse and prose, a formal feature that is set up in the play’s opening exchange between the “White Man” and two of the “Black Boys.” As all of the “Boys” make their way from the back of the auditorium to the stage, chained together at their ankles, the “Man” rises from the audience and twice asks: “What are you doing here?” When he receives no response, he follows them to the stage and asks again:

MAN: What the hell are you doing in here, I said?  
 1<sup>ST</sup> BOY: (*Turning simply*)  
 We come in our chains  
 To show our pain.  
 MAN: (*Sneeringly*) Your pain! Stop talking poetry and talk sense.  
 8<sup>th</sup> BOY: (*As they line up on the stage*)  
 All right, we will—  
 That sense of injustice  
 That death can't kill. (117)

Throughout the play, the “Boys” continue to “talk poetry”—their speeches employing rhyme and repetition—while the white characters speak in prose sentences. In a simple sense, the opposition between the revolutionary class (the Black victims joined with the revolutionary workers’ party) and the oppressor (the “White Man” who stands in for the problems of racism) is cast in terms of the opposition between poetry and prose. The “Man” does not want to hear poetry, and he opposes it to “sense”; but in Hughes’s play, the only characters “talking sense” in political terms are those characters who are also “talking poetry.” As Maxwell argues, by writing the “Boys”’ dialogue as poetry, “Hughes points to poetry as the distillation of the sensible, demotic speech of black workers; for him, only the ‘Man’ could want to disassociate poetic diction, black vernacular language, and a drama of black proletarian expression. This prosaic enemy of verse and Communism in fact never succeeds in squashing the boys’ ‘talking poetry’” (135). Thurston picks up on Maxwell’s reading, relating the “transformative space” of the theater to the “transformative media of rhythm, rhyme, and repetition” in order to posit that these two elements come together to forge a collective of “workers of all colors under the Red flag” (110).

Despite the acuity of these observations, there is a way in which Maxwell’s and Thurston’s readings seem to participate in the very cultural fantasies about poetry—and

its characteristic rhythms, rhymes, and repetitions—that Hughes’s work actually reveals and critiques. Such assumptions about Hughes have historical counterparts. In fact, in many ways they recall the arguments of Albert Shepard’s defense of poetry discussed in the previous chapter, when he lauds Hughes’s verses for knowing “the rhythm and vivid imagery of everyday conversation” (“Is Poetry Dead” 9). In readings like Maxwell’s and Thurston’s the idea of an authentic voice—be it a proletarian voice or a black vernacular—and an ideal of poetry as a transformative medium go hand-in-hand. Put another way: the idealized or “uplift” version of what poetry can accomplish within the space of *Scottsboro Limited*—that is, support the struggles of black workers, create an interracial political coalition, trump the prosaic enemy—relies on the notion that there is a natural connection between these subjects, their manner of speech, and the speeches they make. Smethurst seems to take this line of argument up a notch when he suggests that the speech “marked as poetic” in *Scottsboro Limited* is linked to speaking “the unvarnished truth about race and class oppression.” “In this regard,” he continues, “Hughes is arguing against both a sense within some quarters of the proletarian literature movement that poetry lagged behind fiction and reportage as a vehicle to express the realities of the class struggle as well as a similar sense among leading African-American critics that the 1930s was not an era hospitable to poetry” (105).

The drama of Hughes’s photographs from the 1930s, especially as it is distilled in his photograph of the Scottsboro Boys in Birmingham, cuts through these readings in two ways. First, and on a broader level, it does not necessarily demonstrate that Hughes found himself needing to prove poetry’s efficacy against the rise of reportage. Rather, forms of documentary reportage like the photograph dialectically changed his understanding of the

forms and functions of poetry. Second, the fact of the photograph suggests that authenticity never resides in the poem itself—that there is no “unvarnished” truth to be found in the poem, and such truth is not accessed by vernacular-cum-poetic speech. By using rhythm and meter to regulate the speech of the Scottsboro Boys in *Scottsboro Limited*, Hughes seems to be drawing out the idea that the voice of the poem is no longer a form or source of authenticity, if it ever was in the first place. This is not to replicate the helplessness Hughes felt when he visited the Scottsboro Boys by suggesting the futility his project or by taking agency away from the historical subject. Nor it is to suggest that only the photograph can have historical or political purchase. Instead, it is to register the fact that there is a disjunction between the historical subject and their representation in the poem itself by calling attention to the fact that what might be read as the revolutionary or transformative aspects of political poetry are also, at the very same time, violent acts of representation. The photograph, with its particular power, intervenes to call this to our critical attention.

### **Wait!**

The ways in which Hughes’s Haiti scrapbook mediates the nexus between his formal choices and political commitments culminates in his 1933 poem “Wait.” Originally published as a single page in the first issue of *Partisan*, the magazine of the West Coast John Reed Club, “Wait” is one of Hughes’s more radical 1930s verses (Rampersad 285). Throughout his career Hughes wrote in an accessible style, and in thirties volumes like *A New Song* (1938) as well as miscellaneous verses published in *Crisis*, *New Masses*, and *The Daily Worker*, he tried out popular verse genres like the

ballad. However, as Alan Wald points out, many of Hughes's political verses are complexly simple, as poems like his 1936 "White Man" cleverly "tear down the current forms of language and thought so that new forms can emerge" (314). Similarly, "Wait," though seemingly straightforward, proffers a complex critique of the lyric subject and its relationship to the plane of the political.

Formally, "Wait" is something of an anomaly in Hughes's oeuvre: it is part lyric and part graphic poem, and any reading of the poem relies on an explanation of the page layout. In the center of the page is a lyric poem. This poem is surrounded by lists of words that run along the right- and left-hand columns and across the bottom of the page. These lists name the marginalized groups that form the revolutionary class ("pickers," "strikers," "negroes," "farmers") and geographic areas of oppression ("Alabama," "Johannesburg," "Haiti"). The lists also reference major international conflicts such as the escalating fighting between China and Japan ("Chapei," "Japan") and major sites of labor uprisings in the U.S. and abroad ("Meerut"). In terms of format, one can see that the layout of "Wait" looks surprisingly similar to the layout of Hughes's Haiti scrapbooks.<sup>54</sup> Spatially, the lists on the sides and bottom of the page frame the lyric in much the same way that Hughes's captions frame his snapshots from Haiti. Although "Wait" evidences the ways in which Hughes's scrapbooks and his experience of documenting Haiti may mediate the forms of his political poetry, in the poem Hughes seems to be moving beyond

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<sup>54</sup> This is also true of many of the poems collected in *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations*. Poems like "The Colored Soldier," "The Black Clown," and "Big-Timer" visually mimic the captioned photographs in Hughes's Haiti scrapbooks. Each of the poems is divided into two sections that are separated by a thin vertical line: the right-hand column describes "The Mood" in italics and "The Poem" is written in the left-hand column. In terms of the image-caption model, these poems might be read as organized by an impression (i.e., a snapshot) and the narrative accompaniment (i.e., a label or explanation for the snapshot).

the compositional crisis engendered by the differences between the photograph and the poem.

“Wait” employs the lyric mode at the same time that it destabilizes the position of the unitary lyric subject. It creates a subject that simultaneously represents universal human struggles and acknowledges historical and social contingencies. The use of the list format in “Wait” suggests that the plights of the groups and places named in the poem are both autonomous and connected. Each proper noun stands on its own; but the lyric at the center of the poem draws these disparate strains together and casts them in the position of the “Silent One.” On one level, the “Silent One” is ostensibly a stand-in for all of the victims of the “gas of capitalism” (235). As the voice of the “one” this speaker is universal and generic—indeed, the multitude represented by “the Silent One” seems akin to the Popular Front rhetoric of “the people.” Linked to the many that are denoted in the poem’s margins, this “one” might be read as a lyric subject that is historically and politically contingent.

On another level, however, it is significant that, while each of the specific sites listed in “Wait” is linked to the central lyric, these groups and places remain as part of the poem. The presence of these proper names is important to analyzing Hughes’s re-conceptualization of the lyric. The relation between the “Silent One” and the specific populations listed in “Wait” might be understood vis-à-vis Fredric Jameson’s notion of “cognitive mapping.” According to Jameson, in the historical phase of late capitalism, the “truth” of an individual subject’s experience “no longer coincides with the place in which it takes place” (349). In other words, there is gap between “limited daily experience” and the global and economic system that “determines the very quality of the individual’s

subjective life,” and those underlying “structural coordinates are no longer accessible to immediate lived experience and are often not even conceptualizable for most people” (349). Jameson proposes the process of “cognitive mapping” as a means to allow for a conceptualization of self in space that is necessary for revolutionary and utopian thought. In a way, the various people and places listed provide the coordinates for such a process. The nouns are presented in no particular order, and they are repeated in no discernible pattern. The networks of relations between the various groups and places listed in “Wait” destabilize notions of the lyric subject, critiquing an expressivist model that would trace that subject’s experiences (or, in Jameson’s terms, its “subjective life”) to a singular and confined space and time.

While documenting Haiti, Hughes engaged the photograph’s power to evidence historical and social realities by arresting time. In many ways, “Wait” might be read as a series of snapshots that connect to the narrative provided by the poem’s central lyric. That is, the words in the lists illuminate the processes and violence of capitalism by freezing moments and spaces where such violence takes place. However, while Hughes might harness the photograph’s power to freeze time, the poem also illustrates how its plane of representation is also limited by this very temporality. The photograph, after all, is delimited by what Jameson describes as “a tiny of corner of the social world, a fixed camera view” (349). The poem, however, is able to open up to a broader plane of representation where utopian coordination is possible.

One can see this relationship between the photograph and the poem play out in “Wait.” Hughes’s experience of photographically documenting Haiti seems to have influenced him to specifically mention groups of oppressed peoples and the places they

inhabit. Each word, in essence, evokes a snapshot of a person or place. But the photograph's evidentiary power also seems to have challenged Hughes to seek out a form that would represent more than the immediate political situation. At present, the "Silent One" is "saying nothing" and knows "no words to write" but will eventually be recognized through action, promising:

I shall raise my hand  
And break the heads of you  
Who starve me.  
I shall raise my hand  
And smash the spines of you  
Who shoot me.

I shall take your guns  
And turn them on you. (*Poems* 234)

According to the poem, the "Silent One" will only be heard once it can "make the world / My own. / When that is done / I shall find words to speak." The lyric then ends with the exclamation "Wait!"—a promise that the rebellion and revolution outlined in the poem will come to be (235). The future tense of the verb "shall" opens the poem to a different temporality than the photograph allows. However, a further consideration of the interplay between a centralized lyric speaker and the instability and futurity of the various populations that speaker attempts to represent might also extend such a reading. The "Silent One" is, in many ways, a subject that has not yet been formed. It is silent because its various components—the participants in the revolutionary class struggle represented in the lists—have yet to conceptually merge. Thus, the "Silent One" is not only a centralized lyric speaker that promises it will eventually "find words to speak" to represent various people and utopian potentials; it is also historical class consciousness in the process of formation.



And yet, something of the photographic—its local or particular specificity—remains here. While the desire of the central lyric—the “Silent One”—seems to be to join oppressed populations together to form a universal collective, there is a tension between the lyric’s desire for synthesis and the specific realities represented in the poem’s margins. The poem, then, does not just promise or foresee a future revolutionary collective—by keeping “snapshots” of present sites of conflict and oppression in the margins, it leaves the problem of how that collective will be formed an open one.

### **Striking Out Against History**

Even if, in the 1930s, it was poetry that was always on the verge of dying, it is the photograph that has been unequivocally linked with death—it is, as Barthes famously writes, an “image which produces death while trying to preserve life” (92). Both Hughes and Rukeyser demonstrate through their poetic engagements with Depression-era historical and political realities various investments in such theoretical aspects of the photograph. Such investments lead each to re-conceptualize their positions both in relation to their poems’ subjects and as artists who played at poetry’s generic boundaries—the “unmade boundaries of acts and poem,” to use Rukeyser’s line (*Collected Poems* 108)—in order to speak to the important events of the day. In this sense, Hughes’s and Rukeyser’s poems also force us to think about photographs in a different manner, for the poem is allowed a different and potentially more revolutionary temporality than the still image. Indeed, in *The Book of the Dead*, the dead might be resurrected in the space of the poem, and they carry with them a revolutionary potential like that given to the “Silent One” who promises to speak at the end of Hughes’s “Wait.”

The dead “strike out against history”: “all these men cry their doom across the world,” Rukeyser writes, “meeting avoidable death, fight against madness, / find every war. // Are known as strikers, soldier, pioneer, / fight on all new frontiers, are set in solid / lines of defense” (109-10).

Moreover, looking ahead to the next chapter, these formal mediations open up a consideration of how important Haiti and its history were for Hughes as he fashioned himself as a poet of the people. (Haiti is, of course, one of the geographic areas listed in “Wait.”) Hughes criticized Haitian writers for composing “flowery poetry in the manner of the French academicians” (*Essays* 48), and he attempted to counter such a bourgeois aesthetic in his own political poems and his translations of West Indian poets like Nicolás Guillén and Jacques Roumain. For Hughes, Haiti is much more than the space where he took flight from an old self to reconstitute himself as a black writer. As a site of revolutionary activity within the black diaspora, the country is, for Hughes, the signifier of a future revolutionary and collective hope. In his historical play about the Haitian revolution, *Emperor of Haiti (Troubled Island)* (1936) Hughes briefly echoes the potentials he attempted to capture in “Wait.” “Our hills await us,” says the rebellion leader Dessalines, “Our hills—where freedom lives” (*Plays* 297).

## CHAPTER 4

### Haiti to the Universe: Jacques Roumain's "Death of Poetry" and the Radical Politics of Form

"It has been a good year, an exceptionally good year."

So begins *New Masses* editor Stanley Burnshaw's review of the "Revolutionary Literature of 1934" (36). As literary historian Michael Denning has argued, 1934 was a very good year indeed: marking a significant political and cultural turning point for the U.S. Left. The general strikes in San Francisco, Minneapolis, and Toledo as well as the national textile strike signaled a "new militancy and solidarity among American working people" (*The Cultural Front* xiv). A discernible radical literary and artistic culture began to take shape in relation to these major political battles, and a "proletarian avant-garde" emerged through the formation of writing clubs, group theaters, dance troupes, and little magazines (xv). "If 1929 became a symbol of despair and ruin, an emblem of the crash of an economy and a way of life," Denning concludes, "1934 stands as one of the lyric years in American history ... an emblem of insurgency, upheaval, and hope" (xiv). Even at the time Burnshaw discerned a cultural shift: "Before 1934 it required some understanding of literary and social processes to recognize the promise of revolutionary literature," he writes, "but now even a daily book reviewer has to blindfold his eyes to ignore its achievements and potentialities" (36). However, despite this surge in radical literary production, the status of poetry remained precarious. As my previous chapters have explored, while poetic genres like songs, ballads, and chants often were invoked as

essential components of proletarian culture, poetry (or Poetry) was—almost just as often—deemed a dead/dying art. As communist poet Orrick Johns put it to Harriet Monroe in 1932: the poetry establishment could not survive the “turn” toward “positive social necessity” and it was doomed to be outlived by youth singing the songs of the working class (qtd in *Modernism from Right to Left* 189).

This chapter returns, via Alain Locke, to that “lyric year” of 1934 to establish a different trajectory for considering how narratives about poetry’s life and death circulated on the Left. Starting with Locke’s supposition that poetic production had ceased in 1934, I explore how black radical poets and critics approached the question of poetry’s potential death, and I place these analyses within the important hemispheric context of U.S.-Haiti relations. Recent scholarship in this area has presented a more expansive notion of black radical work, moving away from strictly party-based accounts (such as Mark Naison’s germinal *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* [1983]) and shifting focus from nation-states to a Pan-African frame of reference (“Dossier on Black Radicalism” 1-3). My analyses here remain tied to the inner workings of the Communist Party, but, different from previous chapters, I concentrate on the ways in which communism—with its promise of “uniting scattered but kindred peoples into a whole,” as Richard Wright put it—acted as a thread tying together writers (and poetries) throughout the black diaspora. Placing poetry and discourses about it at the center, I also offer a critique of recent scholarship that, in calling for a “transnational poetics,” reinforces lyric poetry’s claims to transcendence and universality.<sup>55</sup> In the shadows of such arguments is

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<sup>55</sup> See especially Jahan Ramazani, *A Transnational Poetics* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009). Recent scholarship at the intersection of American studies and poetry studies examines poetry’s role in nation-building projects and its use for imagining idealized national communities. These studies argue that the

an initial attempt at the “daunting task” of sketching a provisional “poets’ international” to complement Denning’s conception of a “novelists’ international”—that is, the development of a genre that is not “fully-formed” but that exists in “a continuing dialectic between a self-conscious literary movement and the literary forms it developed” (*Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* 53; 59).

The primary focus of this chapter is Jacques Roumain, a prominent Haitian poet, novelist, and political activist who was variously involved with the U.S. Left. In 1934, after years of underground organizing—including making contacts in the CPUSA—Roumain established the *Parti Communiste Haitien* (PCH). Roughly seven years later, while living in exile in New York City, Roumain would publish an essay titled “Is Poetry Dead” in *New Masses*. Taking these two events as important historical reference points, this chapter uses Roumain’s life and work as a starting point for considering the transnational networks—especially between the U.S. and Haiti—that were integral to the development of African-American Left poetry. Such a focus illuminates a new conceptual space for thinking about poetry’s life and death, opening up previous chapters’ discussions of 30s poetries to broader temporal and geographic shifts. Roumain ponders the fate of poetry at both a moment of personal crisis and a historical brink. Written while living in exile and during the eighteen months of the Hitler-Stalin pact, Roumain’s imagination of poetry’s death does not signal a decline in Old Left versions of political radicalism; rather, it constitutes an important inter-space for the development of black radical poetry on an international scale.

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“ideal poem” becomes a form for the “ideal nation.” Such a rubric might be applied to Ramazani’s arguments, whereby poetry and transnationalism (like poetry and nationalism) become twin ideals.

## The Eleventh Hour

In the 1920s, Jacques Roumain was deeply involved in Haiti's indigenous movement; but, during the thirties, his radicalism would push him beyond the nationalist movement, as he came to see Marxism as the most viable lens through which to conceive of the struggle for Haiti (Smith 15-16). At the time, Roumain was in contact with U.S. black artists and cultural leaders as well as with members of the U.S. Communist party. In 1932, he visited New York to discuss with CPUSA officials the establishment of a Communist party in Haiti. He also traveled to Washington, D.C., to spend time with Alain Locke, whom he had exchanged letters with the previous year. A prominent black intellectual and a key figure of the New Negro Renaissance, Locke also became involved with communist publications and activities. In addition to regularly publishing in *New Masses*, he was a member of Left literary groups such as the League of American Writers and the Negro Playwrights Company as well as "a regular at party-sponsored gatherings, praising Soviet answers to the race problem and linking the Harlem Renaissance he had touted to 'the class proletarian art creed of today's younger generation'" (Maxwell 2).

Roumain and Locke are a compelling pair: both were influential cultural leaders in their home countries, both were variously involved in the communist movement (even if only, in Locke's case, as a supportive literary critic and fellow-traveler), and both shared an interest in how to craft a black proletarian aesthetic that resisted imitating European models and that looked to writing from across the black diaspora for inspiration. Writing to Tristan Rémy in 1932, Roumain declared himself a communist and explained that he was "working for the renewal of our [Haiti's] literature through the study of our very rich folklore ... I am of the opinion that our literature should be *Negro*

and largely proletarian” (qtd in Fowler 308). Throughout the thirties and forties, Locke wrote essays analyzing how effectively African-American poetry synthesized “race consciousness” with a “more generalized social-mindedness” (“Propaganda—Or Poetry?” 70). He also praised Roumain’s efforts to reform Haitian letters. Reviewing Roumain’s short story collection *La Proie et l’Ombre* (*The Prey and the Shadow*) for *Crisis*, Locke lauded the book as “evidence of a creative revival [in Haiti] after the smothered decade of the occupation.” To him, the book signals “a revolutionary change of style and new outlook on life” (341). “The one of Haitian literature was formerly romantic and flamboyant, and though extremely competent, always sounded like a belated echo of France a generation removed,” Locke opines. “But here in this book, Jacques Roumain has brought Haitian letters into a sharp realignment with modern style and contemporary thought” (341).

Despite their commonalities, Roumain’s and Locke’s efforts were guided by different understandings of poetry and its relationship to historical change. Both employed metaphors of poetry’s death to articulate their definitions of poetry as well as its cultural and political functions. But their uses of such metaphors illuminates a significant contrast: while Locke thought that poetry should rise above the fray of historical disruption, Roumain insisted that poetry must be dialectically reconfigured in relation to critical historical moments. On one level, Locke’s and Roumain’s writings about poetry’s potential death provide a means to understand the relationship between African-American Left poetry and broader debates about poetry and propaganda. Locke drew a sharp line between “poetry” and “propaganda.” Roumain, however, saw a use for poetry that was potentially propagandistic—“as effective as a leaflet, a pamphlet, a

poster” (“Is Poetry Dead?” 23). On another level, then, a consideration of how Roumain’s conception of poetry differs from Locke’s provides new insight into how pre-World War II African-American and black diaspora poetries imagined nascent revolutionary communities during a moment of global crisis.

Locke noticed the flowering of Left culture and the increased predominance of proletarian aesthetics. In his *Opportunity* review of “the Literature of the Negro for 1934,” Locke observes how the “social question” pervades art. He suggests that African-American artists are creating in response to major historical transitions, and he declares: “It is the eleventh hour of capitalism and the eleventh hour of Nordicism, and all our literature and art are reflecting that” (9). There is both a glimmer of hope and an observation about aesthetics embedded in Locke’s statement that mid-30s literature reflects the “eleventh hour” of capitalism and Nordicism. Locke intimates that literary works are signaling the final hour of oppressive economic and social structures and anticipating wide-scale change. However, as his description of the year’s worth of poetry makes clear, the clues to such changes are found in both the manifest content of literary works as well as the forms they take.

While, in 1934, Left critics like Stanley Burnshaw praised revolutionary poets for “getting away from the kind of obscurity that marred the work of so many of them” and for adding “clarity” to their works through the “integration of the poet’s experience” (36), Locke thought that the suffusion of the “social question” within the realm of art caused a decline, both quantitative and qualitative, in the production of poetry. After dedicating a considerable portion of his retrospective to the year’s fiction, Locke notes “the almost



complete cessation of poetry” and he laments that “the poetic strain has dwindled in quantity” (11). He determines:

Evidently it is not the hour for poetry; nor should it be,—this near-noon of a prosaic, trying day. Poets, like birds, sing at dawn and dusk, they are hushed by the heat of propaganda and the din of work and battle, and become vocal only before and after as the heralds or the carolling serenaders. (11)

Burnshaw and Locke are, of course, writing for different forums. Nonetheless, Locke’s comments on poetry’s supposed decline are relevant for any consideration of Left discourses about poetry’s life and death. In a broader context, especially, such a focus on African-American poetic production can reframe approaches to Left literature as a whole.<sup>56</sup> Certainly, Locke was amenable to revolutionary literature. As Alan Wald explains, with reference to Locke’s interwar essays “Propaganda—Or Poetry?” and “Sterling Brown: The New Negro Folk Poet,” “Locke was not opposed to politics or protest in poetry, but he sought poetic utterances ‘from the vital heart of the Negro experience’; he scorned derivative strophes that smacked of Moscow or Union Square origins” (*Exiles from a Future Time* 277).

By now, Locke’s suppositions about the place of poetry during moments of historical and political transition should be familiar. Locke declares a veritable “twilight of poetry” (à la Edmund Clarence Stedman) by suggesting that poets “sing” only during times of tranquility (“at dawn and dusk”) and not in the present uproarious moment, where they feel “the heat of propaganda” and hear the “din of work and battle.” It is in this sense that Locke’s essay seems to replicate Harriet Monroe’s view of poetry and its

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<sup>56</sup> As Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst suggest in their introduction to *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2003), asking what happens when we put African-American studies at the center of studies of the cultural/literary Left not only “excavates” the imaginative work and politics of Left writers of color, but also of “reinvents” and “reframes” approaches to the field as a whole (4).

cultural function discussed in Chapter 1. More specifically, his formulation of the relationship between poetry and propaganda recalls the debate between Monroe and Burnshaw about “Art and Propaganda.” Like Monroe, Locke defines poetry by asserting that it is not propaganda. For Locke, propagandistic poetry is merely “rhetorical” rather than “poetic.” True poetry “has the flow and force of reality and the vital tang of life itself” rather than “the clank and clatter of propaganda, and for all its seriousness, the hollow echoes of rhetoric” (“Poetry—or Propaganda?” 87). This distinction is no clearer than in Locke’s assessment of Nancy Cunard’s *Negro, An Anthology* (1934). According to him, the poetry section of the anthology “has for the most part an iron, metallic ring; interesting as it is, it is nevertheless hot rhetoric, clanging emotion . . . the capital ‘P’ is for propaganda, not poetry, and the book hurls shell, bomb and shrapnel at the citadel of Nordicism” (11).

Despite his seeming solidarity with Monroe, Locke’s assertion of poetry’s decline is the product of a different context. Indeed, one might argue that Monroe is trying to protect a Victorian and bourgeois notion of a transcendent poetry from within the crumbling “Citadel of Nordicism.” The “hot rhetoric” of propaganda carries specific meanings for Locke. It does not necessarily signal the devastation of “high poetry” in the same manner as Monroe; rather, it seems to indicate the continued use of an aesthetic that Locke had previously praised poets of the New Negro Renaissance for moving away from. In his 1925 “Negro Youth Speaks,” Locke reports that the art of the younger generation “affords a deepening rather than a narrowing of social vision.” While the poetry of the previous “awkward age” was “stiltedly self-conscious, and racially rhetorical rather than racially expressive,” the new poets “speak to their own and try to

express. They have stopped posing, being nearer the attainment of poise” (48). He continues:

Our poets no longer have the hard choice between an over-assertive and an appealing attitude. By the same effort they have shaken themselves free from the minstrel tradition and the fowling-nets of dialect, and through acquiring ease and simplicity in serious expression, have carried the folk-gift to the altitudes of art. There they seek and find art’s intrinsic values and satisfactions—and if America were deaf, they would still sing. (48)

Here, Locke describes the shift from a “rhetorical” poetry to an “expressive” poetry in terms of historical and social progress. Locke returns to this progressive narrative in his assessment of black political poetry, “Propaganda—or Poetry?,” published in a 1936 issue of *Race*. Citing Phyllis Wheatley, he characterizes early African-American poetry as “pivoted on a painfully negative and melodramatic sense of race. Self-pity and its corrective of rhetorical bombast were the ground notes of the Negro’s poetry for several generations” (70). Adopting a coming-of-age metaphor similar to the one he used in 1925, Locke goes on to describe post-World War I African-American poetry as evidence of “[t]he gradual conversion of race consciousness from a negative sense of social wrong and injustice to a positive note of race loyalty and pride in racial tradition [that] came as a difficult and rather belated development of spiritual maturity” (70).

What stays most consistent across Locke’s assessments of African-American poetry is his general conception of poetry and the poetic. At times, he defines it in a negative sense: it is not rhetorical, bombastic, or prosaic (i.e., dull). And, while it need not be high modernist in its aesthetic tendencies (note, for example, his praise of the folk tradition), it should not be “drab, prosy, and inartistic” (“Poetry—or Propaganda?” 73). Poetry (with a capital “P”), while it might address the problems of the day, should ultimately strive for transcendence and universality—it should last. Such definitions are,

of course, a bit vague, and they don't clearly outline the relationship between the specific political ground the poem addresses and, in Locke's words, its "universal human implications" and its ability to be "broadened to universality" ("Poetry—or Propaganda?" 87). Thus, while Locke's commentary on the relationship of African-American poetry to propaganda potentially provides a different perspective from which to view the field of interwar revolutionary poetry, it offers little challenge to more traditional conceptions of poetry. Here, Roumain's work is crucial. While Locke lamented that the 30s was "not the hour for poetry," work by Roumain shows a different way of imagining poetry's presumed obsolescence, both in the American context and in the broader context of the international communist Left. Locke sees a "cessation" of poetry. But, for him, poetry only "ceases" it is not "deceased." Such a view of poetry is both ahistorical and non-dialectical. In contrast, Roumain imagines—even embraces—the notion that poetry might be dead. For if at a moment of historical change poetry is counted as dead, then it also has the potential to be reborn as something else. In other words, allowing poetry to die ultimately allows for the dialectical re-configuration of the category of poetry, itself. As I address more fully in a later section, such a re-configuration of poetry *per se* also has consequences for Locke's view of what it means for the poem to appeal to "universality."

Even though it was written in the years after World War II—and following traumas that Locke and Roumain would not have imagined or foreseen—Theodor Adorno's oft-discussed claim that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" ("Commitment" 188) is useful for illuminating the structural differences between Locke's view of poetry's cessation and Roumain's imagination of its death. In "Commitment," Adorno quickly follows his assertion that it is "barbaric" to write lyric poetry after

Auschwitz with the insistence that “literature must resist this verdict.” Thus, while poetry might seem “barbaric” after the horror of the concentration camp, it must also persist so as not to “surrender to cynicism” (188). There is a way in which Adorno’s formulation is structurally similar to Locke’s at the same time that it is politically very different. In Locke’s view of poetry’s “cessation,” during a time of historical crisis there is a pause in poetic production after which poetry returns and is, for all intents and purposes, the same as it was before. As Locke describes it, using a familiar (and traditional) metaphor that equates poetry to the songs of birds: poets are songbirds who “sing and dawn and dusk” and fly from “the din of work and battle.” Once the smoke has cleared, they “become vocal” again “as the heralds or the carolling serenaders” (“Eleventh Hour” 11). In other words, after a historical transition, poets return to offer more of the same; and while the political reality is assuredly changed, poetry (or, perhaps more accurately, Poetry) is not. Songbirds sing the same—and one hears them the same—no matter the place or time. As far as poetry alone is concerned, Locke’s formulation is not so different from Adorno’s in “Commitment.” For Adorno, after a historical trauma, poetry is potentially formally or generically the same. What is different—and here I do not mean to approximate the critical historical moment Locke writes of with the horrors of the concentration camp—is what poetry *means* by virtue of its continued existence. In Locke’s conservative view, the ontology of poetry is unaffected by historical disruption and attendant new political realities. For Adorno, historical trauma makes poetry “barbarous” so that even if it seems the same it is, in fact, different.

What Adorno’s formulation leaves open is the question of where literature—especially committed literature—will go after a historical trauma. In “Commitment,”

Adorno calls for a committed autonomous art that does not merely represent reality, but that is about what exceeds or shapes reality itself. That is, it derives from reality but also has a nonidentity with it. A similar dialectical move can be seen in Roumain's writings about the fate of poetry. Indeed, Roumain opens "Is Poetry Dead?" by claiming: "Poetry is not a pure idealistic distillation . . . it reflects that which in common language one calls epoch: that is to say, the dialectical complexity of social relations, of contradictions and antagonisms of the political and economic structure of a society at a definite historical period. Hence, poetry is a testimony and one of the elements of analysis of this society" (22). On one level, Roumain insists that revolutionary poetry must testify to material realities. But, on another level, by imagining that poetry might die—and be reborn—Roumain is striving for a poetry that can conceive of another realm. This realm is not the transcendental one that Locke imagines, rather, it is a realm of otherness that is shaped by what is on the ground.

One can see, then, that Roumain "inquires into the fate of poetry" in order to imagine a new order of poetry that is based on the political landscape from which it springs. Roumain does not ask—"Is Poetry Dead?"—in order to comment on a perceived decline in the quality or quantity of poetic productions (on the Left or otherwise); rather, he intends to expose the ideological landscape that shapes the championing of poetry as an art that transcends the din of politics and history. In terms of Adorno's formulation, one can see how Roumain recognizes that the very existence of poetry in a time of historical transition is political in itself. Going a step further than Locke, Roumain frames a perceived crisis for poetry not merely in terms of a cessation (or pause) but in terms of life and death. Roumain argues that, at a time when "the forces of socialism and

capitalism are locked in a decisive struggle,” the “old society” holds up an ideal of “pure poetry.” It is from this position that Roumain protests what he views as the current idealization of poetry, calling it one of the “ideological weapons of counter-revolution.”

He writes:

On the eve of a fundamental historical transformation, the crumbling old society finds in idealistic construction, in the submission to the metaphysical idols, in recourse to the dark forces of mysticism, the ideological weapons of counter-revolution . . . One must examine with the scientific care of an entomologist these specimens that invent moral pretexts in order to pass over, through the service entrance, to the camp of the people’s enemy. Thus one discovers the pitiful petty bourgeois overwhelmed by an abject anguish, seeking refuge in the cocoon of pure poetry or of what *they* call ‘the freedom of the spirit,’ because the inexorable march of history threatens the class interests of their employers who have debased intellectual production to the level of merchandise, a grocery article. (22)

At this climactic point in the essay, Roumain suggests that an ideal of poetry, one that elevates the art to the status of religion (as “metaphysical idol”) or relegates it to the realm of pleasure (as “pure poetry”), is a screen for conservative—and, at its worst, fascist—politics. In light of the arguments above, one can see how Locke might be implicated in this critique; for, while Locke is attentive to the historical and political landscape, he also intimates that “Poetry” is above the fray of historical disruption.

Contrasting the 19<sup>th</sup>-century French poet Stéphane Mallarmé with the revolutionary Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky, Roumain insists that, when the old social order is crumbling, writers must “grasp in the death of an obsolete social organism its replacement by another of a higher quality” (22). If they fail to do so, their poetry will be like Mallarmé’s—an “evasion of reality” written in language that is “aloof from the class struggle” (22). Roumain imagines a new order of poetry (i.e., poetry that is “of a higher quality”) that does more than testify to new and terrible political realities such as the spread of colonialism, the rise of fascism, and the encroaching war. Roumain’s vision

for a re-born poetry contains within it the utopian hope that a different existence for poetry might help to imagine a different political existence as well.

Ultimately, Roumain provides a new way of looking at a question that the *New Masses* had entertained before. He dialectically reworks the question of poetry's death, and his essay poses the additional question: If, at a moment of historical crisis, the banner of poetry is being held aloft by counter-revolutionary forces (be they in the form of religion, fascism, or capitalism), then can the art of poetry effectively serve the purposes of revolutionary struggle? Put another way: At this historical moment, would the true revolutionary act be to let poetry die? Taking Roumain's suggestions about poetry to their endpoint opens up new ways for thinking about poetry's perceived social and political function in the years leading up to the Second World War. Here, embracing poetry's death is tantamount to embracing an alternate perspective on historical change. In his assessment of poetry—and its fate—Roumain privileges historical discontinuity and dialectical change. Such change is linked to the radical social transformations that revolutionary poets hoped were already in process. In this light, the death of poetry does not only point to the end of an art form, historical moment, or way of political being. It also points to the futurity of Left movements and their attendant aesthetics, particularly in relationship to Black radicalism. Roumain's articulation of poetry's death, especially when read in the context of international political movements like communism and Black Radicalism, allows for a consideration of what Brent Hayes Edwards calls the “futuristic quality in the discourses of diaspora emergent in the twentieth century, particularly in the ‘interwoven histories’ (*histories entrecroisées*) of the African diaspora” (“Langston” 691).



For Roumain, the act of imagining poetry's death creates the space to also imagine a new type of revolutionary community via a new poetry. To fully understand Roumain's utopic desire for a death of poetry, however, it is important to historicize the conditions around which that desire was expressed. At the same time that Roumain was conceptualizing a new ontology for poetry, U.S. Left communities were struggling to define themselves in the face of shifting political realities. As my next section clarifies, a consideration of Roumain's and, by extension, Haiti's symbolic importance for the U.S. Left provides an original lens through which to understand the complexities of this historical landscape. During the thirties and forties, U.S. Left cultural workers were deeply engaged with Roumain's politics and his writing. African-American communist fellow-travelers like Locke and Langston Hughes began to develop friendships with Roumain in the early part of the decade and, at this same time, Roumain was making contacts in the CPUSA. In 1934, when Roumain was arrested in Haiti for "communist conspiracy," Left writers acted on his behalf by giving publicity to his case and by supporting the "Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain," a group headed by radical journalist Carelton Beals. In this way, Roumain's activist work in Haiti and his eventual imprisonment for "communist conspiracy" becomes the ground off of which, for a time, the U.S. Left attempts to build a transnational revolutionary community. Coincidentally, it was while he was living in exile in New York City that Roumain shared his vision of poetry's death and his attendant desire for what might be called, in Giorgio Agamben's terms, a "coming community," or a community that has never yet been. Somewhat paradoxically, however, Roumain is uttering this very desire on a historical and political ground that is pitted with antagonisms.

### **Jacques Roumain and the U.S. Left**

One of the only times Langston Hughes donned a coat in Haiti was to meet Jacques Roumain. Hughes found himself delighted by Roumain, characterizing him as “a handsome copper-brown young man with the deep fiery eyes of a picture-book poet” (*I Wonder* 30). But Hughes was also quick to notice Roumain’s beautifully decorated home, especially its colorful library full of books from America and Europe and its birds-eye-view of Haiti’s capital. “From the hillside windows we looked out on the town and harbor of Port au Prince,” Hughes recalls, “and the slums of the port were beautiful from so far away” (*I Wonder* 30).

Later that day, when Hughes set sail from Haiti, he was honored by a delegation of Haitian writers and government officers, including Roumain. Having become overheated after leaving Roumain’s home, and needing to prepare for deck passage to Havana, the delegation caught Hughes “greasy handed, half-naked—and soxless” (*I Wonder* 31). They honored him nonetheless, and Roumain introduced the shirtless Hughes as “the greatest Negro poet who had ever come to honor Haitian soil” (*I Wonder* 32). While various officials bid the American poet *bon voyage*, a woman he had spent time with in Port au Prince came to say her goodbyes, bearing gifts of guava jelly and fruit. Hughes’s last impression of Haiti is of Roumain standing on the shore with this “girl of the morning”:

As the boat lifted anchor to glide slowly out into the Caribbean, the sun was setting behind the hills. I stood on the poop deck over the churning rudder to wave farewell to the folks on the dock—Jacques Roumain, who was to become Haiti’s most famous writer, the elegant gentlemen of his delegation, and the girl of the town who had come to see me off. (32)

The above two scenes draw a stark contrast between the elegant, educated Roumain and the Haitian people he would come to defend. By describing Roumain's view of the Port au Prince slums, Hughes draws attention to the distance between the poet and the country's peasant majority. However, Hughes's narrative also foregrounds the ways in which Roumain was beginning to focus his attention on the plight of Haiti's lower class, aligning him with the "girl of the morning" rather than the delegation of "official Haitians" and noting the presence of the "slums of the port" within the Roumain's otherwise lovely home.

But, not unlike Hughes, during the early 30s Roumain was on the brink of personal, political, and aesthetic transformations. In a 1932 letter to French writer Tristan Rémy, he "renounced" his "bourgeois origins" and declared himself a communist (qtd in Smith 16). In his youth, Roumain benefited from the very Haitian caste system he would work to dismantle. The grandson of a former government official and son of a large landowner, Roumain's early life was typical of the Haitian elite; he attended the country's best schools and in his teens was sent to Europe to continue his education. In 1926 at age 19, when Roumain returned to Haiti after studying in Switzerland and Spain, he quickly became involved in the Haitian nationalist movement and the resistance to the American occupation, collaborating on the journal *La Troue: Revue d'Intérêt Général* and co-founding *La Revue Indigène: Les Arts et La Vie*. Both projects promoted the creation of an indigenous movement that would, through writing and ideas, counteract the ideology of the foreign occupiers by looking solely to Haiti for inspiration.

Roumain's radicalism would soon push him beyond the nationalist movement. Inspired by the success of the Bolshevik revolution, Roumain came to see Marxism as the

most viable theoretical lens through which to conceive of the struggle in Haiti, for it proffered a political philosophy concentrated on liberating the suffering majority in which the nationalist movement had been born (Smith 15-16). In 1934, after years of underground organizing Roumain helped to officially establish the *Parti Communiste Haitien* (PCH). Facing an elite that feared the potential growth of communism in Haiti (Smith 21), Roumain was twice arrested for communist activity. After his early release from prison in 1936, illness and continued government surveillance forced the radical poet into exile. “This paralyzing vigilance in a milieu as limited as ours and where I am only too well known means being reduced to powerlessness,” Roumain wrote after he was freed in August 1936, “... I felt that decidedly the earth scorched me at every step and that I was under the constant threat of new machinations by the government” (qtd in Fowler 317).

Hughes brought a good deal of attention to Roumain’s case when his open letter, “Free Jacques Roumain: A Letter from Langston Hughes,” was featured on the cover of the May-June 1935 issue of *Dynamo* along with a translation of Roumain’s poem “When the Tom-Tom Beats,” which appeared on the following page. Hughes’s letter asks that “all writers and artists of whatever race who believe in the freedom of words and the human spirit, to immediately protest to the President of Haiti and to the nearest Haitian Consulate the uncalled for and unmerited sentence to prison of Jacques Roumain, one of the few, and by far the most talented of the literary men of Haiti” (1). Included below the letter is an editor’s note asking readers to “send letters and telegrams of protest to President Stenio Vincent, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, or the nearest Haitian consulate” and

informing them that a “Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain” had been formed in New York (1).

The Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain began organizing when Roumain was arrested in Haiti in 1934. Based in New York City, the committee was a national organization made up of Left-leaning writers and intellectuals. In addition to its core members, the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain solicited writers to act as “sponsors” who donated money, wrote public statements on Roumain’s behalf, and used their influence to spread Roumain’s writings through publication and translation. The sponsors included a diverse array of artists—from Sherwood Anderson to Josephine Herbst to Edmund Wilson—many who were affiliated with Left organization and/or wrote for Left publications.

The primary goals of the committee were to make known in the U.S. the unjust grounds for Roumain’s arrest and imprisonment; to secure better conditions for Roumain in Haiti; and to persuade Haiti’s government to free Roumain from prison. Records of a May 2, 1935, meeting outline the various actions members proposed in order to accomplish these goals. Alain Locke was at the meeting, and he—along with journalists George B. Murphy, Jr. and Carelton Beals, Johns Hopkins University professor Broadus Mitchell, and artist Thomas Benton—volunteered to be part of a delegation that would meet with the Ministry of Haiti in Washington. Committee member Conrad Komorowski was set to travel to Haiti, where he would present Stenio Vincent with the committee’s petition. He also planned to visit Nicole Roumain as well as attempt to see Jacques Roumain and obtain the rights to translate his books. The group also expressed interest in getting Sacco and Vanzetti lawyer Arthur Garfield Hays involved in the case so as to help

them secure better conditions for Roumain in prison. They also decided to publicize the case by creating an informational pamphlet and circulation of Roumain's writings. Once these basic steps had been taken, the committee would commit to addressing the broader problem of U.S. economic imperialism in Haiti, which was one of the organization's main political concerns. Carleton Beals, the National Chairman, opened the May 2 meeting by speaking on the political situation in Haiti. Minutes from the meeting, which committee secretary Francine Bradley included in a May 13, 1935, letter to Jean Toomer, reproduce Beals's remarks:

Such unjust and unpopular acts as the imprisonment of Jacques Roumain, Haiti's leading writer, would be impossible for President Vincent to enforce without his National Guard . . . By deliberately building up this Guard, the American Marine occupation has given a weapon to anyone placed in power, and enabled such a person to assume dictatorial power against the wishes of the people. This situation may be seen not only in Haiti, but in other Caribbean countries that have known American occupation.

Beals's commentary demonstrates how drawing attention to Roumain's imprisonment was helping to mobilize a protest of U.S military and economic interventions in Haiti. The committee was, according to the minutes, interested in presented "the whole matter of the economic vassalage of Haiti," and the group resolved to eventually picket the National City Bank and other organizations that were "involved in the economic control of Haiti."

Generally speaking, the committee's goals and actions suggest the broader attempt by U.S. Left communities to bridge racial differences in order to combat economic imperialism. However, as the correspondence between the committee's secretary Francine Bradley and committee sponsor Langston Hughes reveals, this political ground is a contested one. While, as Hughes wrote in his *Dynamo* letter, "all

writers and artists of whatever race who believe in the freedom of words and the human spirit” were called on to protest Roumain’s imprisonment, such coming together was wrought with tension. This is due, in part, to the fact that during the interwar period Haiti, itself, became a site where multiple ideological fantasies would collude.

Before delving into an analysis of Bradley’s correspondence with Hughes, it is important to outline the complex ways Haiti functioned in the U.S. imagination during the interwar period and, especially, the fantasy space that Haiti occupied for Left cultural workers. Scholars like Nicole A. Waligora-Davis and Mary Renda have paid sustained attention to the cultural effects of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. Waligora-Davis explains how, during the 1930s, African-American poets, novelists, and playwrights called on Haiti’s revolutionary history in ways that countered popular cultural representations of the country that “recruited the public into the project of empire building” (Waligora-Davis 114). As Waligora-Davis explores, African-American writers used Haiti’s revolutionary history to signal the dream of a new world, and they cast the Haitian Revolution “as a scene of black possibility and hope, a political manifesto, and an international call for black political solidarity” that “recalled the island’s utopian promise for black civil life despite its present attenuation” (112).

However, neither Waligora-Davis nor Renda fully address the sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing ways in which the literary Left mobilized Haitian history and politics. As Denning notes, citing works by C.L.R. James, Langston Hughes, and Arna Bontemps, “the narrative of Haiti’s ‘black Jacobins’ ran throughout Popular Front culture” (*The Cultural Front* 396). Appeals to Haiti’s revolutionary history were not limited to works by black Left artists. Indeed, prior to the publication of Hughes’s

*Troubled Island* (1936), James's *Black Jacobins* (1938), and Bontemps's *Drums at Dusk* (1939), Guy Endore, a Jewish-American writer who would eventually join the Communist Party, published *Babouk* (1934), a historical novel that begins on a French slave ship and ends by accounting a slave revolt that catalyzed the Haitian Revolution. Blending fictional accounts with historical and archival research, *Babouk* offered an early critique of the silences and horrors of slavery, Caribbean political realities, and the historical significance of nineteenth-century Haitian slave revolts (Gaspar and Trouillot 188). Endore's novel demonstrates a deep concern on the U.S. Left with the problems of racism and colonialism.

And yet, while *Babouk* closes with a hope for a "new world," it does not assume that a universal racial solidarity is easy to achieve—even for Left communities. "This is the world of men and women and of children. This THE world. The ONLY world. The WORLD of ALL," the book ends, "... Oh, black man, when your turn comes, will you be so generous to us who do not deserve it?" (182). The inherent difficulties in forming the revolutionary communities Endore points to were further complicated by the effects of the U.S. occupation of Haiti. As a result of the occupation, Haiti began to function not as a revolutionary utopia, but as a colonized space where foreign occupiers aided in the further stratification of the Haitian classes. Michael Dash has noted the way in which the U.S. Occupation affected "the conception of Haiti's political and economic importance in the world." The marine occupation "in a very traumatic way suddenly lifted Haiti from her historical isolation and created a profound realization of Haiti's position as one of the many exploited and oppressed nations of the world" (25-26). These "profound realizations" affected not only Haitian intellectuals, as Dash describes, but also African-



American intellectuals who identified Haiti as an important symbol connecting the people of the black diaspora.

It is against this backdrop that Francine Bradley and Langston Hughes shared letters regarding Jacques Roumain's imprisonment and the actions that might be taken to bring publicity to his case. As mentioned, Bradley served as the secretary for the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain and, as such, she often corresponded with writers who were "sponsoring" the committee to inquire about making donations, publishing letters and essays on Roumain's behalf, and requesting their involvement in committee-sponsored events. Bradley sporadically exchanged letters with Hughes for several years—from the early organization of the committee in 1935 until after Roumain's death in 1946—and their correspondence becomes friendlier and more personal as time passed.

Even though Bradley seems to have been engaged in Left politics, her interest in Roumain's case was highly personal. Bradley's exact political affiliations remain unclear, though they might be gleaned through a consideration of her husband, Lyman Bradley's, political activity. Lyman, a German professor at New York University, was treasurer of the Modern Language Association and was also involved in the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee. His participation in the latter group eventually led to his interrogation before HUAC, his arrest for contempt of congress, and his dismissal from his position at NYU on political grounds ("Political Activism" 3-7). While Francine remains an unknown figure, it seems that she shared many of these literary and political commitments. She acted as a co-translator and also presented research at MLA

conferences. These dual interests, in addition to past personal interactions with Roumain, seem to have influenced her to work for his release from prison.

A letter Bradley wrote to Hughes in May 1936 reveals the deep personal ties Bradley had to her committee work as well as the enormous responsibilities she felt the organization shouldered. The letter opens with the news of Roumain's fellow prisoner Joseph Jolibois's death, and Bradley relates the rumor that he had been poisoned. Bradley calls Jolibois "one of the finest men Haiti had," and she shares her increasing worries about Roumain's condition as well as her feeling that the committee must be accountable to him. "I am desperate about it [Jolibois's death] and worried about Jacques Roumain and the two others still in prison..." she writes, "I feel somehow responsible for Jolibois' death. If it had made more publicity, we might have avoided his death. But now Roumain and the two others have to be saved from a similar fate." Bradley asks Hughes to try to intervene by writing letters on Roumain's behalf, and she requests carbons of the letters to keep on file.

Bradley's closing request suggests the immense influence Hughes had not just on the U.S. literary scene, but also throughout the Caribbean. In his study of Hughes and translation, Ryan James Kernan notes that, during the interwar period, "Hughes was increasingly seen and celebrated by an *Internationale* reading audience as *the* poet of either the so-called Negro race or the Negro proletariat" (31). In many ways, Bradley's correspondence with Hughes demonstrates how, while Roumain became a rallying point around which Left activists could protest foreign economic imperialism and the exportation of Jim Crow, this community was also fractured and stratified. Bradley romanticized Roumain's and, by extension Hughes's cultural work; but, at the same time,

she figures Haiti not as a historical site of revolutionary promise but rather a symbol of government corruption. This can be seen in a February 7, 1935, letter Bradley wrote to Hughes, where she recalls meeting Roumain the first time he was in New York:

I shall never forget the evening spent in his presence. He carried us away with his fire and charmed us with his culture. Even when I could not agree with his ideas, I was utterly convinced of the purity and nobility of his character. This pure flame we cannot let be destroyed for the sake of a corrupt government and the false gold of the National City Bank.

Bradley holds up Roumain as a “pure flame” of nobility and creativity that must be protected. However, unlike many Left artists—and especially African-American Left artists—she sees Haiti not as a revolutionary utopia but, rather, a site of government corruption.

Of course, as Hughes’s own writings reveal, many writers on the African-American Left became disillusioned by the deep class stratification they observed in Haiti as well as the mulatto elite who had betrayed the legacies of Touissant and Dessalines. Nonetheless, it is important to consider how easily Bradley conflates Hughes and Roumain. In many ways, her letters suggest that she saw Hughes and Roumain as interchangeable symbols of the developing black international. As Kernan points out, positioning artists in this manner might be seen as symptomatic of the Comintern’s conception of “all Africans and people of African descent as one hegemonic collective” (31). In her February 7, 1935, letter, for instance, Bradley tells Hughes that his editorials about Roumain are “of great value to us as it helps to gain the interest of a certain group of people.” In a March 8, 1936, note thanking Hughes for participating in a tribute event, Bradley tells him that he was “so much the soul of everything.”

The tension between Bradley's work on Roumain's behalf and her potential characterization of Hughes and, perhaps, Roumain as, to again employ Kernan's phrase, "*the poet of either the so-called Negro race or the Negro proletariat*" might be further understood by contrasting Bradley's and Hughes's correspondence regarding an event planned to raise awareness about Roumain's imprisonment and the committee's publicity materials. In February 1936, Bradley wrote to Hughes about the committee's plan to pay tribute to Roumain. Bradley saw the event as a way to revive public interest in Roumain's case, and she hoped that Hughes's participation would help to garner even more attention. "As little as I hear from Haiti it seems as if Stenio Vincent were mostly afraid of having public attention drawn to his dictatorship, as his position at this moment seems rather precarious," she wrote Hughes, "It is therefore just now very urgent for us to bring Jacques Roumain before the public again." In the letter, she reiterates Hughes's particular influence, writing that his "personal participation in the revival of the work of the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain will stimulate again the interest of the people who have protested before against the unjust imprisonment of Haitian liberals and radicals." The affair took place at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA. Hosted by Carleton Beals, it featured Hughes reading translations of Roumain's poems, Miriam Blecher performing dance interpretations of Hughes's poems, and Horace Gregory and Babette Deutsch speaking on Roumain's work and on the present situation in Haiti. In a February 20, 1936, letter to Jean Toomer, Bradley emphasized that the event was meant to be a celebration of black culture, telling him that the program was to include "Negro folk songs ... presented by a Negro choir."

While the evening at the Harlem YMCA featured celebrations of black culture, the committee's publicity materials did not always attribute Roumain's revolutionary ferocity to his Haitian roots. Bradley included copies of these materials in a March 20, 1935, letter to Toomer. One of the official committee press releases that she shared with Toomer, for example, casts Haiti as a crude counterpart to European democracy. In its biographical note on Roumain, his education in Switzerland is credited for helping him see the poor conditions in Haiti: "After having spent many years in Switzerland, the peaceful and ordered life of the Swiss and observed the friendly democratic relationship between the classes, Roumain's extreme sensitivity was shocked by the unspeakable misery of the under classes and the callousness and corruption of the wealthy in Haiti." Moreover, it is the European countries that provided the "lesson" on how to "organize" the "under-classes." "In Europe he also learned an important lesson—that the reason the under-classes had achieved a better life was because they were organized," the statement continues, "He had seen in Switzerland, in Germany, in France the work of trade-unions. This lesson he carried home to Haiti" ("Statement"). The statement closes by describing Roumain's unfair arrest and trial as well as the terrible conditions of his imprisonment. Ultimately, it ends with a negative view of Haiti: "Such is the treatment in Haiti of one who dares to stand for justice and dignity" ("Statement").

It is not my goal to indict Bradley—or the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain on the whole—for "essentializing" Hughes, Roumain, or members of the African-American Left. However, the committee's events—at least as Bradley describes them—seem to have failed to acknowledge complex differences and relationships. Indeed, African-American Leftists seem to have connected to Roumain's case from a

different angle than Bradley and, perhaps, other members of the committee. Just a glance through the black press's coverage of Roumain's arrest shows how the African-American community viewed Roumain's imprisonment in relation to the Scottsboro case, often aligning Roumain's plight with the plight of the Scottsboro boys. Coverage of Roumain highlighted the fact that he had formed an organization in Haiti to provide aid for the Scottsboro boys. One article in the Baltimore *Afro-American* foregrounds this with the headline: "Scottsboro Friend Jailed in Vermin-Filled Haitian Pen." This headline immediately establishes a connection between Roumain suffering in his cell and the Scottsboro boys waiting on death row.

Earlier in the decade, the Scottsboro case acted as a flashpoint event for the joining of African-American Leftists and the CPUSA. In many ways, Roumain's case created a similar opportunity for cross-racial solidarity; however, it also reveals how, on the ground, Left communities struggled to create the very revolutionary communities they hoped for. In detailing how Roumain's case was taken up in the U.S.—as well as, relatedly, the complex and multifarious ways Haiti functioned imaginatively for U.S. Leftists—I do not mean to revert to old revisionist narratives that view black writers' encounters with Communism "through the dynamics of manipulation, disillusionment, and betrayal" (Naison xv). Rather, I mean to illuminate the historical conditions around which Roumain's imagination of a new poetry was desired and, eventually, uttered.

In the next section, I consider how the desire for a new revolutionary community might translate to a poetics. As the first section began to detail through the example of Locke, Roumain's work seems to have allowed African-American writers to imagine new forms that broke from European styles. Indeed, Langston Hughes found in Roumain's

work a liberation from traditional models. In a December 1931 issue of *Crisis*, Hughes published translations of Roumain's poems "Guinée" ("Guinea") and "Quand bat le tam-tam" ("When the Tom-Tom Beats") alongside translations of works by Cuban poets Nicolás Guillén and Regino Pedroso under the banner "A Page of West Indian Poetry." Hughes presents the three writers as "young Negro poets" who have done much "to free the poetry of their islands from out-worn foreign patterns," and he singles out Roumain as writing "of the black peasants and the African strain in the New World" (424). Hughes emphasizes the way Roumain's poems articulate "the problems of the darker peoples" (424). Indeed, as the next section will show, both "Guinea" and "When the Tom-Tom Beats" evince Roumain's increasing concern in the 1930s with the ways in which the struggles of the Haitian people relate to local and global concerns. Later in the decade, however, the looming war resulted in a new political reality. What would be the parameters of this new internationalized reality? And could poetry sufficiently intervene in it—or even help to imagine it? Turning to Roumain's poetry, the next section shows how his poems evidence a complication of the poetic lyric that stems from the desire for a new type of global community.

### **Haiti to the Universe**

On November 15, 1939, roughly three years after the Committee for the Release of Jacques Roumain paid tribute to the Haitian radical through a "celebration of black culture" at the 135<sup>th</sup> Street YMCA, Roumain delivered a lecture at that very spot. That day, Roumain bypassed the proposed topic for his talk—the culture and history of Haiti—asserting that an analysis of the impending war "which threatens to crush us all in

its murderous machinery, and its effect upon the present day history of the American people seems to me a more urgent task than to stir the dust of archives in a professorial manner or to orate upon the future of literature” (Untitled Speech 11). Roumain argues that the war “internationalizes” local spaces and histories. “At this very moment,” he writes, “the entire world, because of the war, is facing problems which affect our fate in a most fundamental manner: politically the facts can not remain localized and isolated any longer in time and space. They are immediately internationalized by the very substance of war for a new re-division of the world” (Untitled Speech 7). Given the historical narrative outlined above, one might ascertain that, by refraining from speaking about Haiti directly, Roumain denies his U.S. audience just what they want. That is, there is a way in which Roumain’s speech resists the Left’s fetishization of Haiti as a specific local carrying the promise of a future new world. Roumain instead posits a dialectical relationship between varied and diversified “local spaces and histories” and the new “immediately internationalized” present.

Roumain’s November 1939 speech communicates his broader conception of global political realities and the relation between political communities in the modern world. He asserts that:

The war fronts, bristling with arms, where the enemy troops face each other, constitute a geographic reality, a strategic factor; but in view of the actual historic process: there exists in this war—which already embraces two continents and threatens to engulf our America—only one front: that of all peoples, fighting on the entire surface of the earth for liberty, peace and a better life in which man will cease to be a wolf for man. (7)

Roumain’s articulation of “one front” battling for “liberty, peace, and a better life” should not be mistaken for a hegemonic political community—even if that community is antiwar, antifascist, and anti-imperialist. Indeed, even though he points to a common



“destiny of all mankind” that seems to transcend “country or race” (7), Roumain does not suggest that Left revolutionaries form a community in which local particulars are sacrificed to a universal vision. Rather, he begins to articulate a dialectical relationship between any one local space and history—be it Haiti or elsewhere—and the “immediately internationalized” global political reality produced by “the very substance of war” (7).

Roumain’s description of a new global reality in his 1939 speech bears a difficult relation to his formulation of poetry’s death in “Is Poetry Dead?”. Roumain desires a death of poetry that is related to a moment of historical crisis or rupture. In other words, at a time of historical crisis, poetry must die so that it can be reborn as something else. Through this teleological fantasy of poetry’s death, Roumain imagines the coming of a new political community via a new poetry. But Roumain’s speech reveals that the context out of which he constructs this fantasy of a new poetry (that is, of poetry “reborn”) is actually much more complex: for, while Roumain’s fantasy of poetry’s death and rebirth might express his desire for a new to come, by 1941 there is already a new afoot—a “re-division of the world” and an “immediately internationalized” reality caused by a world at war. It is within this present reality that a different conceptualization of poetry’s form and political function might be realized. As Roumain put it: “it is a question for of making our history at this very moment” not of “orating on the future of literature” or “of raising memorial stones to the glory of the past” (Untitled Speech 11).

Analyzing Roumain’s poetry and critical writing from the 1930s and 40s along with moments of translation and exchange between Roumain and Langston Hughes, this section conjectures that the lyric poetry produced and circulated on the black Left might

be read as emerging between the two historical schematics Roumain outlines. Roumain's writings, though sometimes at odds with one another, help to reveal how the old parameters of the lyric are rooted in a model of political identity (one that is nationalist and bourgeois) that is not appropriate for the present global reality or the potential communities that might be produced through its new alignments. As such, his poems might be read for their implicit negation of the conservative ideological parameters of the lyric. That is, he attempts to reform the lyric from within. This move, while animated by a desire for poetry's death, does not constitute the grand rupture that Roumain imagines vis-à-vis poetry's death. However, it might be a necessary step toward poetry's eventual death. Ultimately, by challenging the bounds of the lyric during a moment defined by crisis, Roumain's work carries through to poetry's death in a qualitatively different way than the previous chapters explored.

Roumain opens his "Is Poetry Dead?" by positing the dialectical relationship between poetry and material reality. He describes how the art of poetry is "part of the ideological system" rather than a "pure idealistic distillation" or a "magical incantation" (22). For Roumain, poetry reflects "the dialectical complexity of social relations, of contradictions and antagonisms of the political and economic structure of a society at a definite historical period" (23). As mentioned, Roumain's prime example of a poet whose work fails to respond to historical reality is Mallarmé's. He views poetry like Mallarmé's as expressing a "lunaticism for pure sound"; such poetry "evades reality" and ignores the lives of the "common people" (22). Roumain notices poetry like Mallarmé's garnering acclaim in the years leading up to World War II, a trend he attributes to the major historical transitions brought on by large-scale economic crisis, the threat of fascism, and

the violence of colonization. Here, a poem's difficulty or penchant for abstraction and conservative notions of poetry as a "high" or "transcendent" art are synthesized. At the end of "Is Poetry Dead?", Roumain calls for a poetry that is "a weapon as effective as a leaflet, a pamphlet, a poster" and that "fuse[s] class content" with "the beauty of the form" (23). Asserting that revolutionary content and "the beauty of the form" should be synthesized, Roumain's essay begs a familiar question: What form shall revolutionary poetry take? Following the prescriptions for poetry in Roumain's essay, this question might be answered in two ways. From a strictly formal perspective, Roumain seems to share with U.S. critics such as Mike Gold who believed that "art is a class weapon" and, as such, should be clear, concise, and accessible. However, by putting the contested concept of the poetic lyric at center, one might see how Roumain's work gestures toward a more complicated view of poetry's relationship to politics—one that moves beyond simple form-based arguments that pit transparency against obscurity.

In "Is Poetry Dead?" Roumain, like other radicals writing during the anti-fascist era, is attempting to imagine a new poetry able to represent and respond to major shifts in conceptions of geographic and temporal realities. Roumain's assertion that poetry should be a "weapon" recalls the prevailing belief among U.S. communists that art should be a weapon in the class struggle. While the phrase "art is a weapon" was popularized early in the 30s as the slogan of the John Reed Clubs, the figuration of poetry as a utilitarian weapon persisted well into the 40s. For example, in the introduction to the 1944 collection *Seven Poets in Search of an Answer*—which featured poems by Hughes as well as Maxwell Bodenheim, Joy Davidman, Aaron Kramer, Alfred Kreyborg, Martha Millet, and Norman Rosten—Shaemas O'Sheel describes how political poets answer to

the “agony” of a world ravaged by fascism by “resum[ing] the great tradition of poetry as a sword against evil” (n.p.). Roumain, too, was convinced that poetry could be an effective weapon in the fight against fascism and he was committed to discovering which forms would be most effective in that struggle.

My previous chapters have charted how a majority of Left writers believed that poetry was an effective weapon when it was clear and precise and thus accessible to the masses. These writers mined popular verse culture for the forms they felt would be most easily distributed and understood. Indeed, even O’Sheel closes the “Introductory Note” to *Seven Poets in Search of an Answer* by musing that poets might return to the “older days” when “people were often fired and welded by ballads sung on the streets and sold on penny broadsides,” and he calls for poets to come together to “survey the needs of this tremendous hour, map deliberate campaigns: books of high poetry; ballads celebrating our heroes and our cause; doggerel to take the hide off Hitlerites; lyrics for rousing popular songs” (n.p.). Turning away from the high modernist lyric in an effort to seek out the political possibilities for popular verse forms such as ballads and nursery rhymes was an integral part of Left discourses about poetry’s life and death: popular verse genres resonated with the common people and were thus “alive.”

Roumain’s writings seem to take these arguments about what constitutes a “living” or “dead” poetry a step further: suggesting that poetry must die *in toto* so that new conceptions of revolutionary community can be possible. However, in practice, creating an art form that conceptualizes and represents a new political reality is not as simple as “killing off” old forms and replacing them with new ones. The historical and political concerns Roumain delineates in his 1939 Harlem YMCA lecture and in “Is

Poetry Dead?” provide a means to see his fantasy of poetry’s death and rebirth in a different way. From the perspective of Roumain, previous accounts about what constitutes a “living” or “dead” poetry might come to be seen as overly positivistic, establishing the parameters for political poetry only by adding and labeling genres. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Carl Sandburg’s painstaking attempts to characterize *The People, Yes*, calling it everything from “a ballad pamphlet harangue sonata and fugue” to “a saga sonata fugue with deliberate haywire interludes and jigtime babblings” (Sandburg 310; 312). As a Marxist and a materialist, Roumain is less concerned with the battle between the obscure “dead” poetry and the accessible “living” poetry—or between “pure” poetry and “tendency” poetry—and more concerned with the conditions that give rise to both. Thus, Roumain deconstructs the idealization of poetry in a moment defined by mass warfare and socioeconomic crisis. And, as I will show, he attempts to reconstruct the poetic lyric so that it adequately represents the new internationalized political community. Recalling my arguments in this chapter’s first section, Roumain’s work reveals how the “immediately internationalized” reality caused by the war does not necessarily require changes in the forms of poetry; rather, this moment of historical crisis begs new methods for understanding poetry’s definition and its cultural work.

Here, it might be instructive to briefly pause and suggest how my arguments about Roumain and lyric fit into a broader critical conversation about the lyric’s relationship to notions of personhood and community. At the most basic level, Roumain’s writings challenge the conventional notion that the lyric subject speaks in an overheard solitude outside of the bounds of history and ideology. As he puts it in “Is Poetry Dead?”:

“Far from being an ‘*Urmensch*,’ as Valery claims, the poet is, I submit, before all a man of his time: the reflecting conscience of his period” (22). Or, in his essay “Poetry as a Weapon”: “...the poet is a contemporary being, the consciousness of his historical era. If his thought does not translate into action, the poet is not free” (*When the Tom-Tom Beats* 108). From the vantage point of contemporary poetry criticism, to insist on the sociability of the lyric speaker in this way is to belabor what has become a rather obvious point. In her recent *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading*, Virginia Jackson traces the process whereby multifarious poetic genres “collapsed” into the idealized lyric, and she reveals how “an idea of the lyric as ideally unmediated ... began to emerge and is still very much with us” (7). Importantly, Roumain’s inquiry into poetry’s fate—and his subsequent analysis of the present-day idealization of poetry—is happening at the same time as the historical process of idealizing and elevating the lyric that Jackson describes. In fact, Jackson cites a 1938 essay by Yvor Winters on Emily Dickinson as an instance of attempts to “plac[e] lyric itself in such an elevated position that it must be alienated from both ordinary poet and ordinary reader” (92).

Given the historical proximity between Roumain’s writings and New Critical writings in the vein of Winters, it is important to outline Roumain’s position on the ideological function of an “idealized” poetry in which an isolated subject purports to speak apart from historical situations and communities. As mentioned, in “Is Poetry Dead?” Roumain argues that an “idealistic construction” of poetry that “seeks refuge” in the fiction of “the freedom of the spirit” is one of the “ideological weapons of counter-revolution” (22). Roumain insists on exposing the function of this poetic ideology, which is tied to a capitalist system that has “debased intellectual production to the level of

merchandise, a grocery article” (22). Within the capitalist system, an “ideal of poetry”—indeed, a “lyric ideal”—presupposes that the individual is “free.” And yet, this very supposition covers over the fact that the individual is constructed by an oppressive socioeconomic system that serves only the interests of the “petty bourgeois” (“Is Poetry Dead?” 22). It would perhaps be too glib to suggest that Roumain is making Jackson’s own arguments from another angle: exposing the political and historical conditions that give rise to an idealization of lyric poetry. Nonetheless, Roumain’s writings add an important wrinkle to the history of the idealization of lyric poetry. Not only does Roumain help us to see how and why the lyric might have been idealized in the late 1930s and early 40s, he also exposes how the very notion of “personhood” or “individuality” on which ideas (or ideals) about the lyric were built were also in crisis. Christopher Nealon uncovers this as a significant concern for pre-World War II poetry via a discussion of W.H. Auden’s early-1940s poem “New Year Letter.” According to Nealon, one of the major questions governing Auden’s poem is “whether something like personhood can survive the twentieth century” (64). Roumain, too, is concerned with determining what twentieth-century personhood might look like. However, while Auden’s poem outlines the “rise of a new human type, the bourgeois” whose “very sense of personhood” has been shaped by the forces of the market (67-68), Roumain is decidedly less cynical. Putting pressure on the lyric from within, Roumain attempts to open up the possibility for a new revolutionary model of personhood—and thus a new model for revolutionary community.

The paradox of Roumain’s desire for a new community via a new poetry is that it is seemingly impossible to articulate that which has never been. However, Roumain puts

pressure on the limits of the lyric—he attempts to re-conceptualize it from within—in order to imagine a new model of revolutionary subjectivity. Roumain’s poetry evidences how this new model is forged in the context of the development of black internationalism, as he imagines new circuits of exchange between the U.S. and Haiti, Harlem and Dakar, and, ultimately, to borrow Hughes phrase, “Haiti and the universe.” In this way, Roumain’s poems demonstrate how the fantasy of an “ideal lyric” fails to acknowledge networks of global movement and the violence of historical change. At the same time, Roumain seems to be in the process of constructing his own ideal, one that might be created out of the radical historical transition he hopes for.

Roumain’s first steps toward imagining a new modality for the lyric subject can be discerned in his poems “Guinée” (“Guinea”), “Quand Bat Le Tam-Tam” (“When the Tom-Tom Beats”), and “Langston Hughes.” Carolyn Fowler points out that all three poems, which were published in 1931 issues of *Haiti Journal*, mark a shift in Roumain’s poetry, for they “reflect not the local but the universal black experience.” As opposed to the “tropicalism” of 1920s poems like “Midi,” “Après-Midi,” and “Miragône,” in these poems from the early 30s “the Haitian countryside no longer serves the ends of regional poetry but now becomes a link with universal blackness” (134). Yet, Fowler’s observation that Roumain’s artistic vision shifts its focus from “local” to “universal” experiences is at odds with Roumain’s own notion of the dialectical relation between the local and universal, whereby local particulars act as a means to apprehend the universal. In my readings, “Guinea,” “When the Tom-Tom Beats,” and especially “Langston Hughes” demonstrate Roumain’s early attempts to formulate new ways of being, even if he employs old forms. All three poems describe a transformation of self that takes place



through a journey to the past, where the speaker attempts to resuscitate the past and mobilize it in a new way.

Both “Guinea” and “When the Tom-Tom Beats” describe journeys that are at once spatial (journeying to an ancestral land) and temporal (returning to an ancestral past). In each, the subject making the journey is transformed through a connection to a new space and time. The grounds for this transformation take place through a process of self-reflection and alienation that is emphasized through the modality of the second-person address. As in Barbara Johnson’s conception of the figure of apostrophe, in “Guinea” and “When the Tom-Tom Beats” the “you” functions as an “‘I’ that has become alienated, distanced from itself, and combined with a generalized other” (189). This relationship between the “I” and the “you,” where the “I” is “simultaneously eclipsed, alienated, and confused with the addressee” (Johnson 189), is enacted in the images of self-reflection that provide the central metaphors for both of the poems.

“Guinea” describes a transformation of self through death. The poem begins: “It is the long road to Guinea / death takes you down.” The rest of the poem depicts this route as a long passageway through the forest that, in the end, opens up to a village by the water. The passage is made in the dark, where one hears “the sounds of the wind / in the long hair of eternal night” and “the streams rattle / like beads of bone.” This darkness, though marked by death rattles, has a soothing quality; it is, in a way, both comforting and liberating. At the end of the poem, the trees’ branches clear to reveal to the voyager the place and the community that is waiting for him: “There, there awaits you beside the water / a quiet village, and the hut of your father, / and the hard ancestral stone / where your head will rest at last.” The return to “the hut of your father” is also, in the last lines,

an image of death. In Hughes's version, at least, the "hard ancestral stone" where the addressee finally rests his head seems to be a gravestone. Because the poem is written in the second person, the speaker acts as a witness, but he is distanced from the action of the poem itself. Such critical distance provides, in a way, an opportunity for reflection. However, the poem is also very much about being witnessed or watched. In the poem, "no bright welcome" is made for the voyager, as he is watched and received by his surroundings:

It is the long road to Guinea  
where no bright welcome is made for you  
into the dark land of dark men:  
under a smoky sky pierced by the cries of birds,  
about the eye of the river  
the eyelashes of the trees open on decaying light.

"When the Tom-Tom Beats" similarly explores the theme of returning to an ancestral past or landscape; but instead of framing this return as a voyage already underway, it begins with a scene of anticipation in which the addressee is on the verge of moving. The poem begins with the act of reflection by describing how the would-be voyager's heart "trembles in the shadows / like a face reflected in troubled water." Then, as in "Guinea," the journey back begins in the dark when:

The old mirage rises from the pit of the night.  
You know the sweet sorcery of the past:  
a river carries you far away from the banks,  
Carries you toward the ancestral landscape.  
Listen to those voices: they sing the sadness of love.  
In the mountain, hear that tom-tom panting like the breast of a young black girl.  
Your soul is a reflection in the whispering water  
where your forefathers bent their obscure faces.

Here, the private journey or reflection of the soul is tied to collective acts of listening and seeing: to the voices singing, the tom-tom "panting," and the impressions the forefathers

made on the “whispering water.” In “When the Tom-Tom Beats” the journeyer moves back to the past so that he may look forward to the future. Moving back to the past, the subject of the poem is able to alter his vision of himself. After his soul’s “secret movement takes [him] into the darkness,” he is able to see his reflection in a new context—one that allows his white ancestry to be wiped away. The subject’s reflection changes in the poem’s last lines; as he moves further into the darkness, he sees that “the white that made you mulatto / is only a bit of foam thrown away, / like spit, on the face of the river.”

The trope of the lyric speaker seeking ancestral lands is an old model. However, in “Guinea” and “When the Tom-Tom Beats,” Roumain is attempting, at least on the level of content, to articulate the birth of a different type of subject vis-à-vis a reconnection to the deep past. Returning to the past, the subject of the poem is able to alter his future self, either through death (as in “Guinea”) or by wiping away “the white that made you mulatto” (as in “When the Tom-Tom Beats”). Similarly, Roumain’s 1931 poem “Langston Hughes,” while also conventional in its form, tells the story of a re-imagined subjectivity using the lyric mode. “Langston Hughes” attempts to imagine a nomadic subjectivity by describing a subject who is always wandering and who is thus constituted by his connections to multiple places and times.

In November 1931, Roumain wrote to Hughes that his tribute poem was “inspired by your existence, magnificent and adventurous in the very best sense of the word.”<sup>57</sup> “Langston Hughes” narrates the African-American poet’s adventures traveling from port to port: from Nigeria to France to Italy. In Roumain’s telling, Hughes seeks to connect to

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<sup>57</sup> Roumain’s original letter is written in French. Asynith Malecki assisted with translation.

each place by loving the women he meets there; yet, these attempts to connect ultimately seem superficial. The poem begins at Lagos where Hughes “knew those melancholy girls / They adorn their ankles with silver bracelets and offer / themselves naked / As the night ringed by the moon” (21). In Venice, seeking “the shade of Desdemona,” Hughes finds instead a woman name Paola. “You said to her: Amorossissima / And sometimes / Babe, Baby / Then she wept and claimed her twenty lira from you” (*When the Tom-Tom Beats* 21).

But “Langston Hughes” tells more than the story of a man without a country. It also attempts to imagine a black radical subject constituted by a complex global network. This subject is defined neither by his present country nor by his ancestral past, but by the relations between the two. Roumain’s attempt to demonstrate this constitution is apparent in the poem’s second stanza, which describes Hughes’s arrival in France:

You saw France without pronouncing historic words:  
*Lafayette, we are here*  
The Seine appeared less beautiful than the Congo (21)

The quotation “Lafayette, we are here” is a phrase commonly uttered by Americans upon arrival in France, and it is a reference to the aid France gave the American army during the U.S. war for independence. By not pronouncing those “historic words” Hughes eschews national belonging and refuses to give credence to U.S. legend. Instead, he is focused on the immediate present, where he finds the Seine “less beautiful than the Congo.” Hughes’s refusal to say, “Lafayette, we are here” demonstrates a break from fantasies about one’s self that are based on old models of national belonging, and his wandering begins to allow for new possibilities of self to take shape. This process might be understood in terms of Edouard Glissant’s notion of “errantry” or “errant thought,”

which “silently emerges from the destructuring of compact national entities that yesterday were still triumphant and, at the same time, from difficult, uncertain births of new forms of identity that call to us” (18). Casting off national identity, the fictional Hughes begins to assume a new—albeit uncertain—identity not by transplanting himself to another place or returning to an ancestral past, but by forming himself in the circuits between African, Europe, and the Americas.

Indeed, Roumain ultimately places Hughes in the circuits connecting “Harlem and Dakar.” He is never fixed to one place or another, but rather exists in the in-between. The poem ends:

Your nomad heart wandered  
like a Baedeker from Harlem to Dakar  
The sea bestowed a sweet, rasping rhythm to your songs, and  
its biting flowers opened in the salt spray.  
Now in this cabaret at sunrise you murmur:  
Play the blues for me  
O play the blues for me  
Do you dream of palm trees and negro paddlers singing down the dusk? (21)

It is the sea—a liminal space—that gives shape to Hughes’s person and his poetry; it “bestows a sweet rasping rhythm” to his songs. Moreover, the cabaret where the poem ends exists in two places at once: at dawn and at dusk, in the desire to hear the “blues” and in the “dream of palm trees and negro paddlers singing down the dusk.” Ultimately, the figure “Langston Hughes” is constituted by overlapping spaces and time and, in this way, he becomes unbounded by history. However, this release from historical narrative is not non-ideological in the same way that the conventional lyric pretends to be outside the bounds of history and ideology. Depicting Hughes as a nomadic subject made in the circuit between Harlem and Dakar, a cabaret and a dream of palm trees, “Langston Hughes” begins to reveal an existing international that the conventional lyric denies.

The stakes of Roumain's reworking of lyric subjectivity are heightened in his poems from the later 1930s and early 40s, especially his 1939 long poem "Bois d'ébène" ("Ebony Wood"), which is, coincidentally, dedicated to Francine Bradley. "Ebony Wood," like "Guinea" and "When the Tom-Tom Beats," opens at the start of a journey. But this journey is qualitatively different: it begins with a conditional if/then scenario and, rather than charting a return to the past, it is cast as an "abandonment" that leads out into the present. In the poem's "Prelude," Roumain writes:

If a sail of ruthless wings carries the island toward shipwrecks  
if the twilight drowns the torn flight of a last handkerchief  
and if the cry wounds the bird  
you will leave  
abandoning your village

[...]

Negro peddler of rebellion  
you know all the routes of the world  
since you were sold in Guinea  
a capsized light calls to you  
a ghostly canoe  
run aground on the soot of a suburban sky (*When the Tom-Tom Beats* 72-73)

Here, the "ghostly canoe" is stranded in a present marked by the violence of capitalism and industrialization. The sky is sooty and "factory chimneys" look like "decapitated palm trees with smoke-filled leaves" (73).

From within this industrialized landscape, Roumain attempts to discern the voice of a "black messenger of hope." The poem, written in the informal second person, seems to be addressed to this "messenger" who knows "all the songs of the world" (73). These songs have been, however, oppressed and silenced, as:

from the presshouse of foundries flows  
a wine of hatred a surge of shoulders a foam of cries  
it spills into alleys

ferments in silence  
in the slum cauldrons of riots (73).

Making this move toward silence, Roumain displaces the traditional lyric's expressive subject. The literal body of the poem (the subject that purports to speak) does not speak, nor is it animated, via the apostrophe—the calling out to the “you” who “know[s] all the songs of the world—by the voice of another. Instead, the historical body/bodies exist only in spaces of silence. Roumain sets up this displacement immediately following his description of factories and foundries; he writes: “Here for your voice is an echo of flesh and blood.” In this line, Roumain intimates that the machinery of capitalism replaces the “voice” of the “messenger of hope” with a mere echo of the violence (suggested by the image of “flesh and blood”) it has wrought. Similar images appear throughout the poem.

For example, Roumain later writes:

But I also know a silence  
a silence of twenty-five thousand negro corpses  
twenty-five thousand railroad ties of Ebony Wood

Under the iron rails of the Congo-Océan  
but I know  
the shrouds of silence in the cypress branches  
the petals of black bloodclots on the brambles  
in that woods where they lynched my brother of Georgia  
and, shepherd of Abyssinia,

what terror made you, shepherd of Abyssinia,  
this iron mask of silence

what vile dew turned your sheep into a marble flock  
in the pastures of death. (76-77)

Again, the bodies of peoples from across the black diaspora are relegated to a space of silence. This silence shrouds those who have been lynched in Jim-Crow Georgia as well as those who have endured the violence of colonization in Ethiopia.

Even in the face of these horrors, the first part of “Ebony Wood” ends with a gesture toward revolutionary hope:

Africa I kept your memory Africa  
you are in me

Like a splinter in a wound  
Like a guardian fetish in the village center  
make of me you catapult stone  
of my mouth the lips of your wound  
of my knees the broken columns of your abasement... (79)

The “memory of Africa” acts as a “splinter in the wound” and the wound, itself, becomes the space out of which the poet asks to speak when he requests that his mouth be formed from “the lips of your wound.” Importantly, the poet does not attempt to suture this wound. Instead, by leaving the wound open—turning it into the mouth of the poet—Roumain suggests a different, and ultimately more radical, possibility. Leaving the crisis or interruption caused by historical violence open, he posits a model of history that (not unlike his fantasy of poetry’s death) is based on discontinuity and disruption. This moment of crisis or disruption effects a space where a new mode of revolutionary being might be possible. Such a possibility hinges on the “BUT” that signals the turn in “Ebony Wood” from a subjectivity based in the “memory of Africa” to one that is also based in “workers peasants of all countries” (79).

Roumain begins to articulate this possibility by listing those persons/populations that will be united in the fight against oppressive regimes. Coming together allows these persons to “trample down the ruins of our solitude” and, it would seem, the poem also breaks the bounds of lyric solitude. He writes:

Red Guard of China Soviet citizen German worker  
of Moabite prison Indian of the Americas  
we will rebuild



Copan  
Palenque  
and, socialists of Tiahuanaco,  
white worker of Detroit black sharecropper of Alabama  
countless multitudes of capitalist galleys  
desiny unites us shoulder to shoulder  
and repudiating the ancient malefice of blood taboos  
we trample down the ruins of our solitude (81)

In the previous chapter, I argued that the format of Hughes's poem "Wait" works to employ the lyric mode at the same time that it destabilizes the position of the unitary lyric subject, creating a subject that simultaneously represents universal human struggles and acknowledges historical and social contingencies. Using Jameson's notion of "cognitive mapping," I articulated the ways in which Hughes's poem tries to re-conceptualize the position of a self in space in order to reach a new level of revolutionary and utopian thought. In a similar manner, Roumain's poem critiques an expressivist model that would trace the subject's experiences (or, in Jameson's terms, its "subjective life") to a singular and confined space and time.

However, "Ebony Wood" ends on a different note than many of the poems I've discussed throughout. In Chapter 2's example of "The People, Yes" and in Chapter 3's example of "Wait," I suggested that revolutionary poets might be attempting to cast off the lyric in order to imagine a new multitude of the people. Roumain's poem, however, ends with a distinctly singular body: the image of a face. After describing how revolutionary forces will tear down borders and "reassemble our forces divided," he writes:

As the contradiction of features  
is resolved in the harmony of the face  
so we proclaim the unity of suffering  
and of revolt  
of all the peoples on the surface of the earth (83)

In these final lines, the multitude is “harmonized” to form a singular body that at once contains contradictions and “proclaim[s] the unity of suffering.” This one body is not—in content or in form—the “shipwreck of the singular” that radical poet George Oppen would write of in his later poem *Of Being Numerous*. It is, rather, a reinvention of subjectivity on revolutionary grounds. Describing the process of “reassembling” those “forces” that have been “divided” by economic and imperial violence, Roumain also describes the process by which a new revolutionary subjectivity might be formed. The poetic voice that speaks forth has also been formed and re-formed via this process, creating new possibilities for what poetry can mean and do out of the wounds of history.

### **In Jacques Roumain’s Wake**

Jacques Roumain died in Haiti on August 18, 1944, at the age of 37. In his biography of Langston Hughes, Arnold Rampersad recounts how “various chilling reports of his [Roumain’s] funeral during a tremendous downpour in Port-au-Prince” reached Hughes in New York (106). Hughes had maintained a friendship with Roumain since meeting him in Haiti in 1931: keeping a periodic correspondence, translating his poems into English, and writing on his behalf while he was in prison. After Roumain’s death, at Nicole Roumain’s request, Hughes translated his peasant novel *Gouverneurs de la Rosée* (*Masters of the Dew*) into English. “Jacques always thought you were the only one capable of this work, I’d say of adaption from one language to another,” Nicole wrote Hughes in May 1945, and she went on to tell him how pleased she was to hear the news that he had agreed to finish the translation: “You cannot imagine with what great feeling and what pride I received the news: the dream that Jacques had in Mexico upon

completing his novel, to see it translated in English and introduced to the public by Langston, is becoming a reality.”<sup>58</sup> Nicole’s letter evidences the deep respect the two poets continued to feel for one another as well as the perceived importance of introducing Roumain’s works to an English-speaking audience.

After Roumain’s death, Hughes also “finally replied” to the tribute poem “Langston Hughes” with his elegy “A Poem for Jacques Roumain (Late People’s Poet of Haiti)” (Rampersad 106). African-American actor Canada Lee read the poem at a memorial for Roumain organized by the Association Democratique Hatienne, where CPUSA leader Earl Browder also spoke, and the poem was published in an October 1945 issue of *New Masses* (Rampersad 106). These contexts for the circulation of Hughes’s elegy reiterate Roumain’s importance for African-American artists and Left cultural workers. But, even more so, a close reading of the poem further suggests the difficulty of realizing Roumain’s vision for a new poetry and a new revolutionary community, especially at the start of the Cold War. As Rampersad notes, Hughes’s reply to Roumain asks “a troubling question, fraught with self-reference, of the former Haitian aristocrat turned revolutionary” (106). This is the question on which the poem turns: “When did you learn to say / Without fear or shame / *Je suis communiste?*” (25). In many ways, for Hughes, the declaration “*Je suis communiste?*”—which also marks Roumain’s turn away from his bourgeois upbringing—did not “amount to much”:

None amounted to much,  
Though, did it?  
When did you realize that?

I can’t answer for you,  
And you are gone.

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<sup>58</sup> N. Roumain’s original letter is written in French. Asynith Malecki assisted with translation.

You are gone—  
Have gone—  
Are gone—  
You've gone.  
Where?  
If I knew  
I'd be a celestial  
Houdini. (25)

In this section of the poem, Hughes resists the conventional function of many elegies, which use the apostrophic address to re-animate the dead. Hughes is unable to “answer for” the dead poet; moreover, he painstakingly emphasizes that Roumain has been lost through the repetition on the phrase “you are gone.” Poetry, itself, has no power here. The poet is no mystic, or, in Hughes’s slightly sardonic moniker, no “celestial Houdini.”

The significance of Hughes’s poem’s opening questions for the dead Roumain might be further understood in light of a line that was to be added to an earlier draft of the elegy but that was left out of the final version: “When did you learn / That nobody is anywhere / When the least is left behind?” (“Draft”). These penciled-in lines might be read in two ways. The phrase “nobody is anywhere” could be read to mean that “nobody exists” or “nobody has the grounds for personhood” when others are left behind. In this reading, Hughes’s poem might be seen to attempt to establish a new ground for political existence and belonging by forging, with those who are “left behind” by the existing social order, a revolutionary community on the margins. But “nobody is anywhere” could also be read to mean that “no one progresses” or “no one goes anywhere” when “the least is left behind.” In this reading, the poem seems to slip into an easy liberal pluralism, where those who are “left behind” seek recognition and inclusion within the democratic capitalist system.

The tension between these two political perspectives is evident in the second half of “A Poem for Jacques Roumain,” where Hughes, after again emphasizing that Roumain is “gone,” declares:

But you are still here  
From the point of my pen in New York  
To the toes of the blackest peasant  
In the *morne*,  
Because you found out  
What it is all about. (25)

With these lines, Hughes resurrects the dead poet by declaring that he is “still here.” But while Roumain’s connection to “the point” of Hughes’s “pen in New York” and “the toes of the blackest peasant” suggest the sweep of his influence and his vision, there is a way in which Hughes’s ultimate portrayal of Roumain is in tension with Roumain’s own vision of the coming revolutionary community. The poem ends:

Always  
You will be  
Man  
Finding out about  
The ever bigger world  
Before him.  
Always you will be  
Frontiersman,  
Pathfinder  
Breaker down of  
Barriers,  
Hand that links  
Erzulie to the Pope,  
Damballs to Lenin,  
Haiti to the universe,  
Bread and fish  
To fisherman  
To man  
To me.

Strange  
About eternity  
Eternal

To the free. (25)

By portraying Roumain as a “Hand that links” disparate times, people, and places, Hughes’s elegy shares in Roumain’s vision of a revolutionary community that is constituted by global networks and that, to use Hughes’s language, “breaks down barriers.” However, the elegy’s act of labeling Roumain a “Frontiersman” undercuts this vision. While “Frontiersman” connotes the act of exploring uncharted territory, it also, especially in the U.S. context, connotes a colonialist project of moving into other peoples’ lands. In many ways, Hughes’s tribute ends on an ambivalent note, for it suggests Roumain’s revolutionary project at the same time that it fairly drips with the rhetoric of U.S. democracy. Even the final lines are somewhat at odds with Roumain’s notion of what a radical poet might be or do: intimating that a poet who insisted that “a rather good definition of ‘writer’ should be that essentially he is not free, that thoughts are so deeply determined by history, that they have no real value if they do not reflect and express the dialectic pulsation of life” (“Speech of Jacques Roumain” 8) is, above all else, “free.”

## EPILOGUE

### Hart Crane's Skull

*'You remember that old town we went to, and we sat in the ruined window, and we tried to imagine that we belonged to those times—It is dead and it is not dead, and you cannot imagine either its life or its death; the earth speaks and the salamander speaks, the Spring comes and only obscures it—'*  
—George Oppen, *from Of Being Numerous (1968)*

It is not surprising that, in the midst of our current “Great Recession,” the scholarly gaze would start to turn to a prior moment of financial panic. Paula Rabinowitz argues in a recent *American Literary History* essay that, even if the “iconography of the Great Depression is insufficient for our current ‘Great Recession’ ... it must still be reckoned with if we are to comprehend fully what depression means to working-class aesthetics” (“Between the Outhouse and the Garbage Dump” 32). So far, however, efforts to tease out the nexus between literary culture and the realities of economic downturn have mostly fallen under the broader rubrics of “Depressions” or “Economics, Finance, Capital, and Literature”—to name recent special sections within two major literary journals.<sup>59</sup> *Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America* speaks to broader questions about how poetic forms and movements have been shaped by the realities of depressions (or recessions), revealing the complex ways poetic genres are conceptualized in relation to moments of socioeconomic crisis. It attempts to give one of the most thorough examinations of how the “big idea” of poetry was defined during late

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<sup>59</sup> See the symposium on “Depressions” in the Spring 2011 issue of *American Literary History* and the “Theories and Methodologies” section on “Economics, Finance, Capital, and Literature” in the January 2012 issue of *PMLA*.

modernism and in the context of Depression-era political cultures. But my dissertation is not merely about poetry's role in financial hard times. The Great Depression—and the consequent emergence of the Communist and Popular Front Left—acts as a historical flashpoint for examining the relationship between poetry and politics. It parses the complicated ways poetry reflects and attempts to intervene in modern socio-political realities.

As Joshua Clover asserts in the pages of a recent *PMLA*, “[m]uch recent thought in the humanities has been devoted to understanding the contours and character of the global economic collapse approaching its fifth year” (“*Value/Theory/Crisis*” 107). Perhaps the most salient example of the intersection between this new interest in “the contours and character” of “economic collapse” and the realm of poetry is Christopher Nealon’s 2011 *The Matter of Capital: Poetry and Crisis in the American Century*. Surveying a wide range of work, Nealon considers how twentieth- and twenty-first century North American poets “attempt to understand the relationship between poetry and capitalism, most often worked out as an attempt to understand the relationship of texts to historical crisis” (30). Such an exploration is, according to him, unprecedented in twentieth-century poetry studies, a field in which “key critics of American poetry of the last twenty years have chosen not to write about the relation of that poetry to capitalism” and in which “the French and German critical traditions most widely referred to in the United States have encouraged ways of thinking about that relation that tend to imply that poetic writing is *prima facie* political, or that the only significant relation between a poem and capitalism is rigorous eschewal” (19). For Nealon, the major breakthroughs in poetry criticism during the 1970s and 1980s were conditioned by “the crises and triumphs of



global capitalism from about 1973 on” (4). The critics responsible for this turn in poetry studies (Nealon singles out Marjorie Perloff and Charles Altieri) leave out “the history of the century” that produced their ideas about poetry (4).

As my chapters have shown, the poetry of the interwar period, itself produced by the perceived failures of capitalism, is a crucial part of this forgotten history. But where Nealon is concerned with convincing his “friends on the academic and poetic left that it is not only the poetics of witness and documentation, or movement poetics, that are worrying over the destiny that capitalism is facing us toward,” my dissertation argues for the importance of writers that actively pushed an anti-capitalist agenda. In contrast to the poets Nealon analyzes, whose work articulates the relationship of the self and of social life to phases of capitalism, 1930s Left writers attempted to define subjectivity and community as a triumph against capitalism. However, my approach toward such obviously committed writing does not entail a blind championing of its political agendas. While I am interested primarily in radical poetics and critiques, I take seriously Walter Benjamin’s statement in “Theses on the Philosophy of History” that, “[o]nly that historian will have the gift of fanning the spark of hope in the past who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins” (*Illuminations* 255). I see my dissertation’s historical work as unhinging poetry from the various ideological positions—on both the Right and the Left—that attempt to determine what it is and does, thus revealing the historical and political foundations for these definitions and claims. And yet, I view such historical work as having a political agenda in itself.

This demands attention to methodological questions. Returning to the 1930s, my project excavates and fills out part of a forgotten history of U.S. poetry. At the same time,

it establishes a new trajectory for understanding the relations between art and socio-political realities across the century. When, in 1934 Walter Lowenfels contemplated Hart Crane's death in his elegy, "The Suicide," it is as if he knew another might try to return to that moment and place. Perhaps in search of Crane's skull which, as I wrote in the introduction, was buried at the bottom of the sea and filled with "ancient death." Near the end of "The Suicide," Lowenfels writes:

So his acts of revelation  
are like an ocean in an empty shell,  
and his religions  
oil in a wound  
we are bound to tear open;  
    but to fail  
allows the moment that discloses  
what it is that moves  
among the rising to no end.

In the first pages of this manuscript, I suggested that the figure of Crane's skull, buried at the bottom of the sea, signified the death of one age and the beginning of another. Perhaps we could see it another way. Crane's death brought to crisis major shifts in the political and poetic landscape that were already underway. In its own small way, it pushed U.S. artists toward a re-conceptualization of the relationship between these two planes.

In order to get underneath the contours of a seemingly ontological metaphor like the "death of poetry" one must think differently about the literary history of the twentieth-century, understanding it not simply as a slow march of events but as a progression that, in Guyatri Spivak's terms, is marked by "discontinuous interruptions," whereby each interruption is related to the whole of the century in a more complex way than just a diachronic narrative. Lowenfels implies that the poet's "religions" might offer

a salve for what Spivak, writing of historical progression, calls “a repeated tearing of time that cannot be sutured” (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 208). But Lowenfels’s elegy claims that the wounds “are bound to tear open.” The critic’s task, then, is to cut back through again, to keep open (to keep alive?) the radical possibilities that inhere in a disruptive opening. Crane’s death is symptomatic of broader historical ruptures. The discourse around it and similar events provides a means to investigate such crises and transitions—to, in a phrase, open the wounds again.

In recent years, under the banner of “historical poetics,” poetry scholars have contextualized received ideas about poetry, and, in so doing, they have uncovered the specific ways that poetic genres—and the very idea of what constitutes a poem—were produced at particular moments and for particular reading publics.<sup>60</sup> Perhaps the most prominent example is Virginia Jackson’s *Dickinson’s Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (2005). Through the example of Emily Dickinson, Jackson charts the history of what she calls “lyricization”—that is, the tendency to read all poems as lyrics. Exposing this critical tendency, she then uncovers specific social contexts for poetry’s production and circulation that controvert the lyric’s claims to privacy and historical transcendence. In his *Being Numerous: Poetry and the Ground of Social Life* (2011), Oren Izenberg calls into question Jackson’s study as well as the methods of historical poetics, arguing that they are too limited in their assumptions about “what counts as context” and would “benefit” from “a more capacious view of what constitutes a moment” (33). However, Izenberg’s own project—to understand how “‘poetry’ names an ontological project: a

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<sup>60</sup> In addition to Jackson’s *Dickinson’s Misery*, see also Max Cavitch, *American Elegy: The Poetry of Mourning from the Puritans to Whitman* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006) and Meredith Martin, *The Rise and Fall of Meter: Poetry and English National Culture, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2012). For a concise overview of the project of historical poetics, see Yopie Prins, “Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and the Science of English Verse,” in *PMLA* 123.1 (January 2008): 229-234.

civilizational wish to reground the concept and value of *the person*—belies his claim that his own work does not participate in “critical fantasies” about poetry (1; 33). Indeed, George Oppen’s meditation on what it is to choose “the meaning / of being numerous” is often invoked in studies of U.S. poetry, but with limited consideration of the historical and political conditions that determine ideas about selfhood—and, for that matter, ideals about plurality and community on which notions of selfhood rest.

What Izenberg seems to believe—but not say exactly—is that historical poetics leans too heavily on positivist historicism, relying on, as he puts it in his summation of contemporary historicist practice:

the elaboration of ever-more-finely differentiated micro-histories of literary genres and functions; it involves situating literary work within richly articulated networks of symbolic and discursive practices; it demands close-up description of the material form of the literary artifact and an aerial charting of the channels of production, circulation, and reception. (32)

In suggesting that the critic forgo meticulous historicism in favor of “a more capacious view of what constitutes a moment” (read: poetry’s participation in the development of philosophical ideas like personhood), Izenberg levels his criticism from the wrong angle. Pitting history against philosophy in the quest to understand *poetry*, he leaves behind a potentially more fruitful consideration of what constitutes history and historical practice. In other words, he doesn’t push the question of what “historical” means within the moniker “historical poetics.”

Though he doesn’t quite carry it out, Izenberg seems to be attacking historical poetics as a mode of New Historicism, where “literature” or “poetry” remain stable categories despite new insights about the historical contexts conditioning their production and circulation. It is in this way that Izenberg is misguided. The work of historical poetics

has been, at least in part, to reveal how poetry means different things at different times and in different places. My study of 1930s Left poetry certainly participates in this ongoing project. It details the political and historical circumstances that condition the production and reception of poetic genres, and it charts an idealization of poetry as well as the ways in which poetry was abstracted to serve particular functions for particular political communities.

But my work on Depression-era radical poetry might also push contemporary critics to move beyond a focus on the history of poetry's idealization and its subsequent scholarly de-idealization. Rather than merely historicize the peculiar ways that poetry and poetic genres were conceptualized and used within specific historical reading communities, "Red or Dead: States of Poetry in Depression America" attempts to expand our notion of how poetry constitutes communities that once existed as well as those that are yet to be imagined or formed. The trope of poetry's death indicates how a crisis in genre is coupled with historical change. During such a moment of transition, there is a brief moment in which poetry, itself, does not exist in a conceptual form, as its meanings and uses are still being worked out. The conceptual framework of historical poetics may not fully account for these gaps in the historical landscape, where ideas about poetry and community are dialectically changing. That is, while the project of historical poetics usefully demonstrates how our understandings of poetry are constituted by historical change, they do not necessarily illuminate how the two are mutually constitutive of each other. Returning to Spivak, I show how poetry might have attempted to suture a rupture, or interruption, caused by a moment of political and economic crisis. Here, Michael Davidson's terms might be instructive: he suggests that there has been "a tendency on the

part of cultural critics to treat poetry as a symptom rather than a practice, cultural capital rather than cultural production” (*On the Outskirts of Form* 281).

The underside of metaphors of poetry’s death and rebirth, its mortality and immortality, is the realization of a corpse. Indeed, if, as Walter Kalaidjian asserts, the “wears and tears of postmodernism” have acted to “repress, deny, and normalize the extreme experiences of total war and industrial mass murder,” then it is crucial to investigate the underside of any literary slogan that takes death as a central metaphor (15). The political crises of the 1930s—the aftermath of the First World War and the beginning of the Second, economic Depression, the rise of fascism in Europe—fundamentally changes the consequences for employing the metaphors of life and death. Part of understanding the death of poetry involves a consideration of this aspect of the metaphor. In the foregoing pages, I’ve only touched upon the ways in which new forms of political violence also challenged poets to conceive of new forms and methods of representation that would respond to the horrors of the twentieth century. I’ve left out, for example, poets like Oppen who, as Davidson explains, “stopped writing” as a response against the “more instrumental idea of poetry as a weapon of revolutionary struggle” (*On the Outskirts of Form* 282).

As much as the 1930s was a time of hope, it also became, from the vantage point of the unprecedented damages of World War II, a time of despair. It is from this position that I might look back on my project. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s arguments in their 1944 *Dialectic of Enlightenment* are based on the overwhelming sense that, during the 1930s and 40s, “public life has reached a state in which thought is being turned inescapably into a commodity and language into celebration of the commodity” (xv).

Looking back over the horrors of the Second World War and the rise of the mass culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno view the 1930s not with a sense of optimism (of “good news”), but with a sense of despair. They grasp for language to describe significant changes in social life and intellectual production: “No terms are available which do not tend toward complicity with the prevailing intellectual trends,” they write, “and what threadbare language cannot achieve on its own is precisely made good by the social machinery” (xv). Perhaps one could see poetry as that “threadbare language” that is doomed to be dissolved into the new social system, closing the vault on a moment that might have disclosed unknown revolutionary possibilities.

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