

The Expanded Object of the Poetic Field; Or, What is a Poet/Critic?

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If it be granted that the “subject matter” of poetry is in a broad sense the moral realm, human actions as good or bad, with all their associated feelings, all the thought and imagination that goes with happiness and suffering ... then the rhetorical structure of the concrete universal, the complexity and unity of the poem, is also its sophistication or richness or depth, and hence its value.

—W. K. Wimsatt, “The Concrete Universal”¹ (82)

Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the “subject” and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For a man is himself an object, whatever he may take to be his advantages.

—Charles Olson, ‘Projective Verse’²

This essay, as many I have written, performs a kind of ‘thought experiment’ in poetics. Its goal is to show how, in a series of discrete stages, the poem as ‘object’ in my work expands in terms of form, genre, and media. The poem as object thus expanded in its construction is a public act, toward wider horizons of meaning. I base this account of my work on a larger periodizing claim: that cultural production (art, literature, media) in the postmodern period (from the end of the Second World War but especially from the 1970s on) underwent a series of structural changes that led to expanded modes of address. The postmodern is the necessary break from the autonomy of the modernist work, and I thus contrast my position with recent efforts in UK criticism to link current forms of experimental writing with high modernism, even as the term ‘modernism’ has varying histories at its different sites.³ The obdurate materiality of experimental writing can no longer be simply a question of hermeticism or restricted meanings: what was intended all along, my thought experiment suggests, was a breaking of the bounds of autonomous art toward larger political and cultural goals, including the transformation of the postmodern subject, seen as refunctioned through the act of writing. Poetics is subjectivation: this

is an even more fundamental claim than the historicist one. New forms of art find their imperative in undoing, renegotiating, expanding, and mediating the experiential, postmodern subject. This relation between the historical ground of production and subjectivation of the poetic (or aesthetic or cultural) object is also a reflexive one, but not in the earlier modernist form of reflexivity that finds its stable mode of production in the autonomous object.⁴

I am connecting as well the critical agency of the poem as object in its expanded form with a new account of the possibility of the 'poet/critic.' In an earlier essay, I tried to delineate a field of possibility for new genres of art based on the productivity of writing in poetics;⁵ I want here to bring expanded fields of meaning into the form of the work itself, to show how the intentional and reflexive act of the poet/critic is entailed in formal construction. For the poet/critic both kinds of writing are primary; neither aesthetic work nor poetic discourse is supplementary to the other. Poetry and poetics thus form a dyad in which questions of a greater comprehension and agency are expanded toward new meanings. Art as a form of pleasure and knowledge includes art as critical reflexivity and social agency. In taking up the formation of the poet/critic through the expanded field of the object, I am advocating a method whose horizon is socially comprehensive, both in and as aesthetic possibility. If the separate vocations of poet and critic are constrained by limitations on their reception, the poet/critic necessarily is a mediation of those limits in the act of transforming them. By short-circuiting the priority of either poet or critic, the poet/critic refuses autonomous pleasure or normative valorization as limits on his or her agency. I want to approach this possibility, not through discourses of legitimation or their limits, but through mediations of the object that make a dual form of authorship possible.

Refunctioning the Object

If I were to write a *Biographia Literaria* where life begins only on entry into the field of the poem, I would begin by charting a faultline between two contrasting imperatives of the poem as 'object' in modernist and

postmodern poetics—unfolded in terms of its means of production, kinds of representation, and manner of use. In the two epigraphs above, such a faultline exists between the poem seen as a normative mediation between presumed universals and subsumed particulars, with Wimsatt, and the poem as an agonistic, unfolding, open field of entities that are simultaneously objective and subjective, for Olson. These were the competing paradigms of American poetry when I entered it, visible in the evident gap between Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's anthology *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and Donald Allen's *The New American Poetry* (1960). The poem as object in Hall, Pack, and Simpson's collection of thematically overdetermined, technically redundant, and emotionally policed versification had all the authority of institutional discipline: it was the poem as taught in universities, reproduced as a normative procedure. Oppositely, the poetry in Allen's anthology made no practical distinction between object and subject, opening the poem to fields of meaning making that were not determined by such normative protocols and could not be guaranteed. Even so, the aims of this poetry, in the construction of that anthology, were representable as unified in a manner that could found a wider field of meaning—a moment of social reflexivity and discursive construction in a poetics that refused 'object status.' Nothing less than a social movement with countercultural aims led to that possibility.

It is the reflexive relation between the poem as object and poetics as a field of meaning that I want to investigate in my genealogy of the poet/critic. One may recall that the poem as concrete universal—the regulative norm of the poem as object that reproduces an interpellative scene, the scene of literary instruction as moral education—emerged with the figure of the modernist poet/critic, from Eliot to the Fugitives and many minor figures.⁶ The poet/critic authorizes that the poem as concrete universal has value, in two senses: it is a species of the genus *literature*, thus universal, and it is specifically interpretable, derived from and applied to specific human situations. The poet/critic brings both halves of the universal/particular dyad together in [his] authorizing agency, in two senses: as author of the specific work and as conveyor of its general meaning. The poet/critic is thus in a split and/or antagonistic

role toward the shared object, the poem: what the poet insists on as the necessary value of individual uniqueness, the critic valorizes. All this gets us only so far as the 'sclerotic Hegelianism' I have complained of in conventional accounts of the avant-garde, until one sees the 'object' in a psychoanalytic sense.⁷ Here, the discrepant demands of individuation intersect with their legitimation: an abstract but efficient thumbnail for the Oedipal triangle, with the poem as object gendered feminine in relation to the transgressive/punitive dyad of the male subject position.

Some of this struggle is visible in the classical origins of the 'concrete universal' after Goethe (a more direct lineage than the combination of second-hand Hegelianism and English romanticism that informs the New Critics). For Goethe, the concrete universal solves the problem of 'inner form' in poetry so that it is not just a matter of subjective inspiration: 'The poet should seize the particular [das Besondere], and he will, if it is something wholesome [etwas Gesundes], make it general [ein Allgemeines darstellen].'⁸ Goethe's distinction between symbol and allegory depends on the substance of the concretization of this wholesome particularity such that it is 'a living momentary revelation of the inscrutable' (a formulation that precedes the current Baudelairean touchstone of the 'transitory and eternal' and thus clarifies the early use of 'symbolism' for what we now know as 'modernism').⁹ It is the productivity of this concretized subjectivity, such that 'the idea remains always active and unapproachable in the image, and will remain inexpressible even though expressed in all languages,' that suggests the poem has become an object in the psychoanalytic sense, with the poet daring to know and present a direct relation to this living body (*Darstellung*) and the critic regulating its access and use.¹⁰ If one route out of this dynamic, unstable crux of subject and object has been a regulative formal ideal, another, via the Kristevan account of the avant-garde, sees the poem's body as irreducibly textual and material, and not subject to the containment of a formal ideal (thus, in a shorthand that depends on vast corroborating detail, the 'turn to language').¹¹

Having lost its connection to the 'body' cathected into the concrete universal, Wimsatt's orthopedic adjustment of the poem's content and

form as touchstone of value reveals either its Oedipal origins (if the 'body' of the poem is living, gendered, or sexual) or parthenogenesis (as ideal effusion of intellectual history) as illicit consort/offspring of the poet/critic. Not wishing to strain analogies by exactness, I want simply to characterize the New Critical poem as either incestuous union or monstrous birth—in either case, a difficult moral example. The New Critical formal ideal is in any case hardly regulative; rather, it installs an unstable object as the center of attraction in the scene of instruction: Slavoj Žižek's 'antagonistic kernel' as hard core of desire in English 101.¹² Something of the convulsive rejection of 'close reading' that occurred from the 1960s on, and which led directly to the turn to theory of the 1970s, may be seen to begin here: with the transgressive excess not organized in an 'object' but legitimized by 'authority' that was left over from the regulative norm of the lyric poem as inculcated in teaching. Semeiosis, *différance*, and subjectivation appeared forthwith to channel this excess, into either the play of signification or discursive regulation. In bracketing that literary history, I want to return to the primal scene of the modern lyric for its phantasmatic potential, in which the poem is a miscreant or prohibited object and the critic the fraudulent double of the poet. Imagine the psychic fantasies condensed in the object that would soon come undone with the reaction to 'close reading' in circumstances no longer subject to its institutional rule. This is precisely what occurred in the 1970s, with the theoretical and historicist rejection of autonomous form. Theory and history took over the disposition of illegitimate excess, the claim of the Lacanian/Žižekian 'obscene father' to reproduce himself in poetic form.

If I am, in this thought experiment, a poet/critic, albeit in an expanded, nontraditional sense, I am free to argue both through discourse and by example. I want to juxtapose, then, the paragraphs of framing narrative I have roughed out with an argument via example in the form of a hybrid lyric I wrote about 1978 and published in 1–10 (1980):

Conviction fills the body
The presence of dead souls
flute-like at the base of the ear.

A particle enters the soundings
suddenly open, a door
separating bright from careless
patterning, forcing a language
memory designs from sleep.
The body is more primitive
attached to the ground.
A frame lights up horizons
to lead forward, larger than life.¹³

The shortest of the five poems in 1–10 (alternating with five prose poems and framed by lyric introduction and coda), the poem presents the effective history of its construction as meditation on lyric form. Its language was sampled and adapted, for the most part, from Lee Harwood's stellar translation of Tristan Tzara, issued by Trigram Press in 1975 (an act of literary borrowing or outright theft I have always avowed and never regretted).¹⁴ Materials for the poem were thus obtained by illicit means, and organized in the form of the work by arbitrary ones. I was thinking, for reasons I cannot now recall, of four stanzas of thirteen lines each, for a total of fifty-two lines, as in a standard deck of cards (but it appears I wrote, in fact, four stanzas of twelve lines each, for forty-eight lines). Intention, like the logic of a dream, is subject here to condensation and displacement, and I am left only with the work's surface language to reattach to its deeper elements, such that they exist. The stanzas are imagined to present the form of an argument by example, of the kind that seemed to connect non sequiturs in the dream but whose connections disappear forever. The poem was intended to be a dream of poetry explaining itself through its own emergence as form, as only the poem it is—we begin to see a hint of an Oedipal moment. Something of oedipality's inability to explain its own desire, yet its guilty insistence that it can do so, is conveyed by the interrupted chain of inference in the syntax of the poem. A particularly metalinguistic crux shows how this logic of parallel production works:

Two eyes blinking through a door.
The missing head must be seen whole
where one word leads

clouds to accident of end.
The machine never tires.
Edges of stations start to come in. (Lines 31–36)

The imperative to visualize an impossible scene of castration or decapitation—to see the head as both missing and whole—leads to a logic by which any one word can engender the overall argument. ‘Clouds’ then are both occasions in the world and the words themselves; their coincidence as a mere accident (of the sexual or fatal kind) is goal-oriented. History might be arbitrary and produced automatically by an ‘evil genius’ or automaton; high postmodern subjectivity, with its desiring machines and pastiche, is soon to arrive. Automatism, however, provides a possibility for meaning, as search engines or station scans locate at least a channel of transmission. Thematically, what is worked up through the poem’s broken language as ‘edges of stations start to come in’ (a reference to Cocteau’s Orpheus turning the dials of his car radio, the moment immediately prior to lyric transmission of the ‘outside’ that so inspired Jack Spicer) thus departs from oxymoronic anxiety in ‘the missing head must be seen whole’ to produce the next stanza’s anxiously triumphalist assertion: ‘The head of a king’s son / multiplies at crossroads.’ Oedipality branches out in multiplication and excess as it destabilizes the poem’s concrete universal. Avant-garde non sequiturs like Yves Klein’s burned sponges, Marcel Duchamp’s missing head seen through the crack in ‘1. Given the waterfall,’ and Tzara’s ‘night for the blind’ are refunctionalized in the poetic form of communication. The avant-garde poet can explain the moment of his birth in a form of particularity available anywhere—‘the best descendent / were bred / in shallow waste’—a presentation of contingent particulars that would be a provisional solution to the crux of desire and descent as a moment of legitimation.¹⁵

It is important to note that what I just performed here is illicit—I read my own poem. There is no shortage of people who have commented, often very negatively, about the impropriety of doing this. The chair of my department, for instance, was reportedly undone by the appearance on page 267 of *The Constructivist Moment* of a ‘head of a king’s son’—my own, drawn about age 5, about the time when my father was stationed

on a destroyer and in Japan during the Korean War. My own private *anamorphosis* is the crux of my chapter on negativity; it is so motivated as a moment of ellipsis as to risk self-canceling. The difficulty it presents as a violation of standard academic protocol should be obvious.¹⁶ The concrete universal invoked by my drawing is a figure of the purely private, which I use to criticize the containment of poetic form and to create a transgressive scene of reading. Poet and critic converge in the practice of an illicit object, which in the example of 'Radio' produces out of thin air the condition of possibility of statement it authorizes (as itself, as a transgressive act), a horizon of meaning read out of the object as primal scene. 'Wo es war, soll Ich werden' (Where it was, so I will be): 'Radio' is an essay on the reproduction of the psychic economy of the lyric, through its displacement in the radical particulars of the avant-garde, which I re-present as an object under construction. There are three entailments of this scene of instruction: first, there is a necessarily unstable relationship between particular and universal in the lyric poem, due to a psychic economy that cannot produce content and confirm meaning simultaneously without violent transgression. Second, such instability of the lyric is not a site for any form of 'unity' but functions as a scene of its reproduction in another (a.k.a. the reader) and is thus social. Third, the dissociation of the language of the poem from its formal reproduction (of the objects organized by the poem, in Olson's sense, against the poem itself as object) opens the autonomy of form to the historical contexts that the poem *as* form cannot contain and regulate. Theory and historicism enter as dissociation of the object, taking their revenge on the psychic economy of originary exclusion that motivated their deployment.

It is a bit embarrassing to cite the ancient strictures of the New Critics and their institutional offspring, particularly as the genealogy of modernism and formal autonomy has been so reconfigured in the last two decades as to render them mere curiosities. For the concrete universal of mid-century modernism, one can substitute the disjunct poetics of William Carlos Williams's *Spring & All* (1923) as the primal scene of the poet/critic. It is well to recall that, for readers of Williams before the 1970s, the available versions of the lyric cycle cut the prose

of the original and provided each poem an individual title, an act of Oedipal disavowal if there ever was one. It was only with the 1970 Frontier Press pirate edition and the subsequent appearance of New Directions' edition of *Imaginations* that the prose was restored.¹⁷ This move to undo the opposition between poetry and prose was, it may be noted, a period concern in the 1970s (evident in Robert Creeley's *Pieces, In London, and A Day Book* and Allen Ginsberg's *Indian Journals*, but also in the Language school's frequent elision of the poetry/prose divide as 'writing').¹⁸ Williams makes a clear distinction of value between poetry as 'the contraction which is felt,' the formal order in which new meaning is made, and prose, which represents states of mind and contexts of all kinds that may give rise to the poem but that do not condense in it. The postmodern moment, it follows, would be to undermine the hierarchy of this distinction—to see the poem as equally prosaic and filled with the contingent and excessive, and the development of poetics as a necessity for making poetry. Williams may be said to anticipate this later moment in his decision to publish the prose, and to explore it on its own terms in *Kora in Hell* and *The Descent of Winter*, which appear alongside the other experimental works in the posthumously edited *Imaginations*. A modernist genealogy of the poet/critic may well begin right here—not with the formal gridlock and moral rearmament of the concrete universal but with its dissociation. Williams's insight is that form and context are indissociable only when brought together and codetermined critically; the form of *Spring & All* re-presents the context(s) that constitute its own legitimacy.

The transformation of the concrete universal into a hybrid object places poetic form squarely within larger cultural logics, beginning with the mutual relation between social rationality and poetic form. In with his experimental texts, Williams correlates the difficulty of poetic form with social aporia ('No one / to witness / and adjust, no one to drive the car'), offering the poem as object as first approximation of a legitimate ground ('So much depends upon' its object status). Later, the 'machine made of words' connecting poetry to 'the work of Henry Kaiser and of Timoshenko' in the introduction to *The Wedge* (1944) would interpret these experimental logics as artifacts of rational totality, which Williams

would go on to investigate more fully in *Paterson*.¹⁹ This struggle between total form and social rationality, contingent particulars and systemic safety valves became a hopeful figure for radical democracy, anticipating the oppositional, open poetics of the 1950s. Unfortunately, the 'concrete universal' became the institutionally preferred mode of social reproduction; taught in English departments in the 1950s and 60s, it is still reproduced everywhere even today in creative writing programs that teach creative writers how to teach creative writing. Such utter circularity of object and value was one of the primary motives for the turn to 'poetics' in the Language school—to begin with, to take under our own responsibility such self-constituting authorizations of value. But the 'concrete universal' as a social form continues to have a reproductive potential: because it was identified with particular cultural values (Eliot's conservative Christianity, for example, and all the baggage of 'God and man' reinforced by that tradition), it allowed for a formal register of difference from other cultural traditions. In the era of its dominion, the New Critical lyric excluded these traditions with a vengeance: women writers from Gertrude Stein to Edna St. Vincent Millay; the Whitman/queer lineage, apart from Hart Crane, through the Popular Front; the Harlem Renaissance; and the avant-garde. However, there is a cunning of institutional reason in this installation of the norm: it seemed possible thus to change the cultural model simply by changing the object, setting up the anthology wars that were a major scene of literary revisionism in the 1970s and 1980s.

Two routes to the social reproduction of poetry are thus implied: one through the object itself—change the object, change the paradigm—and the other through the subject, with the language-centred self-reflexivity of the avant-garde. A critic like Charles Altieri importantly identifies such self-reflexiveness with the object itself, but this still yields circular results: only poets available to the aesthetic traditions of German idealism or English romanticism provide proper models for the identity between form and self-reflexivity.²⁰ The second route, which I explore, sees reflexivity as not containable within poetic form, and reads the formal construction of the work in relation to external, social logics. Here, Williams showed the way in his dissociation of the poetry/prose

dyad. For Williams, the two components of poetry are nonidentical—the poem is not just the condensation of exemplary form but bleeds into the world out of which it is produced; poetic prose as material held outside of form-making activity is its condition of possibility. On analogy to this dissociation of form, the value-conferring critic portion of the poet/critic dyad does not merely stand apart from the object-making poet; both set the terms for social reproduction. This is what Wordsworth did in his famous preface, in which a poetry of the ‘real language of men’ in a state of passional excitement is upgraded to a standard of cultural value. For the modernists, unlike the romantics, the act of making is comprehended, reproduced, and valued for its fundamental dissociation. To be on both sides of the dyad is thus an impossibility, yet it is that impossibility which is compelling. Something is left incomplete in the subject, something is left over in the object—this is the condition of the modernist poet/critic. The unfolding dyad preserves a remainder that refuses impossible Oedipalization as it brackets the parthenogenetic formalism of the New Critics. Williams left the door open for his heirs and assigns (not all of them men, after Alice Notley and Bernadette Mayer’s claim of descent in *Doctor Williams’s Heiresses*) to find new means of poetic reproduction that are at once subjective and social.²¹

In a hybrid, experimental text published in $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, I rethought the form of the ‘object status’ of the poet after receiving an interpellative call in a postcard from Tom Raworth. My series of meditations on the poetic ‘object’ began with:

14 Cosin Court, Cambridge
March 29/ '79

Dear Barry,

Would you, if you have the time: for a booklet I’m doing: send me the name of, or a brief description of, or a photograph* or drawing* of, the first

O B J E C T

To enter your mind now!?

Love, Tom

*black, white, postcard size.

which I answered with my own subvocalized/written responses to its initial provocation:

The first OBJECT to come to mind was the KEY RING next to your CARD. Immediate steps taken to erase this response were impossible while all around white noise not connected to OBJECT continued as before. Waiting for the 'appropriate' response while hovering over the CARD, there came BLUE ROCK. BLUE from a BLUE flyer in hand under the CARD and ROCK from Clark Coolidge's 'A ROCK is the inside of space' in his book OWN FACE, read this afternoon. A THUMB TACK posted the BLUE flyer, I remember it as a plastic push-pin. The BLUE flyer showed an exploded OBJECT being either constructed or taken apart.²²

The object here (which would have been a concrete universal but for Williams's prose in *Spring & All*) appears by virtue of a social logic of interpellation: 'Hey, you!,' calls out Raworth in his postcard, and my response—not exactly Althusser's—is, 'It's my poem!' The poem itself is a hybrid construction of various kinds of objects—the poetry of Clark Coolidge, read in *Own Face*; the *objets d'arts* seen in a conceptual exhibition in Catalonia; the archaic museum pieces in Les Eyzies; the 'wicker haze' in the worker's head as he theoretically approaches the scene of construction, after Marx's *Grundrisse*; the 'contraction which was felt' in the condensation of a fictive object, the 'blue rock'; and finally the excluded object which turned out to be the mother of them all, a piece of red volcanic rock that had hailed me in an open field in the Sierra Nevada foothills, and which I was finally able to connect to the piece (and to first meeting Ted Pearson at The Grand Piano reading series, it turns out).²³ The ensemble of relations here is, in my account, a poem—remote from Tom Raworth's form of textuality, but I hoped acceptable to his project.

Later, in a hybrid (critical/creative) chapter in *The Constructivist Moment*, I attempted to extend the refunctioning of the poem as object to a social logic, through the mode of production of the 'assembly line' itself. In refusing the autonomous horizon of 'literariness' that is at times identified as 'language' in the Language school of poetry,

'The Bride of the Assembly Line' interprets Gertrude Stein's abstract principle of 'composition as explanation' as social production through her admiration of automobiles and Henry Ford. Stein's Fordism, of course, was suggested by and demanded an account of the larger mode of production I live in, the ensemble of productive relations in Detroit, as a site of form-making activity that is indissociable from its historical context. In what way is a poem as object comparable to 'the automobile' as product of the rationalized, automatic assembly line? What authorizes the poet/critic to make this analogy?

Cars burst into the light. The missing X of [the poem immediately above this paragraph in the essay] is the product rolling off the assembly line, the Bride of all those Bachelor Machines that have been so hard at work in their auto-matism. Visiting the River Rouge assembly line of the Mustang Division of the Ford Motor Company, I was awestruck to witness one of modernism's primal scenes: the automatic sex Marcel Duchamp could only dissociate in *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, brought to fruition every ninety seconds as a new car rolls off the line. Here the Bride is being built up as she is stripped bare by robotic bachelors in sequential steps along the way, component parts being supplied by feeder lines from the sides and rived onto chassis or body forms by angular metal arms that shower the floor with loud sparks and violet auras. Dollies of shining tanks roll by to be bolted into place—the illuminating gas to be siphoned through blossoming barometers, the nine malic molds to be brought to the assembly point by gliding sleds, oculist witnesses adjusting coruscating planes of flow, given the waterfall speed of the windmill in the form of a toboggan but more or of a corkscrew, and the splash at A is everywhere an uncorking. So when the Bride finally appears, all dressed up with everywhere to go, it is a miraculous reversal of the destructive impulses that went to work on her ... in a carefully plotted sequence. The Bride is a shiny new car, with seat belts and gorgeous multicolored paint job, which an inspector then leaps into and drives to her first parking lot.²⁴

This description, with its structural overlay of Duchamp's *Bride* and Ford's assembly line, tries to imitate, in a mode of sequenced production,

as I wanted to locate the measure of the ‘human’ in wider frames of industrial production. Rather, it was to look for ways in which specific cultural logics—in this case, that of the suspension of authorship within the highly rationalized and anonymous auto-teleology of the assembly line as a figure for social meaning—could suggest new ways of writing and reading experimental poetry. It was also to suggest that there is no autonomous zone for poetry outside these larger cultural logics; the ‘bride’ that appears at the end of the assembly might be either a brand new car or a poem. The ‘object’ can only be socially constructed.

I will continue my genealogy of hybrid objects in which the poet/critic dyad is being refunctioned with two examples from recent work. The first is my section of the third volume of our ‘experiment in collective autobiography,’ *The Grand Piano*, which intersperses thirteen stanzas from my poem ‘Non-Events,’ another of the five poetic texts in 1–10, between every four paragraphs of the fifty-paragraph essay.²⁶ While this autobiographical prose is to some extent an act of memory, it is also an attempt at explanation and even critique, through its organization of parallel incidents taken largely from the period in question, of the poetry I was writing then. Rather than Zukofsky’s ‘the words are my life’—a slogan I was becoming increasingly critical of at the time and find even less useful now—words and life are unlinked and recombined in the hybrid form. In this section, I wanted to show how logics of class identification led to the aesthetics of language-centered poetry, and how the ‘non-events’ (wasted, discontinuous, absurd) of my young adulthood might be explained (if not redeemed) by the poetry I was writing then:

Different landscapes balance matters
with the force of clear ideas.
A blueprint for flood channels
empties music of its sound. Notice a trap
made for oneself. Out of the constant
bright wounds circumscribe the work.
You becomes another constant, unresolved
war of nerves on a separate planet.

I was lusting for the stability of structure, in which the foreknowledge is absolute. Death and the young man. I would

pour my energies into it forthwith. Bill Berkson phrased this perfectly, in his poem “Negative” with its logic of push/pull. For him, the stasis of energy meeting its equal resistance was a technical note to an effect of art, while for me it was a description of a social process by which one is brought into one’s fate. The outcome is fixed as the structure from which one emerged but in which one can only act. “You are left wondering if just/holding [the door] wouldn’t involve involve exactly the/same level of force.” Hans Hoffmann as pure dialectician. Philip Guston as class cartoonist. [...]

That all energy and form would return to the mode of production out of which they emerge: this was the problem of culture for the newly educated Marxist. However decisive the poem might be, its agonistic excess placed at the crux of a decision that might have fateful consequences—it had been anticipated. “The foreknowledge is absolute.” Absorption returns us to structure—never, certainly, to our rewards. The idea of art acquiring symbolic capital—prestige, the surety of the canon—was unthinkable at the time. Art was an addition to a fully rationalized world and thus subject to immediate reintegration. Art could appear or disappear at will, as it did. I thought this insight was progressive, and I intended to act on it.²⁷

My claim in the prose section of this work is that class relations are a ‘cultural logic’ in ways that filter down to a baseline of the aesthetic. In poetry, I was attempting to write ‘language as such,’ but this was analogous if not identical to the idea of material culture I was also attempting to live. But it is from the *disconnection* of this analogy—the unlikeness of its terms, that which is not subordinated or contained by the form, the way that the materiality of language is never subsumable, and the slash between poet/critic that inevitably results—that the work’s aesthetics were formed. The poem is a material condensation of the social logics that created it; the poem is a differential creation of an inaccessible world that argues only by approximation. If there were anything that joins the two, it is the ‘anti-poetic’ as material and as experience, which provides a site for self-reflection on all the entailments of the act of ‘making’ I could imagine in both registers.

My final example of the hybrid object is a current work-in-progress (which I read at my conference performance in Dartington)—a ‘correlation’ between Book 1 of Williams’s *Paterson*, sampled by aleatorical means, and a parallel text of ‘knowledge sentences’ (representations of complex states of affairs) that I wrote in an attempt to *say in other words* what Williams’s poem *says*. My thesis is that *Paterson* does not simply trade in the aesthetic but is a nuanced meditation on constitutive social logics distributed among the kinds of writing Williams deploys in the poem; it is an essay on social comprehension and its (im)possibility, with the famous Falls as the register of our modern compulsion toward sublime disconnection. My project, in other words, was to criticize *Paterson* as a poetic act of reconstruction of what I see is a central enabling condition of poetic production: that we can’t understand a word we are saying to each other, and that we suffer this condition without acknowledging it. This disconnection leads directly to the turn to language of language-centered poetry, but for me that isn’t enough. I want to dig through to this formative impasse, which is where we fail to comprehend the stuplimity of our current ‘state of disconnection.’²⁸

XXI

A quart of potatoes, half a dozen oranges,
a bunch of beets and some soup greens.
Look, I have a new set of teeth. Why you
look ten years younger . . .

[...] They are the divisions and imbalances
of his whole concept, made weak by pity,
flouting desire; they are—No ideas but
in the facts . . . [2.12]

In democratic form, content seeks its own level by
the force of its displacement from the absent norm
which it is in the process of creating. Absence then
defines the facticity of the content creating norms.
The positive is the impossible but dumbly insisted
upon in a series that ratifies itself as only possible.
These things that you have brought forward to us,

they are the materials of poetry? The poetry is just these things, and the poetry is a displacement that only is enacted where such things could never be.

XXII

Twice a month Paterson receives
communications from the Pope and Jacques Barzun
(Isocrates). His works
have been done into French
and Portuguese. [1.10]

Coming in and going out—centrifugal, centripetal—
information locates the common center that unites
sender and receiver in the throughput of dispersal.
This is a knowledge sentence that attempts to say
what a complex form of activity really is and does.
Thus it takes the form of a complex, but differently.²⁹

What I often find lacking, I will say, in much poetry of the present—not that it is not worthwhile in other terms, no—is a connection to the conditions of its own production. If that sounds like a prescription for what counts as aesthetic experience, again I'm sorry. By 'conditions' I mean motivating factors, not surface effects that can never locate them, that dissolve in the bitstreams of channel switching or the identity profiling of data pools. The act of 'erasure' only gets us so far; I want to see the larger logic or motivation that makes such acts of abstraction and recombination necessary and productive, on other terms than simply as a placeholder for producers of like objects seen as a 'community' (maybe 'community' itself is one such logic; in which case let's hope for an engaged one). But even more I am struck with the pervasive inability to read or comprehend the information one is given. We need high-level interpretants, and poetry can produce them.

The poet/critic is a construction site, a site of intervention. Paralleling Nietzsche's genealogy of the forms of historical discourse, the poet/critic refuses both monumentality and the accretion of objects (discourse in a static, normative sense) and engages the effective horizons of the critical act.³⁰ Moving from the rejected concrete universal, with

its moral project of regulating the value of complexity, to an open and productive engagement with complex logics that subtend the making of the object, the poet/critic refunctions the mode of production of meaning and value that once went under the name of *literature* but which has, of necessity, taken new forms. There is no particular genre now to which his or her activity is restricted; the poetic is a made relation motivated by the conditions of its possibility and the necessity of its occurrence in a larger cultural field. The poet thus becomes the maker of an object that enacts and criticizes the conditions of its own possibility, while the critic becomes the site of discursive knowledge that explains and expands the resulting reflexivity of the object. It should go without saying that both sides of this dyad refuse to externalize institutional structures, in which the poem is a disciplinary object or the critic the disciplinary subject, as they displace the interpellative call of the autonomous poem toward a social imperative that is, after Althusser, delivered at many sites of meaning. Even more, we can look for a logic in which dyadic structure of this opposition itself is recast, even as a mere positivity of their identity would risk losing the force of the negative ‘slash’ of nonidentity between the two opposed functions.

I began by claiming that gender and sexuality were key aspects of the concrete universal—in Goethe’s notion of a living and embodied spirit contained by the form—that necessitated its refunctioning in other terms. While my critique has been mainly to recover the social logics of the poet/critic dyad, gender and sexuality appear at key points. Of course, seeing the poem as object in a psychodynamic sense is gendered by definition, even as one possibility of gender would be to see the ‘critical’ element of poetic making as something like an act of parthenogenesis, the birth of Athena out of the head of Zeus. In moving from the ‘sclerotic Hegelianism’ of the concrete universal to an open spatio-temporal field of objects in the postmodern, parthenogenesis often appears as the first move toward a better account of the object in terms of desire. Such an early postmodern challenge to the dualism of subject/object is readable in Charles Olson’s spatial allegory of ‘The Moebius Strip,’ which refuses the object status of the poem in its complexity:

Upon a Moebius strip
materials and the weights of pain
their harmony

A man within himself upon an empty ground.
His head lay heavy on a huge right hand
itself a leopard on
his left and angled shoulder.
His back a stave, his side a hole into the bosom of a sphere.

His head passed down a sky (as suns the circle of a year).
His other shoulder, open side and thigh maintained,
by law of conservation of
the graveness of his center,
their clockwise fall.
Then he knew, so came to apogee
and earned and wore himself as amulet.³¹

The birth of beauty in the poetic act stems from the parthenogenesis of self, seen as the primal androgyne of the aesthetic, straight out of the head of the poet. Yet a moment of doubling necessarily results in this refusal of Oedipalization, whose logic is kept outside. Olson suggests, in his medial position between the overthrown concrete universal and the displaced logics of the postmodern, that sexuality and reproduction—as cultural orders—are the necessities that aesthetic form failed to respond to in the modern (in modernist form). *Spring & All*, for Williams, was the moment of its frustrated but split comprehension (recall the original edition with its ovum and sperm paralleling the split between poetry and prose). If we are on the way to another relation of the poet/critic dyad, it may be in the reproductive potential of the dyad itself—and what is meant by reproduction as social rather than individually embodied. New possibilities of gender and their resulting psychic investments, which refuse the Oedipal containment of autonomous form and its constraints on meaning, will motivate, in all senses, the exploration of this little divide. More needs to be said to develop a transition—which I hope at least to have suggested—from an Oedipal ‘default mode’ of the concrete universal as a mode of social reproduction, to an exploded, hybrid object in terms of new psychic formations of gender and

sexuality. In my genealogy of the poet/critic, to refunction the poetic object changes the relation between form-making and value-conferring aspects of the poem, opening the work as site for poetic agency and social meaning to much wider frames of activity.

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Notes

- 1 W. K. Wimsatt, *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954), 82.
- 2 Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse' (1950), in *Selected Writings*, ed. Robert Creeley (New York: New Directions, 1966), 24–25.
- 3 Cf. the implicit claim that what Americans might call the 'postmodern' is really just a continuation of modernist aesthetics in criticism such as Anthony Mellors, *Late Modernist Poetics: From Pound to Prynne* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2004). I am interested (and slightly concerned) about the degree to which this notion of the continuity of modernism can be assumed in UK experimental verse practice.
- 4 For a benchmark account of the reflexivity of modernist poem, organized around the crucial dictum of mid-century modernism that 'It must be abstract,' see Charles Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry: The Contemporaneity of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989).
- 5 Barrett Watten, 'Poetics in the Expanded Field: Textual, Visual, Digital ...', in Adelaide Morris and Thomas Swiss, *New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- 6 Herman Rapaport has usefully termed the moment of interpellation a 'scene of instruction' in the Symbolic dimension; see his discussion of the British reception of Althusser and 'subject positions' in *The Theory Mess: Deconstruction in Eclipse* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001), 67–88. On Althusserian interpellation, see Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 106–31.
- 7 I discuss the Hegelian aporia of the avant-garde, and suggest ways beyond it, in Barrett Watten, 'The Secret History of the Equal Sign: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Between Discourse and Text,' in *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003), 45–54.

- 8 Quoted in René Wellek, *A History of Modern Criticism*, vol. 1, *The Later Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1955): 209, 325n. Thanks to Susan Nurmi-Schomers for her comments at the conference.
- 9 Quoted in *ibid*, 211, 325n. On the use of ‘symbolism’ for ‘modernism,’ see Edmund Wilson, *Axel’s Castle: A Study in the Imaginative Literature of 1870–1930* (1931; New York: Norton, 1959).
- 10 Goethe, quoted in Wellek, *History*, 211, 325n.
- 11 Watten, ‘Secret History of the Equal Sign.’
- 12 For a Žižekian reading of the New Critical poem, see my chapter on Laura Riding in Barrett Watten, *Horizon Shift: Progress and Negativity in American Modernism* (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1995), and an MLA presentation adapted from it, ‘The Sublime Object of Close Reading,’ Washington, DC, 1996.
- 13 Barrett Watten, ‘Radio,’ in *Frame: 1971–1990* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon, 1997), 54–55; this is the first stanza of four.
- 14 Tristan Tzara, *Selected Poems*, trans. Lee Harwood (London: Trigram, 1975).
- 15 ‘Ode to Bourbaki,’ the first poem in my first book-length collection, *Opera–Works*, reprinted in *Frame*, 279.
- 16 I have also heard someone ask whether one is allowed to use the pronoun ‘I’ in critical writing, and whether it is permissible cite one’s own work. Once and for all, it must be said: I know the risks I am taking when I do this; it is part of a larger analysis; it is meant to work in certain ways connected to the structure of desire; I am sorry if you don’t like it.
- 17 William Carlos Williams, *Spring & All* (Buffalo, NY: Frontier Press, 1970); in *Imaginations*, ed. Webster Schott (New York: New Directions, 1970). As with the 1970s pirating of Ezra Pound’s radio speeches, but for very different reasons, the illicit edition seems to have had an immediate effect of canonical revision.
- 18 Ron Silliman’s section of part 4 of *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography, San Francisco, 1975–1980* (Detroit: Mode A/This Press, 2007), points as well to the crucial importance of Williams’s prose/poetry hybrids in the development of the Language school. I entirely agree, and with Ron would like to promote Williams as the denied/neglected alternative to Pound/Stevens dyad in American modernism.
- 19 William Carlos Williams, introduction to *The Wedge*, in *The Collected Poems*, ed. Christopher MacGowen, vol. 2, 1939–1962 (New York: New Directions, 1988), 53.

- 20 See Altieri, *Painterly Abstraction in Modernist American Poetry*.
- 21 Alice Notley, *Dr. Williams' Heiresses* (Berkeley, CA: Tuumba, 1980).
- 22 Barrett Watten, 'Object Status,' in Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein, eds., *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1984), 110–14. I have remediated and interpreted the work in 'Recovering 'Forty Poems' and 'Object Status,' at http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac_pages/ewatten/posts/post28.html
- 23 The series of objects developed in this piece are all available on my website.
- 24 From Barrett Watten, 'The Bride of the Assembly Line,' in *Constructivist Moment*, 139–40.
- 25 Barrett Watten, from *Under Erasure*, in *Progress/Under Erasure* (1991; reprint ed., Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2004), 260–62.
- 26 Barrett Watten, 'Non-Events,' in *Frame*, 13–21.
- 27 Barrett Watten, 'Non-Events,' in *Grand Piano* 3:78–103; 82–83.
- 28 I use the term 'stuplimity' in the sense developed by Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2005), 248–97. 'State of disconnection' riffs on Giorgio Agamben's concept of the 'state of exception'; in *State of Exception*, trans. Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). The implication is that the current public discourse situation we are in of 'disconnection is 'exceptional' both in the suspension of basic human rights and for the unique and pervasive distortion of social communication that has resulted from their refusal.
- 29 From 'Correlation of *Paterson*, book 1,' MS; a section will appear in the journal *Antenna* (Karlsruhe, Germany) in 2007, and the opening sections are available on my website at http://www.english.wayne.edu/fac_pages/ewatten
- 30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980).
- 31 Charles Olson, 'The Moebius Strip,' in *Selected Writings*, 162–63.